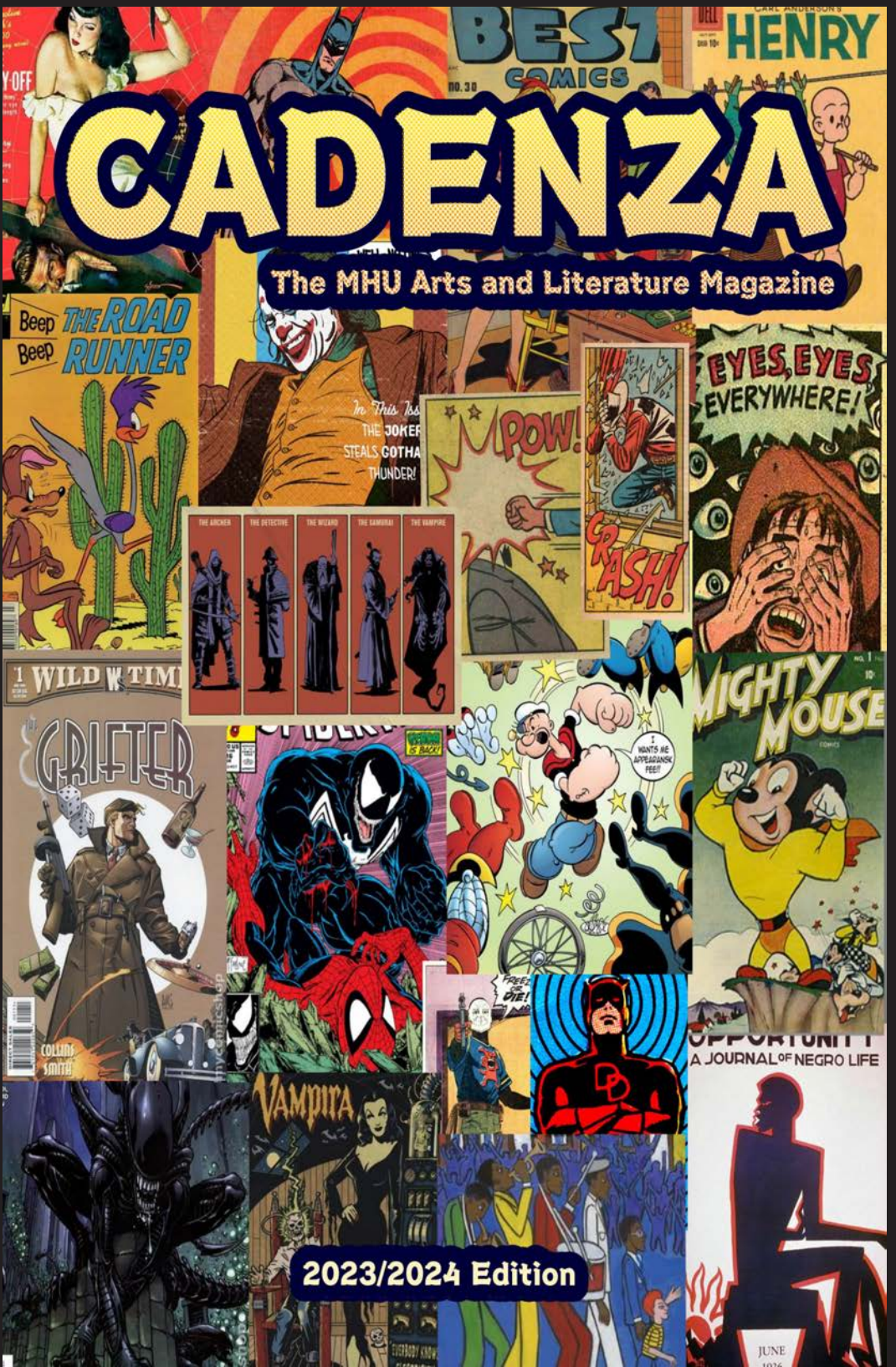


CADENZA

The MHU Arts and Literature Magazine



2023/2024 Edition

OPPORTUNITY
A JOURNAL OF NEGRO LIFE

JUNE

Special Thanks

Professor Felice Bell

Professor Lora Eggleston

Writing Editors

Braxton Robinson

Erin Cline

Cadence Wyatt

Skylar Camby

Art Editors

Lovelle Williams

Ja'Leah Bellamy

Nash Richardson

Selection Committee

Leah Wilson

Taylor Hodges

The Selection committee, Our Staff and Judges

Congratulations to our Creative Writing and Art Winners...

Art winners:

Judge: Rachel Elise

Photography

1st: Ghoulish by Lee Barker

2nd: Circles by Lee Barker

3rd: Deep in Thought by Lee Barker

Painting and drawing

1st: I Don't Have Anything by Bella Moore

Graphic Design

1st place: NO AIM by Ant Flores

Writing winners:

Judge: Ali McGhee

Poetry

1st: "Reticent" by Faith Giles

2nd: "Faded" by Faith Giles

3rd: "Miraculous Myers" by TJ Burske

Prose

1st: "Greek Life and Death" by Samuel Evans

Prose 2nd: "The Fog of War" by Caleb Brewer

Prose 3rd: "Burning Memories" by Aurella Kowalski

Table of Contents

Death Has Many Names by Cassie Berry.....	6
Point of View by Riley Gall.....	6
Death Has Many Names By Liz Gandee.....	6
Dear, ____ by Skylar Camby.....	8
Ghost Mug by Leah Brabham.....	8
Fear by Tayler Hodges.....	8
Morning Dew By Jamie Garcia.....	9
BLOOM By Ant Flores.....	9
Extraterrestrial by Skylar Camby.....	10
The Vormator Challenge: Gwes the Robot By Marlee Bishop.....	11
The Night We Met by Adam Sellers.....	12
Twilight by Hosanna Guess.....	12
Burning Memories By Aurella Kowalski.....	13
Dark Angel by Nash Richardson.....	13
Aphrodite in the Garden of Adonis by Cassie Berry.....	14
The Art of Her by Tom Bertelsen.....	14
Paper Cranes by Skylar Camby.....	14
Pantone and Paint by Emilee Harper.....	14
Reticent By Faith Giles.....	15
The Black Memorial Bracelet by Caleb Brewer.....	15
Faded By Faith Giles.....	16
Home by Tayler Hodges.....	16
A Time of the Past by Kaylee Fitzgerald.....	16
My Valentine Always by Sabrina Kennedy.....	17
Fawn by Ja'Leah Bellamy.....	17
Envy Us by Tyler Rice.....	18
Prayer For Future Generations by Kiki Palmer.....	19
The Slide by Lovelle Williams.....	19
Meat Cows by Cadence Wyatt.....	21
Honeysuckle Love by Braxton Robinson.....	21
Charcoal Skeleton by Nash Richardson.....	21
Wednesday by Jade MacDonald.....	22
Deep In Thought by Lee Barker.....	22
The Value of Gold by Leah Wilson.....	23
Hanahaki Disease by Cassie Berry.....	24
Hanahaki Disease by Liz Gandee.....	24
The Monster: Loss by Adam Sellers.....	25
The Lemon Gulf by Owen Blake.....	25
ENOUGH by Ant Flores.....	25
Is it My Fault by Cierra Williams.....	26
Ghoulish by Lee Barker.....	27

Greek Life, and Death By Samuel Evans.....	28
The Fog of War by Caleb Brewer	30
An Ever-Changing Self Reflection by Kaitlyn Johnson.....	31
Ineffable by Kiki Palmer.....	32
Big Girl Bed by Jade MacDonald.....	33
Mushroom Set by Leah Brabham.....	33
Humble Beginnings by Lupa Mpiana.....	34
The Flash of a Friday Night by Caleb White.....	34
NO AIM by Ant Flores.....	35
Trust the Process by Malik Laurent.....	36
Anxiety by Erin Cline.....	37
Miraculous Myers by TJ Burske.....	38
Peek-a-Boo by Lee Barker	38
Ring by RayRay Ellis.....	39
Countdown by Alex Oleschuk.....	40
Madame Monet with Parasol by Nicolas E. Varner	40
I Don't Have Anything by Bella Moore.....	41
I Woke Up Today by Arwen Mamer	42
Una Vite By Lovelle Williams.....	43
The Town Figure by Hosanna Guess.....	44
Good Ol' Slackjaw by Peter Klisiewicz	45
Circles By Lee Barker.....	46
I Am Me, Simple As That by Kat McDonald.....	47
Star-Gazing Dinos by Owen Blake	48
Empty the Tanks by Jocelyne Lowery	49
That Time of Year by Walker Woodall	50
Lock and Key by Kaylee Fitzgerald	51
A Bump in the Night by Emilee Harper	52
A Bump in the Night by Emilee Harper (cont.)	53
A Bump in the Night by Emilee Harper (cont.)	54



Death Has Many Names by Cassie Berry

Ivory bones rot upon the grass and from them purplish blue flowers bloom.
I knelt down smelling the flowers, they smelt like him. They were him.
And like him they will decay and be consumed by the Earth. And in Her embrace they will come together as one and that is oblivion. For he lives his days dreaming of her, his flesh disintegrating for her. While my love for him dies the same way he would die for her. Unrequited and silent I watch you play the fool in this tragedy you made for two. This is my revenge. This is my karma. I did nothing but sit back and wait while he sowed the grass over his own grave.
Death has many names but none are scarier than Anteros.



Death Has Many Names By Liz Gandee

Point of View by Riley Gall

I tried to erase the memory of you from my tortured mind.
To eliminate the inconveniences of my flourishing thoughts.
Upon every day, every hour, every second, I tried to wash away my desire to cry out,
I love you.
I choked on my words, holding in my breath, strangling my heart in my hands till they were
bleeding red.
I was drowning in my insecurities.
Every moment in time was agony.
I was hanging on for dear life, afraid that if I were to ever unclasp my tired bleeding hands, I
would be forever in the absence of your love.
Certainly, you did love me.
For the turn of phrase, you poetically recited to me every sunrise and sunset expresses you did
in fact love me.

For every nerve in my body was ignited on fire, the warmth your fingertips brought to my bare exterior was enough to spell out the words I love you.
When you held me like the world was ending, and if you let go, I would dissolve into nothing but the dust on your windowsill.
You loved me, right?
You could not breathe unless my lips were intertwined with yours, taking and giving exhales as if it was your only source of oxygen.
You definitely loved me.
I let you into my guarded walls that were built up so very high to protect me from the pain in my life, you saw inside of me, the rawest version of myself that even I was afraid to see. Scared that the darkness would come to capture me and take me away from the light that was you.
You still loved me.
We shared the most beautiful, intimate, secret moments.
You concealed our love from the world, to cherish it just you and me.
You loved me.
And I loved you.
Our hidden love grew and grew into a prosperous garden.
I watered it every day,
but you picked the flowers instead,
to make a bouquet maybe,
to once again show me how deeply your love bloomed for me.
Yet, I never received a bouquet.
You instead took the flowers we had made and gave them to someone else.
Without your care, our garden died.
In lieu, you grew a garden in her.
You watered her flowers.
Showed the world the beautiful moments that you and she had made.
You lowered her walls and became the light she desperately needed.
You became the oxygen she craved with every breath you breathed into her.
You held her not in fear that the world was ending, but in comfort, that she would be there in the morning.
You traced her fair skin and started fires in her soul.
You told her you loved her with the sound of your voice, a song I have never heard.
So, I lay here drowning in my tears because you never actually loved me.
I try to forget every moment you held me safe and warm in your arms.
Every laugh I heard escaped from your lips.
Every shred of happiness that we had ever shared.
I would rather erase it all than spend one last moment in agony.
Grieving over the love that you never gave,
and I never had.
I guess I was a fool.
But I know, one day you will come back to our garden in the silver spring.
One day you will water it again.
One day you will sing that song.
One day, I will be the one to harvest our garden and dissolve into nothing but dust.

Dear, ___ by Skylar Camby

The distance you claim?
It was you that created it.
The apple falls far from the tree
When the hill is too
 steep.

The hole you dug stays;
Reminiscent of how the pain runs
deep.

I refuse to be like you.
You weren't a spark to this fire—
Just a reminder to fan the flames.
I'll hope I can maintain the blaze.

But, I fear that one day...
Everything I hold dear will be one more thing to raze.



Ghost Mug by Leah Brabham

Fear by Tayler Hodges

“Fear” is an unanswered question
As it passes o’er lips.
Compressed and crushed lungs
Air comes in little sips.

Silence hisses and serenades,
Moments mimic minutes.
The beating rhythm of my heart,
I have reached my limit.

The crowd creeps in,
My heart hammers.
The dropping of a pin
Could erupt the silence.

The performance is done,
The crowd files out.
Like the setting of the sun,
It is time to slumber.

Morning Dew By Jamie Garcia

Cameron had been looking forward to lunch all morning. Due to the nice spring weather, all the children were allowed to have their lunch outside. A light breeze made the branches and bushes sway, as the sunshine glinted off the morning dew. He sat on a giant stump off the side of the playground and on his lap was his blue dinosaur lunchbox with a lime green latch. His mother had decided to make his favorite, a nice turkey and ham sandwich, with lettuce, pickle, and salt-n-vinegar chips to top it off. But what really made it special to Cameron was how his mom would shave the crust into a heart, just for him. He opened the box, and to his surprise, there was no heart shaped sandwich. Instead, there sat a small white cake with red icing swirls around the top laying on a piece of checkered paper. It was a very pretty cake, Cameron thought. He wondered what it might taste like. Whoever expected this, sure would be missing it. Cameron couldn't help himself; with his little finger, Cameron went for a swipe. However, before he could he heard a delicate,

"Excuse me, is this yours?" A girl stood at his side; she wore purple overalls that matched with her purple glasses over a white shirt, and her ringlet curls were pulled back into a bun. Her outstretched hand held a lunchbox with a green latch and dinosaur on the front, just like Cameron's. Cameron closed the box on his lap and hesitantly, he swapped with the girl. Though, as soon as the lunchbox was in his grasp, Cameron rapidly turned away from the girl and opened his box. Sure enough, there was his sandwich. He was satisfied, until he took his first bite. Cameron suddenly felt soft curls touch the back of his neck. He whipped his head around and realized the girl had sat down on the stump, right behind him. Cameron was annoyed. Was there nowhere else she could sit? He huffed and turned back around. As he was about to take a bite, a finger poked his side. That did it! Cameron turned his body to face the culprit, ready to tell her just how much he wanted her gone.

"Would you like some?" she asked. He was met with her hand holding a ripped piece of checkered paper with half of a white cake with red swirly frosting on it. Cameron softened his look and gently took the piece. "T-thank you," he said. They both returned to their respective directions and continued eating. Cameron waited for another interaction, but she did not turn back to him. They sat back-to-back, as if waiting for that ice to melt, so no one had to break it; it looked like it was his turn now. Cameron got up from his spot and relocated himself to sit right next to her. "W-would you like some?" His body had tensed up, he was a bit afraid that she would notice his palms getting clammy. The girl looked up from her box and gave Cameron a delighted smile. He noticed how the light bounced off her glasses, the rays blinding him a little; it reminded him of the dew. The girl accepted half of his potato-chip sandwich that his mother so carefully cut into a heart, and there they sat, silent and together.



BLOOM By Ant Flores

Extraterrestrial by Skylar Camby

Characters: AL IAN, LUNAR LARRY, SKWONKLES (mentioned)- Aliens

Setting: Mars

Time: Current time, 2023

Al Ian bursts into Lunar Larry's apartment, and the door hits the wall.

(BANG)

The furniture has the same rocky texture and shade of the planet they're inhabiting. Plants of clearly Alien nature cover the apartment, along with picture frames filled with Alien relatives of all shapes and colors.

Al Ian is clearly panicked- the lights change color over him as if changing with his mood. Lunar Larry jumps and looks up from his work at the sudden disruption. He quickly shuts off the hologram and hides it from view.

AL IAN: What on Mars are we going to do!?

LUNAR LARRY: Huh? About what, Al?

AL IAN: The humans! Skwonkles told me they're getting closer, trying to live up here! What will we do if they invade?

LUNAR LARRY: (sighs) Skwonkles is just teasing you again Al, he knows how worked up you get.

AL IAN: No, no! It's real this time, I'm sure of it! Trying to colonize Mars is just inhuman- utterly alien!

LUNAR LARRY: (mutter) Seems pretty human to me.

Al Ian paces with his alien appendages waving about, his round shape waddling and his large eyes even wider than usual.

AL IAN: They'll bring their weird rituals they call tik-toking-

His pacing continues.

LUNAR LARRY: Al-

AL IAN: And oh Frank Sinatra, no- Larry, the capitalism...

LUNAR LARRY: AL, listen-

AL IAN: They'll put us in zoos and name us things like Steve-

Al Ian stops pacing and grabs at Larry's shoulders, pulling him closer and looking him in the eyes.

AL IAN: I don't wanna be a Steve, Larry.

Lunar Larry carefully moves Al Ian's tentacles off his shoulders with an audible pop and sits back at his desk with a resigned posture.

LUNAR LARRY: Right, Al. You aren't going to be a Steve, so if you could listen-

AL IAN: They'll make movies about us-- and I couldn't even watch it because you know how I get over scary movies Larry. I get bad dreams. Bad, bad dreams.

LUNAR LARRY: I know, take deep breaths Al.

AL IAN: I watched "Alien", you know, the movie? Always get that dream about looking like the monster in it. Frank Sinatra, Larry, If I ever end up looking like that I'd want you to set a flamethrower on me too.

As Lunar Larry holds his hand out placatingly, Al takes deep breaths, his skin changing from red to yellow in accordance with his mood and the overhead lighting.

LUNAR LARRY: Al, it would take a lot of effort to come out here, And I don't have a flamethrower at hand, but I'll get creative. Just for you. Plus, they're more focused on the next iPhone than any way to live on Mars.

AL IAN: Eye-phone? They make calls with their eyes now?

LUNAR LARRY: No? It's like the letter "I" in their alphabet, but that isn't the point Al.

AL IAN: What, like the I's in Alien?

LUNAR LARRY: There's only one I in alien, Al.

AL IAN: No, Larry, I have two eyes. Wait, do I only have one???

LUNAR LARRY: No, yes, I mean... yes you have two eyes, I just meant-- how do you not know how many eyes you have?

AL IAN: I don't know! Am I having a mid-life crisis, Larry?

Al Ian falls to his “knees,” or rather, tentacles, in his duress.

AL IAN: I’m just so overwhelmed, I think I need some space from all this…

(silence)

LUNAR LARRY: I mean, we are in space AL…

(More silence)

Al Ian stands up slowly.

AL IAN: …Get out Larry.

LUNAR LARRY: Well, Al, this is my apartment but-

AL IAN: Okay, fine, then I will get out. I can’t deal with this atmosphere anymore, just remember that I predicted it when they come for us Larry!

Al Ian turns around resolutely but is stopped by Lunar Larry.

LUNAR LARRY: Wait, AL!

Al Ian turns around expectantly.

LUNAR LARRY: Sorry, can you repeat that?

I spaced out.

Al Ian throws his tentacles up in the air in frustration.

AL IAN: You know what? There’s nothing on this side of the solar system that would make me stay in this apartment with you Lunar Larry! I’d rather curl up in the crater beside the Planet Pilates class! Good day to you!

Al Ian declares before turning back and slamming the door on his way out.

(BANG)

LUNAR LARRY: (whispers)… What’s wrong with Planet Pilates? I love Planet Pilates.

Lunar Larry sighs and rubs his hands down his face and massages his temples.

LUNAR LARRY: (grumbles) I have a headache the size of the solar system, I need to let off some steam.

He waddles over to the cassette player shaped like a duck. He presses play on his mixtape labeled “space jams”, (but that’s been marked out and replaced by “Nep-Tunes”). As it plays, calming background music combines with directions and affirmations related to Pilates.

CASSETTE PLAYER: As we begin, let’s take deep calming breaths. Remind yourself to allow space for growth and transformation. As you are exhaling, relax, and release the embodiment of what mars your mind and body.

LUNAR LARRY inhales deeply and practices the methods he was taught in Planet Pilates.

LUNAR LARRY: (Screeches Unnaturally)

CASSETTE PLAYER: Very good, now that we have released these feelings, let’s gravitate towards our movements for today. Disclaimer, this routine is not intended for disjointed entities-- please see our hands-off version for a plan that suits you—

(Beep, beep, beep)

A low-pitched beeping resonates from Lunar Larry’s desk, interrupting his Planet Pilates routine.

Lunar Larry turns off the cassette player with a sigh before he approaches and locks the door

Al Ian had exited through. He returns to his desk and slides the drawer open. He grabs the communication device and holds it up to his head.

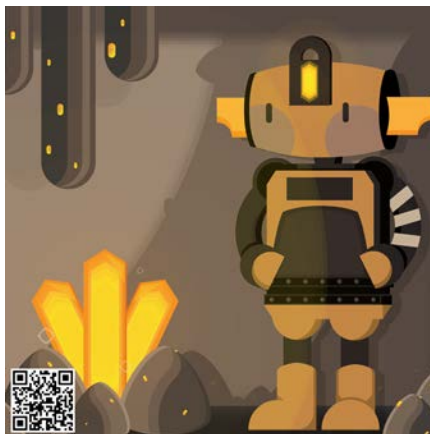
MAN 1: All clear, Larry.

LUNAR LARRY: Clarify what you mean by clear, Steve. Seems like things are getting tense here, and stuffy.

STEVE: You should be clear to get unsuited for a bit. We’ll keep watch on the radar.

LUNAR LARRY: Roger that.

Lunar Larry then sets his device down, before reaching around his back for the zipper of his costume. He struggles to get a hold of it, stumbling and struggling to navigate the fake tentacles. He lets out a breath upon releasing himself from the suffocating weight and material, revealing



The Vormator Challenge: Gwes the Robot By Marlee Bishop

his very human form. He picks up the communication device once again.

LUNAR LARRY: Not sure how much longer I'm going to be able to keep this up. Don't know many Aliens, but if they're all as tenacious as this one we're in for some trouble.

STEVE: Still gathering data, shouldn't be too much longer Larry. Hey, what's wrong with the name Steve?

LUNAR LARRY: What?

STEVE: I mean, really, I think Larry is a lot worse than Steve.

LUNAR LARRY: That's my real name, Steve...

STEVE: Oh, my bad. I mean, Steve is my real name too. But, you know, My Mom says it suits me.

LUNAR LARRY: Right. Well... (clears throat) A mother's love, am I right?

A brief awkward silence ensues.

LUNAR LARRY: ...do you think we could bring Planet Pilates down to Earth?

STEVE: What? You've been there too long, Larry.

LUNAR LARRY: Nah, it's been a pretty light-year you know?

STEVE: Oh, God.

THE END

The Night We Met by Adam Sellers

My tote bag followed behind me like a child grasping for candy.

So close.

Parking was scarce. I did many loops in the small parking lot.

I'm impatient.

I walked up the stairs to the restaurant.

Brightly lit.

And there you were, waiting outside the glass door.

You smile.

We introduced ourselves to each other. I fidgeted with my bag.

I'm nervous.

We found a table after 30 minutes in the cold.

It's packed.

I remember looking at your eyes as you spoke.

Sparkling jewels.

Dinner consisted of a chicken salad

sandwich and fries for me.

Very yummy.

We spoke some more. About life, how we grew up, and things we liked.

Great conversation.

The night went by way too fast. It was time to go.

Go already?

I walked her to her car. We stood there for a

second.

It's cold.

Then, our lips collided softly.

We kissed.

It was time to go now. We hugged and said

goodbye.

Goodbye.

I walked briskly to my car, my face hurting from

my smile.

I'm happy.

Take me back to that night.

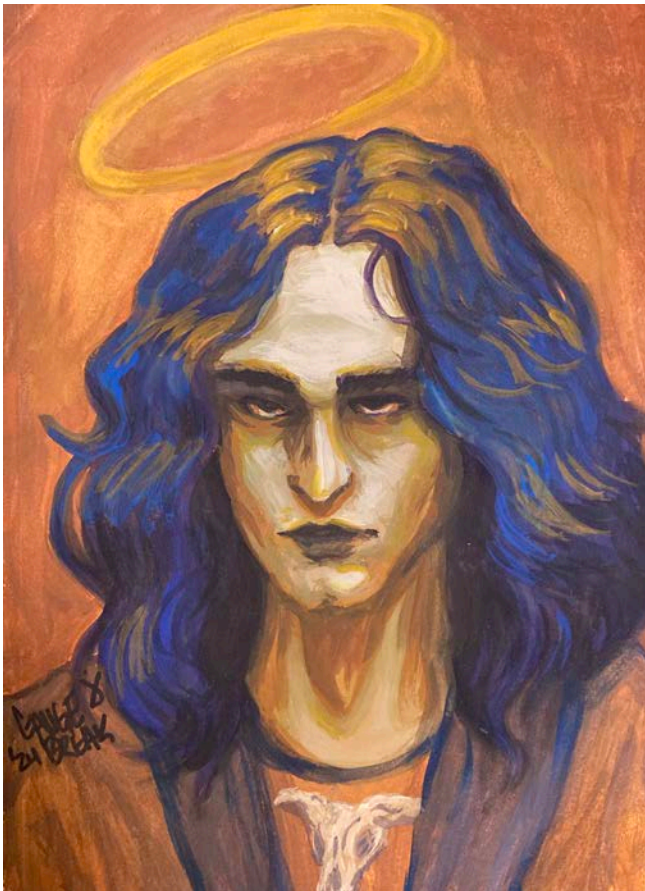
We met.



Twilight by Hosanna Guess

Burning Memories By Aurella Kowalski

Still glowing red in the rubble, my favorite books from my childhood to now. The blanket my grandma crocheted for me when I was born. Every kept teacher note from kindergarten telling of how grown up I seemed. The stuffed puppy I got as a baby that I so wisely named Puppy which barely resembled a stuffed animal any longer from far too much time spent being hugged. Praying my cat found a way out when everything came burning down. All the notes I wrote to myself with hopes future-me would read them and see how far I'd come. The pictures of friends that are no longer friends anymore. Everything I've known for nineteen years of my life. All of the successes put into tangible form, the trophies, the badges, the medals. All the physical things that said this is my home, I was born and raised here. All the things that showed this was my only home for nineteen years and I existed here. I watch it burn still instilled with the sense that this is my home. I was still born and raised here. I still exist here. My memories tether me here. My memories won't burn with the home I lost.



Dark Angel by Nash Richardson

Aphrodite in the Garden of Adonis by Cassie Berry

Shall my white roses remember		How
my hands were pricked by the thorns.	I	
watched the boar rip you apart. I	wish	
I had never met you. If only		I could
Keep my heart to myself. If I could		stay
away from the branches that cut deep		with
"Love." Ares was jealous of	you;	
Jealous of how much I cared		but
I shall never love again as		it is
A curse that I shall bring down upon		all
Who spite me. There he lays,	for	
I cannot bare to look, his death was for		naught;
As I will never forget. My blood mixed with his stains		so,
Now the roses are red and		fair.
I replaced my white rose pendant with a red one. All's		well.

The Art of Her by Tom Bertelsen

my thoughts have created
a gallery
but it's only images of her
I can see
skewed tones come together
as a harmony
her eyes light up at night
my visual melody
no major nor minor,
but still my symphony



Pantone and Paint by Emilee Harper

Paper Cranes by Skylar Camby

You disregard my broken heart--
Like the dust on your windowsill.
Could wrap my hands around your throat,
So, you might know how I feel.

Hands stained red when I touch your skin.
I fill the bed and you fill your cup to the brim.
I drown in my thoughts, and you drown in gin.
I live in purgatory while you live in sin.

I take my red hands to the sink,
watching as the water turns pink.
And I wash away your remains.
Our history, dead to me, as the water drains.

Then I walk away, take my paper cranes,
And pass by fractured picture frames.
I open the door to a battle won.
And I do what I should have always done.

Reticent By Faith Giles

The audience shivers in the congregation of ragged, aged velvet chairs,
Cowering behind their almost-forgotten coats and wringing their hands,
Though their eyes are focused, taking in the image displayed just for them.

Worn down dance shoes journey across the open dusty wood,
A three-four timed step barely audible against the skipping track,
Before they take their final position moments before the quiet.

Then the sudden eruption of booming hands,
Pounding their enthusiasm through their pain.
Not a soul dares invite silence to stay the night.

Hot breaths ripple against thin fabric,
Finally bringing motion to the tableau
And life to a dying stage.

As hastily as the moment arrived,
It shoves through the crowd
Until it is gone.

And here we are left.
A memory,
Hushed.



The Black Memorial Bracelet by Caleb Brewer

Why is this black band so heavy?
It is only metal with a few names engraved,
But when I look at it, I find myself feeling empty.
I wonder if loss always makes you feel this ashamed.

It is only metal with a few names engraved,
but I would do anything to swap in their place.
I wonder if loss always makes you feel this ashamed.
Is a death supposed to create this much hate?

But I would do anything to swap in their place.
Because there is not a time, I don't see the names.
Is a death supposed to create this much hate?
Is it pain that I should tame?

Because there is not a time, I don't see the names.
The black band I always feel on my skin,
Is it a pain that I should tame?
Is it a burden created of sin?

The black band I always feel on my skin.
Honoring those I called brothers.
Is it a burden created of sin?
Or is it a burden we created for each other?

Faded By Faith Giles

Her home was the floral couches and a crumbling brick fireplace I preserved in my memories.

It was the place where I had orange soda tea parties in plastic princess cups.

It was the backyard where I chased fireflies in circles until I got dizzy.

Her home was moments from my childhood.

Her home was fragments of her childhood, mornings riding the buggy through several feet of snow to school.

It was her father's old red truck, falling apart before he could fix it again.

It was chasing the feral kittens around the barn, but never touching the soft fur.

Her home slid into the dark hand-in-hand with her memory of it.

Her home remains frayed along the edges, a photograph with smeared smiles and creased lines.

Still, ever so still, it hides from the light that it once basked in.

Her home was gone before I had the chance to say goodbye.

I don't know what cardboard box holds her chestnut-colored jewelry box with the stained glass flowers.

None of us can agree which rosary was the one she held when she prayed.

Her aging home was placed carefully in newly bought boxes.

Her home was lost to her before she was lost to us.



A Time of the Past by Kaylee Fitzgerald

Home by Tayler Hodges

They say home is where the heart is, and I couldn't agree more. Home for me consists of the physical and the abstract. My physical home has never changed, not really anyway. When I moved into my dorm room, my mom made the same remark that she makes every year: "Are you sure you don't want a rug or something to make this place seem more like home?" To anyone else this question may seem innocent, but it catches me offguard every time she asks. Each year when she asks, I adamantly tell her that the room is fine how it is. She shakes her head in disagreement but drops it and lets me move in peacefully. She doesn't know what goes through my mind every time she asks that question.

As the words pass out of her mouth, I think of all of the ones that I have left behind at home to come here. Hendersonville is an hour away, so it doesn't equate to other people's treks that require an airplane, but it is unfathomably far to those who count. I know that I am at home when I hear the gentle sound of claws against linoleum or hardwood floor, the early morning wake up calls of a barking pit to protect me from suspected intruders and, the weight of a paw on my chest while I try to sleep (which to those who know is pretty painful when one has a twelve-pound cat). Home is when I roll over gently in case there is a warm, fuzzy body lying against my back, but here I need not be gentle because there is no one keeping me company. This isn't home.

Home will always be where my pets are. They are family, and I leave them without being able to articulate that I will be back. Instead, they watch me leave, and they lay in my empty bed waiting for me to come back.

My Valentine Always by Sabrina Kennedy

Happy Valentine's Day

Wait, what does it even mean to be my valentine?

Is it when you bring me heart-shaped chocolates and buy me flowers?

Or when you buy me a teddy bear and take me to my favorite restaurant?

Is it all of those things that would usually make any woman's heart flutter?

These traditional things are not what makes Valentine's Day special to me,

So if those things don't make Valentine's Day special to me, then what does?

It's not about the gifts you buy for me or how much money you spend.

It's not about the pictures we take to post on social media for everyone to see to show how much we love each other.

It's also not about the romantic gestures that every woman desires.

It's about the little things

Going on movie and dinner dates, not because we have money to spend, but because we want to get out of the house and do something special for a change

Or going to the farmers market to buy your favorite snack and walk around because going downtown is too much of a cliché

And when we're too broke or too lazy, we can simply stay home

Which isn't the worst thing, it's actually one of my favorite things to do

Lying in bed watching you play your game may sound boring to some, but it's interesting to me.

More interesting is how you lecture me to do my homework, and yet, you allow me to be lazy and sleep next to you with my arms wrapped around your waist.

It's the little things.

It's how we watch horror movies at home but fall asleep after ten minutes.

It's the days that you ask me to cook for you and always wanting seconds.

It's the mornings when you gently wake me up and shower me with kisses.

It's knowing that I get to wake up to see my favorite person lying beside me.

I could go on and on.

Valentine's Day may happen once a year for everyone else, but it's always Valentine's Day for me.

Happy Valentine's Day



Fawn by Ja'Leah Bellamy



@ricepix

Envy Us by Tyler Rice

Prayer For Future Generations by Kiki Palmer

I pray you never get sick of sunrises or
blow off the beauty of
stars and satellites and lunar garbage.
Cherish your happiness within darkness.
Value the strength of your vices and virtues.
Covet your reprieves from reality.
Appreciate the fleeting feeling of peace and finality.

I pray you understand what's so great about the dawn of a new day.
The possibilities and persistence,
moving on to what could be.
Leaving the past behind you to
march onwards to a fading forever.
Choosing the matter over the mind to
quietly mourn your future, blind.

I pray you get the chance to live your life, to
trust your mind and value your matter.
Live and breathe and be.
Dance to the beat of the blood flow
through your precious heuristic heart.
Lessons learned should be coveted like gold.
Allow yourself to earn what it means to grow old.

The Slide by Lovelle Williams

Scene 1

Timothy and Kenneth are sitting down at a Lancaster table with their mom. Behind them is a hot dog vendor. There is the sound of a wave pool that the boys are looking at.

MOM: Hey, boys. Do y'all want to take a break and eat before the next ride?

BOTH: (In Unison) Yes, ma'am.

(Mom walks over to the hot dog vendor.)

KENNETH: You were def super scared on that last ride.

TIMOTHY: I know you ain't talking. You looked like you about shit your pants.

KENNETH: (High pitched) NO, I WASN'T!

TIMOTHY: If you so big and bad, let's go on the slide with the trapdoor.

TIMOTHY: I know you seen it when we first walked in.

KENNETH: I ain't neva scared

TIMOTHY: You literally just were.

(Mom walks back with food for everyone.)

MOM: Here, y'all go. Do not drink your Icee's too fast. You will get brainfreeze.

(Both start slurping their Icee's.)

BOTH: BRAINFREEZE!

MOM: What did I just say?

TIMOTHY: He put his foot into this hotdog. Is yours this good?

KENNETH: Yes, bro, they have the best food here. Why is this so good?

TIMOTHY: Hurry up and finish eating, though, that line getting long, and I want to ride that beast.

(Kenneth looks around with worry on his face.)

MOM: When y'all go back out, ride like three more rides, then it is time to leave.

BOTH: Yes, ma'am.

(Kenneth and Timothy throw their plates away and sprint back into the waterpark.)

Scene 2

Timothy and Kenneth are standing side by side extremely nervously shaking as they walk in from the right side of the stage. There is a mountain behind them with a great view, and the spotlight should follow them as they are in line moving towards the slide. There is a teenage lifeguard who is between the ages of nineteen and twenty-two. There is a lifeguard across the stage letting people down the waterslide with what seems like a straight down drop. There is a line, and the pre-teen boys are four spots back from the front. Every time someone goes down the slide, there is a loud scream.

TIMOTHY: You ready?

KENNETH: Can't lie, I'm a lil scared.

TIMOTHY: Don't be pussy. We just walked up like twenty flights of stairs.

KENNETH: But, bruh, the hair on my arm is deadass standing up right now.

(The line gets one person shorter, and the boys walk closer.)*Screams

TIMOTHY: That's the whole point of the ride.

KENNETH: I think I'm going to go back down.

(Kenneth starts to turn around. Timothy grabs him and pulls him towards him.)

TIMOTHY: BRUH, WE ARE THREE SPOTS BACK NOW! YOU WANNA SAY SOMETHING?!

KENNETH: I'm going to tell mom if you don't release me.

TIMOTHY: Yeah, you gonna tell her after you go down this slide.

(Shakes head in disappointment.)

TIMOTHY: You really thought that was gon work, you going first, too, now, since you wanna cry.

(Continues to pull Kenneth and hold on)

KENNETH: Ok Ima do it. You don't have to hold my arm.

TIMOTHY: Obviously, I do. You better not run away or Ima tackle you in front of all these people.

(Timothy releases Kenneth's arm very aggressively. Spotlight shines on Lifeguard.)

LIFEGUARD: You boys funny, I'll let you press the button when he goes down.

(Jumping with excitement)

TIMOTHY: Bet that's too lit.

(They move to second in line.)

KENNETH: Can you just go down the slide first please?

TIMOTHY: Who?

KENNETH: You.

TIMOTHY: No, I'm not dumb. Ima go and you just gonna stay here.

LIFEGUARD: How bout y'all rock, paper, scissors, and I will make sure the winner goes down after the loser?

(In unison)

BOTH: Bet. He can't beat me.

TIMOTHY: Best of three? Or do you want to do one and done?

(All of sudden extremely excited)

KENNETH: Best of three, just in case.

TIMOTHY: On "shoot," right? I don't wanna hear no cheating.

KENNETH: Yes, no more running, let's do it.

BOTH: Rock, Paper, Scissors, SHOOT

(Kenneth wins with rock, and Timothy picks scissors again)

KENNETH: YOU TALKED ALL THAT SMACK! NOW GO DOWN THE SLIDE!

TIMOTHY: Fine.

(Kenneth smacks the button extra aggressively. Timothy screams: have a girl scream in place of him.)

LIFEGUARD: Now it's your turn.

KENNETH: I ain't even scared no more. I'm just happy I shut him up.

(Kenneth screams in terror as he goes down. Curtains drop and fade to black.)

Meat Cows by Cadence Wyatt

"Something smells good," Michael said, stepping through the kitchen door. "What kind of five-star meal are you cooking up in here?"

"I'll give you one good guess," Kate rasped out with a roll of her eyes.

"Sirloin and sauteed mushrooms with gravy!" When she didn't respond to him he sighed in disappointment. "Chili again, huh?"

"More like soup, without any potatoes or carrots." She flicked in some more seasonings and stirred the pot.

"Plenty of meat, though."

"We live on a cow farm Michael, of course, there's plenty of meat."

"Well, I don't know," Michael said offhandedly. "We haven't really had any meat cows lately. You think Pa might've gone down to Farmer Roberts for some?"

"Maybe when he went down to look for Ma," Kate answered and the silence that followed was somber. Their mother went out often, but never for this long. At least, not usually.

"Do you think she's coming back this time?" Michael began quietly. "I mean, like, seriously, do you think she might just stay with Farmer Roberts?"

Kate didn't answer right away; instead, she took a moment to chew on her words. When she did speak it was unsteady and uncertain. "I'm sure she'll show up eventually." She finally decided.

Michael watched her slowly set the pot on the other side of the stove with a suspicious look.

"You know something, don't you?" he mumbled, and when she tensed up, he continued.

"Hold on, Kate, do you have something you'd like to share?"

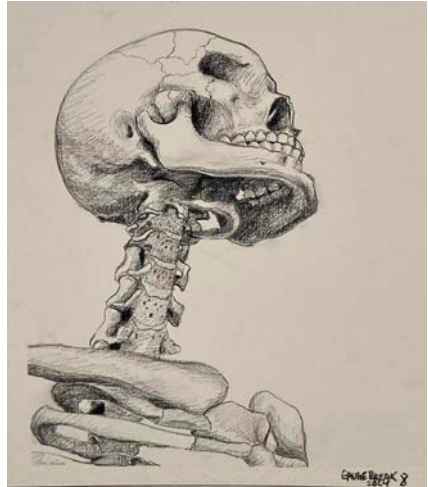
"I don't know anything," she responded quickly.

"Kate."

She turned to face him, avoiding his eyes but speaking anyway: "I don't know anything for certain. You said it yourself, we haven't had a good meat cow in years, but suddenly the freezer's full. I heard Mrs. Johnson say she hasn't heard back from Farmer Roberts about eggs in a week, either."

"Are you saying that--"

"No," she cut him off. "I don't know what I'm saying. But, I do know that this meat smells off, and I'm not all that hungry anymore."



Charcoal Skeleton by Nash Richardson

Honeysuckle Love by Braxton Robinson

We're the definition of

Honeysuckle Love

A sweet aroma of affection

The warmth of a summer night in July

The striking color to the garden's greenery

The vague sage blended with the olive opaque plants

A drop of nectar that refreshes the soul

Just a little taste of love's sweetness

Wednesday by Jade MacDonald

Jesus sat across from me this morning as I ate cereal in my studio apartment.

But I never bothered to look up from the depths of my bowl.

I knew He was there, but the floating remains of Captain Crunch held more of my interest in the moment.

When I went to class he didn't ask me if He could go too, He just followed my lead as I put on the same shoes I wore every day and gathered my things.

He sat behind me while I half-listened to my professor speak. I wouldn't know what she said now, I don't think.

We sat in silence on my drive to work, but He wasn't judgemental of my decision to not listen to music.

And until 11:55 today I never spoke a word to Him.

What do you say to the creator of the universe on a Wednesday morning?

I opened my mouth because I thought I had maybe found the words, but instead I took another breath.

It felt like I had more important things to worry about, probably like teaching

myself the lecture I missed so I could pass the little bit of school I had left.

I knew I would worry about the words that I needed to arrange so they weren't too hurtful or un-tame.

He watched me patiently with soft eyes as I drummed the steering wheel at the red light.

My nerves bouncing with my knee as I finally turned my head towards his light.

I looked over into my passenger seat and didn't see this glorious man, too out of reach for me.

I saw a man who was rugged, perfectly human, and willing to listen.

It didn't matter if my words came out messy like his slightly overgrown hair or harsh like the stubble on his cheeks.

He would hear them wherever I stood, and He would be there with me.

His dulled hands grabbed my face and I leaned into the warmth He exuded and laughed as His thumb wiped away a tear.

At 11:56 today, He told me He loved me and I said it back.

I realized the God that sits high up on the throne is the same man who sits across from me when I eat my cereal in my studio apartment.



Deep In Thought by Lee Barker

The Value of Gold by Leah Wilson

I sit in the studio and stare at the empty shelf.
The space sits vacant, impatient, in need of a golden decoration.
A golden decoration that defines, describes, and determines the success of the prior season.
Two days, I thought.
Two days until a fifty-fifty chance of winning with a dance
With so much pressure building, it felt as if I were in a trance
In the blink of an eye, it is finally that time.

The emcee holds the metallic microphone muttering malarkey, revealing the overall results.
I notice the collar of my shirt feeling tight like a hand holding with great might.
My teammate's hand is clasped upon mine like a snake dying for prey to find.
Third place goes to...
I feel my heart pitter-patter.
Second place goes to...
I feel my heart shatter.
I feel the frown of the crowd at the sound of my team's losing number.

Sixteen years of training, twelve months of preparation, fifty-two weeks of hard work
For a three-minute shot at perfection
All to lose in a mighty battle?

I feel the bright spotlight dim, my thoughts become grim
Were my feet not neat and pointed? Does the blame fall upon me?
Was the formation not clean? Was its configuration not pristine?

In the silence, I hear whispers of might-have-beens, all echoing in my head.
These echoes grow louder, prouder, a chorus in my mind
A symphony of "if only," a melody of the denied.
I wonder, analyzing every pirouette, every leap,
The shadows of self-loathing start to creep.

A realization arrives in my mind, as bright as a sunny day,
It's not about the trophy with its golden array.

It's about the knowledge-filled journey and the friendships we've built,
The shared laughter of the after-hours, where we felt we belonged.
This team is about unity, a community where everyone wins.
We dance for the memories, not for the gold that lines the walls.
It's not the gold that validates our worth at the end of the day.
I realize the prize lies in the bonds we've created.
The journey continues in the trials and the smiles.

So, I sit in the studio and stare at the empty shelf.
The shelf sits content, at ease, almost like it internally agrees.
Let the trophy collect dust, may it be withered with a wilderness of rust.
We dance not for the medal, but for the joy it brings.
The happiness of dance comes from the little things.



Hanahaki Disease by Liz Gandee

Hanahaki Disease by Cassie Berry

Through the garden I go,
Watching all the flowers grow;
The Violets are indigo, the poppies lipstick red,
The roses have thorns covered in bloodshed.

I watch the busy bees and butterflies drink
The pollen stays on their feet like a little treat
Between the woods and xcottage,
Lives the garden keeping me in my dotage.

The dragons snap in my ears.
The flowers “try” to melt away my fears.
My love, unrequited, keeps me silent.
Though I rip out the flowers, I promise I’m not violent.

Those times where you are all I can think
I sit in my garden, and I drink.
My lungs slowly turn from periwinkle to pink.
My lungs slowly turn from periwinkle to pink.

The Monster: Loss by Adam Sellers

Loss greeted me at my bedroom door when I was nine.

He rode in on my grandfather's jacket.
And sat on the bed beside him.

Feeding the words to my grandfather by the spoonful.

My grandfather spitting them out.

"She went to go live with God and Jesus," he said.

Into the air those words went. Which created a thick gas.

It made my eyes water.

Loss got what he wanted and crept out of my bedroom window.

I would see him again, soon.

Loss greeted me in the office when I was eleven.

He sat in the recliner in front of the television.
"He passed at hospice last night," my father said.

Into the air the words went.

Loss smiled his widest grin.

And left out the glass door into the backyard.

I would see him again, soon.

Loss greeted me when I was lying in bed at nineteen.

He slid under the crack of the door.

Awoke me by smacking me in the face.

She's gone, I thought.

Sure enough, loss followed me out of my room.

And sat next to my mother in bed, consoling her while she wept.

He rubbed his grimy paws together.

And left out the front door, running up the street.

Loss would greet my family every January.
Taking a soul with him each time.

It's 2024 now.

And he's still taking things he doesn't own.

About a month ago, he took another.

Every January, I hunker down.

I prepare for Loss to rear his head back.

And take another.

Laugh.

And take another.

Smile.

And take another.

This monster takes, does not give.

This monster brings sadness, not joy.

This monster is greedy, does not spare.

This monster is loss.

The Lemon Gulf by Owen Blake

Let me take you down to
The sour beach at night.
Citrus all around you
Come on and take a bite.

We'll build ourselves a boat
Made out of tangerines.
Together we will float
Across the lemon seas.

Maybe I'm just crazy
But I do not tell lies.
I know your vision's hazy
Behind those watered eyes.

You could wait idly by
And pass time on the shore.
Let lemons turn to limes
And I will sail no more.

But is that what you want?
A life devoid of fruit?
Stuff your face with croissants
While I enjoy the juice?



ENOUGH by Ant Flores

Is it My Fault by Cierra Williams

A deep hole
A shallow space
An escape from reality
In a sunken place.
My body is still here
But my mind is gone.
They say there is nothing to fear
But where is the place I belong?
I feel as if I have no voice.
I feel as if I have no choice.
I feel hands that aren't mine.
I hear a voice I can't find.
The hands felt like ones I've known before.
The voice does, too.
The aching pain behind my "Why you?"
Is this why we're so close?
Is this why we talked the most?
Is this how he saw me?
Is this my fault?
I didn't wear anything sexual.
None of this was consensual.
I covered my body from head to toe
But is this my fault?
Did I lead him on with a friendly hello?
IS THIS MY FAULT?
I DIDN'T DO ANYTHING.
I AM JUST A HUMAN BEING.
"Behave yourself and sit like a lady."
THAT'S WHAT I WAS TAUGHT.
IS THIS MY FAULT?
I BEHAVED LIKE I WAS TOLD.
I SAT UP RIGHT.
I KEPT MY LEGS CLOSED.
I kept my legs closed.
And he pried them open like he was a
Claw tool, Pry bar,
Denver tool, Halligan bar,
Kelly tool, or the "pig."
He pried open my thunder thighs
Like they were twigs.
Momma, I'm sorry.
Daddy, I'm sorry.
I did what I could
But it wasn't enough.
My mind shuts off

And my body lets go.
I stop fighting.
I stop saying no.
He seemed very pleased.
He seemed at ease.
He seemed like someone I never knew.
I knew this was something I could never undo.
With the satisfaction of it being over,
I still feel like I got run over by a bulldozer.
The night went quiet.
The room fell silent.
I lay on my back and stare at the ceiling.
I pray to God to help me with healing.
As the days go on, I lose my grip with reality.
From keeping a secret that swells deep inside
of me
I space out every chance I get.
I space out because you make me sick.
I space out every time I get asked if I'm ok.
I space out because I think I'm the one to
blame.
I space out because it's the only escape that I
have.
I space out because-
The hands that weren't mine still haunt me.
The voice that wasn't mine still taunts me.
The things that you did still want me
But I don't want you.
Yet you're still in my head.
But I don't want you.
Yet you make me wish I was dead.
A deep hole,
A shallow space,
An escape from reality,
In a sunken place.
My body is still here
But my mind is gone.
Is it my fault that he touched me?
Is it my fault that he had a lust for me?
Is it my fault that his sense blinded him?
Is it my fault that I stopped going to the gym?
Maybe then I could get him off me.
Maybe then I wouldn't have to think of you so
awfully.
God take me back.
I want to go home.



Ghoulish by Lee Barker



Greek Life, and Death By Samuel Evans

It was a cold and windy night on the second Friday of October, fairly normal for that time of year, and the normal sounds of traffic and nature were blurred out by the thumping coming down the street from the house 1331, the Tau Kappa Epsilon House. The red lights on the lawn flashed upwards to the beat of the song highlighting the huge TKE attached to the side of the house, “Girl the way you’re movin’, got me in a trance.” Crowds of sorority girls flocked towards the three-story colonial house, that minus the flashing lights and disco balls, didn’t look to have been renovated in decades. This was the party of the year put on by the most well-known fraternity on campus. It was a sorority invite-only, and only the top five sororities got to attend the party the night before the big Homecoming game.



The party couldn’t officially begin until all five sororities were standing at the gate that surrounded all four sides of the yard. Kennedy, Carlie, and Crystal were standing with the rest of their sorority sisters huddled together singing along to the song, “Girl, drop it to the floor.” They were all three members of Tri Delta, one of the biggest sororities on campus, and everyone knew the girls in blue. They decided to get there about 15 minutes before the party was to start knowing that the rest of the sororities would be late due to makeup and wardrobe malfunctions. Kennedy noticed that at the very front of the line were the pink and green Delta Zeta girls, who obviously already pre-gamed before even thinking about getting ready, followed by the similarly dressed girls from Kappa Delta. It was tradition that for this party, the girls had to dress in the colors that represented them. Just a few minutes after Kennedy, Carlie, and Crystal had arrived, the “Barbie” Phi Mu girls had got in line. They didn’t seem too excited to be there, but they made sure they looked the part for a night full of fun. The only group missing was the Kappa Kappa Gamma girls that usually walked as if making an ocean full of flowing skirts, dresses, and bell bottoms.

Kennedy noticed that the upperclassman in the front of the line couldn’t stop pointing to an awkwardly placed door that seemed to open between floors. Right as Kennedy turned around to ask Carlie and Crystal what the door was meant for, the lyrics “And I’ll proceed to throw this cash…” drifted into the abyss by the handsome man at the door announcing that the girls from Kappa Kappa Gamma had declined the invitation.

The handsome man at the door immediately withdrew his focus from the crowd and motioned for the pink and green group to walk up the stairs toward his table, set up perfectly by the door. Kennedy couldn’t see exactly what was on the table other than a tablecloth neatly placed in the center; she was too far away to see anything else. She wanted to ask Carlie and Crystal all kinds of questions because this was their fourth and final year being invited to the Tau Kappa Epsilon PreHomecoming Party; they would be graduating the next May.

“Why did KKG decide to turn down the invitation?” Kennedy blurted out, asking the first question that popped into her head, to Carlie and Crystal who both looked stunned at Kennedy’s rude outburst.

“Shhhhhh,” Carlie hushed as she quickly looked around to see if anyone had heard Kennedy’s inconsiderate question about their fellow sisterhood on campus.

Crystal quickly jumped in with a hushed tone, barely audible due to the music thumping in their heads. “You know us girls have to stick together, whether we are in the same sorority or not. It is a crazy world out here.”

"I know," Kennedy whispered, matching the secrecy of her two friends. "But why would those girls turn down the it party of the year, when it is an invite only event that everyone wants to get into?"

"Nobody knows. Those no good whooo owl girls have turned down the invitation now three times. They are such boring losers now that their new presidential era started our sophomore year. They stopped coming to parties, throwing parties, and having anything to do with any of the frats. They only associate with fellow sisterhoods on campus, and even that is rare," Crystal explained with a worried look on her face as if the whole thing was a big secret, cursed to talk about.

Carlie picked up right where her sister left off in a gossipy tone, "I heard that the presidents of KKG and TKE had a disagreement about the way parties go on within the fraternity community, but as far as I'm concerned, I've been to so many parties that nothing seems out of place. Everyone's party is just like the last one, and the one before that."

Suddenly, Kennedy noticed that not only had the easy DZ girls joined the party, the Kappa Deltas already had too. The man who announced the news about Kappa Kappa Gamma was still standing in a poised position with his arms crossed in front of his chest. He was wearing black dress pants with a red button up shirt with the letters TKE embroidered on the pocket, just like all of his fraternity brothers. He motioned for Kennedy and the rest of the girls to make their way up the stairs and over to the table.

"Hello, my name is Carlisle, and this is my friend Felix," Carlisle motioned to the man standing at the mysterious door that Kennedy had noticed earlier. Felix had some kind of resemblance to Carlisle but Kennedy couldn't quite figure out what it was about them that looked the same. He continued by saying, "Welcome to the Tau Kappa Epsilon House." The girls clapped loudly at this, but Kennedy didn't quite see the need to just yet. "Who all here is a freshman?"

Kennedy didn't see the point of needing to know this information, but she raised her hand along with about four other girls who also seemed to have the same look of confusion, worry, and doubt on their faces.

"Wonderful!" Carlisle stated. "Let me explain to you the process to get in. Our fraternity here is in charge of helping the top five sororities on campus pick out one of their girls a year that follows their charter perfectly to receive a special award, all defined by our ancestors of these organizations. Each member of the sorority must pick a straw out of this cup." He held up a black cup that had about twenty to thirty sticks in it, all different shapes and sizes and completely impossible to see into to determine the lengths. This was the first time Kennedy had noticed a cup even being there, not to mention the fact that there was some kind of cover over the top preventing anyone from seeing the true sizes of the sticks. Carlisle let the freshman girls admire the cup for a couple seconds before continuing on about the process: "If you pick the shortest stick then you have to follow Felix while your fellow sisters get to go to the party. Shake your head if you understand."

Kennedy looked around to see what the other girls were doing. They were all nodding so she decided to as well. She didn't want her first couple months as a member of Tri Delta to be over this quickly. So in turn, each girl picked a straw and hid it in her palm, until given permission by Carlisle at the end to compare. Finally, it was the freshman's turn, but for some reason, Carlisle seemed to have something against Kennedy, telling her she had to go last. After finally getting to pick her straw, Carlisle instructed the girls to open their palms.

“It’s me, it’s me!” yelled Crystal. She seemed too overly excited for Kennedy, given the fact the girl had just gotten the short stick, and having no idea where Felix was going to take her, and what her reward was.

Carlisle looked at the rest of the girls as Felix escorted Crystal away from the group. “Congratulations to the rest of you, you get to go ahead and go into the party but you have to take a shot of our TKE special, liquid loss.”

Kennedy, still uncertain about the whole situation, didn’t like the ambiguity surrounding TKE, asked, “What if we refuse to drink it?”

“You don’t want to do that.”

Kennedy saw that all the older girls didn’t question Carlisle and quickly took the shot served at the door. When she glanced over at Carlisle, she knew he was dead serious. So she followed suit. Just as she was turning the glass up she heard Crystal scream begging to be let out, presumably from behind the door but it was too late. The moment the black liquid touched Kennedy’s lips, she no longer heard Crystal nor did she remember anything that had just happened. All she could focus on was the music leading her further and further into the party.

The Fog of War by Caleb Brewer

The sun roasted the armored Humvee, turning it into a well-heated oven we all despised. Dust clung to every sweat pore, crusting around our eyes and mouths as the driver launched down the barren desert road. All heads cast down to hide the fear and doubt we felt, knuckles white around rifles to hide the trembles of adrenaline that flooded our systems. The dusty brakes of the old Humvee pierced our ears with a high-pitched scream as it slammed to a stop. Sprinting out of the safety of the truck, establishing the defense we rehearsed and practiced for months. SNAP, dust flew up from beside me. CONTACT FRONT! I yelled, throat bleeding from the dry weather mixed with the strain on my voice. SNAP, someone collapsed. BREAK, BREAK, BREAK, echoed over the radio as all other voices left the frequency. STAND BY FOR CAS EVAC NINE LINE. SNAP, the world slowed, dust settled, SNAP, no enemy in sight, sand exploded somewhere behind. FALLBACK, Sargent Ghramm screamed! One at a time, we left our positions. Throwing gear and diving into the truck that we so hated moments before. Hands grabbed and placed the last man on the dusted metal between the seats. Red lines pushed their way through the dust and grime in his uniform, penetrating the folded flag that lived in his pocket, forcing the pure white stars to retreat, leaving sinister crimson ones in their place.





An Ever-Changing Self Reflection by Kaitlyn Johnson

Ineffable by Kiki Palmer

What do I do
when your existence
prevails words?
I bite my useless tongue.
Scowl at your smirk.
You have not bested me;
My lexicon has failed me.

One day I will laugh at the word ineffable.

Hundreds of words,
uncountable hours
I have spent quantifying
my feelings for you.
Others roll their eyes
at my plight
in relation to your existence.

I swear, one day I will laugh at the word
ineffable.

Why should I settle
on a single word
when my entire language
could pick apart
every single reason
I have come to call you
mine, mine, mine, forevermore.

It'll happen, one day I will laugh at the word
ineffable.

When the day comes
a laugh will rip from
my lungs.
Others will squirm
in discomfort at my triumph.
Clear and shrill the cackle will be,
and I will be satisfied.

One day I will get to laugh at the word
ineffable.

I will have beat the language
artists, scientists, and philosophers
have had to deal with.
Imagine it!
I'll keep the words
to myself.
I'll dedicate them to you.

One day I will laugh at the word ineffable for
you.

I refuse to allow you
to be regarded as
ineffable, my love.
For everything
that has made you
who you are
has meaning and consequence.

I will laugh at the word ineffable.

Big Girl Bed by Jade MacDonald

Anticipation crept through me as I sat on the floor, screws and an unread set of directions watching beside me. His surgeon hands moved in front of me, crafting and piecing together fresh wooden boards and beams. A fatherly exhale traveled through the room as he laid the finishing touches on my big girl bed. The top of the mattress felt like an Everest away to four-year-old Jade. A daunting and impossible feat, Thus, the step stool 2-year-old me formerly used to reach the sink, Repurposed at the edge of the mountain in front of me. A big girl bed? Crap. I lay sleeping in a bed I was too little to fill, drowning. It had a way of making me no longer feel like a kid, no matter the number of stuffed animals that occupied it. Tears struck my eyes each time my dad came to mummy-tuck me back in, His overworked hands coming to save me from my big girl bed. How would I ever grow into this? I lay adrift in an endless sea of sheets, A castaway, up high and unsafe from the realities of growing up.

The queen-size mattress like a life raft I'd have to cling to
Floating or sinking in the waves of dark, big girl bed grief.
Scared to go to sleep, my bed a dreaded destination.
My anxious little mind buzzed as I curled up on my side,

Rocking my nerves back to sleep.
Breathe, you can do it on your own.
I'd shut my eyes when I got tired of staring at the dark deep.
But my eyes flash open and I groan at the clock.
I try to remind myself that I'm a big girl and I can do this.
Laying here at 21 years old, the world seeping through my window, I start to cry.
Because I just wish I could go back to the day I first got my big girl bed.
To when the biggest step I made was from the second stair of that stool onto my mattress.
When the darkness I faced was in that ocean current, mountain top bed,
And not everything and everyone around me instead.
But lately it feels like the hardest step I take is the one away from the safety of my big girl bed.



Mushroom Set by Leah Brabham

Humble Beginnings by Lupa Mpiana

I remember my friend's car was how I got around.
Honestly I'm still in that predicament now.
Trying to make things better but change is going to take a while
Kinda hard to do when people try to take your smile
I remember when my efforts were taken for jokes,
Getting flamed by niggas who would always do the most.
Now they trying to say that from the start that we was close
But where were they at when I was struggling at my lowest?
I remember middle school back in the seventh grade
Khaki joggers and red Jordan Futures was the wave.
Only shoes I got that year were cleats so I can play
Football but I hated it, my teammates liked to haze.
I remember when I finally turned thirteen,
I had finally hit my spurt so nobody could mess with me,
And the girls would talk to me, I liked talking to them, too,
But I'd always wear the same clothes every day so I'd always lose.
I remember nights when I was going to sleep hungry.
I was waking empty handed early Christmas morning.
Man back in those days a nigga really ain't have nothing,
But those days I miss the most, so I must've had something.

The Flash of a Friday Night by Caleb White

DOWN SET HUT!

It's a Friday morning waking up to the sound of my alarm
Just now realizing it's Friday, the day I can finally use my charm.
I'm sitting in class, bored as ever, watching the tv waste away,
Just itching in my seat thinking about how I am ready to play,
As we march down the halls for the game day parade,
You already know I am rocking that fresh fit fade.
DOWN SET HUT!
The boys of fall, you gotta love us all,
Telling everyone to come out tonight to watch us ball.
We're all excited for what the night can hold
but we cannot bend nor break, we have to be bold.
Me and the boys in class joking we just checked the temp, it's finna be cold.

DOWN SET HUT!

Listening to the band yelling from the stands, looking at all the fans,
Tonight's the game of our life playing against our rivals, the Rams.
As the time is getting closer, we're suiting up our pads and putting on our uniforms.
As I am putting on my uniform, I can start to feel everything on my body from
Crests in my jersey to the hair pressing against my forehead because of my helmet,
slowly walking out with my teammate's arms locked like we're going to battle.
I'm starting to get butterflies. I can now feel my heart racing BOOM BOOM BOOM. I guess
This is what it feels like when you have nothing to lose, even though this game is like a test.

DOWN SET HUT!

There are no more nerves. This is me; this is what I am meant to be.
The quarterback hiked the ball, now it is time to give it my all.
I've outran the defender, it's finally my chance, I see the ball, it has come straight to me.
I need to catch this ball, it is getting close I can see.
Fierce footballers fight fearlessly till the end.
The lights are bright, dropping this is my biggest fright. I got this, right?.....



NO AIM by Ant Flores



Trust the Process by Malik Laurent

The first 20 years of my life have been a blur.
If you know my story, you would concur.
Memories of playing catch outside the family home
Evaporated when we evacuated to the Super Dome.
Cries of pain, tears on faces
There were blacks, there were whites, no time to be racist
We walked around lost, looking for assistance.
Attempts to leave the city were met with resistance.
Rumors of violence and rape ran wild.
I could hear my parents saying, this is no place for a child.
They gathered my siblings and me without making a fuss
As they hurried us onto the next available bus,
Off to Atlanta, a new life to seek.
We stayed with my aunt for 5-6 weeks.
So finally, we found a place of our own
Excited for a new life but sad the old one was gone.
This new life was different, I had black and white friends.
My mom drove a punch buggy while theirs drove a Benz.
There was no need to be jealous, I was just grateful to be there
Kids asking if i was puerto rican because the texture of my hair
Despite how diverse we were we began to grow close
I laugh everytime i think about Alex running into the goal post.
Riding our bikes through the neighborhood, running through the woods
Key moments of my childhood back when life was good
Pops lost his job, now we're packing up again,
Off to another place leaving behind all my friends
Back to square one, renting out a new house
In a neighborhood with a name I couldn't pronounce.
This neighborhood had lots of open grass and a basketball court.
Being outside so much I eventually fell in love with sports.
The time came to try out for the middle school team
So excited that I made it, I was living the dream.
I remember those frosty Saturday mornings, when I was scoring, the crowd roaring.
At that point, life was the complete opposite of boring,
Until one game when 300 pounds fell on my leg.
I shouted out as I felt my ankle crack like an egg.
I tried to walk it off but i just fell to the ground
Hearing the commentators say we have a man down.
They rushed me to the ER to see what was wrong
My mom rubbing on my shoulder telling me I'm strong
Another setback in this world, I just felt like I didn't belong.
Then in walks the doctor singing the same sad song.
I know you have dreams of having a football career
But it looks like you're gonna have to put them on hold until next year.
Another setback in my life, I won't cry much longer.
Each one of these setbacks did nothing but make me stronger.
I learned about friends, I learned about love.
I learned that family is much beyond blood.
It's not about black and white, it's about staying true
It's about surrounding yourself with folks who actually care about you
I rehabbed my leg and was back on the field
My determination wouldn't allow my spirit to be killed

I went into highschool with a chip on my shoulder
Still lacking confidence even though I was much older.
As The Years went by, I got bigger and stood tall
While still pursuing my dreams of playing college football.
Year in, year out, continuously grinding,
Momma's proud of her son 'cause I'm continuously shining.
Colleges calling me up, I'm starting to get noticed.
No time to get the big head, I gotta stay focused.
I still thank Coach Reese to this day for giving me a chance.
He's the reason why I get to put on the blue and gold pants.
Negative thoughts from my past begin to fade away,
But I'm grateful for it all, it made me who I am today.

Anxiety by Erin Cline

Anxiety runs my brain. I constantly have to
beat the thoughts down in my brain. Medications
consisting of
daily doses. Serotonin inhibitors
eradicating the unwillingness to calm down. Wondering when my next
freakout will be and what will cause it.
Generalize the idea of it's okay to not be okay. No matter
how much you want to hide behind a curtain never to be seen again.
I wonder what people see when they look at me. Is it
justified by my disorder or by how I am? Trying to
kill the voice in my head
letting me lose control of my body.
Mumbling my words as I can't breathe.
Not knowing how to make it stop. My brain being
ominous and thinking everyone is looking at me, judging.
People mind their own business but, in my mind, they only see my flaws.
Quick to turn a good situation bad. My mind
running a thousand miles an hour not able to
stop.
Thinking the panicking will never go away. After taking my medications my mind
unwinds. My thoughts of
viciousness have now turned to thoughts of
wonder. My mind is
x'actly where it needs to be.
Yearning for a day that my brain settles down. Maybe this is a sign that
Zoloft is the right medication.

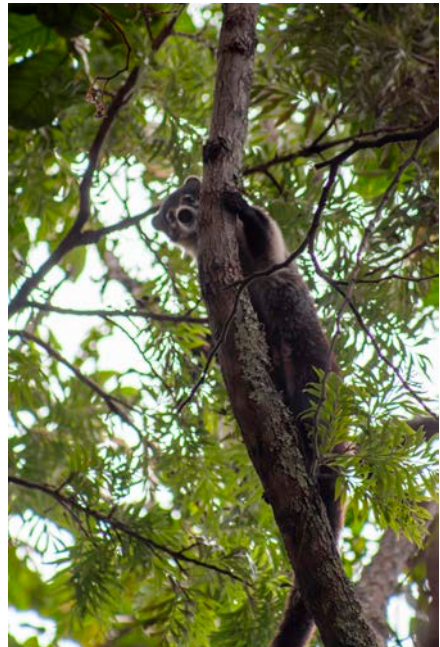
Miraculous Myers by TJ Burske

They say what is beautiful on the outside
Isn't what is always beautiful on the inside.
That's Myers for Mars Hill.
Let me tell you about my situation
That starts with the realization, that turns into an infatuation
With the derealization that this is the reality.
I guess I just gotta get through it
But how can I get through it
When I'm living in shit?
As soon as I walk in I'm greeted by a smell
That consequently gets me high as hell.
Showers always running,
Guitar strings always strumming,
It's 1 am and my neighbor won't stop yelling.
The smell of kush.
Toilets won't flush.
And the drain is clogged by a bush.
I guess I just gotta get through it.
But how can I get through it,
When I always feel like Ima lose it?
I stop to think, is this the college dream?
Cuz shiiii, this isn't what it seems.
26 to 1?
26 guys to 1 bathroom?
Yeah, that right, things get pretty tight.
And that's not including the fly colony that resides in there.
But me and the fly share a common problem.
We're trapped inside with nowhere to hide.
So you may ask, where is it that I reside?
And I'll tell you in a room that could be seen as a jail cell.
This shit feels like a living hell.
It's a jungle gym.
It's a trap.
Founded in 1955.
How the hell is it still alive?
I wish I could make things right.
I wish I could go down with a fight.

Res life, this is all on you.
But maybe someone up top should take a hint
Before the roof caves in and the walls start to splint.
I give it an honest review.
Being a part of the few that have to put up and make do,
With this awful home that's worse than fallen Rome.
Don't tell me not to complain unless you feel this pain.



Cuz I tell you now you'd be driven insane.
Nothing to lose, nothing to gain.
The men of Myers deserve respect
For being able to accept
This dorm that ain't like the norm.
So I guess I just gotta get through it, right?
But once again how can I get through it?
You could say I don't have a choice, which is true,
But what I do have is this voice to say what is true.
If you aren't in Myers, you're lucky.
Those with me would agree, Myers is sucky.



Peek-a-Boo by Lee Barker

Ring by RayRay Ellis

You gave me a ring.
It was plain and simple, all silver and blue.
It seemed like a sort of offering,
To signify my friendship to you.

You gave yourself a ring.
It was plain and simple, all silver and red.
To signify that our friendship was true.
They tied us together as if with a thread.

Yours was plain and simple, all silver and red.
Mine was the same, just in a different color.
They were like our tying thread.
They showed that we loved one another.

Mine was the same, just in a different color,
But time went on.
Where it once showed that we loved one another,
It came to signify the breaking of our bond.

Time carried on.
Our calls began to dwindle
Another sign of our breaking bond.
And then our friendship turned to kindle.

Not only did our calls dwindle.
You also found new friends,
Which only added to the kindle.
I knew we had gone past something we could mend.

Yes, you found new friends,
And that would have been okay
Had we not already crossed the ability to mend
Our friendship that was in disarray.

This would have all been okay,
But you gave me that stupid ring.
Our friendship was in disarray,
But I still had to wear the damn thing.

You gave me that stupid ring.
It wasn't even silver and blue anymore
I still wore the damn thing,
But it had become rusty to its core.

Yours probably wasn't silver and red anymore,
A sign of decomposition.
I'm sure it had become rusty to its core,
But that's just a suspicion.

This sign of decomposition

Made me think back to our times together.
My thoughts were shrouded with suspicion,
But I don't remember you wearing it, ever.

Thinking back to our times together
You had never felt the same.
You never wore your ring, ever.
Had this all just been some game?

You had never felt the same.
The ring was never really a symbol.
It had all just been a game,
Plain and simple.

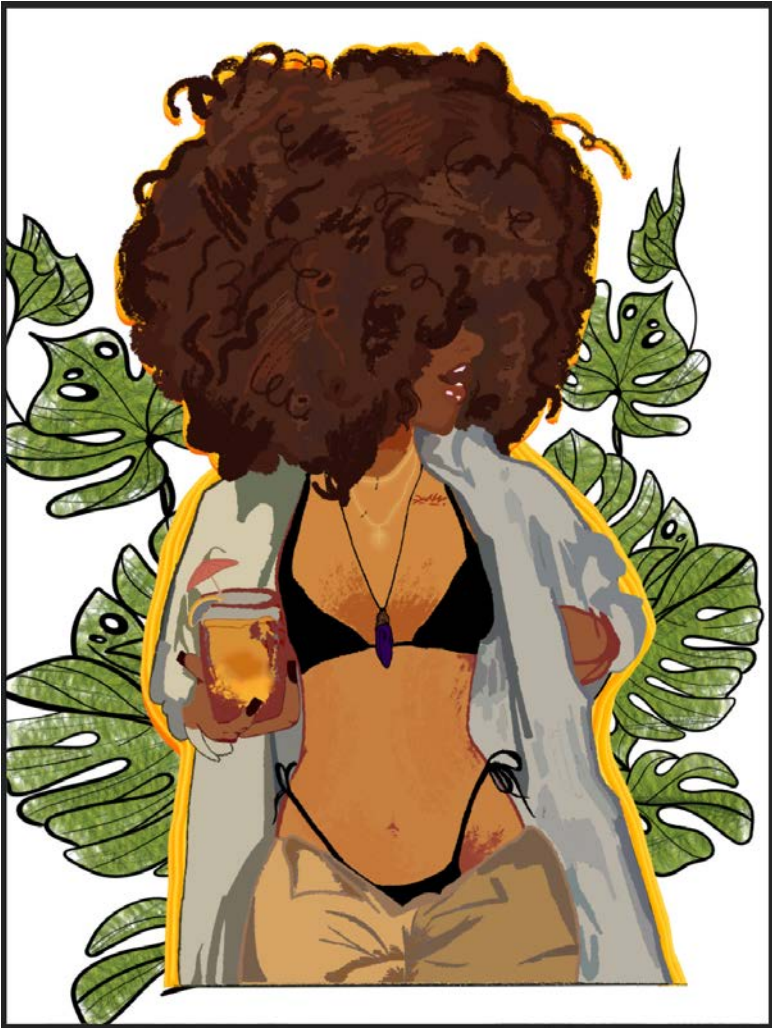
Countdown by Alex Oleschuk

Five cars for
Four people
Three houses
Two lost love birds
One lousy marriage

Madame Monet with Parasol by Nicolas E. Varner

This is the expression of love: A stillness of the eyes
when absolutely everything is moving,
a face that seems to ask something unanswerable.

As Messiah looked upon the thief and
as the Word of God was one time why,
here is Love—
the world merely
her shadow on the grass.



I Don't Have Anything by Bella Moore

I Woke Up Today by Arwen Mamer

I woke up today and I realized

I have no pencils in my backpack cause I use em all to pack my joints,
my computer's been dead for three days, I'm silenced listening to the voice coming through my
phone belting notes

I haven't written any down since I've been back.

Laying here in my bed

I feel strapped to the morgue's table, I can't move, my medication's obsolete,
it fell down the crack

behind my nightstand and I don't want to reach for it.

Forced to get up five minutes before I need to be in class

confined to a contract I willingly signed, I wish I would've told them to kiss my ass.

Trapped between four walls, surrounded by the beckoning call to leave forever

wading knee deep in my shortcomings and sorrows

But they tell me I carry so much weight so well and compliment me in their backhanded
statements.

I'm trying to relearn how to swim or float

I thought I had healed.

I woke up this morning realized I'm still broken

not so far away from home but only emptiness in my heart.

I don't know what to do.

I asked for help but you only want me to be there for you.

Promised different but received only more of the same things that broke me in the first place.

I woke up and I realized I'm still lost moving fast paced towards someone else's goals

a shell of my own body not in control.

Cans of alcohol lining the side of the doorway waiting to be taken out, roaches in the ashtray
needing to be dumped, the sucked dry liquor bottles in my closet, clothes and dreams littering
the floor,

I woke up today and I realized I am

shattered pieces of a beautiful handmade ceramic held together by superglue,

a frayed knot slowly pulling apart,

something that appears put together at first glance

but upon a closer look the misaligned seams, large cracks, chips, and lines show as obvious as
the tension tugging on either side of the string ready to snap.

I woke up today and I realized I miss my mom,

I miss my not so little sibling that I wish had never followed down my path.

I woke up today and I realized that I'm teetering on the edge of that cliff again, swaying in the
wind, wanting to take that dive

knowing that the way down would be the last breath of fresh air

but the inkling of hesitation gives me just enough time to step back and think
the rest of my thoughts

slowly trying to drag me down back into the darkness

farther away from my hollowed out corpse

I watch myself in third person

I woke up this morning and I realized

I'm a different version of myself

not happy go lucky and free

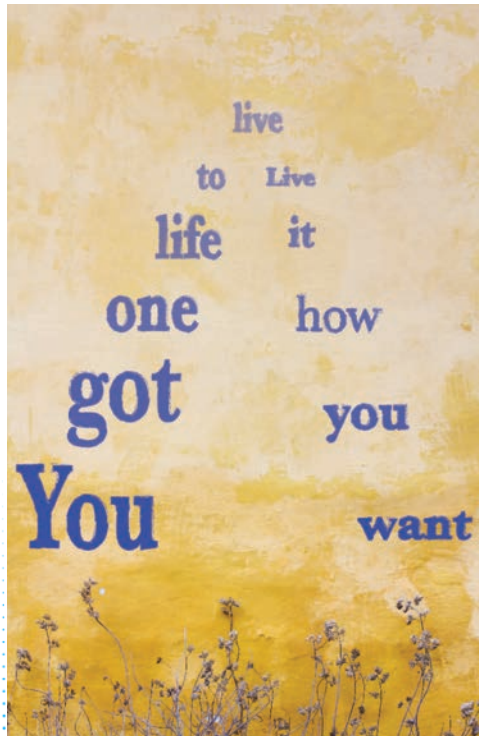
a ball and chain wrapped around my ankle

stuck in a prison I trapped myself in searching for an exit.

I woke up this morning and I realized
I can get through it.
I'm better than this.
I know I relapsed I'm sorry,
I've been here too many times before
you don't need to ask why, I'll tell you
it's familiar, it supports me,
I know it's the byproduct of what broke me.
I woke up and I realized I'm still here for a reason, I can get clean.
Two steps forward and another step back
I have to start all over again.

Handcuffed to my subconscious ideations.

I woke up and I realized I can't keep letting my demons win.
They fight harder now than ever.
I have to become a stronger swimmer to keep my head above the water.
I can't let the current pull me out to sea.
I woke up and I realized that if I don't wake up tomorrow I would cause devastation.
I hope you can't relate to the heartbreak in my words
but I know more than a few people do.
I woke up and I realized I'll keep fighting to wake up tomorrow
and I hope with my whole broken heart that you will, too.



Una Vite By Lovelle Williams

The Town Figure by Hosanna Guess

Willow walked down the cracked pavement of her town's street, the eerie quiet filled only with sounds of her clear whistling and feet hitting solid ground. Her nonchalant attitude was clear to anyone watching, and despite the empty street, she knew they were watching. They were always watching. As she rounded a corner, she heard the footsteps getting closer. Attempting to remain calm, she began to quicken her pace, noting the person - or thing -- walking faster behind her. Willow knew what it wanted, everyone always knows, but she refused to give up as the imposing woods, separating her from her home, slowly rose in her field of vision. She realized she had stopped whistling, a sign of her growing fear, and blew out a hesitant note. The whistle caught in her throat as she tried to push it past teeth, out her mouth, and into the air, but was thwarted by dry lips. Running her tongue over her lips in a vain attempt to continue her carefree whistling, the footsteps behind her somehow grew heavier and louder as she entered the treeline of the dark woods, despite the lush mix of moss and grass that covered the ground.

Her mother's daily mantra rang clear and true in Willow's ears as she made her way over a fallen tree, palms scraping against rough wood, inviting delicate splinters into her hands--"We are free, and we will always be free, no matter what, as long as you listen and never find yourself outside during twilight." How those words haunted her every day, the weight of the world upon her frail shoulders. She did not want the responsibility, no girl ever did, but the long line of girls only grew every year. Each year, or as often as needed, a girl who is deemed most obedient, most kind, and most caring to those around her is chosen to "represent" the town. Except they are not told what this representation means, and do not find out until they are gone. After they are chosen, their parents recite a written mantra provided by the town council, who chooses the girls, and are told no more information.

The sound of a twig breaking snapped Willow out of her thoughts as her house came into view. A breath of relief began to slip past her lips as one foot in front of the other turned into two feet tangled into one. Willow cried out in fear as she felt a soft hand grab her from behind. Her mother's voice was the last thing she heard; her house the last thing she saw as the world around her slowly faded away.

"I told you, Willow. Never be outside during twilight." The entire town shook for as long as Willow's cries lasted, the imposing gates surrounding the town vanishing as she was pulled into the ground. Each town council member gathered shortly after, once again deciding on their next town figure.

Good Ol' Slackjaw by Peter Klisiewicz

One day outside, I met with my eye a creature of unusually large size.
It was a rat snake six feet long warming itself on thicket branches.
It slithered away, but I'd see him another fun day.
Many days later, on a comfortable night, I was at a coop making sure the birds were alright,
But I looked up, and then I saw
A non-avian creature, six feet long.
The coop was a hen house inside a roofed fence.
It decided to hide inside with birds that could hardly abide.
Gentle squawkers showed they derided this squatter.
The dimming light of the day made my attempts to move him futile.
Eventually, a friend came with a light to shine on this fight.
I stubbornly tugged on his coils,
A dimly lit toil,
But this snake was so large my attempts were foiled.
While it tried to hide, a loop emerged and I got a grip on its hide,
I began pulling
A serpentine-simian struggle,
A four-limbed creature vs six feet of muscle.
Eventually, the snake revealed his head and I saw
A crooked mouth, thus I named him Slackjaw.
He crawled his way partly past a fence

In front of him, a dark green expanse of trees, freedom, loomed
But the snake still hid mostly within.
I wanted to end this struggle quick
But Slackjaw was a stubborn creature
Wedged between unyielding wood.
An idea suddenly came to my head
To grab this serpent behind his head
But retracted lay the crooked white jaw and black face.
This languid serpent wasn't mean or crude.
He didn't want to bite; most snakes aren't rude
So an idea came to me to use my glove
And annoy ol' Slackjaw
In the white light of flashlight, repeatedly the glove whipped harmlessly through the air
In front of the face of my foe,
Perhaps the stuck snake struck the fake feint
Or merely moved his head out, I don't know,
But soon, I had him 'round the head
And eventually the struggle came to an end,
Or rather a bottom, of a bucket-said bucket I carried away
Back into the woods where hopefully Slackjaw would stay.
Snakes are quite good at remembering location
So there was no doubt this thing wouldn't return
To a place where it had an experience of such frustration
But alas, two coops stood 'round where he lived.
A long while later, when the sun was golden in the rays
I met Slackjaw after a brief feeding daze
Resting atop a nest.
Was this our rematch, another contest?
It was far pass the zenith of the zaftig zmij.
I moved him along.
That's all.



Circles By Lee Barker

I Am Me, Simple As That by Kat McDonald

I'm beautiful, I'm beautiful, I'm beautiful,
More beautiful than everyone and anyone else.
Well, that was what you always told me.
That is what you wanted me to see.
Until I was older, then you were colder,
You would snap, lash out, so very brash.
I liked being real.
I liked being me.
You told me I could dress up when I was a freshman.
By then none of it mattered to me and it bothered you.
One day you wanted to brush my hair.
The pull of the brush was nothing compared to the sting of your words.
You told me I would have a boyfriend if I were prettier.
My heart and mind felt heavy.
Later on, you told me I used to look so pretty
But now I dress the way I do.
I look at my nails, plain and unkempt from sports,
My face plain and makeup-free,
My closet filled with hoodies, jeans, and tees.
And it wasn't just you.
Dad wanted us to wax our eyebrows.
Sean wanted us to cut our hair short.
Told how to dress and how not to.
Told to leave my hair down.
What if your boyfriend wants this from you?
I hoped he would be happy with me.
Comic books and video games lined my shelves,
My skateboard and fishing gear in the garage,
My bow and arrows hanging in my bedroom.
Don't look at my lack of style,
Look at my grades.
Don't look at my tattoo plans,
Look at my art.
Don't look at my non-designer shoes,
Look...look at my college acceptance letters.
People I know are mixed in bad situations,
But no, you only notice I don't wear foundation,
Or prefer silver to gold.
I don't dress like this because I am gay.
I don't dress like this because I want to transition.
I certainly don't dress like this to spite you.
I'm me, simple as that.
I want my individuality intact.
For my prom I went shopping for myself
And I found a dress that was out of my comfort zone,
Strapless and a coral color.
After a moment I took it home.
I left my hair down.
I lightly painted my face.
When I stepped into that building,
Into the bright lights, it was a sight.
With my classmates there to have fun,

I was not a new person.
I was still me.
That's where I found moderation.
I could be happy as long as I chose for myself.
My tattoos are trashy.
Couldn't care less I'm not classy.
The things you said.
You would have friends if you were pretty.
What did his ex look like?
Prettier than you, no wonder he doesn't like you.
I look over at my boyfriend,
The one you said I'd never have,
Someone I even loved since we were in high school,
Our videogames lined up together,
Skateboards in the back of my car,
With a new bow he bought me during break.
He doesn't help me pick out shades,
He helps me pick out mouthguards.
He doesn't watch me plan my outfits,
He watches me get crushed in rugby,
Holds my hand through my tattoos
But he does notice when I paint my nails.
He does notice my dresses.
Happy with my appearance no matter what,
My hair can be messy,
And my outfits fashionless,
There is someone out there for everyone.
It is better to stay true to yourself
Because he sees me as me,
Simple as that.

Star-Gazing Dinos by Owen Blake

I feel like we can fly on nights like this,
I feel like I could die on nights like this.

Mother nature looks so pretty that
I start to cry on nights like this.

I'd ask you to hold my hands, but my arms are too short,
So instead let's lay side by side on nights like this.

I'd tell you I love you but you would probably just roar,
My feelings can't hide on nights like this.

While my teeth are sharp, my heart is soft,
I'd never bite on nights like this.

Wow that star is bright, REALLY bright,
It's an overwhelming sight on nights like this.

It's coming closer like a freight train,
I feel like I might die on a night like this.

Empty the Tanks by Jocelyne Lowery

Empty the tanks.

Empty them now.

Fifty-two left imprisoned

Should they all take a bow?

Send them to retirement, this industry should end
Corky's fifty-two years, traumatic, forced to pretend.
Seven calves, all dead before age one
In all her grief and torture, should she not be done?

Has Blackfish taught us nothing?
Free Willy and all the sequels?
That one documentary about Lolita
And how she was a slave to the people?

Don't become captivated by captivity.
"There is no beauty in stolen freedom."
Don't you see the corruption?
How we've been brainwashed to think we need them.

Your entertainment was kidnapped.
And you wonder why Tilikum snapped?
He was rapt at attention, taking the crap, forced to adapt.
The devastating death of Dawn and two more before her
Weren't enough to call it a wrap?

When Tilikum died, we made a vow
Carry on the fight in his name, but how?
We fought to set him free
And yet he was dead after three decades of misery.

We demand it, we demand it, the world demands it
Demand you Empty the damn Tanks.

If you were in a bathtub for twenty-five years
Don't you think you'd get a little psychotic?
Fed up with the chaotic nature of the exotic aquatic shows
That are so hypnotic they hold us captive alongside them?

Empty the Tanks.
Empty the Tanks for Shamu, Ramu, and Namu.
Do it for Orky, Corky, and Snorky,
The seven Kandus, three Hyaks, and four Nootkas,
The twenty whales who have borne the name Shamu,
To hide the shame of SeaWorld's sins.

Are you aware that the original Shamu was only nine when she died?
That Hugo meant so little to the Seaquarium that his body was dumped in a landfill?
That Tokitae hadn't seen another orca in forty-three years?

When will it end? When will it stop?
When will we see the way the fins drop?

These beautiful, broken Blackfish have given enough.
Now they float listlessly, ragged and rough.

Their next day off is the day they die
But we can help if we don't buy
The tickets to fund an endless slaughter
While these magnificent creatures wither away in artificial water.

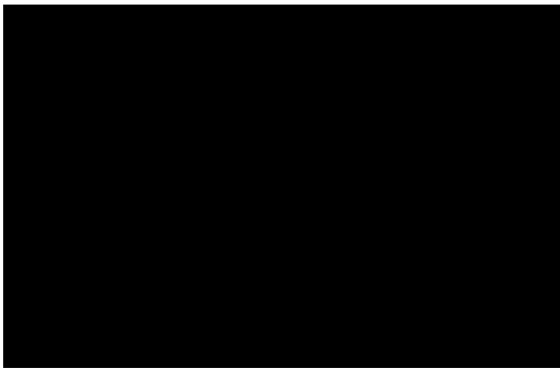
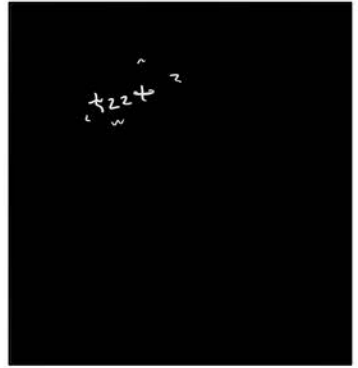
So I say it, I beg it, I scream with all my might
Please empty the tanks and call it goodnight.

That Time of Year by Walker Woodall

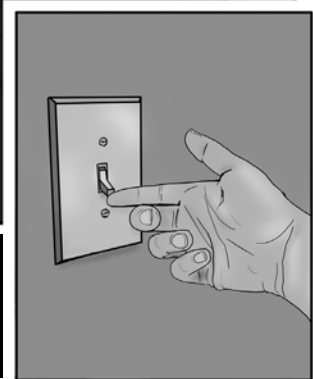
Almost that time of the year.
Becoming the person I really love.
Caused by one thing,
Dedication and commitment to the game of basketball.
Everything besides basketball doesn't matter to me.
Forgetting everything and going into a lost mental realm.
Got to keep going.
Hard work,
Inspired by the great ones around me.
Jumping around the court in full joy.
Killing myself with hard work, but I still
Love the game of basketball.
Many people in the crowd
Not to mention the closest people to me.
On the court, I feel comfort.
Peace is vibrating on the court.
Quieting the critics.
Ready to take on the opponents.
Still, I work.
The competitive part of me wants to win.
Under it all, I'm calm and focused.
Very calm, so you don't know what I'm thinking.
Waiting to shoot my next shot.
X-factor, wait and see.
You know what to do next.
Zoned in, it's that time of year.



Lock and Key by Kaylee Fitzgerald



A Bump in the Night by Emilee Harper



A Bump in the Night by Emilee Harper (cont.)



A Bump in the Night by Emilee Harper (cont.)

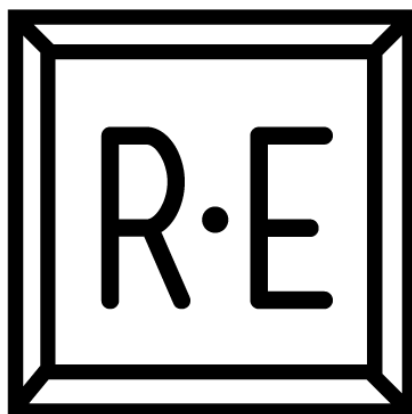
Special Thanks to Our Judges!

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