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Fresh Ink



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Naugatuck Valley

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2026



GRIP
Julia Harding

ISSUE 57

CONGRATULATIONS!

FIRST PLACE - BEST ARTWORK - Eastern Division
Community College Humanities Association

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MILNE'S HOUSE



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April 12, 2026

Dear Reader,

It is with great pleasure that I present the 2026 edition of Fresh Ink. I hope you enjoy the work of these talented student and community artists and writers.

This year, many people worked diligently to bring this publication to fruition. Naugatuck Valley faculty, Professors Wade Tarzia, and John Greg Harding, Professors Emeriti Steven Parlato and Sandra Newton (all the way from France!), College alumni Joseph Adomavicia and Christopher Boniecki, community artists Brigitte Tutschka and Diane Calder and CT-State student Andrielly Almeida evaluated art, short fiction and poetry along with me. Thank you for your continued support of this journal and your timely and conscientious review.

The layout team consisted of Professor Ray Leite, and Educational Assistants Stephen Rogers and Vismel Marquez. Thank you for your professional, reliable and exacting attention to making this journal a success. I couldn't do it without you.

Special thanks go out to Karen Blake, Director of Student Activities, Alberta Thompson, Secretary of Student Activities, and the members of the Student Government along with the staff of The Tamarack for your support. I appreciate all your help.

In addition, my gratitude goes out to LABSS Secretaries Robyn Mazzamaro and Linda Ames and Fiscal Administrative Officer Linda Anderson for their assistance in navigating this ever-changing process.

Finally, I'd like to thank the CT-State NV's president, Dr. Michael A. Rooke, Dean of Academic Affairs, Dr. Paula Dowd and English Department Chair, Christopher Rempfer for their support and encouragement.

In closing, thanks go out to the writers and artists who submit their work and support this publication. This is for you.

Best Regards,

Jeannie Evans-Boniecki, PhD

Adviser to Fresh Ink, 2026

1st PLACE - ART

David Shaholli*

WISE OWL



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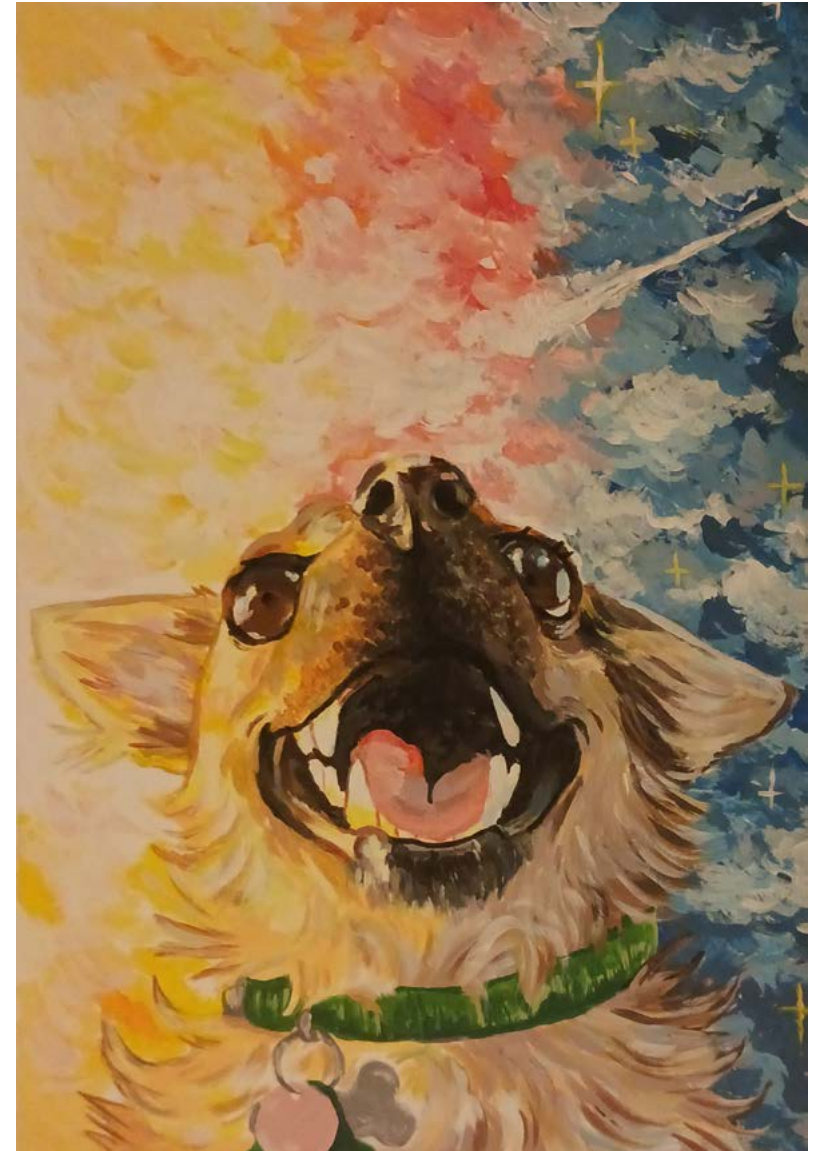
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2ND PLACE - ART

Rue McFarlane*

RITA'S AWESOME



Meat**1st PLACE - FICTION****Joshua Harris***

Jacob lay on his bunk with both hands folded under his pillow. Other men were muttering and shuffling about. Far off explosions rumbled like a thunder that never died. He stunk of sweat and gunpowder and old cigarettes. Those scents were a part of him. Jacob had lived a hundred nights like this. Fell asleep like this a hundred times. He knew he was unlikely to have a hundred more. But tonight, like every one of these nights, he drifted off to sleep under the screaming lullaby of shellfire and with eyes set to open on a hair-trigger disturbance.

The dream is always the same. Jacob is sliding down a hill of mud. He's fleeing— no, retreating. From The Front. Its world-shaking gunfire bellowing spiteful at the concept of silence. The simian shrieks and hyena howls of soldiers in the life defining heat of battle. The barbed wire snakes slither, and the mud is mulched with men still moaning, run over by tank treads. The Front is coming and it will claim him if he does not get away. He's got to get back behind the lines and meet back up with his squad. The uniforms change. Some nights he's wearing desert camouflage, some nights it's British infantry gear with a wide brimmed helmet, some nights it's peasant's rags. But every night he slides down this hill. He picks up speed and slips, falling on his back, and as the hill flattens out he flips onto his chest.

Slick with mud, Jacob picks himself up. He's in a large ditch, a miniature valley really. The walls are soaked with layer over layer of mud and blood. Jacob looks up. There, standing at the other end of the ditch, is the Enemy. Some nights he wears the grey uniform of a Confederate, some nights he's dressed like a Comanche horseman, some nights he's dressed like an American revolutionary. The Enemy stares at Jacob, face twisted into an ugly rictus of bestiality. He's covered in mud and blood as well. He's holding something sharp. Jacob scrambles to his feet. He brandishes his own weapon. Some nights it's the bayonet of a rifle, or a trench knife, or an ancient wooden club. Tonight it's a femur bone splintered to a sharp point.

For a moment Jacob and the Enemy stare each other in the eye. The Enemy's pupils are huge, making his eyes appear almost black. For a moment there is no noise but the roar of The Front and the ragged panting of the two boys. Their mouths and throats taste

like smoke and bile. When Jacob wakes up he can never remember whether he or the Enemy makes the first move. But they charge, wrapping their barely contained fear around the spool of their voice and weaving it into a savage battle cry. They move through the viscous syrup-air of a dream impossibly slow, but that only serves to give Jacob more time to contemplate what's about to happen. They're about to collide when Jacob steps to the left and trips the Enemy. He always looks his foe in the eye before he does it. He sees the anger, the hatred. The Fear. Then, when the Enemy is lying on his chest, Jacob pounces on him, turns him over, and stabs. Over and over. That's how it goes every night. He looks the boy in the eye while the piece of femur is stuck into the boy's insides. The black pupils recede to a pinprick. The color of the eyes is always different. The light that leaves them is always the same.

And then the Enemy is suddenly Jacob's brother. Familiar features in his face, in his frame. The slight differences forgotten in a heartbeat. Jacob always drops the weapon. And he always cradles his brother in his arms. Jacob sobs while the warm blood gushes. He begs his brother to come back. He apologizes. He feels the body grow colder by the second. As he stares at the lifeless, filthy corpse of his brother, he is all too aware of how real and angry and alive the boy had been moments ago, and how in less time it takes to speak a sentence, that life has vanished. All personhood gone, just meat and bones and blood. Jacob hears hoofbeats.

He turns and behind him stands Jacob's god on horseback. It may seem odd to call it a god. Profane even. But the things people do for it are the same they do for the more traditional gods. They starve, they travel, they build huge buildings dedicated to its name. They kill. And it brings people to a spiritual state, that heightened state of epiphany, where life and death lie solely in the strokes of a blade or the twitch of a gun. Where men are shown to be what they really are. At their best. And at their worst. It is not inhuman. It is hyper-human.

Adorned in patchwork uniforms and armor, from all places and all ages. A belt crowded with scabbards and sheathes and holsters. A face caked in mud save for the streaks of tears like warpaint that carved their way through. A head crowned in a rusted knight's helmet. Jacob's god trots closer on its red horse, black cape

billowing in the wind like an inkstain on the fabric of the world. Jacob's face contorts into his own rictus of bestial grief.

"How could you do this to me? How could you make me do this to people, to him?"

Jacob's god grins, its yellow teeth turned orange by blood. The Front is louder, closer, and rising in pitch.

"I didn't make you do anything. You have a duty. If you have such a problem with it then kill me already."

Its voice is sharp and cold like a scalpel. Cutting through the din of the approaching Front perfectly.

"I don't have a duty to kill. Not to you, not to anyone." Jacob sobs.

"But you already have. And you already will." The god says bemusedly.

Jacob stands, the weapon is in his hand and it's suddenly a gun. Jacob's god sits a little taller in the saddle. The pitch of The Front's madness rises even more, making the screams sound shrill and childlike.

"I will not kill for you." Jacob snarls.

Jacob's god shakes its head. And it says the thing it says every single night.

"You don't have a choice. You live when I say, you eat when I say, you fight when I say, you charge when I say, you fly when I say, you die when I say. Humans are but meat, and meat is made to be consumed and digested into power."

He's heard it too many times. Jacob lifts the gun and shoots the god in the head, bloody grin still on its face. It falls limply out of the saddle. Just like it does every night. Jacob screams with unrestrained, ferocious animal rage. A rage that runs far back into a primordial genetic age when the first skull was bashed in with the first stone. He falls to one knee, panting and weeping. The uproar of The Front decreases in pitch, but increases in volume.

He hears it behind him. It's at the top of the hill. He can never

outrun it now. His dream-legs are exhausted, and even in his sleep he breathes heavily. But as the noise surpasses deafening and little drops of boiling mud and blood rain down from the hill above, Jacob looks up at the red horse. It's clad in bloodsoaked armor. Jacob looks up at the hill, heart once racing now heavy, and approaches the creature. He bends down over the corpse of his god and wrenches off its rusty helmet since he has none tonight. He takes its cape too because he's starting to feel cold.

Then Jacob mounts the red horse, picks up its reins, and urges it on. It goes off at a light gallop down the ditch. Tears carve streaks through the grime on his face and drip down onto his bloodsoaked clothes, mixing with the blood and the mud. The horse trots on, and Jacob lifts his head high, tuning his mind to his mission. And though he still walks and talks and breathes and eats and sleeps: all that remains is meat destroying meat.

Amira Jung*

1ST PLACE - POETRY

Everything Is Meant to Be Loved

I.

The sheer curtains of my childhood bedroom that glow soft pink, the gifted traditional rug from my younger cousin, the old medinas we endlessly explore, old photographs on my digital camera, my mother's favorite orchids, chipped porcelain dolls once tossed in old basements, unexpected cards with my brother's distinct handwriting, childhood drawings faded though still hanging, dried petals on shelves of clay tajines, the now-fixed CD player and the old crush 40 CD, the box of seashells collected over the years, old cassette tapes paused in time, the small jar of my kept baby teeth, the vintage match box gifted by my dearest childhood friend, wooden animal sculptures I got in a small woodcarver's shop in the mountains of Imlil, the smell of cedar and adorned fabrics, unglazed clay roses from high school ceramics class, watercolor painted cards, scraps of cut-up lace, empty perfume bottles, gilded mirror frames, and the reflections inside.

II.

Nostalgia will ruin you:
It will eat at your bones from the inside like rotting mosque columns infested by flesh hungry termites
It will swarm the carcass of memories like fruit flies, feasting on succulent laughter and the nectar of summer nights with your warm rushing blood and eyes that glow like fireflies
Yet I still drink from its tampered chalice, tracing my tongue along the edge of its fragrant red clay
and breathe in all the dead end streets and old rooftops
and mosaic tiles and multi-colored stained glass
The lost gentle faces that draw ashore
like bottled letters, soft and faded
will bury its shapeless form into your skin
and stain your bones with all the remnants of nights
we danced without care in wiser cities that stand self assured against the sands of time
It will build cities in our hearts just as old as
the medinas we'd explore and race against the dusk that slowly falls upon its fragile foundation of innocence and stubbornness
refusing to crumble.

Kenneth DiMaggio

Nannie

Ode # 1 to Nanni (not Nonna)

Nonna is how you said *grandmother*
in Italian

Nanni is how we said it in my family's Sicilian corruption of the language which I never understood just like Nanni who knew little to no English and so every time she baby sat me at her three-room apartment whenever I was sick from school

"Nanni, soda, soda!"
I said while pointing to the cans of beer in her refrigerator

And about a half hour later when I started singing & dancing on the sofa: "No more soda! You cray-zee! Cray-zee!"

And to get me to be normal enough to shut up and take a nap with her she table-spooned me some of her 100+ proof grappa

and after two or four table-spoons herself she was curled around me while I was curled within her:
the both of us gently snoring

A *dialect*: only we could speak and share

Ode #2 to Nanni (and not Nonna)

Nonna was that Italian grandmother who wore long white gloves to church while *Nanni* who always wore a house coat and never went to St. Ann's had "the second sight"

The sweetness of flowers (when none were there) meant that a saint was watching over you

Dreams about a dead loved one meant they were visiting you

Lost Souls—beware! They knocked at your door as sweet old ladies asking (with concealed malevolence) to enter and when kindly lady from the Witnesses or Pentecostals asked if she could leave a few pamphlets behind *Nanni* was already whacking her away with a broom

The tobacco while she baby sat me at her apartment: *Nanni* sometimes mentioned how *her* *Nanni* smoked a pipe and from the kitchen where I heard *Nanni* and another old woman but when I peeked in saw only my grandmother at the stove stirring a pot of gravy

And sometimes writing a poem: the pleasant scent of lemon-flavored smoke --a sauce bubbling with familiar but long ago unknown spice --or the freshness from a bouquet that someone gently brings before you

*

Ode #3 to Nannie (and not Nonna)

While the 1920s roared my Sicilian grandmother kept the Middle Ages alive

Our earliest photo of her: bouncing one of her daughters (a blurred image) on her thick cheese block arm

Nonna was the proper Italian way but *Nanni* we called this woman who probably bounced generations of kids while sweeping cooking peeling slicing and more for which Social Services would take her kids away today but this was *Nanni*: who sometimes baby sat and bathed me in a tin tub where she soaped washed & wiped me from my inner ears to between my toes

Being poor illiterate and separated from her husband she almost killed with his butcher's knife didn't mean you could not afford to be clean and picking me up by my arm pits she gave quick wash & wipe to the crack and beneath the sack before pouring hot water on my soapy hair and then pull me out to hold towel and dress while her other peasant paw stirred the pot of gravy simmering on the gas stove and why not?

No different from her ancestors except the oven was fired by dried animal dung; women whose hut and brood were always clean and women who knew how to fight with a club or a knife

*

Ode #4 to Nanni (Not Nonna)

Nanni was how we called our
Sicilian grand-matriarch *while* others
called their grandmothers the more
proper Italian *Nonna* that in one late
picture shows a tribe of them surrounding
my second mother at a formal event
wearing a dress but with her slip too
long and hanging beneath the hem

Her pearls probably fake like the
ones worn by her compatriots but
hers too long and thus wrapped
three times around her neck

Did it matter if Nanni's stockings crinkled
around her ankles while sitting among the
well pearled well poised & made-up Nonnas?
(And thank God Mom's mom avoided make up
where her face would have looked like some
Cubist-Expressionist Picasso)

Were they secretly laughing at the one
oblivious to formality?

Nanni: how proud to hear the stories
I wasn't meant to like how you fought your
abusive husband back with a broom a rolling
pin and when they didn't work: a knife

But this was the 1970s: couldn't you
have been enough of a Nonna so that
people wouldn't laugh

Or did I miss how you too were
laughing?
--but at those women born in Catania or
Siracusa puffed out in polyester plastic and
powder like *slightly* moneyed suburban
Americans?

Ode #5 to Nanni (Not Nonna)

In my family we pronounced it
"It'ly" not *Italy*

My Sicilian grandmother
we called Nanni not *Nonna*

Did we eat pasta? (What the
hell was that?) But we ate
Spaghetti Manicott' and Egg
Shells stuffed with Ricott'

Pizza from a wood-fired clay
oven ha?
We baked it in the same GE
gas range where we baked
the Manicott' and before baking
the pizza we all contributed a sweater
or sweatshirt jacket or something to
wrap around the dough until
it rose big enough to give birth
(and to at least twins)

And best (and now lost dish)
was Chicken & Olives which
I helped make: I banged each
Green olive with the bottom
of a cup so that the pit spit
out and we could then rub
the legs and wings & breasts
with oil & grease that was fresh

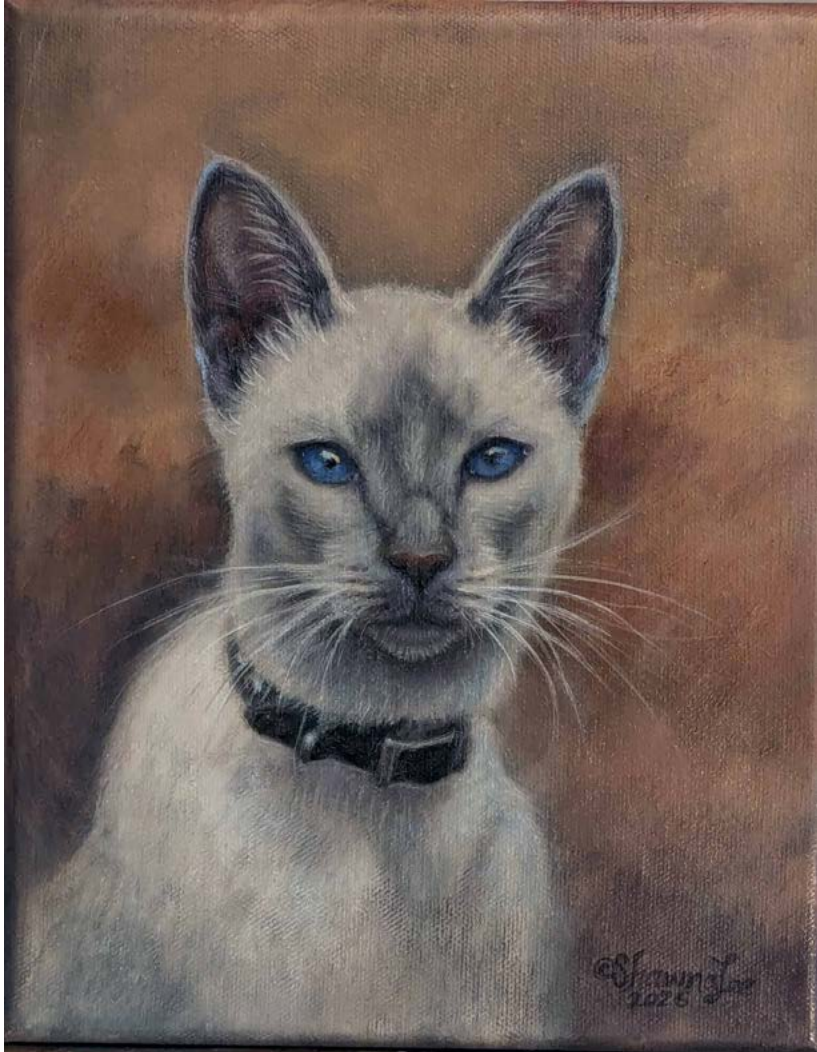
Going to Italy soon are you?
Enjoy Eat Well Have fun

But the It'ly of my Nanni
family and table

Forever gone

ShawnaLee Kwashnak

LING LING



Kieran Bheemaswarroop* 2nd PLACE - POETRY

Fish Food

The fisherman's father taught him how to fish
Just as his father's father before him
How to bait and cast and catch
How to sink and swim and breathe
What not to do when you fall through ice
And how to survive your father.

As a child, he was taught how to swim
When his fisherman father threw him in
The cruel man laughed as he begged to be saved
Not seeing the shadow encroach on his babe
A fish severed the fisherman's foot that day
And he swore to take his vengeance.

Revenge never came
His pain never faded
The fish died and sunk and rotted away
The fisherman's father passed the same day
After that, fishing was never the same
But it would always be something he hated.

Each fish he caught was caught with malice
Their stupid blank stares brought him nothing but rage
He bitterly watched them gulp for water
As payment for when he did the same
He wished each pathetic fish would be his last
But they never were.
And they never would be.

I gazed up at you through gelatinous lens.
Your cracked dry mitt held me aloft.
"I was guarding my nest," I told you.
"I know that," you snapped, "You're a bluegill in May."
I gasped for water.
You held your stare.
"Hundreds and thousands of my eggs will be eaten."
"I know," you admitted.

I gasped again.
 You loosened your grip.
 “Do you hate me?” you asked, stupidly.
 “Yes,” I said, “but it does me no good.
 I didn’t ask to be caught, but I was.”
 “It was your fault you bit,” you accused with pride.
 “It was all I could do,” I wriggled and heaved.
 “I was born with the urge to protect myself.
 I just wanted to survive.”
 “That didn’t work out very well for you, did it?”
 “It was your hook and your line.”
 You put me on ice in the back of your boat
 And rowed back to the shore.

You never stopped fishing
 I never expected you to
 But you hated the way I got under your skin.
 You saw how I suffocated pleading for mercy
 Just like when he threw you in
 Laughed as you cried that you couldn’t swim
 Gasping for air as something closed in
 Vowed to hunt down any beast with a fin
 The time you died like a fish.

Kieran Bheemaswarroop*

Take a Shameful Seat

My bones and skin and teeth splinter like pine
 My hair woven wicker to cradle your spine
 Each finger a dowel to hold myself firm
 I glued them in place so my joints wouldn’t squirm
 My face is no longer
 A grimace so somber
 My arms are still arms
 But yours are much softer
 My legs are still legs
 But they’ve doubled their numbers
 I’m vintage and tarnished in hues of burnt umber
 I’ll sit at a table to be used once a year
 And I’ll be here whenever you need a good chair

Andrielly Almeida*

3rd PLACE - POETRY

Dear, Nobody

Each message you send like a carrier pigeon
I wave off
Its gift in its beak, its eyes trained on me

I hold its plumpness in my palm
white feathers, clipped claws
and let it go free

The envelope in my box
with no mail address
a message in old-scripture ink

I flick the flag up to your humble heaven
and claim it was from absolutely
Nobody.

You caress me
look out for me
hold my hand — keep leading me

But I don't see you
nor do I believe in you
And I find it odd,
that you believe in me.

3rd PLACE - ART

David Shaholli*

THE DEAD CAPTAIN



Andrielly Almeida*

Crescendo

dormant silence,
pipes and crystals twirling but never touching
there's a stillness to me, a timid expectation
for me to explode in music
but I never do.

I am a windchime,
but I don't do as I'm supposed to:
release an energy bristling.
that dissonant dissociation drowns.

Then,

There's a wind.

Distant humming,
Clinking and clacking the sounds of stars singing
It begins with this alone, gusts of inspiration
Shake out my ideas and dreams

The 'too loud' of me
Free

Beneath the Red String 2ND PLACE - FICTION

Xavier Thompson*

The cold and wet alleyways in this city truly feel like a labyrinth. The chimneys cough smoke into the heavens, and the lanterns flicker like dying stars. They hunt us like dogs. Sister Clementine was the most recent one to go. She was cornered near the edge of Blackgate Bridge—a place where the fog is so thick it feels alive, filling your lungs with dread and sickness. It curls around your throat like a whisper, wrapping you in lies. The rain had been pouring for hours that night, soaking the cobblestone road until it gleamed like dark glass. Clementine had been running away from her soon-to-be capturers for a while now, every footstep echoing against the narrow walls as if the city itself was mocking her attempt at escape.

The red string felt hot that night; through it, I felt pure terror. For every gasp of air that struggled to find its way to her lungs, I felt the tightening in my chest, and suddenly catching my breath became a challenge. I then faintly heard and saw what she saw in her last moments, the hunters' approach, the ominous sound of iron boots and weapons of immense butchery. Their torches shining like false halos of gold, cutting through the murky fog. She was desperate and scared on that bridge. The water below her, rushing and crashing, roared like a wild beast in the night, reflecting back a lonely full moon.

Clementine tried to call on the string for strength—she tried to call on her sisters for guidance, but by the time that thought had crossed her mind, she was already too exhausted. The Hunters soon closed the distance, but when they caught her, she didn't scream. Not once. She stood defiant to the bitter end; that's what I loved about her the most, her stubbornness. As they bound her hands with their silver net, twisting it tight until the blood ran down her arms. The rain washed it into the cracks between the cobblestone, creating a crimson puddle.

The string then snapped.

Through that thread, every witch could feel another's essence: the joy of shared laughter, the sting of regret, and even the weight of sorrow. But nothing struck the thread harder than when a link was snapped—the death of a sister. It's sharp and cold, leaving behind a

hollow ache that no spell can mend. Sister Claire tells of how it once was, years ago. As an elder sister, she knows what we younger witches do not, and she often says that “wisdom is just long and hardened survival.” She tells us stories of how this city was once great—how witches and regular folk lived in peace. Back then, the Red String, the lifeline that connects all sisters, was strong. It pulsed with life and purpose, a thread of warmth that seemed to flow beneath the skin.

The thread I know now is thin and fragile, as though fading with every sunset, nothing like the stories. It still binds us, yes, but the whispers of unity and joy have turned hollow. All that fills the lifeline now is anguish and fear. I once asked Sister Claire, “Why are the regular people like this? Why do they hunt us? Why don’t we fight back with our powers?” She only sighed, her eyes clouded with the weight of centuries. “Many of us tried to fight back, your mother included, but it was all for naught. They advance fast, and many witches betrayed the sisterhood for their own safety, leading to an imposter problem. Humans fear what they can’t control,” she said. “And what they can’t control, they destroy.” Her words linger in the air long after she’s gone, like smoke that refuses to fade.

The hunters have learned to track it, to sense faint currents that flow between us. They say they can “smell the magic in the air”—what a joke. Sister Claire calls them leeches of faith, men who drink holiness and bleed cruelty. They’re said to have been priests and scholars years before, men of faith who claim to serve the light and stand for what’s right. But when the church declared war on witchcraft, we became enemies of the empire, and that faith that was once welcoming to all people began to twist into something else. Something hungry.

They call themselves the Evangelist, a name that sounds holy, until you see the way they kill. They brand themselves with silver sigils across their chest; each symbol represents a different rank, like some form of militia, but the ones to look out for have a sigil shaped like a broken halo. They have markings around their iron-plated gear that glow faintly in the moonlight—said to protect them from our curses. The last time I saw one up close was when they dragged my cousin through the market. The smell of her burned flesh that had pressed against hot iron clung to my memory for weeks. They stalk the streets at night in groups of four, carrying torches that seemingly

never go out, even in the rain. The smoke from their torches is black and thick. When you breathe it in, it fills your head with static and confusion. That’s how they track us; their smoke pulls us away from our connection to the string. When they catch us, they don’t just kill us, no, they take their time and drag us away from our lifeline, our support, until the line snaps. It’s inhumane torture, but they don’t see us as humans anyway.

Recently, their patrols have come closer to the safehouses. They broke into the old abandoned church that we were just in. They somehow always seem to know where to look. There were still sisters in that church, told to stay there under Sister Claire’s orders. Shortly after the raid, they all vanished from the reach of the thread, not dead, no, but seemingly unreachable now. This is when Sister Claire started to suspect what none of us wanted to believe—that someone in the sisterhood had been giving them help. It sounds like a crazy idea, given the sisters who were left in our group, we had all been surviving in the same safehouses for around six months, but recently, I started to feel something off with the connection.

We lost two more sisters last night, Sisters Isa and Victoria. They both vanished from the thread an hour after Claire sent them to “gather herbs” by the riverside. When the string snapped, I noticed she didn’t flinch. I started trying to remember a time when she did. She looked up at me with a cold, expressionless smile from across the dinner table. “Fate’s pruning,” she said, then continued to eat. But I am sure fate doesn’t smell like smoke and silver. I searched her quarters that night, the thread led the way, and I was drawn beneath her bed. I found a satchel marked with the sigil of a fallen angel. The same sigil was branded on the chests of sisters who betrayed the sisterhood and joined the Evangelists. I dropped it in shock because I soon noticed it was commissioned in her name, the string shuddered. “How long had she been a part of their ranks?” I asked myself, “How many sisters had she backstabbed?” From the darkness behind me, I heard the door creak open; a familiar voice came from the abyss, soft and calm. “You shouldn’t have found that child.”

Jenna Re*

WAS IT REALLY A MISUNDERSTANDING



Ariel Battelstein*

Mourning Dove

In the early summer morning, a familiar noise cooed in my ear.
A gentle riptide whisper drew me closer.
Closer to moment so unforgettable I had forgotten.
A moment so brief it barely lasted twelve years.

My knees dug into the earth, the slight seams and folds catching dirt.
Face plump, eyes full of muddy ponds and barefoot mischief.
Earfuls of silence interrupted by the morning,
The mourning of call, of a dove, or some six years ago.

Soft melodies painted the landscape, painted my mind, painted my eyes.
Dull greens made vibrant neons, pale blues made brilliant royalty,
muddy ponds made oceans.
My color pallet gently crafted in innocence.
A pallet now changed, not worse, only different.

I'm older now, I'll say, I'll swear, I'll lament.
Yet a siren draws me nearer, a song I will recall.
I'll follow it to a pond, an ocean.
The pieces of me fit together by its mourning, one early summer morning.

Daisy Rachiele*

Liars

Your words are satin
 You whisper sweet lies to me.

I know it,
 you know it.

But I won't drop my stones of blame into your palms—

I, too, am a liar.
 I could never love you.
 But it's not my wispy love that you desire anyway.

My attention is fleeting,
 and once I capture yours,
 the *want* vanishes into s m o k e .
 Inky black is beginning to creep into my head:
 a slow poison that is leaking into my skull.
 We could've been *beautiful*—
 and in my mind,
 we were.

We glistened in the warm sun,
 iridescent tears were slipping down rosy cheeks:
 Bliss.

We had crystal spines and mossy ribcages.
 Petals blossomed within our viridian lungs,
 thorns puncturing the soft fabric within us.
 And together,
 we nearly suffocated in our ecstasy.

But you pulled away too soon,

And
 I
 was left there.

Just like that,
 I had lost control.

Just like that,
 itchy panic began crawling up my organs.
 Just like that,
 spindly fear crept inside me,
 invading my nose, my mouth, my eyes.
 Anger stung sour within my throat.
 And by the time the tides of your affection pulled back in,
 onyx hatred had already contaminated me, deep beneath my skin.
 The tar had long oozed into my now-wilted lungs.
But I am a liar,
much like you.
 And so I drew close and grew cold,
 our attachment freezing over,
 our hips growing a sickening, lovely azure.
 Frost hugs our waists and nips at scars and freckles.
 Our exchanges are empty, vacant.
 Our lips are painted grey—
 dead from the false words and the candy lies that have rotted our
 teeth.
 We are hauntingly beautiful:
 The way we have chipped pieces of ourselves away until our bodies
 and souls could fit.

Naiomi Chouinard*

When the Smoke Clears

Listen to the sound of the streets tonight.
 The calling and clawing of cocktails that steel your being.
 The violent thrashing of men and women in clothes that are furbished with only dewed skin.
 The attendants for the gates of the redlight district, bombing soundwaves with their invitations to sin.
 You huddle yourself in the wraps of a semen-stained blanket, that has been stained since you started referring to yourself in the past tense.
 To watch the TV glow another night more in your hovel is another night in the seventh ring, where she taunts you.
 You step out readying yourself for the expedition that night brings.
 Gazing into a reflection of brilliance, a seance happens in your prefrontal cortex and flushes onto your tongue and teeth.
 "You are the magician bound to disappear and dazzle anything that pulses. You can make the water shift to wine. You can make the arms of tides part and guide yourself to the holy land. You can make the synapse of any Jezebel flare and take what you want. You are the suave, the businessman, the intellectual, the philosopher, the pillager of homes, the warlord, the titan, the divine!"
 The actress is waiting for her cue on a barstool.
 Your arrival is on schedule like the previous time last week, the week before that and the month before that and the-.
 The actresses' hand is on your knee.
 You had an audience just by walking in and flashing your holiness upon the actress.
 The club is festered with the fragrance of abortion, degeneracy, and abominations of women you have deemed ill-fit goods.
 But you have planted your flag.
 "Do you frequent this bar for your work?"
 Looking up from the soles of the actress's deep platforms.
 Your reflection shines in violet-painted toenails.
 "I'm not the pilgrim of this kind of conversation, for you, am I?"
 Voiceless, the actress smiles and pulls you by the hand, engaging you to the dancefloor.
 Jerking motions erupt from your shoulders and hips, and the actress reciprocates in elegance.

You eye down your target, as lights flash with each polyrhythm making the actress become a specter of dance.
 The screeching of heartbeats, behind lumps of fat that keep poking out, protruding, and pounding at your hypothalamus.
 It has not tasted the light in so long.
 You pull the actress in, with face curdling, as you whisper profanities of grandeur.
 A palm of red grows upon your face, followed by a pair of matte crimson lips.
 Following to the bathroom, the first act of your performance is done.
 Turquoise porcelain tiles hue your backstage in azure, blue lighting.
 The actress loiters on the sink, your existence is a mental hurdle that hasn't been paced yet.
 You lean at a distance that makes the sink become a threshold between intimacy.
 Reaching into the actress's purse you find the collection of lipsticks ranging from warm to cool.
 You end up choosing a charred maroon that almost seems black in the light.
 A dozen sum minutes of nothing occurs, as you both walk out to the audience of leers and into the car.
 Inside, the actress maintains the preoccupied visage, that occurred in the moon pool bathroom.
 You long for her head to turn to you but it never does.
 Driving to the room, you open the door and lead your prize to bed.
 Like Renaissance paintings, you become nude, kneeled, and euphoric.
 Slumber and sludge fall upon you.
 Waking in the same sheets you've woken in before, you shift your duvet over.
 The actress is gone.
 No impression on the mattress, no stench of body, nothing.
 A cigarette smoked in the ashtray, it's not on the side of the bed that you sleep on.
 The actress's hold, the folds of skin, the grip, the tics of hers, the sex last night all blustering in the ashtray.
 The only thing that remains is the ashtray and the feeling of her gawking at you.
 At the idea that you would think of her again
 This is how it always has been for you since her, eleven months from today to be exact.

Your family that you left behind in that house, grows horrid and unfamiliar by each day.
 She sits there thinking of the wrong inside of good memories.
 The taste of sulfur in your lips and your flaccid member at any time she begged for your intimacy.
 The books of the professional real men still sit, in what was your dresser at that house.
 She wants to burn them and be rid of it, but she can't bring herself to simply throw them away.
 The morning rain begins to rock you back into your dream that you will wake into again during your next performance.
 Before your eyes shut, a moment of sobriety occurs as the window to your hiding place reflects the ashtray, smokeless.
 And you stare back at the magician, clouds roll in and he disappears.

Zoe Robertson*

Autumn

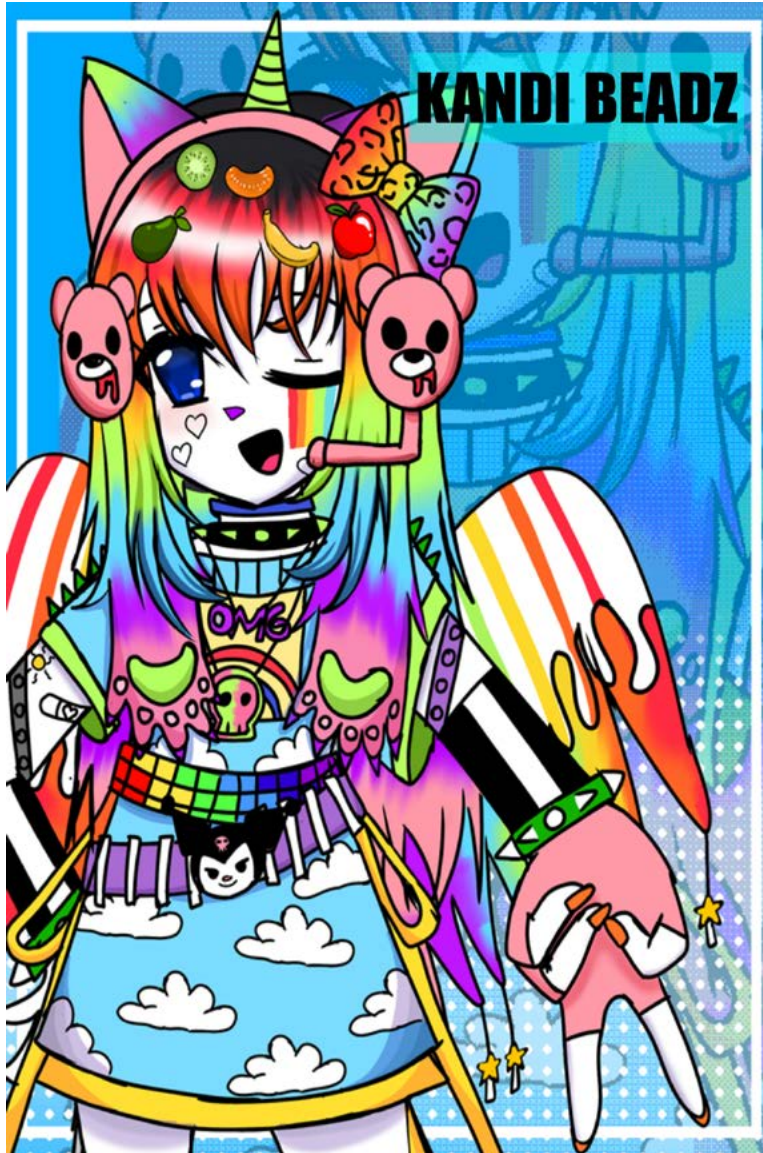
Leaves crash in patterns on yellow grass
 Holding each other in melodic peace
 Their browned veins bare, exposed
 Days go on, wind forces them apart
 Nature pries at their weakened statures
 First in inches, then in meters
 Until they are forced miles away.

Time passes, their vibrant hues fading
 Air strangles them in vengeance
 They weaken and weaken
 Losing all proof of life
 Until at last, their air is stolen
 Leaving nothing but curled edges and browned, dead veins

A girl leaves her home to reach the giant yellow bus
 Running down the beaten pathway
 Fallen leaves littered about
 She crushes their dry, withered frames
 Her mind solely focused on the vehicle awaiting her.

Abbey Brague*

COLORFUL KANDI BEADZ



At Pearl's

Nancy Manning

I choose this cafe because I am over Sergie.

At the counter, I peruse the chalkboard menu. A clarinet concerto plays overhead.

The scrawny girl with purple hair and a nose stud asks me what I want.

“A house salad, creamy Italian, an iced tea.”

“Name?”

“Jess.”

On Sundays, Yalies in tie-dyes and sweats lounge in chairs to eat brunch and discuss the Times Book Review or last night's performance at Woolsey Hall. I don't have the privacy of a crowd today, but our table by the window is available.

“Tom,” the Asian server announces.

A ponytailed man raises his hand.

I lean forward, rest my elbows on the red checkered tablecloth—something my mother always forbade my sister and me to do.

I admire the spiky wildflower off to the side. Sergie and I searched our phones for its name and discovered it was orange hawkweed or devil's paintbrush. I joked that the name seemed to symbolize the Bohemian lifestyle I craved as a teenager but was too scared to adopt.

Outside the window, a boy glides by on roller blades. A woman in a tube top and shorts crosses in front of a city bus.

“Jess,” the server calls. I wave my hand and he delivers my lunch.

When Sergie first brought me here, I was amazed by the speed of the service. “It's raw vegetables. It no take lots of time.” His Portuguese accent thicker than my creamy dressing.

Today I rip open a packet of sugar, empty it into my iced tea. It dissolves readily. I stab my fork into the escarole and raise it to my lips.

Sergie introduced me to healthy foods. I gave up bacon and eggs for breakfast and fast food. We seven tarted jogging. At first I hated it. Blisters sprouted on my feet. Muscles complained. But with Sergie it was all rhythm—hard workouts and the pleasure of massage afterwards.

I sip my iced tea. My eyes wander across the street to a solitary red chair on the sidewalk, oddly out of place. Abandoned.

My eyes shift back to the table, the bread on the plate. I break off a piece and chew it. Closing my eyes, I remember the sweetness of Sergie's taste as I relax to the slow, steady notes of saxophone music.

When I open my eyes, I catch sight of the clogged intersection at the Green, pedestrians speedwalking through pigeons that seemed unfazed.

I once asked my sister if it were hard to say how you feel to her beloved Donna.

“Communicating is tough, but if the relationship is worth it, you do it.”

I remember Sergie saying that I always do what others want.

“That's how I was brought up,” I replied.

I pleased my mother by dating Paul, a good Catholic whose mother was friends with mine. I'd just graduated college, tutored ESL students at the university before my grad program would commence. Paul was older, an actuarial for me to love, honor, and obey. Turns out he didn't obey, honor or even love me.

One afternoon, I left work early and went to his condo to make a surprise pasta dinner. Only I was the one who was surprised.

Back in the cafe, I stir my tea, the iced cubes beginning to melt. The back of my neck feels tight. “Stiffer than a whiskey,” Sergie used to say when massaging my shoulders.

I look around Pearl's. A congregation of people eating, talking, laughing. The red chair lonely outside.

I dumped Paul, felt the void for months. Hated leaving the apartment, making eye contact with others. I was a bird pushed out of its nest. Walking the New Haven streets, I felt more injured, viewing the spires of Yale.

Then I met Sergie.

At twenty-four he had his life together. After studying civil engineering back in Portugal, he worked at the town planner's office then applied for a Master's degree at Yale, but first he had to pass the English as a Second Language Test.

His advisor contacted my tutoring office and I was assigned him. Fighting the attraction I first felt when he walked into the room, I spent three weeks teaching and re-teaching him the grammar rules of English, found the work therapeutic, felt valuable, as if I had something to teach a man.

Someone at a cafe table laughs. I remember Sergie's laugh. How he made fun of the exceptions to usage rules.

“In Portugal language, we no do that.”

“In Portuguese, we don't do that,” I corrected.

“Okay, okay.” He smiled. “After I pass test, I fly you home. Show you the village where I grew up. My school, the people. Everything. My mother feed you feast.” I laughed, but he got serious. “No. I do that.”

For weeks I waited for his call. Finally, he phoned.

“You learned me, Jess.”

“What?”

“I kidding. I pass.”

To celebrate, Sergie took me to The Cellar, a Portuguese bistro outside New Haven.

In the candlelight, he raised his wine glass, “With all my thanks.” His face glowed in the candlelight. His pride as sweet as the wine. I imagine touring Lisbon with him. Strolling through narrow plazas, studying Romanesque arches and the tejados he often

described. Swimming in the blue of the Mediterranean, a heaven spread before us.

After dinner, he walked me to my door. Kissed my cheek.

“Good night,” I said. Turning my back I pictured him lying next to me in bed, making love, physical but tender.

The next morning, my colleague observed, “You’re glowing.”

For Sergie’s birthday, we came here to Pearl’s. Somehow Paul became the subject, my right index finger rapidly tapping the table.

“He no appreciate you.” He touched my hand, made my finger stop moving.

Outside in the cold air, he kissed me on my cheek, then my lips, his mouth soft on mine.

In his small apartment, we undressed each other, felt the warmth of bare skin on bare skin.

I tutored other students, attended a grad class on American poetry. Planned a spring trip to Portugal to see the sea, smell the salt air, watch the waves crash on the coastline.

Laughter at the adjacent table distracts me.

Sergie’s old girlfriend caused our break-up. Marianna had flown into New York. For some reason, Sergie wanted to see her.

When he returned, he tried to talk to me. Later he pleaded on my answering machine messages of apology, confessions that nothing had happened. I erased them all. Let him tell his sins to a priest.

One night he knocked on my apartment door. “Jess, we must have to talk.”

“Go away.”

“Please,” he urged.

I finally let him in.

His black hair disheveled, his jeans ripped, his cotton shirt in need of ironing. “I no sleep with her.”

“Why did you even go?”

“She wanted me back—”

“She! I bet.” I turned from him, collapsed on the sofa.

He knelt before me. “Jess, I no eat, no sleep. I no study.”

“Sergie, you’re not attached to me by a leash.”

His forehead wrinkled. “I no understand.”

“Ugh!” My arms crossed at my chest.

He tried to place his hand on my knee. I pushed it away, sighed heavily.

“Paul cheated.”

Sergie’s mouth dropped open.

I stared at him. A wounded bird in flight. I tried to keep my head raised.

“I found him with another woman.”

Sergie whispered, “What you do?”

“Took the bus to my apartment, vomitted in the bathroom. Paul called the next day, said, ‘Marleena makes me happy.’ A rope twisted around my neck.

I opened a window, threw his clothes out. They heaped on the sidewalk like an ugly pile of trash. I went to my sister’s house, broke down there. She hugged me, said, “Didn’t you two talk? Communication is the key.”

When I told my mother, she said, “I woman must be with a man.”

Sergie sat beside me. “Jess, nothing happened with Marianna.”

The memory of us dissolves from my mind. I look over at the red chair across the street.

“Shit!” I push forward my half-empty plate and knocked over the glass of iced tea. I dab the mess with my napkin. A server offers me a towel.

So I took tried love again. Screw it. The vulnerability it makes

you feel scratches deep in your soul. The loneliness that surfaces after a break-up lingers long. Someday I'll see someone sitting on that red chair smiling back at me. For now, I want to sit on that red chair. I don't need someone else to make me happy. I can control my own fate.

I remove the barrette from my hair. My brown strands fall to my shoulders, light like feathers. I stand.

Being alone doesn't represent weakness. It reveals strength of character and I have plenty of that left in me.

Riley Lupinski*

That of a Sailboat

I rock right on top of my reflection. Over a floor that can be shifted by the lightest breeze, knowing that my very stability could be betrayed at any moment by the very thing pushing me forward. Though there is nowhere else to be. Stuck following the whims of those beyond any control or be forced into rust and stagnation. Occasionally, I pass by them who take their stable ground for granted, and wish my feet were fit for their path. Light above passes me by everyday as if to check whether I still live and to burn away that which ails me. The light sinks away into a land of gold, urging me to follow, though the distance between us never seems to shrink. I understand that my say in the matter is of no concern to those who carve my path. But I wish that which they carve, as arbitrary of a path it is, takes me to reside in that land of gold.

Ryan Garesio

Stillness

When I was eighteen my father stood at
the threshold of the home he built for us—
bags packed, hand on the doorknob, car started
in the driveway.

I remember him looking back at me like a man on his deathbed
full of guilt, like some sinner soaked in solitary confinement
while screaming to God—*Why did you do this to me?*

I sat at the kitchen table with my mother and
my sister, and like witnesses waiting
for the crescendo of some awful opus,
merged ourselves with the moribund moment.

When my father turned away and crossed
over into the world that was without me,
I turned to my mother to look for an answer in the stillness.

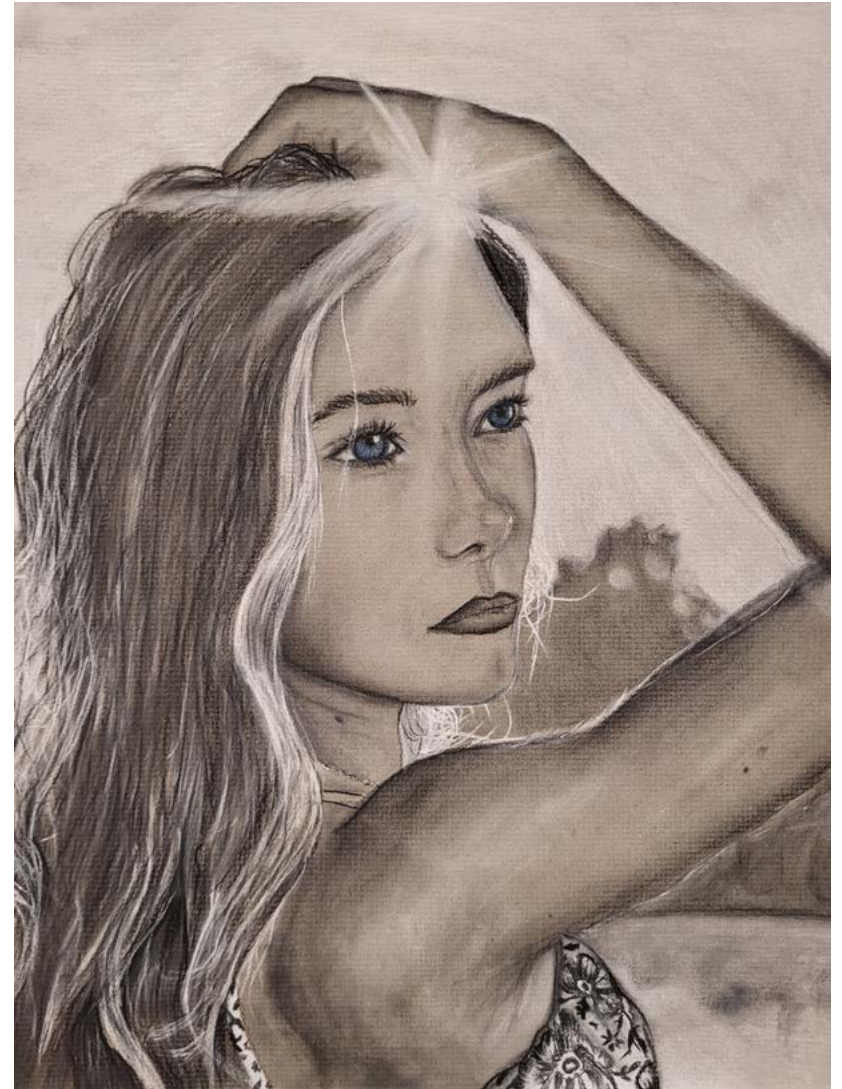
In the beginning, she said, there is nothing.
I am loathe to think we will make it, love.

And then my mother said, let there be darkness.

And there was darkness.

Julia Harding

SUMMER SELF



Candace Hall

Epiphany

The kid at the gas station
 called me *Ma'am*.
 In front of everyone,
 no one even noticing.
Ma'am? I said. *Ma'am?*
You must mean my grandmother
Or some old lady with orthopedic shoes
And a big shiny pocketbook with handles.
You can't be talking to me.
 There was a pause. It's respect,
 he told me, backpedaling.
Deference, he said. *It's not about age.*
 But I had heard the truth,
 heard it in that single word.
 I knew I was old,
 when that kid at the gas station
 called me *Ma'am*.

Candace Hall

School Picture, 1980

You're standing second to the left, third row,
 William J. and Bruce M. on either side.
 Brittany and popular girls in front row,
 their outfits and expressions match.
Didn't we look young then?
 We say each class reunion.
Can you believe those clothes, hairdos?
 Pointing, *There's George, in taxes now,*
married Brittany, two kids.
 Brittany, and front row girls
 come back every year,
 But not the second to the left, third row.
What was her name? I forget.
Oh yes, she's that foster kid.

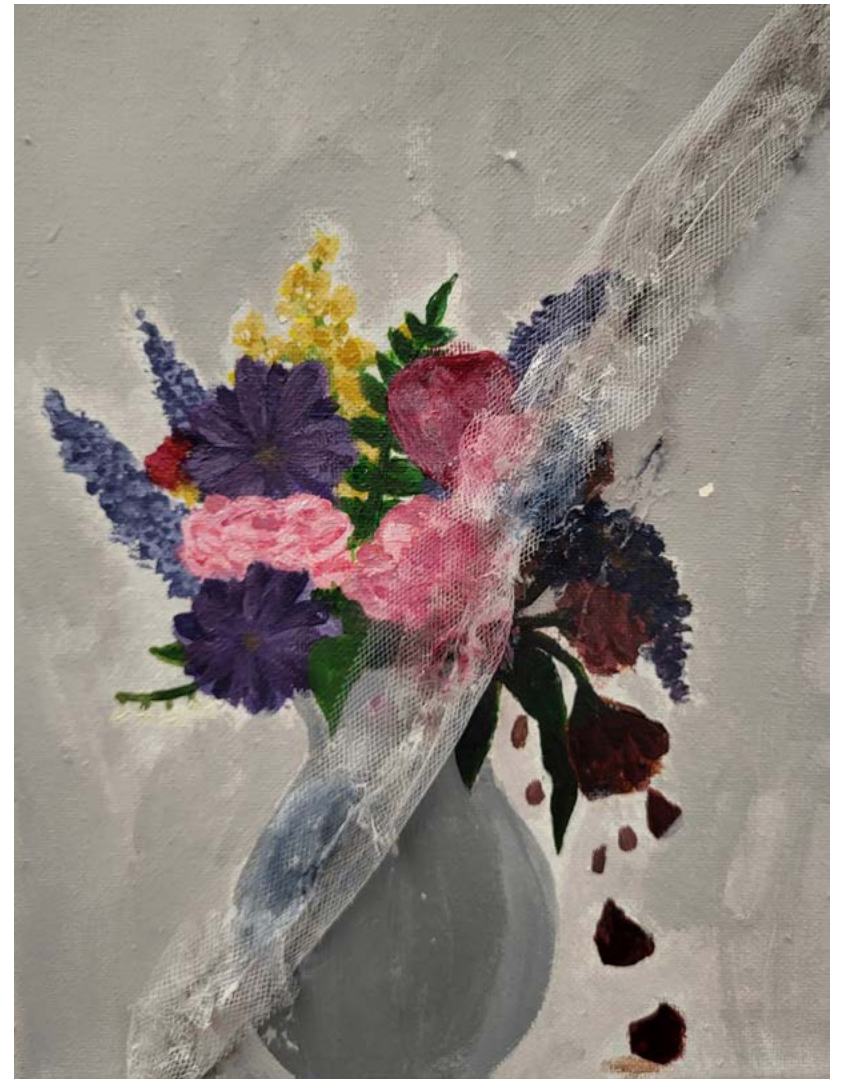
Candace Hall

Maiden Aunt

In our 1955 home movies
Elizabeth stops by December 24th
on her way to visit nephew George.
I watch her again
coming through the front door,
bringing pie and homemade cranberry sauce,
a holiday corsage from nephew Howard
bright against her winter coat.
Sharing herself like her Christmas gifts
showing me what is possible
at the end of years.

Julia Harding

PAST AND FUTURE



Until My Ears Bleed

3rd PLACE - FICTION

Mathew Nelson*

Tiria steps out of the rain and into her friend's kitchen. Lost in reflection of the last few chaotic months, and eager to finally enjoy a moment's rest, she almost doesn't notice Finn's voice, "Hang up your jacket and head to the living room, I want you to see something." She nods to him and unzips the dripping raincoat. He continues as he walks toward and opens the door to the storage closet, "I'll be right behind you, just going to turn the heat up a bit."

Still shivering slightly from the cold rain, she lets out a relieved sigh, "Please do." After sliding out of her boots, she starts toward the living room door. But as she grabs the doorknob, she hears faint music coming from the other side of the door. She presses her ear against it and listens carefully; The song is slow and airy, with prominent lingering jazz organ chords. She lets out a snicker just in time for Finn to return to the kitchen and see her.

He turns his hands upward and questions her, "What's so funny?"

She turns her head slightly to look at him, her lips and eyes smiling with amusement, "You're trying way too hard..." She jerks her thumb toward the door, "I'm willing to bet you set up a hot tub in there."

He smiles back and gestures forward, "Only one way to find out."

Quietly laughing to herself, she slowly shakes her head and opens the door without looking away from him. Fully bought into her own prediction, she playfully exaggerates her turn toward the living room. What meets her eyes leaves her stunned for a moment. She slowly walks into the dark room which is illuminated by the dancing neon city-lights outside, all diffused and scattered around the room by special curtains hung on the sliding balcony door.

Finn follows her and quietly closes the door, "So, what do you think?"

Still scanning the room, fully taking in the light show, Tiria takes a second to respond, "It's just like Q'tir... The purples, blues, and pinks of the trees at night..."

"I thought you would like to feel at home," he pauses for a moment and lets out a quiet laugh, "y'know, before we potentially raze your home."

Still captivated by the scene, she decides to appreciate his effort to comfort her rather than ridicule his insensitivity, "It really does feel like home..." She turns to him, "I'm not sure how to thank you for this..."

He chuckles playfully and holds the tip of his chin with his fingers, "Well, your shirt's been trailing rainwater all through my apartment..." He shoots her a devilish smile, "You wouldn't mind taking it off, would you?"

She laughs and shakes her head slowly, "As chivalrous as ever. You're lucky this is why I'm here or else I'd wipe the floor with you for saying that."

"I'm not so sure I'd mind that."

She rolls her eyes and gives him a shy smile. She begins to slowly lift her shirt, but her arms freeze as the various battle scars and marks on her torso are revealed. She lets it fall back down to her waist.

Finn frowns slightly before speaking, "Something wrong?"

She's quick to stumble through her answer, "I, um.... no it's nothing.... nothing really..." She chuckles nervously and rubs the back of her neck.

Finn tries to break the tension, "You had no problem stripping down in front of us during our prison break, remember?"

Her face slightly flushes red and she plants her fists on her hips to scold him, "Hey, that was different, I needed to get into that Kevlar suit!" Seeing his gaze drop, she realizes he was joking and clumsily doubles back, "B-besides, those jumpsuits were uncomfortable, not to mention not my style at all."

He looks back up at her with an eyebrow raised, "I thought you looked pretty good in them." Tiria cocks her head slightly to the side, so Finn shrugs and explains his reasoning, "The look just seemed to fit you, the casual coolness that comes with wearing baggy clothes. It's part of the reason I started talking to you."

She almost hisses her next words, “Casual coolness isn’t what I try for.”

“Yet you do it anyway.”

She gives him a glare, “Because when do I ever get to dress differently? Either I’m on a mission and need to be in tactical garb or I’m in clothes fit for exercise to stay in shape for my missions.”

He shrugs again, “I think that style looks good though....”

His inability, or refusal, to understand her perspective gets to her. She feels her face heat up slightly as she retorts, “You might, the people of New York might, hell maybe all the people on Earth do, but where I’m from, combat boots, tactical visors, and Kevlar suits are not fashion befit a woman.”

After quickly considering the risk of offending her, he decides to challenge her philosophy, “And you’re not a woman?”

His words hit her hard, like a slug to the chest. Her face contorts in frustration and confusion before she stamps her foot on the ground and raises her voice to answer, “I don’t know, dammit! Compared to a real one, I really can’t decide if I am or not. I mean, look at me!” She points to various imperfections on her body as she begins to list them out loud, “A war brand burned onto my cheek, a camera lens for an eye, all these scars all over my body... I have more in common with a combat training robot than I do any other woman I’ve met thus far! I’m not fit for what we’re doing right now....” She drops her gaze in shame, “Not fit for you....”

Taken aback, Finn hesitates before responding, “Not fit.... Tiria, I don’t-”

She abruptly cuts him off, “I envy my sister. The way she commands a room with her speech instead of her fists. The way she can connect to others without ulterior motives,” She swallows down the lump in her throat before continuing, “The way her form perfectly complements each dress she wears.”

Confused, and not fully realizing the weight of her words, Finn instinctively inquires about her last statement, “Her form?”

Without warning, she practically tears her shirt off and throws it to the side, the skin-tight sports bra quickly following

suit. She points underneath each of her nipples to two long, vertical scars running down her near-flat chest, both warped and faded into the pink skin by time and healing. She inhales sharply, and her voice comes out shaky and unsteady, “These were taken from me before I even fully knew what they were. I was told they would get in the way of my training, and that I didn’t need them.” She starts to tremble, “They didn’t ask me if I wanted them, let alone what I wanted my future to be, that decision already was made for me. While my mother was busy raising Ophilia, my father wanted a son to command his army. He all but created one out of me. I didn’t want any of this,” She shakes her head slowly and narrows her eyes, “but what I want doesn’t matter. What I am is what matters.”

After a long moment of silence to absorb her words, Finn lets out a small sigh, “You’re right, what you are does matter,” he slowly steps close, takes her hand in his, and guides it away from her chest, “but what do you want?”

With tears welling up in her eyes, she gently squeezes his hand and raises her voice to respond, “I want to be free from my past! I want to be normal again! I want to be a woman again! I want....” Her words trail off as she looks down at the floor, “I want....”

Finn steps even closer and wipes a tear off her cheek. His voice is low and comforting as he repeats himself, “What do you want?”

Her trembling stops as she looks up at his face, the features of which are soft and welcoming in the low, cool lighting. The aperture of her mechanical eye is opened to its fullest, and the light glowing from within her natural eye is brighter than ever before. Her voice came out as a desperate, shaky whisper, audible only to the ears mere inches away from her, “I want you.”

His lips form a gentle smile, “I’m yours.”

ShawnaLee Kwashnak

RASPING SASSY'S HIND RIGHT HOOF



Christopher Boniecki

Intentions

Like the hallowed smear of a bird corpse,
lying on its back,
Its wet feathers clinging to the concrete.
They used to be one impressive strata
that carried the bird.
Now each feather clings alone,
trying to hold on,
but that's not what feathers are for.

Christopher Boniecki

Ophelia

Oh, please don't be dreadful.

If you are to drown

Could it be— under lily pads?

The way the strands of your hair

twist with the algae.

Some terrible beauty,

your spirit,

pleasant jet streams,

decorate a sunset.

Christopher Boniecki

I See Resurrection

I see resurrection

In horse stampedes,

In the bellows of smoke they kick up,

In how the grey light makes the whole scene feel like rock,

In all the wary bends of time.

Joshua Harris*

Dancing Star

I broke my nose so that you might have blood
 I ran miles so that you might have sweat
 I rewatched Castaway with Tom Hanks so that you might have tears

You grew, bit by bit, ounce by ounce, second by second
 Churned and frothed in the chaos of my innards
 Gestating in my heart
 My larynx quivered in anticipation of speaking you into this world
 Until you pushed up through my throat
 Along my tongue and raked by my teeth
 Unhinging my jaw like a cobra
 I gave birth to you
 Every time

Out you fall into my hands: wet and pink and wriggling
 I glow when I look upon you
 Your touch could cure lepers & cancer patients
 To me you are a star that can dance and a sunset that can sing
 But then you say: "Daddy, I shat myself!"
 And I say: "How?! How the hell could you have done that? That
 doesn't even make any sense! You were just born!"
 But you don't answer me. Because you're dead.

So, with a sigh, I don my surgeon's garb
 Masked and gowned
 Hands steady, scalpel at the ready
 I cut, from chin to navel
 And, oh, yup
 Sure enough
 You're literally full of shit
 Full to the brim with it

The closer I look the worse it gets
 Organs in the wrong place
 Some over-abundant, some entirely absent
 Some are colored wrong, some are too short or too long
 Some have tumors

I pull off my gloves just to smack my forehead
 "Shit!" I say, both in disbelief and observation
 I followed the recipe. I had a plan.
 Agonized over every step like tiptoeing through a minefield made of
 eggshells
 I learned rocket science and string theory for this
 Yet here you are, stinking all the same

I look down at your stillborn form & sink against the surgical slab
 with a sigh
 I can't bear to even touch you, like every bit is hot and cold and sharp
 all at once
 Every step of the way you sung and you shone
 But now that the labor pains are over, the pain of regret burns black
 and songless

So I bury you in the basement
 Where you belong
 Next to all the other plots of fetal demise
 Long ago I'd cry a parent's tears
 But now my face stays dry

Sour you are!
 Sorrowful you are!
 Sickening you are!

Smelly, flayed, full of shit, disobeyed
 In pain

And maybe it's my fault too
 Due to how easily I give up on you

And then I wonder: is it the thing that slings these words that stink
 That is the sickening sorrowful sour thing
 The father that births only bastard babies
 And then I really wonder
 Who I'm really talking to

But I know that if this is the last funeral
 The words I sling will only further stink and spoil

I'll never crawl out of the basement
 I'll waste away and rot from the inside out
 Never to hear the song of the setting sun
 Never to see the light of the dancing stars

So I re-break my nose
 Even though the blood has dyed my hands
 I run miles
 Even though every finish line turns into a halfway point
 I watch Castaway, again
 Even though I can recite all the dialogue by heart
 And the chaos in my soul churns

Joshua Harris*

Priorities

In a frigid sunstarved land
 Far in the anemic willows: lays a house

A grey lump rising out of the browned ground like a wart
 It's orbited by a constellation of burnt out stars formed of a thick halo
 of stumps

A dilapidated garden lays east for the rising sun
 But its desperate furrows bear no fruits, and the light does not thaw
 the soil

Stuck into the naked wall by the empty doorframe is an axehead
 With a blade duller than a textbook on the tax-records of dead
 nations

Inside, all the walls have been messily knocked down
 The only survivors of the purge are the bare minimum beams who
 stripe the interior
 The skin-and-bone skeleton can barely do its job, causing the eveless
 ceiling to sag in many places

The floorboards are gone, and their supports follow suit
 Leaving only a jarring dirt pit of a floor a few steps below the door
 Littered with insulation and rubble from the demolished walls

The cabinets have been gutted
 Every stick of furniture is gone
 Even the windowsills have been torn and chopped off

Against the left wall of the hollow is the fireplace
 The pale red brick stands out against the other remains,
 freezerburned white
 But interior is burnt black with the ashes of a hundred warm nights

The chimney collapsed into itself long ago
 Letting the ice-soaked wind claw even deeper inside

The fires have died, the fuel is spent, and soon it will snow
Against the right wall of the hollow is a box of metal and ivory and
the only surviving wood
But the warmth of every felled tree from every emptied forest burned
Doesn't hold a candle to the sound of its music in that frigid
sunstarved land

Kaydence Soule*
BLOOMING THROUGH SILENCE



Jeannie Evans-Boniecki

Hovering Halfway

The cherry red balloon
brought home from the Yankee Doodle Fair
one Friday night
floated frenetically
against my bedroom's popcorn ceiling
buffeted by the breeze of the whirring fan,
bobbing so violently to escape to the sky
we thought it would burst.

I'd dragged it home
reverentially
through the cotton candy streets
as it tugged at its leash,
the helium heart
reluctant to be a child's pet,
but once in the house
accepting its fate.

That night when I was tucked in
it skittered over to rest above me
its ribbon dropped like a twirl of green tail
down the wall as I fell into dreams.

Saturday, frustrated it couldn't lift me too,
I tied the balloon's ribbon
round my teddy bear's neck
and he was lifted so gently
his fur feet grazed the gritty kitchen floor.

By Sunday night, the balloon began to drag,
distant, listless.
hanging halfway,
no longer straining, draining life.

By morning it bobbed
an inch above the ground
withered and wrinkled
its red skin darker deeper
and richer than blood,
the green ribbon, in a heap, curling into itself.

My heart withered too.

There it lay like a dead bird
bloated, distant.
This was my first death: a bit hysterical
haunted
hovering only halfway
I choked as I lifted the limp body
and laid it gently in the trash.

The Organic Perspective on the Robot

Apocalypse

Kieran Bheemaswarroop*

Carbon cycles tip and teeter, given the nature of fine balances. It is no different now than it was since the world was roiling and molten, our celestial mother furiously finding and fixing her form. When big green mats turned the seas to poison, when big green roots broke down the rocks to soil, when big keen apes saw it all too easy to grind up their great-great-grandcells into grease for their horrendous contraptions.

It seems as no matter what we do, we cannot help but to disrupt what beautiful and intricately built systems we have been offered. Can one blame the child if their broken toys had not been made to played with? To survive so violently seems par for the course on a very fortunate rock in the middle of a cold, vast nowhere.

Recently felled greenery had spurred a motion towards moldy locomotion. Plenty of yeasts with plenty to eat! Soon after the world had turned brown and grey, patches of green and blue blossomed out in fractals across every formerly living surface. Mammals and non-mammals alike began growing their own new thick coat of thin white hairs. Fleshy forms were all but gobbled and gone in the blink of an eye. But mold still hungers. It is built into their wispy little bones.

In the wreckage of things, the makeup of the thick debris-filled atmosphere began shifting away from noxious particles dispersed by man, and towards an abundance of spores. One cannot refine away what it is that mold loves to chew on. As it turns out, machines look mighty tasty to things without eyes. Metal is stone, is soil, is rot. Rubber and silicone: oil, soil, rot. Plastic and steel and cogs and wheels are but a bountiful banquet for none other than these ferocious fungi with a propensity for uncritical consumption.

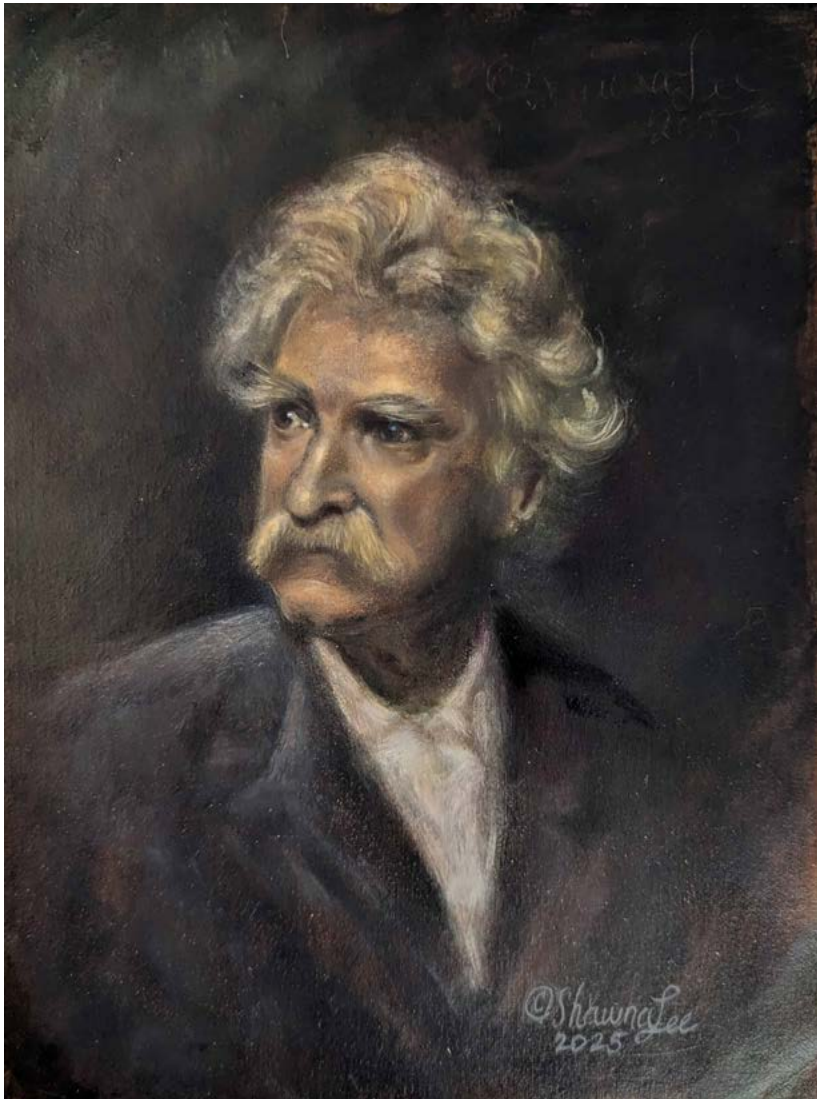
Both flesh and metal were too soft for acid rain. Scrap metal with limbs slumped between the concrete pillars of a spire-like structure, its metallic innards exposed and swollen like fat sardines in a tin-can carapace. The silvery fish skin sloughed off of its lead-laden

lungs like macerated flesh peeling off a finger under a week-old wet bandage.

Though this beast had a pulse. Something rubbery and strange squelched and swelled around its circuitry. Something glistening and foul with a sulfurous stench. Slimy sanguine tendrils soaking up solder in neat rectangular lines. A bubbling, throbbing, thriving goo thrusting out its wet little limbs to find a new feast—the only way forward is to eat more than its kin can, motherboards and tin cans dissolving on their moldy little tongues.

ShawnaLee Kwashnak

WHAT WOULD HE THINK NOW?



Arriana Gilbert*

Déjà vécu

My love, does it not feel familiar?
Like the sunset rolling over the hills,
With the moon rising behind our backs,
And a chill that follows till the morning rise.

Can you feel the flow of time slowing?
Sounds of chatter and breath melting into the background,
The concept of seconds stretching into hours,
While memories emerge like waterfalls spilling into a hidden creek.

When I gaze at you, my love,
I see an oil painting preserved across from the Mona Lisa.
You have eyes of waves and the smile of the sun
That illuminates the horizon, glistening on the ocean's surface.

Every moment we have spent together,
Warmth and familiarity fill me.
It is as if the veil has lifted from my eyes,
And I can remember what will happen next.

My love, can't you feel it?
The hums of *déjà vécu*
déjà vécu
déjà vécu

Arriana Gilbert*

Insignificance

How am I meant to measure myself,
when my mini skirt is modest for church?
It could be made of tulle, or stained the color
of the Devil and a whore, and church folks
would smile with their cold, deadened eyes.

I am confined to hold my attention forward,
incapable of gazing down to hide my shameful face,
unless I wanted to see my exposed toes peeking
from the sheer, red skirt, with a frayed trim of dirt.

I would fixate on my reflection, expecting
a tall Sungold sunflower, yet the sea,
it has been watering the soil and my roots.
All I can see in the salty puddle is a brown,
rotten thing, with shriveled, dull petals.

Am I expected to grow big and sturdy as a stalk,
full and fluffy, with the complexion of golden yellow,
when nurtured with poison that drips from their lips?
Or rather, do I adapt, then crystallize the salt to be palatable?

Arriana Gilbert*

Archetype

Her problem is that she was created as an archetype,
Stuffed into a mortal's body,
And given a gift of clear sight.

But her existence as a metaphor drowns in a world of literalism,
With her power destabilizing a world that cannot contain her,
And a world that could never understand her.

She is a goddess trapped in a realm that's separate from her home –
Her home that is hidden and shunned,
Spoken as hallucinatory and evil.

It is her home that understands her ambiguity,
Does not attempt to limit her,
And sees her for whom she is without an expositional breath.

Joseph R. Adomavicia

Wandering Vagrant

CNC machinist, poet, and author—
I've dedicated myself to these passions.
Eighteen years and counting
of machining tools that fasten applications together,
like the lines of stanzas, I pair in my poetry.

Achievements and accolades serve
as a momentary source of euphoria,
yet never quite hit the mark
when it comes to my yearning for love.
The world gets lonely always walking it alone.
A wandering vagrant.

I never feel like I'm home,
even though I have a place I call home.
Sometimes I question if my hands,
calloused from hours at the lathe,
are the same hands that carefully arrange
words into delicate patterns.

My days are measured
with micrometers and metaphors,
within precise cuts
and the soft rhythm of steady syllables.
I find myself caught between
the grind of steel and the quiet pulse of inspiration,
always searching for connection,
for meaning fastened into the seams of my existence.

Evenings drift by in solitude,
the hum of machines echoing in the silence.
Pages of unfinished poems scatter the floor
like metal shavings.
I have colleagues, and I have readers,
but neither can fill the hollow ache
of wishing someone would see the beauty

in both the work and the words.
In the end, I remain adrift,
fastening together my life with grommets and verses,
hoping someday to build something
that feels like home.

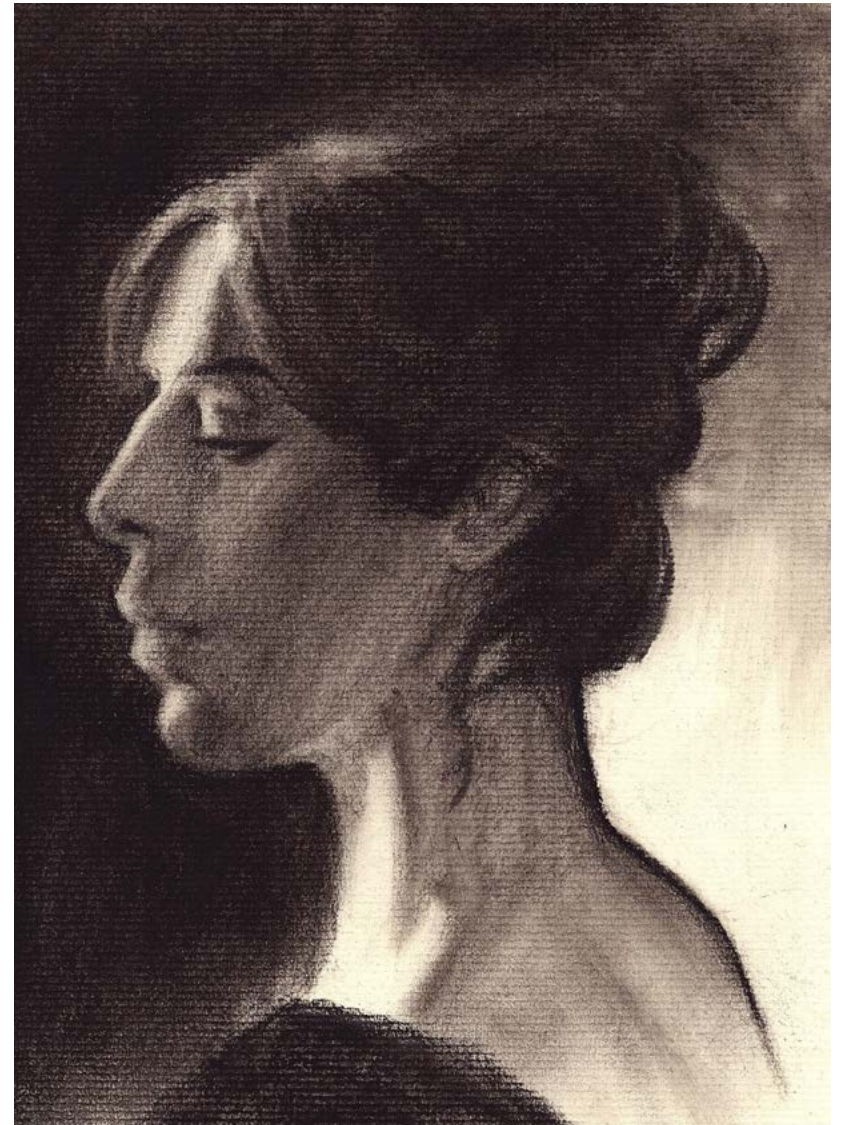
Joseph R. Adomavicia

Without Saying a Word

It lives in the small things,
 those that are gentle, those that are softer—
 the gestures others forget to offer.
 When you shrink your presence to fit the room,
 I am the voice that expands your space
 until it belongs to you again.
 I know when the day has frayed your edges.
 I am in tune with the static in your silence.
 Come, put down the armor;
 I'll carry it for you.
 Home is the safety I've built for your rest,
 so, nestle your head upon my chest.
 While the world shouts its empty demands,
 those selfish commands telling you who you ought to be,
 I'll be tending the garden,
 minding the things you hold sacred.
 In the noisy corners of your life,
 I am the soft space where you can breathe.
 It is the steady hand, the weight divided—
 proof that the burden you carry
 is no longer a solo act.
 I am the corner of the room
 that doesn't ask for a resume.
 The heavy lifting?
 It's lighter when we both have a grip.
 No fanfares. No speeches.
 Just the quiet fact of me,
 standing where the shadows used to be—
 Without saying a word.

David Shaholli*

LADY CHARCOAL



Tired People Know You're There

Thomas Warner-Crouch*

Grandma's stare is the only thing I remember. Her gaze at the wooden floor in her apartment cleaned every week because she didn't know how anymore. Grandma's eyes were worn through slits of bleeding sunlight. "Grandma?" I'd prompt. But nothing ever came of the prompting. She'd mutter something unintelligible. Something vague at best before she'd continue her reverie toward nothing.

"Honey," my mom would say. "Leave grandma alone."

Her eyes wouldn't wander like she once did. Her eyes never pried from her shadow. I would wonder every time my mother would tell me to leave her be what would become of her. But there wasn't anything I could do to help. No one could help her but I persisted. "Grandma?"

"Oh for fuck's sake leave grandma alone."

"Well, there's obviously something wrong with her. Look."

"Nothing's wrong with grandma. Grandma's just tired. "

She's like that everytime we come...tired. God forbid I put my finger on what was truly wrong with grandma my mom would freak out. The swearing at my persistence was the marker that her nerves were thin. They could crinkle and dissolve completely if I pressed so I relented.

"Let's go okay, there's nothing wrong with grandma.

Grandma didn't talk anymore. She was in a wheelchair. She lost the ability to walk. Every time I went to "Sunshine Retirement" I could see a full catheter sunlight yellow protruding from her leg, Yet mom never admitted fault or wrong when it came to grandma. Even though as frail as she was she was always a frailer mother. Grandma would never admit to that. Admit to the times she struck my mother in the face for acting the way I did. Never fessed up to the fact that the closet would sometimes be my mothers bedroom, that at school they'd see the bruises. But back then there were never probes into the goings ons of various households.

Imperfections were hidden. Tears were shed but sobs weren't heard and the like. I can't help but think this is what kept my mother's sanity alive. The fact that if she could just say everything was okay

like repeating mantras in the dark, she'd believe it no matter what the circumstance, no matter the reality that presented itself. This was her gift. Her passion even. It was all she had to cling to. The notion of perfection.

The next day we'd come over to Sunshine Retirement and my mother would ask. How did she behave last night?"

To which a receptionist in a white washed hallway would just add to her denial. "Your mother can be quite the pistol."

"Don't I know it."

Leading me by her arm we'd go to her unit where the night nurse left her.

"Hi mom," she'd greet the air. A ritual her and I would constantly repeat despite no sign of approving results.

"Hi, grandma."

Mom would never tell me anything. How grandma would scream at night just shriek an eeking sound from her throat until her night nurse would tell her it's just a dream, Not even aware whether that was the honest to God truth. No one could tell whether my grandma dreamt. Sometimes I wonder if that were so what were her dreams about? One time my mother told me what I knew to be true.

"I don't know sweetheart. Maybe she dreams of you."

"Me? No grandma doesn't look at me."

"She knows you're there. Tired people know you're there. "

"Yeah you're right."

Now I'm not convinced the dreams had any topic if she had any at all. Maybe they were just tangents of who she used to be, then when she woke she realized even in her detachment who she really was. Who she had become. But neither us nor the nurses had any time to examine her core imaginings because speech remained evasive. As did everything else.

Grandma grandma? I waved my hand in front of her face and snapped my fingers the way I always did. This time, though, Grandma slouched over while my mother washed dishes in the kitchenette.

“Mommy”

“What, sweetheart.”

“Grandma must be tired so she fell asleep.” I never saw my grandma let sleep take her. Only her mind. ‘

Mom peered from the tiny kitchen and saw her slouched over silhouette in the carpet.

“Shit.” She mouthed.

“Is she sleeping?”

Mom never answered me even when I said asked her twice, only put her finger to the right side of grandma’s neck. I had no idea what she was doing.

“Oh dear. This is a deep sleep.” She said

Honey, here’s a dollar go get a soda from the machine down the hall.”

You said I’m not allowed to drink any soda.,

Damn it just do it!”

I listened to my mother. Heeding her advice while I came down the dimly lit blue carpeted hall, the smell of urine and the elderly leaking through every dirtied apartment unit. I saw a white clothed male nurse sprinting toward the unit, and the whirring sound of bells. A singular unending whirr that refused to stop. I didn’t know what it was and still don’t. All I knew was that grandma was sleeping. Did she know that I was there before my mother lied? No one could possibly know. This agnostic revolution of thought that grandma both did and never knew who was there, where she was or what she thought. That all remained speculation. All I would ever know back then, was that grandma was tired, And tired people have to sleep.

Abbey Brague*

I Search for Love

I search for love in twilight skies,
 In whispered winds, where silence lies.
 I chase its echo, faint, unseen,
 A distant dream, a fleeting gleam.
 I reach for hearts that slip like sand,
 Through outstretched arms, they don't withstand.
 A touch too brief, a glance too shy,
 Like stars that flicker, then say goodbye.
 I long to feel a warmth so true,
 To find a soul to see me through.
 But though I search, both night and day,
 Love's path just fades and slips away.
 Yet still I hope, though it may sting,
 That one day love will softly bring
 A quiet peace, a steady light,
 To end this endless, searching flight.
 For though it's lost, I know it's near—
 A whispered promise, crystal clear.
 And maybe, just when I let go,

Love will find me, like the snow.

Joshua Tobar*

ARTIST



Benjamin J. Chase

Bearded

Every beard begins in neglect,
but some foster the virtue
into Civil War proportions
and wield a haggard tuft
like a bayonet
against the civilized world.

Benjamin J. Chase

Cut Cut

As I pass oak slabs
through the whirling jointer,
I see Levi's inquiring eyes
in the smudged window above.

"Cut, cut," I see him mouth,
and I exaggerate a grinning nod,
replicating that verb myself
to affirm his observation.

And I am quick to wonder
who my son becomes
beyond these moments—
each act a new vocation.

But it is truly best
not to know just now
and love the little boy
who loves his father working.

Benjamin J. Chase

Levi at the Pacific

In one windswept corner
of Oregon's Tunnel Beach
at the end of the continent,
Levi ambles from rock to rock,
tidal pool to trickling stream,
his golden, wispy hair askew.
Self-appointed curator of stones,
he is overtired and hardwired
to inspect this limitless bounty
scattered across the sands.
I follow at a distance
and marvel at his precise play.
I know he has no plans
to retire from his profession.
Like me, my son requires rescue
from beloved projects.

Andrielly Almeida*

KEY TO YOUR HOUSE



Road to Athens

Xavier Thompson*

There was a long and ruthless road said to connect all of Greece. It stretched from the myth-rich lands of Thebes, passed through the warrior society of Sparta, and wound its way to the home of scholars named after the goddess Athena herself—Athens. It was said the road could even reach the gods on Mount Olympus and descend to the realm of Hades.

Now it was hard times, in the world of men.

The road, once alive with trading merchants, debating philosophers, and marching armies, now lay silent and empty. The war between the Delian League and the Peloponnesian League had hollowed once great cities. Famine engulfed the countryside, and the gods themselves seemed distant.

Along this road traveled a boy named Xenos and his mother, Cassandra. In recent years her name had begun to travel farther than her feet, carried on whispers and quiet praise, for her song held power in an age grown deaf to prayer.

“Xenos, my child, must you carry that dull blade?” she asked.

“Mother, say no such thing,” he replied. “This blade protects us on our travels.”

Kassandra laughed softly and looked down at her son, holding onto the quiet hope that one day he would find his true calling. His father was a Spartan Soldier commanding and taking charge in numerous battles. He was very strict on Xenos, always forcing his warrior ways upon the child, and for this, Xenos grew to despise his father. The last time Xenos saw his father was just before the man left for war, after a brief grace period of three weeks.

“Boy, get in here!”

“Yes, father,” Xenos answered, stepping into the room. “Have you been training?”

“Yes, father.”

His father’s cold and calculated eyes studied him for a second, as if weighing the truth in his words. The house was quiet

except for the distant sound of steel striking wood from the training grounds outside. Even as a child, Xenos was weighed down by heavy expectations, being the son of a commander; it felt like armor he had never asked to wear but must bear with pride.

“Then show me,” The Commander said coldly.

Xenos hesitated only for a moment, but it was quickly noticed by his father. As they stepped into the dusty yard behind their home, the afternoon sun above them beamed, its rays burned against the dry ground, and what stood in the center of the yard was a wooden training post. It had been beaten with years of hardship scattered throughout its frame, and it stood there waiting like a silent opponent once again.

Xenos drew his blade from his side and took his stance, the way he had been taught. “Now Strike,” his father ordered.

Xenos dashed in from the side, holding the blade steady. He then closed the gap fast and thrust the blade into the post. It was a sloppy attack not worthy of his father’s praise. He struck it again, and again, each blow slower and less accurate than the last.

“Harder!” his father barked.

Xenos tightened his grip and swung once more, but this time the blade glanced weakly across the post.

His father stepped forward and snatched the weapon from his grasp.

“This... This is how you train?” A Spartan’s son swinging iron like a frightened farmer...pathetic.” Xenos lowered his eyes and stood there in silence.

“Look at me when I speak to you, boy.” Xenos lifted his gaze reluctantly.

“You carry my blood,” his father continued. “That means you carry my duty. Strength. Discipline. This is War. Sparta does not raise weak sons.”

“I know,” Xenos muttered quietly.

For a moment, the air between them froze.

Xenos swallowed but forced the words out. “But I do not wish to fight.”

His father’s face hardened like a rock. He turned away for a moment, staring toward the distant mountains.

“You have no choice but to fight,” he said firmly. The world is not kind to those who choose the softer paths.”

“But mother says—”

“Your mother sings,” the man interrupted. Songs do not win fights nor wars.”

The anger behind Xenos’ eyes grew; they became red, so red that it started to form tears. “Her songs help people,” Xenos said. “More than a sword does.”

In a single quick motion, his father drove the blade deep into the training post out of frustration. “A sword keeps people alive,” he said. “It would be wise to remember that.”

He turned and began walking back inside the house.

“I leave in the morning,” he said without looking back. “When I return, I expect to see a warrior standing here, not a boy hiding behind his mother’s songs.”

Xenos stood alone in the yard as the Mediterranean sun dipped lower in the sky. He stared at the blade buried in the wood and wondered if strength always had to come from steel. A few months later, word came back home that Xenos’ father died at sea fighting the Athenians; he sent back home a blade withered from the heat of battle.

The memory of that day faded like smoke in the wind as Xenos walked beside his mother. The road stretched endlessly ahead, its cracked stones worn smooth by centuries of travelers who once walked it with purpose.

A broken cart lay abandoned beside the road, its wheels half buried in dust. The nearby fields were dry and yellow, their crops long dead from famine. Even the wind seemed tired as it drifted across the hills.

Xenos walked with his dull blade hanging from his side, his

eyes scanning the quiet road. Cassandra smiled faintly, though her gaze remained fixed on the horizon.

“The road remembers, you know,” she said.

Xenos frowned. “Roads cannot remember, mother.”

“Not in the way we do,” she replied gently. “But every stone has carried the footsteps of kings, soldiers, poets, and fools. Their stories linger, even when the world forgets them.”

Kassandra possessed a voice that seemed meant for the gods themselves. Through her songs, she told stories of hardship and hope, bringing comfort to those who listened.

“Xenos, my child, would you like to hear something I’ve been working on?” she asked. “A hundred times, yes, mother,” he said eagerly.

Her voice rose softly at first, like wind through dry grass. Though the melody carried sorrow, she was a widow, after all, it also held warmth, like sunlight breaking through storm clouds. It was a song of wandering souls and lost homes, but also of hope.

The sound drifted across the empty fields and along the ancient road.

Xenos had heard her sing many times before, but something felt different now. The air felt heavier, as if the world itself were listening.

Far above the land of men, beyond drifting clouds, something stirred. On Mount Olympus, the gods watched the mortal world below.

Apollo paused among the golden halls, his lyre resting in his hands. Then he heard it.

A mortal voice. Soft. Honest. Rare.

Apollo listened as the melody drifted upward on the wind.

“It has been a long time,” he murmured, “since a mortal song carried such strength.”

Looking down upon the world, he saw them: a woman beside a ruined shrine and a boy sitting along the lonely road.

“The voice belongs to the mother,” he said quietly. “But the path...”

His golden eyes shifted toward the boy. “...belongs to the child.”

Back on the road, the song faded. “Mother... did you feel that?” Xenos asked. “Yes,” she replied quietly.

“What was it?”

“Sometimes,” she said, resting a hand on his shoulder, “when a song is strong enough... even the gods stop to listen.”

As the first stars appeared, a traveler approached.

He wore a pale cloak and carried a lyre across his back. “I heard your song,” he said.

His eyes turned to Xenos.

“And you... do you trust that sword to protect you?” “My father said a sword keeps people alive.”

“And what happens when the sword breaks?” Xenos thought carefully.

“Then a person must find strength somewhere else.” “And where might that be?”

Xenos looked toward his mother. “From the soul.”

The traveler smiled. “Well said.”

He plucked a string on his lyre, and the note shimmered warmly through the air.

“The road ahead is dangerous,” he said softly. “Be wary of those who offer too much.” The wind suddenly rose.

Dust swirled across the road. When it settled...

The traveler was gone.

Kassandra stared into the empty distance. “That,” she whispered, “was no traveler.” High above the world of men, Apollo smiled.

Because the boy’s journey had only just begun.

Vy Van Vu*
KILLING TIME



Roberta Whitman Hoff

My Dad Grew Older

Dad would say as he went on his way
 his body was not what it used to be.
 I heard his same voice as always
 as if I saw the young person placed in my eye
 that I beheld at childhood looking up at him.
 I imagined now he could just slip out of this grey hair
 and long beard. He had once been clean shaven
 and as sharp and handsome as the actor, Robert Conrad.
 I looked and looked into his image, into his young person
 somewhere as if there were two of him,
 the younger and the older.
 His young dadness was hiding
 as the body grew old. I saw his spirit
 under those age spots and thinning skin,
 and as long as I could hear his voice
 familiar and loving, I was held on the thread
 of all that he is and was and then he was gone,
 as if into thin air, and my memory of all
 that he was to me remains like a blue cloudless sky,
 and my heart aching for his spirit,
 aching to hear his voice again.

Roberta Whitman Hoff
Star Song

*certain stars leaving their doorways
hoped to become crickets
from Under Black Leaves
by W. S. Merwin*

It's a voice of light
far in sky's star
mute to my human ear,
immeasurable chorus of light
piercing all
my years' grown hearts,
tones of distant light
crashing like cymbals against
the dark, dark night.

Once there was a little girl,
who picked out stars to fix her gaze,
star light, star bright,
the stars remain a mystery
like a kindness
lingering on periphery,
like the sound of thousands
and thousands of crickets
on summer nights, their ancient
music healing some hidden memory,
I can just feel it on the horizon
of sound.

Roberta Whitman Hoff
Blue Jay

Winter hovers in the Southern sky over
Jackson Square at high noon, and the cathedral
bells peal their music majestically and sonorous
as if a piece of time stood still
while in a quiet formation of Blue Jays
in silky positions like dance among
intertwining branches of the large gnarly posing trees:
The seven Blue Jays in flawless flight
as I would imagine true love of dance and connection.

The Blue Jays are playful racing in tune
with each other from some magnetic inner spirit,
how I would imagine the best partner,
two souls whirling like dancers among light and sound
and ground; their intuition unblemished,
connected like two planets orbiting a sun,
or magnificent whales traversing the oceans,
where two can come apart with two different minds
and two beating hearts and
come back together again
like Home: Yikes, that is my cat,
Ray.
Perhaps,
Ray is my Blue Jay.

Jenna Re*

BIRD OF PARADISE



**Who Makes the Thunder: Inspired by the art
of Mark Rogers**

Joshua Harris*

Even though no rain beats down on the sunbaked adobe: thunder rolls and roars across the entire sky. It boomed loudest by the horizon, by the sandy orange mountains where wild things live and watch the lights of the pueblos down below. It's heat lightning. The storm itself is miles away, leaving the town as dusty and dry as ever. But the noise still howls and rambles through the air itself as if the storm were threatening to jump out from behind a corner.

A child cowers in its mother's arms. The mother sways in an old rocking chair. She wears a faded red gown and a threadbare apron. Her black hair is tucked tight beneath her bonnet and her bronze-colored skin is acquiring wrinkles. She rocks back and forth with her child in her arms, a scene barely different from the days of infancy. Thunder crackles and the child tenses, as if it were trying to get smaller.

"Why is it so loud, mama?" it whimpers.

The child quivers and the mother shakes her head and shushes gently.

"I've told you sweetheart, they're hard at work." She coos.

For a moment the child breathes. She feels the tiny chest expand and contract against her own. She can feel her heart beat in time with her child's.

"Tell me again. I like to hear it." the little one whines.

She smiles and tilts her head back.

"All the clouds are actually disguised skycrafts. And the thunder is their machinery hard at work taming the static electricity and turning it into lightning."

"What's machinery again?"

"It's, uh... it's like- like gears and pipes and things. And metal. But their's uses static. Or something."

There's a little nod against her chest.

"And who's up there?"

It isn't actually a question. The child whispers it like a statement. Leading the mother on. She obliges in a whisper of her own.

"There's Gaksalar with his grey skin and sunken eyes and egg-shaped head. He puts on a robe and holds a knife to the electromatrix to keep it scared."

"And?"

"And Morhglodj, the blue heap of veiny meat. He helped build the craft and the matrix with his many tentacles."

"And?"

"Kiskthidjerskiskwitz, with the drooling head of a cricket who slobbers words of encouragement and intimidation at the lightning. She's also the interior decorator."

"And who else?"

"Oh, well we can't forget Maurn. Maurn wrote up all the lightning-using plans. But nobody knows what Maurn looks like under that black cloak. Every time someone tries peering into the little yellow lights where the face should be, they get sucked—" she makes a sucking noise with her mouth. "Into Maurn's inner-world. And are never seen again."

Thunder crashes far off in the distance. There's a long pause. The only noise in the pueblo is the sound of the creaky chair rocking back and forth.

"You forgot someone!" the child says accusingly.

"Who?"

"The most important one!"

"Oh yes! Missus Mittens! Their little gray cat."

"And she has her own little mat!"

The mother nods.

"Who told you who makes the thunder, mama?"

The mother looks up at the ceiling. She rocks a little harder.

"Oh well, my mama told me, and her mama told her, and her mama told her."

There's silence again. Verbal silence. The winds still blow and the thunder still rolls and the chair still creaks. The child doesn't quiver. The crook of the mother's arm and her bony chest is warm. The little one can feel the mother's heart with its ear to her ribs, like a tiny little stethoscope.

"Why do they do it, mama?"

"Do what?"

"Why do Gaksalar, and Morhglodj, and Kiskthidjerskiskwitz, and Maurn, and Missus Mittens fly their craft and make thunder and lightning?"

The mother sighs dreamily. Not the kind of sigh that gets let out when people hear what they want to be told. No, this is the sigh of hearing someone a little slow ask why people all can't just get along.

"They just do. That's how it's always been. The Zetans have their ways."

Another bubble of wordless thunder and rocking passes.

"Why?"

Now the mother is hesitant to answer. A stern look has crossed her face.

"It won't do you well to question, child. It's not our place to wonder."

Melanie Redline*

THE HOME



Amy Gray

Scars

She called to me.
I found her
soaking in the tub,
her jet-black wig off,
exposing her
porcelain white scalp.

Delicate bubbles
made a thin veil
over her frail frame.
She had hoped they
would hide her scars,
but they didn't.

I scanned the room
searching for clues,
too afraid to speak
or to look directly
at her vulnerability.

Eventually my eyes
landed on her
missing breasts
and the red, raised incision
that had cut her in two –
armpit to armpit.

She was sewn back together
with black thread.
“Mama!” I gasped.

She slowly turned
her head away
as the bathwater
began to quake

Amy Gray

Ghost Apples

Our family tree,
with its hardened limbs,

stands ice-covered, sparkling
from freezing rain.

Our coat of arms,
are ghost apples –

those who remain
when the delicate fruit

rots and slips down
to earth, leaving behind

its hollow, fragile shell
hanging like a glass

chandelier, still glittering
long after the party ended.

I wonder if our apple tree –
like phantom limbs,

or lucid dreams,
remembered who

each fallen apple was,
and that is why

it can't
let them go.

Amy Gray

If This Isn't Joy

for my hometown, Branford, Connecticut

When I left for college,
I packed a box of first loves,
a tin of childhood treasures,
shells still holding the breath
of saltwater afternoons,
a postcard from Stony Creek,
Its gazebo ringed in the gold
of afterschool laughter.

I told myself I wouldn't come back.
Said goodbye to:
horse barns,
cornfields heavy with August,
beach roses blooming
through wind-spit salt.

But Branford –
Branford never let go.
My handprints still live
in the tidepools.
My name still heard
in the gull calls.
My laughter lodged
between the Owenego's
stone pier –
my brother's initials,
weathered into pink granite,
still holy,
still there.

I climb the stairs
of the house that raised me.
The second step creaks
as if my father still waits
at the top landing

asking:
Are you home?

I am home.

At Young's Pond,
I let them go –
mother, farther, brother –
but they return
in the moment before owl wings lift,
in the shimmer of minnows
gliding below the surface,
in the birches trees
we planted one Mother's Day,
her presence wrapped around them
like early spring wind.

Even the Blackstone Library
remembers me.
It smells of ironwork & ink,
the crinkle of pages turning,
its shelves still cradle
the girl tucked in the corner,
reading book after book
until her mother
found her.

And just when I thought grief
had emptied me
of all belonging,
Branford gave me back
my birth mother –
one block away –
both of us hearing cries
from the same osprey nest,
watching the same
Yale sailboats

cutting the surface
of this shoreline town,
where I was born –
and born again
in the finding.

Branford doesn't speak in sentences.
It speaks in frost
on the window,
in light stretched
across familiar paths,
in the church bell
forever ringing
a minute before noon.

And if that isn't joy –
If that isn't holy –
Then let me write it again:
in sea-glass,
in coyote cries,
in farm stands,
in every curve
of every road
that leads me
back.

Gionnie Sanchez***Cabbage**

Father had a gardening problem
 His trowel turn taut and twist soil
 Plants of thick thatch lain row
 December, his coldest son, would come visit every year
 Seeds of leaves of cabbage green

I grown jealous of father's garden
 Not great as gallant as mine
 Father grown jealous of my garden
 Perfect green carrots and cabbage

Mother grown jealous of my garden
 Cabbage seed grown potpourri
 Flakey.

I grown from my mother's head
 sprung lines
 sputter and die
 spring flicker
 A rotting green cabbage flesh with
 reek of rotted death

Natalie Schriefer**Cross-Stitch Lesson**

Embroidery thread is sold in braids
 of six strands. For storage this is fine,
 but no stitch requires all six—

which means you'll have to separate
 your thread before you can sew.
 Of course, the strands often cling

together instead of cleaving apart,
 twisting and tangling from static
 electricity but also habit, all those

years rolled up in their skein.
 This means it may take time
 to unwind the strands—breathe,

when you get frustrated. Close
 your eyes. Cry, if you need to,
 when your threads knot and tangle,

but remember: Sometimes
 things must be pulled apart
 in order to create something new.

Rue McFarlane*

PATRICIA AND LINDA



Original Sin

Thomas Warner-Crouch*

I sit in an empty room. My home for days on end--my coffin. A yellow walled enclosure swallowing the hope to do anything. And so I do nothing. Although, this is not by choice. I can not be rectified or healed in this fixed and finite space by anyone or anything. I look at an empty bed, an empty closet, an empty shelf and wonder how this could have happened without someone else in my realm of thought. An initial action that sparked a reaction. You'll be shocked to know I have none. The room is just empty.

I rent this room with what little I have to give from a woman who runs the local Kingdom Hall. Part of God's plan was to subject Job to all manner of hardship to test his faith in the Almighty who once loved me. But I don't need another test. So she doesn't in fact know who I am, only what I chose to frame to live in this room at all.

My parents knew. Or rather, they found me out. Jehovah doesn't love you, they'd say. Thou shall not lay with men as one does with women, that is detestable. What they called me before they spurned me; a detestable sodomite. Not worthy of any room at all. Any space to give the illusion of safety. Unworthy of any tale to tell. And so, the spurned weaves his tale of woe thinking his parents would rather he end up in an urn.

That's all I am. Ashes thrown in the street. A blackened rain of filth that coats the air in poison. I am the filth. I am broken. I am the spurned who roamed loveless among churches. Wild but not free. I slept on God's doorsteps that lined each corner in ubiquity.

I begged them. I pleaded. They never listened to my vain attempts at reason. Their faith toward the unknown is stronger than the bond of the known, the tangible, the once vibrant little boy who wore mom's church heels. Sin is all they see in me. There's no chance in seeing humanity when sin is the driving force through which they guided and guarded each of their decisions against people like me.

It hardly matters at least to them. But I never touched a man. A fact I tried explaining. Explanation was hopeless as is exploration when faith leaves you empty. The sin of being was all they chose to see. Not me. Not their little boy. I was at one point. But not anymore.

It rained that night. The pavements were reflective caldrons of cold water in which I slept. My home outside the Kingdom Hall my landlord runs though I never told her. They don't fraternize with the honest apostates. Though I'm pretty certain I belong on only one of those lists if any. It doesn't matter to them and it never did. Sin is everything they see. I love God. I always have and yet his word was their cue to leave me.

I only wish they saw a little bit of what made me one of his most precious creations though they blinded themselves to what made me special. I am not an empty room but a hall of traits, trials, fears, and longings they refused by the sight of me. My admission to them was my downfall. I don't know how to get back up. A wall has been built around us instead. Ignorance of their home and mine as well. Is it a tad dramatic to wish that I were dead?

A hall of love they could've built if hatred was not their choice. An exclusivity clause in the contract they signed with God. Ministers and demagogues they chose to listen to prompted this dove's flight from their nest. What you know won't hurt you. What you don't can kill you. Dramatic it seems but truth nonetheless.

I am the spurned. I am the sin. I am the unloved. My refusal to be anybody else demonstrated a cause to discern danger that wasn't there. But I'd rather be alone than someone else. I'd rather be me. Someone they refused to see. Someone they rejected. Someday I'll leave this room. Someday I'll love myself. But for now, the room I'm in is empty for the sin of being.

Vy Van Vu*

ALIEN ANGEL



John Greg Harding**Proof of Seuss**

I wipe off the blisters of condensation
 From a window keeping the world from me
 To see raindrops hurling,
 Little liquid meteors
 Crossing my atmosphere
 Exploding in puddle-oceans
 Making Whoville tsunamis
 That disrupt one another like
 Kaleidoscopic light.

And I wonder of things
 That I cannot observe,
 Too small to be seen,
 Too great to be heard,
 The mites in my bed,
 The squirrels in my head,
 Little people living unknown,
 A young one's "Yop" through a megaphone,
 Proof of existence for which he did fight

To save his world from terrible things
 Like meteor rain and broken strings.
 And I watch the raindrops explode into puddles,
 A beautiful, terrible, wonderful sight,
 And I cannot help but thinking that

Maybe Horton was right.

John Greg Harding**Upon the Dying of a Father**

You sit unspeaking but unquiet
 In a chair that swallows you, shrunken now.
 You need a haircut and a shave and no one cares
 Because you are and have become
 The litmus test of our characters.
 In your dying is our opportunity for truth,
 And we become exactly what we are
 Before your silence,
 Before your weakened hand,
 Barely grasping your precious rosary.

We cannot hear your need above the din of our own hubris
 You haven't spoken, nor eaten, nor drank
 In three days,
 And your bones now stab your cheeks from beneath the skin.
 We do what we think is best, trying or not, to understand your wishes
 Though you have made them clear for your whole life.
 One of us shoves food in your mouth.
 One prepares the pills you cannot swallow.
 One looks at the others and worries about himself.
 The last controls all controllable things, and then some.

And a shrunken, sour, withered shell
 Preparing to release its golden glow
 Gives its children his constant blessing
 To be who they are, to allow for their weakness,
 Accepting what is without even the slightest reproach in
 His sagging, bloody, overcome, resolute eyes
 Unable now to hold themselves open or shut.

You seize and stiffen in a tormented gasp
 That crooks your neck and extends your overbite, grotesque,
 And you are complete,
 And we are left to ourselves.

John Greg Harding

Wild Consciousness

Now the woods are small.
 They don't even hold
 The risk averse deer anymore.
 Every lot bisected and bisected again by roads
 That become death zones for
 Skittish creatures crossing
 From one sector to the next
 Not understanding so many things
 About mass and acceleration
 And the way in which they are expected
 To choose a side and stay on it.

They are not civil war brothers
 Dying for causes they know little of.
 There is no cause, only living, only dying.
 And their boundaries are determined
 By the smell of one another,
 Not a gridline and coordinates
 And some legal mandate
 In an English they wouldn't recognize.
 They know where their mothers live.
 They know where their threats linger.
 They know where they are without maps.
 They know where they are without thinking,
 In relation to things more and less abstract.

I'd imagine--how sadly human is
 The limit of my consciousness—
 They think things like
 Food over there, go that way,
Freeze!
 And I can't conceive of a liquid awareness
 Connecting thought and action
 As if they were one.
 Perhaps they are one.
 Being,
 One with moisture,

One with musk,
 One with hunger,
 One with being.

They are not one with us,
 Not thoughtful about their roles in our world
 While they chew on things they chew on
 Climbing our asphalt fences
 Not knowing they have escaped the pens
 We made with no consideration.
 They have no consideration either.
 Crossing as we drive, putting us at risk
 By way of antler stabbings, stink bombs, and
 Moving walls of meat--those moose are big.

I simply wanted to understand,
 So I entered the forest, ambitious and green,
 And began my animal life.
 I walked the game trails trying to
 Soak in the beauty of nature:
 The softness of mosses,
 The diamond clarity of fast running streams,
 The drama of fuchsia in autumn leaves,
 And I thought that bears must care little
 For the color of leaves
 As I noticed the wind blowing colder.

I zipped my jacket tight and dug a hole;
 Then I raked fallen leaves with a forked stick
 Filling my nest till it crowned,
 And I dove in to hunker down.
 As warm as I was, I slept little
 For the hunger that escaped
 My belly and chewed on my mind all night.

I awoke planning awkwardly,
 Not like the sun moves across the sky
 But like the giraffe bends for water,
 All knees not doing what I want, and
 Reaching a little too far.

But the planning did not feed me,
 So I roamed through brush and brambles
 Led by nothing but a nose
 To the edge of a rotten slough.
 The mucky brine was frozen
 Enough to walk on, though
 It moved like a swampy waterbed
 As the solids in the crust allowed
 A flexing under foot
 And the heat of decomposing
 Kept the frosted surface from thickening.

I saw a moose had fallen through
 Its spindles and hooves too thin
 To support its mass on five inches of ice dirt.
 It didn't seem to care at all
 As it ate a path through water plants
 That I could not identify.
 Having no weapons for such a fight,
 I didn't consider taking him down.
 A waste it would be, I reasoned,
 To eat ten pounds of meat
 Only to watch a thousand spoil.
 The idea that animals favor the rancid
 Fascinates, though not to the point of indulgence.
 But if he could get so big eating swamp grass,
 Maybe it could satisfy me.
 So I yanked at a clump of dying drying
 Willow shoots and chomped
 And chewed and ground it between my teeth
 Until I had created a stringy paste,
 something like eating celery
 But without the moisture,
 A sort of oatmeal grass,
 and my jaw had fatigued
 Beyond aching such that
 I couldn't produce sufficient force
 To break my own skin with a bite.
 Then I swallowed, and swallowed,
 And tried to swallow

The clump half down stuck just below my larynx,
 Until I had no choice but to drink the swamp
 Or die right there.
 And so I drank brown water loaded,
 I'm sure, with moose shit and everything else shit,
 Until my mouth tasted like a rotten tooth
 And I could breathe but couldn't stand to breathe.
 And then rancid meat sounded tasty,
 and I didn't care if I'd wasted it all.
 I have needs.
 But I had no tools, no skills,
 And as I turned my head up out of the brine,
 My eye was confronted by the giant hazelnut
 Eye of that very moose I was thinking about eating.
 Stealthy he was.
 And he'd managed to glide right up into my face,
 Still chewing away,
 To let me know that I wasn't yet ready for him,
 And he snorted his magnificence at me,
 Spattering me with snot and some of his lunch,
 And left me alone.
 The shivering hit as the sun waned west
 Over floating pines
 A hundred feet high with graceful
 Needles dancing down on air waves
 Blown by thermal laws.
 No nest would dry my clothes tonight,
 And fire was a tool I'd carelessly
 Left behind
 In a more human life.
 So back to the nest and stripped naked
 Huddled while dreaming of moose shank
 And grass,
 I shivered and shuddered
 Through a black relentlessness,
 My furless form inadequate,
 My thoughtfulness irrelevant.
 Cold doesn't need to be
 Understood.
 No contemplation affects wet skin
 In frigid wind.

Melanie Redline*

AMETHYSTS



Stitched Soul

Andrielly Almeida*

Everything is so quiet

That thought in itself was so loud in the vacancy I inhabited, my mere physical presence a cumbersome intrusion in this intangible space.

I tried to recall the name, the one dearest to me, the person I came here for. But all that came to mind was how smooth the name rolled off the tongue, and the vibrant colors in that person's blurred after-image — all of it leaving an aching longing that hollowed me out.

That was all I felt as I drifted — if I was even moving at all. I couldn't quite tell the difference between where I'd been and where I was now. All that I could see was translucence, and through that translucence, energy. The energy came in waves, the only indicator of any existence other than myself.

Until I saw her.

Suspended, was a silhouette, conjured from fragments and crystal prisms, slivers of light bouncing off each shard, angled towards one another to gather bundles of energy right at its center; like the core of the sun.

I looked inward, and saw myself shaped similarly.

The energies I'd been seeing before, the only thing to occupy this blank space, were reflections. The only reason anything existed here at all was because it bounced off of us and back out. If we weren't here for this space to reflect, there'd truly be nothing here at all.

This place was as empty as a mirror.

I directed my attention back to my daughter's soul.

Mia

God, It felt good to remember.

It was second nature to reach forward, to cup the space where my daughter's left cheek would be.

In that instance, the prism form blinked, the vast space shifting as if someone had tapped a piece of glass.

If I didn't do this, then I'd forget more than just my daughter's name, I'd forget she'd ever existed at all.

I focused, my translucent hand tensing with purpose, and right at my daughter's cheek, I plunged through rips of time, digging my nails into solid substance, atoms and molecules becoming cells as I pulled.

The empty space fractured, trembling as I brought live matter into nothingness, strings of muscle and veins and bone marrow curling around each other, slowly beginning to knit together. It was a tedious process, one that took effort.

Mom?

The word wavered, echoing like it'd been spoken in a chamber. It was everywhere and inside of me, trembling my very core. It hadn't even been uttered, the concept — the feel of the word being what persistently pushed against me, cascading from my daughter in questioning ripples.

I wanted to speak, but couldn't remember how. I couldn't even remember if I'd ever spoken at all.

All I could do was repeat the task I'd set out for myself.

I couldn't remember if this had been a part of my plan, if I'd been aware that I'd lose myself in the process. All I knew was that the task of stitching my daughter's soul back together was repetitive enough that it'd be impossible to forget, even as bits and pieces of my own self dissolved into the clear reflective expanse surrounding us.

Where are you going?

The second ripple was akin to a little girl pestering her mother with irrelevant questions, tugging her linen skirt as each inquiry came one after the other like ducks in a line, waddling with no patience for a response.

That image came so vividly.

I wondered who that mother and little girl were.

The second ripple repeated again and again until Mia's waves were crashing down on me, twisting and turning as if trying to keep the sand-like particles of her mother in one place, trying to put me back together. It was a clumsy attempt of a child copying an art their parent took years to perfect.

My daughter's bones began to harden after I shaped them, tying strings of muscles under and around, becoming writhing masses that converged and melded. I was careful with the veins, sewing them in and wrapping them over my daughter's half-made heart. It took a bit of time to reach the skin, but I got there eventually, each fold lovingly placed one by one.

Please don't leave.

It was louder now, a ring instead of a ripple, repeating itself until it no longer held the sense of a plea, instead, a demand.

Don't leave.

Extending my daughter's fingers like clay, I made sure to perfect the slight crookedness of her pinkie and the little mountain ridges mapped out on her palm. They were soft with youth, another reason Mia should've never ended up here.

I molded my daughter's lips, the little chunks of flesh that held no structure were somehow the most difficult.

"I need you."

The words didn't echo, they fell flat from her lips, warbled and distorted.

I continued to do the only thing I knew how, and by the time I willed my daughter's lashes like strokes from a paintbrush, tears had begun to well in her eyes, staring up at the space my soul occupied, unfocused, as if she didn't know exactly where to look.

I was disappearing, the bulbs of energy bouncing inside me dimming as my shards disintegrated from having nothing to reflect. I mustered the last bit of my strength to cup the little girl's face — this little girl — who I could no longer recall her name nor what she meant to me.

Having no hand—no warmth, all I could do was hope that the girl could feel the love I still had for her, blanketing it over her, an energy that slowly dissipated like smoke. I leaned down one last time to place what I knew she'd know was a kiss to her temple.

"I love you."

The second those words left Mia's lips, Mia forgot who'd they'd been for. She felt raw, her blood pulsing at a concerning speed for there supposedly being nothing there at all.

Julia Harding

CONFLICT RESOLUTION



Nevaeh Molina*

Gone Down Under

“Grace is what matters in anything, especially life, especially growth, tragedy, pain. It keeps you from reaching for the gun too quickly. It keeps you from destroying things too foolishly.”
 - Jeff Buckley

The sun was nearly at the edge of the horizon
 the deep blues dimming the sky
 I ran in without a single thought, acting solely on impulse.
 Fully soaked clothes against my damp skin caused me to shiver, and still I swam.
 My ears were underwater
 All I could hear was the peaceful silence
 My boots had become full, they floated past, gone right down the river way
 toes peeked out of the murky water
 the glitter green stained nail polish was a stark contrast against my pale skin.
 I sang as I was taken by the cool river
 becoming one with it
 The chaos of the dreams that rummaged in my head was now inaudible,
 like they were underwater, they were drowning
 I closed my eyes and remembered that day, right on the stage
 the lights blinded me, my hands had been clammy
 Still, I sang as the rest of the world faded out
 And right there on that stage, I stood tall
 dreams spilling out of my lips
 soul laid bare
 I smiled up at the invisible stars as Zeppelin kept me company
 “Gonna give you my love.”
 “Wanna Whole Lotta Love”

The water begins to gain traction
 The calm river being awakened by something deep and raw
 The wolf sat at the harbor, staring with wide eyes
 But I was half underwater, and half somewhere I couldn't fully comprehend
 full of a deep calm, a deep quiet that my mind never allowed
 It's as if I was asleep in the sand with the ocean washing over
 The current rough and alive wrapped around my body
 Without so much as another breath, I'm gone down under

Xavier Thompson*

The String Trembles

Smoke curls through the night,
A sister's vow now turned to ash,
The Red String trembles.

Charlie Guaman*

One Silent Night

All was calm, all was bright
Who could have ever guessed
one December night
would change everything
I'll forever miss.

Maybe you'll be better off with her,
She got a soul so clean as Mother Mary
I'll forever miss that one silent night

while you sleep in heavenly peace
I'll be out in this cold
peeking through your window
Indoors with someone who isn't me
spending this christmas

Snow will once start again
A new Christmas falls upon
I'll be setting the tree myself
cause you're breaking this heart
'tis holiday season, I guess

Looking through his window,
the boy whom I once loved,
will bake fruitcake for his lady's home,
kiss under a new mistletoe,
I'll forever miss,
I'll forever miss that one silent night

David Shaholli*

LOST AT SEA



Kassidy Selmani*

Hope

There is hope on the tip of my tongue
 Flourishing in the lines of my palms
 And in the veins on my wrists.
 It is pulsing through my blood
 And piercing my fingertips
 In everything, it is here.

I pray, be a fleeting glimpse that my eyes catch
 Something that is caught and let go
 Something that I cannot taste
 As I know I cannot hold
 I cannot hope
 I dream, and I hear it whisper to me,
 To taunt me by night
 A sweet promise, a useless wonder

It lives in the wells under my eyes,
 In the corner of my smile,
 In the beat of my heart
 It is there.
 Waiting for me to crawl to it

I run and I sprint and I dash toward it
 I yell and I shout and I scream for it
 I hope and I hope and I hope

Roberta Whitman Hoff

Lost Music

There was once your voice,
your talk, your sentences,
your tenor laughter streaming
unhindered into my ear,
now a lost music,
as if only those who loved you most
stumble into the shattering absence
of your individuality.

Roberta Whitman Hoff

Weightless Love

The Canadian geese send voice
one by one, side by side in unison.
They approach in formation and dance,
so light with only themselves and wings
in a frolicsome chatter of cohesion
in their airy sky; the earth their only home,
wings and friends, their only possessions
side by side with traveling songs.

And now that you are gone,
and I am alone without my kindred soul,
without you, oh you have gone to death.
I love all the possessions you ever gave
me, but your weightless love is far greater
and lighter, if only I had always known.

Jenna Re*
DEER SKULL



John Greg Harding

Sorry is Enough, Pam

Standing in procession
Somewhat underdressed,
No out of style tie or pinching shoes,
Nearing the hand-carved box
set upon the table
beside the flowers
in front of the crucifix facing backward
to show only the flat surface
of the nondenominational somewhat christian representation
above the kneeler
before the line
of distressed unfamiliarity to be faced,
your survivors,

Unable to find comfort for my hands—
Maybe take a mint and sign the book to document the presence of
the name they do not know—
I kneel for a generic prayer to the god,
Seeking silence among the chattering of unrecognized voices and
subjects,
Help them, please.

Rising to greet with distressing consolation,
Reaching out a not unfriendly hand,
I must bring words with my showing of sadness.

It is honest:
“I am sorry,”
(But I am not in your photo slide show, not among your complaints,
not wearing your tee shirts, not sharing your jargon, your tree, your
memory cards),
So it is all I have to give, and it will be enough.

Kieran Bheemaswarroop*

Candlewick

You strike a match
 With such pure intention
 Not just to hear the fizzle of life
 From an infant flame
 Its brilliant wisps
 Hungrily lapping away
 Drinking up the matchstick
 Pinched precariously
 Between the pads of your fingers
 On its way to your supple skin
 Do you find that
 Time moves in slow motion
 As you watch the imminent burn?
 Or is it just a practiced movement,
 Confident as you light the candle?

I'm afraid of fire, you know.
 The thought of being consumed
 By something so much greater than I
 By something I've made.
 I don't think I'll ever get over it.
 The light of the flame stuns me.
 It's hard not to stare for too long.
 To be stuck in place until,
 like yearning dogs with the sun's tongue,
 The flames lick my cuticles
 And beg for sustenance.

You don't even flinch when you see the dogs.

I kept my eyes trained,
 Against my will
 As you swiftly lit the fire stick.
 My jaw grew tight.
 My thoughts went still.
 You set the flame atop the wick.
 I saw you execute your motions,

Methodical and slick.
 All measured, no emotion,
 You don't even care!
 To stay
 To watch
 The melting candle wax drip.

But hungry as the fire seems to be,
 The wax refuses to go down
 As one might expect it to.
 Do you see how it runs
 From being eaten alive?
 By dripping and hardening down the side?
 A burning wick can't compete
 With liquid wax evading heat.
 Little brittle bridges they build as they flee,
 Yet another droplet's salvation.
 Please
 If you stay, you'll see
 The candle still persists
 As the wick burns out,
 Though it's left gnarled and twisted
 From fleeing flame.
 Ever pragmatic and merciless,
 You will melt it back down.
 To be consumed
 Is to be changed.

David Shaholli*

TRANQUILITY



Joseph R. Adomavicia

1 + 1

12/10/21

10:06 p.m.

The end to a beautiful day and the beginning of a fond memory.
 Two Starbucks coffees.
 Two Metro Cards.
 Two lovers seeking adventure.
 Two Buddha necklaces.
 Two bead bracelets for each of us.
 Two twenty-dollar bills.
 Two lovers laughing down the road,
 after a street merchant swindled me for "peace" and it cost us forty
 bucks.
 Two bad donuts.
 Two flights of stairs into the tiniest martial arts store.
 Two slices of cheap pizza on a bus stop bench.
 Two subway rides.
 Two sets of footsteps as we made our way through the city.
 Two shocked sets of eyes that saw a rat the size of a cat at our feet,
 and two lives safe outside of the park.
 Two Italian dishes for dinner.
 Two cannoli for dessert.
 Two coats hanging on an art gallery rack.
 Two postcards.
 Two hands laced together.
 Two sets of eyes only for each other,
 even in a city full of millions.
 Two sleepy heads taking turns on each other's shoulders.

Two—
 Enough to make a world.

Melanie Redline*

TORII GATE



Benjamin J. Chase

A Brass Bed

“What if Daddy gets you a brass bed
like the one for your dolls?”
suggests my father-in-law, slyly,
in his favorite black-and-white
family rerun at the dinner table.

“Okay,” he replies as the girl
who became my wife
after learning to agree
to the finer things
her father always wanted.

Amy Gray

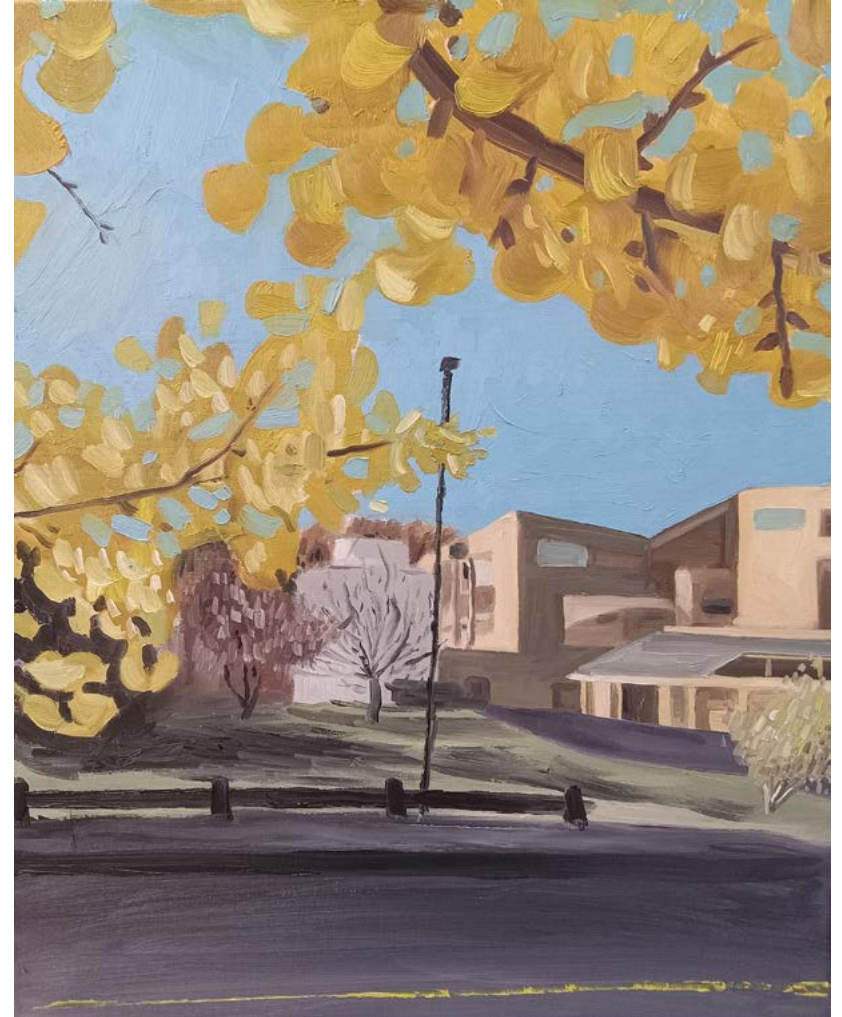
Homecoming

I wrote a love poem for my first husband, Tyler, to read at his memorial service. There was much pain and too few answers surrounding his death. My heart has yet to heal. I am still trying to understand the choices he made that led him to be alone when he died. I sit listening to the minister as my mind begins to drift. We are back hiking in the Maine woods where he grew up. We would often sit together talking by the stream. He was so happy here. He is asking me if he can come home now. I try to make the running water flow backwards, but I cannot. I am startled at ceremony's end by the loud pealing of the bells. Tyler's two young nephews are pulling hard on the old ropes, making them call out: Ka-klang, ka-klang, ka-klang. *Tyler is home. Tyler is home. Tyler is home.*

autumn leaves falling
letting go of the branches
that held them so close

Melanie Redline*

ON CAMPUS



Submission Deadline: March 15, 2027

Fresh Ink 2027

NV-CT State'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 1500 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 format (300 dpi)
- All graphic submissions will be considered for the cover design.
- All entries must be submitted via

NV-FreshInk@ctstate.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 attached poems, short stories or art.
- Authors' and artists' names, emails and mailing addresses should ONLY be included in the body of the corresponding email.
- Only works from self-identified NV-CT State students will be entered in the NV-CT State Poetry, Short Fiction and Art contests.

For further information contact Jeannie Evans-Boniecki, PhD
Fresh Ink Advisor at jean.evansboniecki@ctstate.edu.

