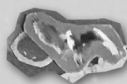




cul-de-sac
literary & arts magazine
volume 15



cul-de-sac 15



How to Write an Editor's Note for a Literary & Arts Magazine

1. Allow yourself to exhale. The cover has been finalized. The submissions have been carefully selected. Each poem and story has been combed through a scrutinizing lens of grammar corrections. Fonts and layouts have been chosen. The demanding process of creation has reached an end. You can now think of the easy things to do.
2. Like thanking Alene Terzian-Zeitounian for her constant guidance of and dedication to the students at COC. Thank the editors and staff for trusting you and constantly filling the class with their inventive vibrance and humor. Thank the students for submitting their pieces of heartbreak, wonder, anguish, triumph, and confusion, for they have breathed life into the pages that await printing.
3. Next, recognize that the world has not made it easy to prioritize art. Budgets continue to tighten. Connection continues to be scarce. Safety continues to be compromised. And yet, here we are.
4. Relish in the collection of art before you, for every piece has been picked by our editors because of its stunning reflection of the human experience. Become a part of these experiences that aren't your own. Transport yourself to these places you've never been.
5. Realize that there will always be a reason to create. There will always be a reason to be heard.
6. Remind everyone to keep creating.
7. Finally, welcome all to cul-de-sac, volume 15.

Chloe Mendoza
cul-de-sac, Editor-in-Chief

Acknowledgments

When the pandemic forced us to migrate online in 2020, I thought cul-de-sac was doomed; how were we going to produce a literary & arts magazine in the virtual world? How was it ever going to come together with so much distance between us? For the last three volumes (13, 14 and now 15), I have taught English 122 entirely through Zoom. Every Monday and Wednesday, my students and I meet in our virtual space and create magic—something I never thought would be possible! So first, I want to acknowledge this group of extraordinary English 122 students whose hard work, generosity of spirit, and dedication made all of this happen. You are all uniquely perfect, and I look forward to our continued friendship in the coming years. The truth is that we have relied on the support and guidance of so many champions over the years, and our deepest gratitude goes out to:

- Chancellor Dr. Dianne G. Van Hook for always keeping the ship afloat—in so many ways, big and small.
- Andy McCutcheon, Dean of the School of Humanities, for always knowing what to say and when, and for being our biggest forever-fan. Believe us, the feeling is mutual!
- Jennifer Smolos and the school of Visual and Performing Arts for being volume 15's benefactor. There aren't enough thank-yous in the world!
- ASG for awarding us a grant to make the publication possible. Without your continued support year after year, we would not be able to create such a masterpiece.
- The Public Information Office for always helping us get the word out and for showing us the ropes.
- All of the instructors and college staff who encouraged our students to submit to cul-de-sac, especially the creative writing, art, and photography faculty. THANK YOU!
- The hundreds of students who risked sending their work into the world.
- And Xenia Digital for their continued professionalism, quality workmanship, and commitment to making cul-de-sac accessible to all populations.

We sincerely thank you.

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Intake Survey

Margaret D'Isa-Hogan

Personality Quiz

Intake Survey

Quiz introduction

Thank you for making an appointment with BetterDays Psychiatry. This entry survey is to help us better understand your needs so we can connect you with the right services. Are you ready to begin?

Enter Your Name

Start Quiz »

Scan to take survey



<https://uquiz.com/quiz/UscKZW/intake-survey>

Checkmate

Ren Canfield



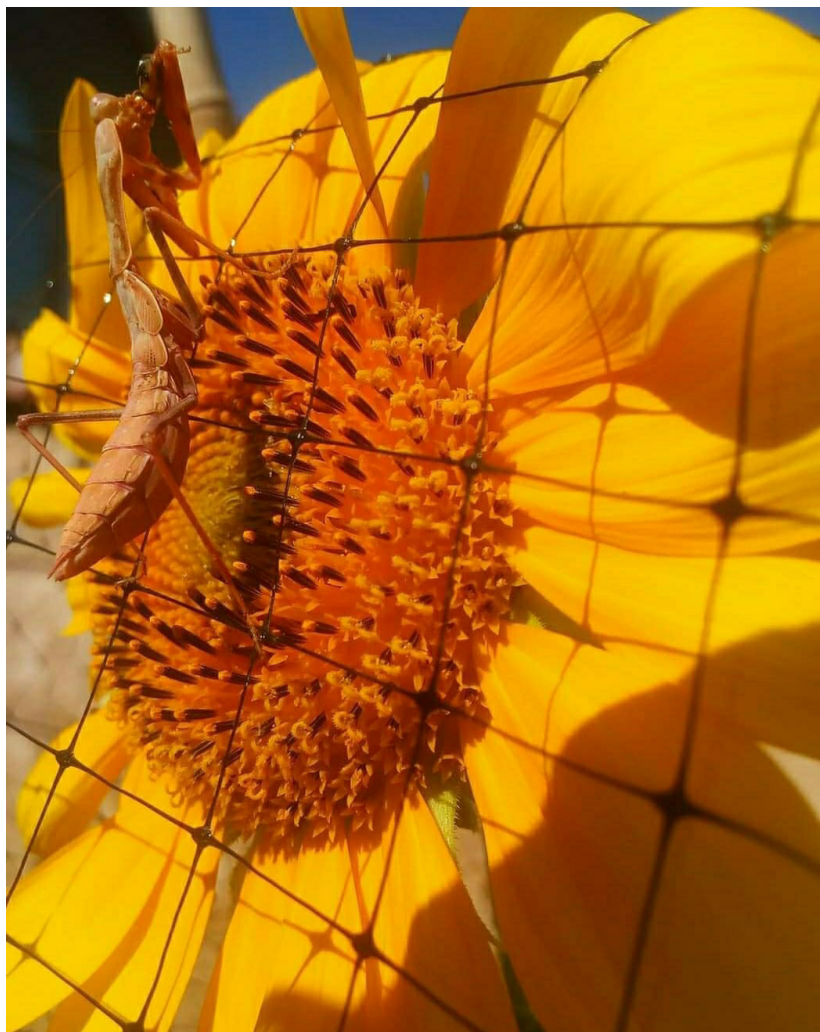
Wendy

Madison Fink



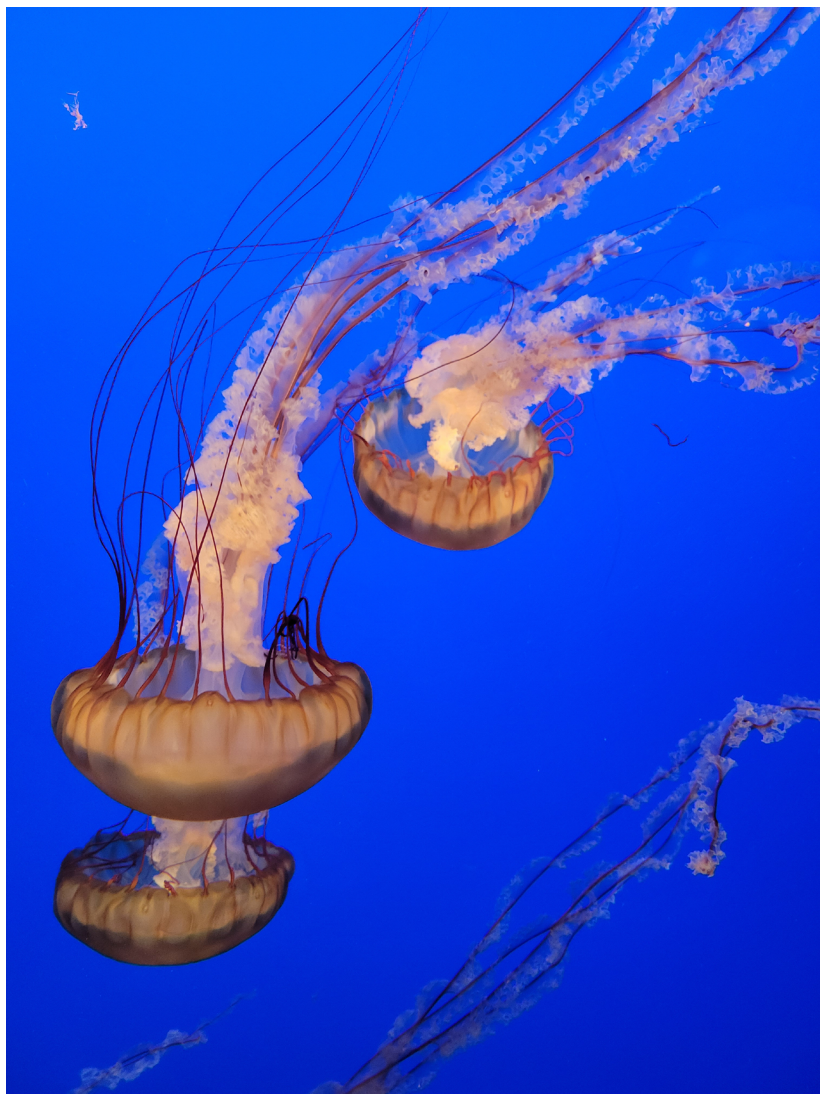
Serendipity

Mallory Arden Fink



Jellyfish

Kaylee Toma



The Amazing Spider-Man

Michael Prezioso



There Is Something Wrong With My Body

Dilinna Ugochukwu

There is something wrong with my body.
I leaned towards her desk; she was talking about

some boy she met at the department store.
She really liked him,

him and he and his

words she uses to describe him,
words that people use to describe me.

I say I don't mind, but when I'm called a man,
I feel ready to cut off my ____
and some nights if I had a sharp enough knife, I would.

There is something wrong with my body.
Around certain boys my heart feels funny,

yet when I imagine **the one**, she's the epitome
of feminine beauty. Sometimes
I wish I could meet some boy at the department store,

sometimes I wish I could be the boy she met, sometimes
I wish I could be her.

Breathe, Child

Margaret D'Isa-Hogan

In.

Count to four.

Out.

Count to four.

Brush your teeth. Drink your coffee. Click "Apply".

Check your email. Check your bank account. Check both ways.

Stand before Frost's roads and look as far as you can in each direction.

Set up camp at your little crossroad

And live in the forest for a while.

Listen to the birds.

In.

Out.

In.

Out.

The roads are so long and there is so much to fear.

There are so many people to love and so many ways to fail them.

In.

Out.

In.

Out.

There are so many adventures to have and so many years to forget them.

There are so many mistakes to make and so many ways to be unhappy.

In.

Out.

In.

Out.

There are miserable parents, teachers, and accountants.

There are unhappy actors and painters and doctors.

So many people are fine one day and miserable the next,

And there is no sure fire way to stop yourself from becoming one of them.

There are so many roads and so many travelers and nothing to light anyone's way.

In.

Out.

In.

Out.

Check your email. Drink water. Go on a walk.
It will be ok.
It will be ok.
Whichever way you go, child,
It will be ok.

Floreceer

Bridget Couzin



Ode to Little Brown Bats

Ren Canfield

Especially the ones that come every summer to paint the sky
in patterns of black and twilight and sunset.
Perfectly choreographed ballet of black
silhouettes on the hunt for bugs. They
come, whispering though the air on silent
summer wings. Swiftly after sunset seeking moths
and mosquitos to munch with needle teeth. Makers of
inaudible music. Shrieking at a pitch no human can hear. Echoes
of moth's wings returned to twitching mouse-ears. A frantic dance
of jazz-hands at night. Every heart a tiny train engine. Skin stretched between
long finger bones. Black capes wrapped into furry burritos pressed
together under an eve. Or a tree hollow. The gray evening
light like the static on the old VHS player, and dirt
under bare feet as a bat swoops by like a phantom or
a fighter jet. A flicker of moon-shadow. Hunting a mosquito
like a heat seeker. Carriers of superstition. Little winged mysteries.
The most important Jenga piece in thousands of
ecosystems. These nocturnal bug-catchers,
inhabitants of the liminal spaces,
come every summer
and are not,
in fact,
scary
at
all.

Chloe Mendoza

Suspend the sun in the air as it drags reluctantly through the sky,
and just for that moment,
we think we can keep it there forever.

Inner World

Ren Canfield



The Voice of the Rain

Lindsey Jacobsson

Take me to the place where the desert flowers,
Where sun meets seed, I want to see
The rain kiss the parched earth again.

I want to hear it as it falls, to know it by heart
The song of its downpour, how it bathes and soaks,
Leading me to the place where the desert flowers.

On the road where I wander, unconscious
Of how my eyes grow lifeless and dim, let me see
Purple blanketing the cracked earth again.

Where dying embers hasten to remind me
Of all that is gone and buried, how I thirst, how I long
For the place where the desert flowers.

And if my ears grow numb to all sound, when all
is static and noise, a thundering void, bring me the joy
Of loud silences. Let silence still the troubled earth again.

When I am quietly alone, awake and afraid
Lift my chin up to gaze, bring back the child of me, and please
Take me to the place where the desert flowers, let me hear
The voice of the rain as it mends the shattered earth again.

Dance the Night Away

Mallory Arden Fink



Scream Your Lungs Out!

Chloe Mendoza



IDORU

Madison Fink



Rampion

Ren Canfield

Once upon a time, there was a woman who lived in a small village at the edge of the woods. Because she lived alone and had no husband, many people thought she was a witch or a sorceress. Some of the older folk believed her to be a fairy, one of the fae folk. Whatever the reason, the people of the village avoided her, even the little couple who lived in a small house next door.

Now, the witch, if that is what you wish to call her, had a beautiful garden surrounded by a high wall to protect it. And in her garden, she grew the most beautiful flowers the most glorious herbs and the most delicious and rich vegetables you have ever seen. The garden was her pride and joy, and she tended it day and night.

One day as she was tending her vegetables, the witch noticed that some of her prized rampion was missing. It had been ripped out of the ground; nothing but dark holes in the earth remained, and there were footprints and trampled leaves leading to the wall at the back of her garden. The witch was furious that anyone would dare steal from her; she resolved to catch the thief. So, she kept watch and lay in wait. Sure enough, the next night the thief returned. The witch saw a man climb over her garden wall and sneak into her rampion patch. She appeared before him with fury in her eyes.

“How dare you sneak into my garden!” cried the witch, “How dare you steal from me! I will curse you and your son and his son and all the family that comes after you for seven generations!”

The man’s eyes were filled with terror, and he pleaded with the witch, begging her to spare him. He explained that his wife was pregnant and that she was wasting away and the only thing she would eat was rampion.

“Has your wife already eaten the rampion that you stole?” asked the witch.

“Yes,” said the man. “It was the only thing she would eat and so I brought her some from your garden, and she made a salad with it. But her craving grew even stronger, and she desired more rampion. She said she could not live without it.”

The sorceress was troubled, for she knew that the rampion she grew was no ordinary plant. Yet the man cried and pleaded so much

that the witch took pity on him.

"Very well," said the witch, "you may have as much rampion as your wife desires; however, you must promise me one thing in return."

The man said he would give anything to save his wife.

"You must give me the child that your wife will bear."

The man was horrified, but he was more scared of the witch and her curses than what she might do to his unborn child, so he promised.

The witch gave him the rampion and sent him back to his wife.

Soon enough, the child was born, and the witch took the child, promising her parents that she would raise the girl as her own daughter.

She took the baby to a little cottage in the woods. There they lived for many years, and the girl grew up beautiful and healthy, and her hair grew long. It was the most beautiful hair. It glistened and glittered in the dappled sunlight that fell through the trees like spun gold. By the time she was 12 years of age, the girl's hair was so long, it stretched across the little cottage and tangled around the furniture. The witch combed the girl's hair every day and picked the twigs and leaves from the knots and tangles.

One day, as she was combing Rapunzel's hair, the witch found a cluster of small bones tangled in the hair, as if from a mouse or a bird. The bones were pure white, picked clean. The witch thought it strange as she had never seen a mouse or a rat in the house. Not even birds roosted under the eaves. She looked at the hair in her hands and grew uneasy.

The next night, the witch awoke to something circling around her neck. Something that felt very much like silken hair. When she stirred, it was gone, as if it were only a dream in the dark.

The next night, the witch watched the dark intently, eyes piercing every shadow, searching for movement. There, in the dark, a shadow crept across the floor, serpentine and sinuous and spreading. The witch watched it creep out of the cottage under the door. And then, after a while, it crept back in and lay still. The next morning, the witch found rabbit bones tangled in Rapunzel's hair, the bones picked clean and fresh. The skull wrapped and threaded through with strands of golden hair. Rapunzel seemed to notice nothing. She only laughed and chatted as usual, playing with her dolls. Then the witch scrutinized the girl's face... was it simply the vitality of youth that gave her that glow? Or was it something else?

The witch had a small mirror in the cottage. She was not young, but nor was she very old. There were no wrinkles on her face and her hair, still, was dark and luscious. But the witch was surprised to notice that in the 12 years she had cared for Rapunzel she seemed to have aged greatly. Fine wrinkles now lined her face, and her hair was threaded with silver.

The sorceress knew then that she had to take drastic measures. She led Rapunzel deeper into the wood where an old tower stood with no doors or stairs; there was only a small window that overlooked the great trees. There, she left Rapunzel, and though her heart broke, she told her daughter that she could no longer spend the nights with her, but that she would return every day. Rapunzel was sad to see her mother go and sad to be left alone in a high tower, but the view was beautiful, and she could see over the tops of the trees. The witch stayed with her daughter all day, making the tower ready. Rapunzel sang sweetly all the while.

Years passed, and the witch visited her daughter every day, tending her hair, and doing her best to keep the thing that was growing inside it, subdued. Though she knew each time aged her, she climbed Rapunzel's hair every day, and every evening. She combed through the hair, picking out small bones and applying tinctures and oils. But the hair continued to grow, and Rapunzel continued to sing sweetly to the birds outside her window.

One day, when the witch returned to the tower, she noticed Rapunzel acting differently. She seemed secretive. She giggled and smiled to herself. The sorceress narrowed her eyes, but she said nothing. She began the work of brushing the long golden strands, but there were more lumps and knots and snarls than usual. Finally, she managed to untangle a large knot toward the end of the hair. It was nearly as big as her head. When she saw what was inside, the witch dropped the hair as if she had been burned.

There was a human skull in Rapunzel's hair.

It was just like the animal bones, picked clean and white, not a trace of flesh left.

The witch tore through the hair and found more human bones. Here an arm, there a thigh, here a rib. She rounded on Rapunzel then.

"You monstrous child!" cried the witch, "You had a visitor, didn't you?"

Rapunzel looked at her mother in fear. “But I knew you would be angry, and besides, the prince told me we should keep it a secret.”

The witch held up the skull, still threaded through with hair. “This is the price of your secrecy!”

At the sight of the skull, Rapunzel screamed. The witch knew what she had to do. She grabbed the pair of scissors laying on the table, grabbed the hair at the base of Rapunzel’s neck, and began hacking at the beautiful golden strands.

The hair resisted of course. It twined around the witch’s legs, her arms, her neck, but the witch did not stop cutting, even as she felt her lifeforce draining from her, even as the hair crept over her face, looking to fill her mouth and her eye sockets.

At last, the hair lay still. Each strand severed from the host. Rapunzel sobbed on her knees; the witch ripped strands of hair away from her face, her body. Her skin was paper thin, and her bones ached. Her own hair fell about her face, disheveled and silvery white.

After, the witch, now aged a hundred years, took Rapunzel to a remote and desolate land. There she left her in a place where no living thing dwelled, and where princes were very unlikely to wander.

A House Party

Abigail Royster

Up
the staircase I stumble,
fumbling cran (extra vodka)
that bleeds through my fingertips.
Down

Beige
The unforgiving shag steps
are surely stained now.
Don't worry, the dawn will sort it.
Crimson

Hallelujah!
I have found it!
The pearly carrara on the bathroom floor,
a cool, stony embrace—like yours.
Heaven

Shiver
The bass buzzes my occipital
until the floor is San Andreas
and I am but a lonely tree in San Jose.
Timber

Question
Is it safe to close my eyes?
Or will they find me, snoring over my solo
And your brimming box of voicemails?
Answer

Scold
They admonish my absence,
slurring cries that I am just simmering in my youth.
But—I am nineteen; I boil with it.
Scald

Stir
Kerosene snakes up my throat.
Perhaps it's liquor, or longing, or lunch.
It untwists the knots that hold me together.
Pour

Cannibal
Still, the gnawing persists.
Then again, it always does;
it relishes the hollow within.
Feast

Me?
I am not one to get—to be—wasted,
drunk, on the bathroom floor,
if only to be interrupted by a quiet, penitent rap on the six-panel
You.

Child's Play

Sachi Kojima

I have many memories of Mom's room. Her room contained many mysteries, treasures and comforts. Sometimes I would spend time with her there, in her room, in companionable silence, me playing with some toys or books and her reading or doing whatever grown-ups did with their time. Sometimes I would sneak in when she wasn't in there or wasn't home. Those times, I would play with her make-up and nail polish. Or I would put on her heels and shuffle around, trying to keep them on my too-small feet. Playing the part of a grown-up lady in my make-believe world. Maybe I wanted to grow up fast to be like Mom or maybe I was looking for an outlet from the pressure of being the eldest sister to three brothers with parents who loved us but who were so often mentally or physically absent. Most of the time I successfully snuck in and out undetected, or so I thought. But sometimes the nail polish and lipstick mess would leave evidence that was hard to deny. I would get in trouble, but not too much. Eventually, Mom got wise and bought some bottles of peel-off nail polish that she would cleverly stash with her other make-up. There was something comforting about being in a space that belonged to Mom.

I never really was one for dolls. Sure, I was given Barbie dolls, but they mostly sat in the closet, forlorn and forgotten, until they were eventually tossed out. It was much more fun to play Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles with my brothers or to spend the time running around the backyard with our ever-tireless Golden retriever. The one who was always there to welcome us home from school whenever we had to hop the back fence because the front door of the house was locked, with no one home.

My Mom started collecting antiques, including antique porcelain dolls. I never knew why she was so fond of those porcelain dolls. Maybe she thought they would be valuable one day. She put some of them on display on the dressers and tables in her room. They stood like sentinels, observing everything that went on in the room. Entering

the room would often turn into a challenge to sneak by them as fast as possible. But each time I did, their eyes would follow me. Large, luminous glass eyes. Lush lashes. Soft, silky curls. Dresses with lace and patent leather shoes. Porcelain skin, so smooth and lifelike. Little cherry red lips curved ever so slightly into a hint of a smile. A light blush on the cheeks. They tried to put forth an innocent, sweet front. But, I knew. I knew they had a dark, sinister side beneath.

Kind of like Chucky. The first time I saw Chucky I was scared shitless. Well, my five-year-old self didn't think those words exactly. When Dad was home in the evenings, he would often sit or lie on the couch and watch something on TV and then fall asleep. While he slept, oftentimes snored, the TV would drone on. It was a great place to hang out—I could be with Dad and I could watch TV for as long as he was there, or until Mom kicked me out. That is, it was a great place until the spawn of Satan reared his diabolical redhead and freckled face on the TV screen.

The next time I snuck into Mom's room, I was sneaking in to avoid *them*. Funny how I always thought of the room as my Mom's room. Is it because Dad was often away or he often fell asleep on the couch? Mom was a constant, she always slept in the room. Dad, he sometimes slept in the room. This time, I leapt through the doorway and ran as fast as I could past the ever-vigilant dolls. My target was the bookshelf tucked in the corner of the room by the window. The bookshelf, crammed with books. Large, fat books. All books were large and heavy in five-year-old hands. My own slim, illustrated books were not as satisfying as the thick books. I wanted the wise books for grown-ups. The window provided enough light to see by. I left the lights turned off because I didn't want to announce to my Mom or *them* that I was in the room. But the shadows only added a menacing atmosphere. I looked at the pictures on the covers and flipped through the pages. Seeing, but not reading. I tried to ignore *them*. But those eyes! I could feel them boring into my back. Of course, they weren't watching me. But they were! I *knew* they were. I looked at one. She stared back—holding my gaze.

I stared, transfixed, petrified by those large blue eyes on the TV screen. Evil shooting out from them like daggers. And no one, but little Andy knew that Chucky could come alive... until it was too late. Chucky grabbed the scissors and held them menacingly. I ran screaming from the room. Never mind that Dad was asleep.

The dolls stood motionless, waiting. Those eyes. Those beady eyes. Dark, empty and bottomless. I refused to be scared. *This is silly, they're not real*, I said to myself. I turned my head, but not my eyes. Thinking I could trick her. Trying to catch her off guard. Trying to catch her move. But she stood there, staring, penetrating. I felt a prickle at the back of my neck. I turned to see another pair of eyes on me. *Why won't they stop!* My heartbeat raced. My stomach lurched to my throat.

They say that eyes are the window to the soul. Maybe that's why I didn't like dolls. When you peer into those eyes, they are empty, there's no one home. Except for the times when they peer back. Is it a child's imagination or is something possessing the doll and staring back through those eyes?

Mom's room, so often a place of comfort, became something ominous.

The next time Chucky came on the screen, I knew what to do. I ran. Screaming as I abandoned the living room.

Their presence, their hateful eyes were suffocating. I couldn't stay there anymore. I grabbed the book and ran out of the room, closing the door behind me. Closing the door to keep them from following.

Maybe that's why Dad didn't sleep in the same room either.

Brighton Shore

Sachi Kojima

Light breeze, soft summer sun, drifting
through the window of the little red rental Peugeot
or wait, was it a Citroën, I can't quite recall which one, but
I remember the sounds of the radio lilting
out that same window, driving

stick shift in England is one of the craziest things I have done,
but with you as my co-pilot, I would even call it fun. Round
& round the roundabout, you would tell me exit right
now, you'd say, but I'd miss it anyway, the exit on the left,
so round we go for another

time. It was a sad time. Your stepfather passed away. We were visiting,
not there to stay. We were there to help your mum take care of things,
his things, oh so many things, things that weren't fun, like the funeral.
Amazing how many things can be left undone,
how many things left unsaid when one is gone &

Break. I needed a break. You needed a break. I had a break.
So we took a break. To Brighton shore—we were driving, driving far
in that little red rental car, driving away from it all, for a moment,
but I still like to recall the bikes, the Lanes, the loud colors,
the pebbled beach, the ocean smell, the fish

& chips, the fudge, the cold vanilla ice cream & cone, the seagull—
that ice cream crook, the pictures I took, because, I was a tourist after all,
but mostly the pictures I took so I could recall that day, with you, that
despite it all, we found a bit of sun & were laughing on an English shore,
up on Brighton pier.

The Monarch's Plight

Sachi Kojima



Gallant Greenery

Trinity Winslow



Northern Lights '22

Jessica Flores



There Is a Time for Everything

Kaila Cadabona

To the ones who are not certain
As to where life is taking you,
Or as to what life is doing,
And why you seem to not be moving—
Rest.

Your mind sometimes convinces itself that it is faster than life.
You are trying to catch up to something that hasn't even happened yet.
You run to tomorrow and next week
When today is begging you to be present.
Rest.

You are too rushed even for your own spinning world.
Rest and know
How *slowly* beauty occurs in nature.
Do you ever look around
And see that the things of earth take time?
Do you see how seeds are planted and how their roots
Stretch down and grab the soil?
How they patiently anchor themselves?
Notice how they dance in time with the sun,
How they reach their petals to his rays,
And how they wrap themselves under the gaze of the moon.
A flower constantly changes
And still, it remains lovely in every transition.
Know that unrelenting streams of water carve and bend
Even the strongest bodies of mountain,
And over time form canyons and chasms.
The mighty redwood rises tall—
Rings form in her core by the year
Just as wrinkles etch their design on the form of a great-grandmother;
Her wisdom is something that cannot be gained in mere days.
Grace is built upon the back of time.
Rest.

Listen to nature
When she tells you that
It takes time
To become.

And the Scalpel Smiles

Karina Avila

When you hear him call your name, you wilt. You wither. You shrink. You shrivel. You curl into yourself like the tip of a matchstick burning and blackening. His focus, the cold point of a knife, is only ever turned on you when you have done something to displease him. That is the only time you exist. In your mistakes. As a mistake. A mistake.

What did I do? What did I do? What did I do?

But you do not show any of this to him. It would be unwise, so unwise. He burns with pleasure when you squirm. When you writhe, when you flail, when you flounder, when you thrash around helplessly. So you remain still instead. And you want to disappear. Because you cannot make *him* disappear. Maybe he won't notice if you try to press yourself into that small, small space under the arm of the sofa right next to the wall. He rarely pays you any attention. You only exist in your mistakes, remember? It's your mother's attention that interests him. That's why he visits. But no. Remember. You've done something to displease him. It's in the edge of his voice. The stiffness of his posture and gait. He's bristling and prickling and itching all over. You can feel the spikiness of him with your mind. No. You will not be allowed to disappear. Even if he himself secretly wants this too.

"Please come here."

You stand up and walk to the chair he's pulled out from the kitchen table. You have to pull yourself up onto it because you are still too small to simply just sit down on it, and your short legs dangle over the edge of the seat. The surface of you remains still, impassive. It would be unwise to show him anything. A mistake. A mistake to show him the shuddering of the breath inside you, the contraction of your lungs, your liver, your spleen. Then he speaks. He says you have to choose. Choose between his religion or your mother's.

This surprises you. You were so sure. So sure this was about you. About something you'd done, a mistake. When else does he shift his attention towards you? When else do you exist? But never mind. Take this blessing, this narrow escape. You'll only get so many with him. And you thaw. The taut center of you unclenching and smoothing out. Anxiety dissolving into a thin film of foam in bubble bath water. Though you do not show this. Remember? *Don't show anything.* And the careful impassiveness you wear remains.

So this isn't about you. It's about *him*. Something has happened. *What?* you wonder, then stop yourself. No, it doesn't matter. In this moment, right here, right now, it doesn't matter. What matters is that he isn't unbuckling the black, leather belt attempting to constrain the gut swelling over his pants. What matters is that he isn't draping you across his knee, the length of you wrapping perfectly over it. What matters is that you are safe. At least, for the moment.

The question of which religion does interests you though. Not *his* of course. You've already dismissed it as an option. You would never choose his. Never choose *him*. So you begin to contemplate your other choices. Choices, of course, he would never consider giving you. His mind is so small. You can see him constantly bouncing up against the walls of the tiny space that is his mind. But you will not be corralled by his restrictions. No. But as you peruse through the choices he hasn't given you (*if I become Jewish then I get the star*), letting your fingers run through the texture of each of them (*but if I become Christian then I get Christmas*), letting yourself feel the knit and weave of each them, an opportunity occurs to you. An opportunity that has nothing to do with faith.

But then it's never been about faith. You knew this the moment he asked you to choose between his religion or your mother's. This is about him. Something has happened to injure his ego. What it is doesn't matter. Not that it would have taken much to have done so. His ego, a long molded over banana, lies soft and limp and misshapen at his feet. And you see this. You see inside of him too. You see the void that is him. A void that consumes so much space. That consumes every space it moves through. That eats every inch of it. Devours it. And yet still walks away unsatiated. But then that's the nature of a black hole. Nothing can sate it.

Your mother doesn't understand this though. She gives and gives and gives to him, this blackhole. And when he asks for more, she does it all over again. And you are tethered to her, as the Earth is tethered to the sun. So you watch this endless cycle go on and on. And you don't know how to make her stop giving endlessly to him. Maybe there isn't a way. But there is a way, an opportunity, to make him be the one that takes what he always gives to you and your mother.

It might risk your temporary safety. Might cause the magma of his temper to breach the thin, fragile surface of his "respectable" façade. But the possibility of success is too tantalizing to pass up. The possibility of giving him even just one nick back to his several hundred

slashes. You know this is about him trying to shore up the sludge at his feet. You know this. You know him. But he doesn't know you. He doesn't know that you have a knife inside of you too. But your knife and his knife are not the same. His knife is a dagger, one which he openly stabs a person with and twists it inside of them as he watches them watch him do it. Your knife is a scalpel. And you know how to wield your scalpel with far more subtlety than he does his dagger.

You steal a quick glance at your mother who has been standing off to the side quietly. Your gentle, kind mother, with her downward sloping eyes. Her eyes that always lend her face a quality of impenetrable sadness, even when she smiles. Who shapes and reshapes herself into the few tiny spaces of existence he allows her to occupy. Your mother who has no scalpel. No knife inside her at all. Only a heart. She has been waiting for your answer as much as he has. Maybe more. Though it is not because her ego is at stake like his is, but because she would like to share with you everything that is her. You know this. You know her. And she knows you too (You think. You hope.).

"Do Muslims celebrate birthdays, Mama?" This has been a serious point of contention for you with his religion. Which is not so much a religion as it is a dogma of ego. His poor, pathetic ego. And his ego needs you to fade, to atrophy, to decay. His ego needs your mother to fold herself away. Fold and fold and fold and fold, and then fold again. Fold until there is nothing but a speck of dust left. Why does she do this for him? You cannot understand it. And you might never understand it. But you do understand birthdays. Birthdays are a must. Birthdays have cake. Soft, sweet, tender cake. And his religion doesn't do birthdays. *Who on earth would willingly live like that?* He would, of course, but then he's always been weird.

Your mother tells you that Muslims do celebrate birthdays and you sharpen with excitement, your scalpel readying itself: "Okay, I'm Muslim now." Then you quickly slide off the chair and walk back to your toys on the floor of the living room, making sure to carefully position yourself with your face turned away from him, so you may replay in your mind the spectacle of theater you just witnessed.

His face. His face gives you everything. Everything you wanted. Everything you knew it would give you if you chose what you chose. The pop of surprise as your words slap across his reality. The deflation of his features as they fell into the swell of his face. You can feel the stunned silence of him even with your back turned towards him now.

And you glow with the pleasure of it. He'll be festering from the cut you made for weeks, maybe even years. No, you know it will be years. He will not forget this. You have further injured his already frail ego. But you do not care. Even if only a nick, you have made a wound. And the scalpel inside you smiles.

Descent into Inner Darkness

Karina Avila



Hide

Margaret D'Isa-Hogan

Remember when my mom came to pick me up from your house,
and you hid me?
Well, no one is coming for me anymore.
We can finally have that eternal sleepover.

So, break up with the boyfriend you met in college
And move in with me instead.
We can finally have our endless play time.
I'll make you those cookies again—
The ones with sprinkles and crushed up BBQ chips.
We can have the life we said we wanted.
Best friends forever.

I don't want to "get a girlfriend".
I know I could learn to be satisfied with that,
With "romance",
Or whatever they call it,
But it will never be the life I really want.
I will always know I gave up the most sincere part of myself
When I gave up on you and me.

So I won't.

I'll be hiding under your bed until my mom comes
Or you kick me out.

The Gray Goose

Hayden Herrera

The gray goose stumbled and fell;
he picked himself up and did not want anyone to tell.
Looking this way and that, he surveyed his pond
of which he happened to be quite fond.
Flapping his long mighty wings, he
felt like an unchallenged king.
Suddenly, he spotted a fellow young goose,
And so not wanting a bruise,
he retreated into the sky of hue gray
vowing to return, another day.

Simply Silly

Roselyn Uy



Singularity

Mallory Arden Fink



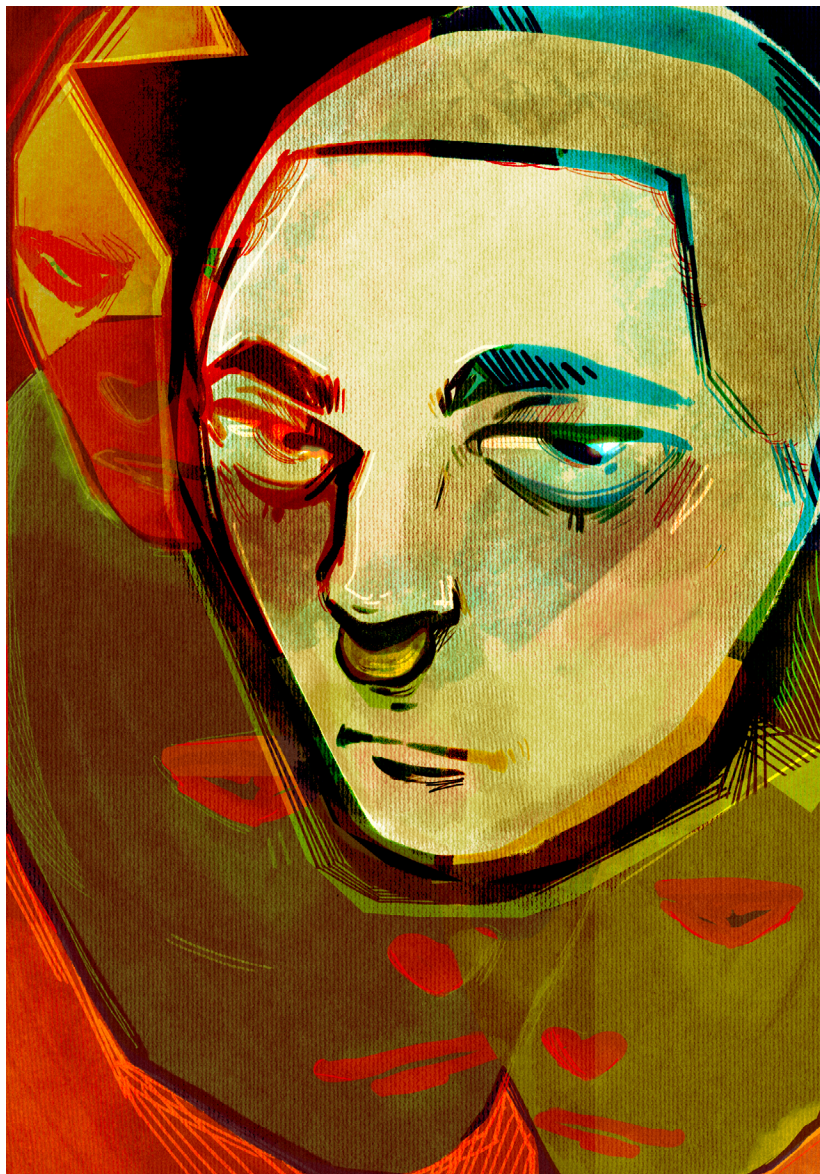
California Farming

Kaylee Toma



Identity

Roselyn Uy



A Pet Sterling's Shamanic World

M.C. Bellow

The sound of drums fiercely summons my brethren

We are bound by feathers and blood

Each

Color

Representing

Chakras

We are bound by our ancestors

Each

Color

Representing

Transition

We are bound by our nation

Gather

Around

The

World

Tree

As the sun starts to rise,

We cleanse ourselves from lies

Invasive

Persuasive

Abrasive

We cleanse ourselves with evil eyes

Protection

Convection

Infection

We cleanse ourselves with *moths instead of butterflies*

Is my flock disturbing the peace or do we just rebel?

Against what others see as peace
Is my flock like an infection
Or do we simply need protection?

3 months ago, I was born
Purple feathers that I was embraced for
Golden eyes I've been on trial for
Since

This
Morning

Lower
Middle
Upper

Is
All
I
Know

These three worlds
Feel
Like
I'm
On
Death
Row

I look around
Around seeing my fellow birds enjoy the ceremony
Around smelling the burnt firewood
Around listening to the enchanting music that dwells deep inside me

What Do I Do?

Our eyes connect as he drinks the river water
As if he were granted immortality from it
A tiny croak comes out

The
Village
Claps

The

Birds

Coo

Is that it?

Am I through?

Wisdom is the name they were chanting

All of the purple birds flew in a circle

I

Am

His

Wisdom

I fly slowly towards my guardian

The closer I became, the more I saw

I saw my ancestors

I saw his ancestors

I saw that we were equal

I Saw Three Worlds

Self Portrait

Bridget Couzin



The Dryad

Jennifer G. Morrow

Into the old hollow tree she went
Knowing that her life was almost spent
What used to be her blooming bower
Was to be chopped down in just an hour
For no reason other than it looked ugly
Even though a few leaves were still to see

She thought about the spring and green
And living by the rushing stream
With autumn leaves gently falling there
And her branches bare in the winter air
With snow atop and birds below
Her living home was soon to go

She huddled in her forest home
Wishing there was a hope to come
Her life had been long and sweetly wild
She missed the days of Pan's reign and guile
The forest maidens who danced and sang
And brought her gifts of melodies that rang

She reached out feeling along her creaking branches
Her tree tips quivering as her crunching bark blanches
Her drying limbs wavering in hot summer's ease
Soon to be stump dying in the scented breeze
Maybe it was time to let go and move ahead
She bowed her face wishing she were already dead.

The Pink Coat

Leslie Kennedy

Her pink coat
was already in my hand,
engulfing my tiny palm
and alerting her of our plan.

The white, powder snow
had been falling all day,
covering the ground, preparing
us for an afternoon of play.

She twirled, running in circles
as excitement flew through her veins,
barking at me to put on her pink coat
even though she always complained.

It was her first snow day,
so I held her close,
making sure she wouldn't bite
off the booties that matched her pink coat.

Her tail wagged,
at inhumane speeds,
as we placed her three-pound body
atop the snow-covered weeds.

Almost immediately, she sank
into the ground, her nose
coated in snowflakes. Laughter
grew at the sight of my dog's pose.

We reached a sliver
of the bright pink coat (barely visible)
in the snow-covered ground,
her energy still unpredictable.

The second time
was easier because instead
of sinking in, she jumped!
The snow so far above her head.

Her four tiny paws dug into the snow,
each hop looked funny
because instead of moving like a dog,
my puppy resembled a bright pink bunny!

The white, powder snow
continued falling all day,
covering the ground, allowing
us to enjoy an afternoon of play.

And her soaked, pink coat
now laid in my hand,
freezing my skin with memories
of this day—our Winter Wonderland.

The Creek

Cali Rohrbacher

first day of school shoes
before the end of summer,

skidding down the side of a mountain,
dirt staining our jeans
and making its way into our socks.

when we grip the earth with bare hands,
we brush off the pebbles,
ignoring our burning red palms.

we are little explorers, archeologists, adventurers;
three small girls who are bigger than they know.

we pick out rocks we like
and scoop up handfuls of water
from the tiny stream.

we feel like animals in the woods,
a wolf, a deer, a wildcat,
three little girls out in the unknown.

the setting sun is our cue to leave,
running home to drink right from the tap,
shutting the door to keep the dark out

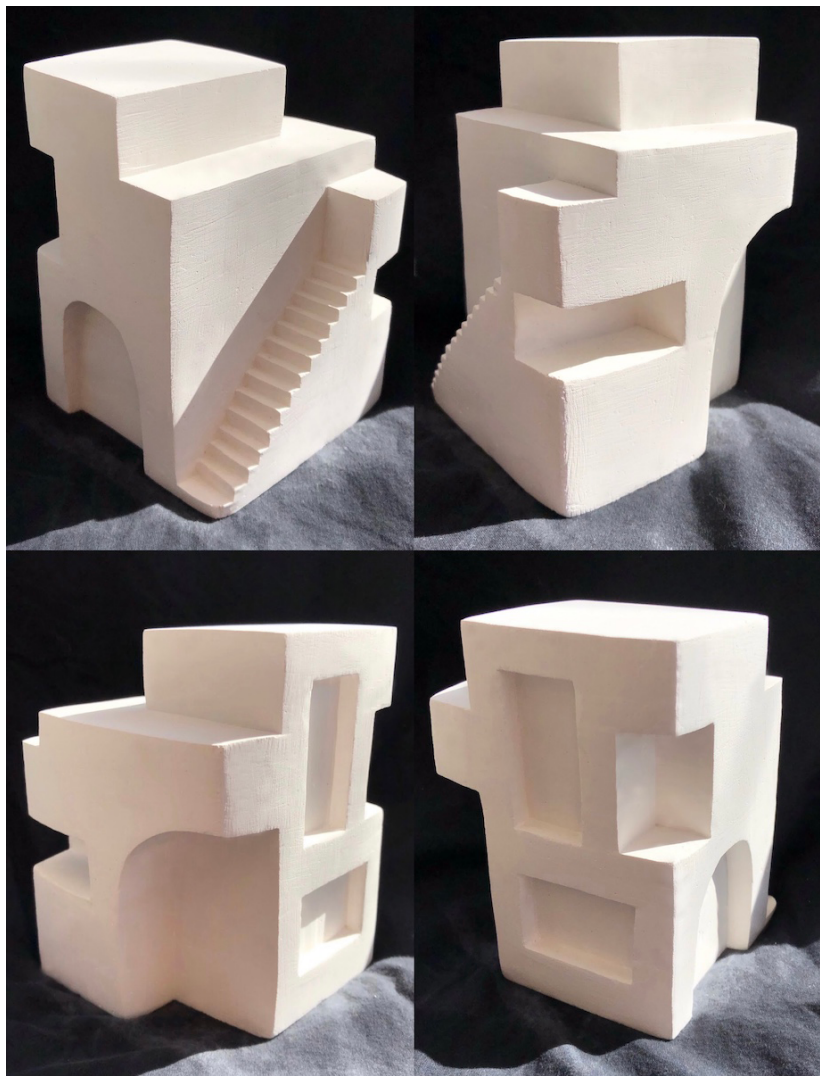
that's when the real animals
creep out from their dwellings,
the wolves, the deer, the wildcats.

in our quiet house,
we share the same bed
and fight over one blanket,

heads full of dreams of running back to the creek
when we wake up in the morning.

Domicilio

Bridget Couzin



Confession of a Superfund Site

Margaret D'Isa-Hogan

The Safety Light Corporation Superfund Site (SLCSS) is a radioactive site located near Bloomsburg, Pennsylvania. Superfund sites are hazardous and contaminated areas that require coordinated and long-term clean-up efforts.

Safety Light Corporation Superfund Site: I do not repent.

The Mother: I don't know why I got all dressed up for this, then.

The Mother removes her white collar and begins to stand.

SLCSS: Wait.

*She sits back down, but does not restore the collar.
They both sit in silence for a moment.*

M: I don't have all eternity.

SLCSS: You don't? Really?

M: Well, I wouldn't want to spend it here. I don't like how this place feels.

SLCSS: That's not my fault.

M: I know.

They both pause.

SLCSS: The review is up soon. In August.

M: What happens then?

SLCSS: I don't know. They have to make a decision, I guess. On how to "clean up".

M: What decision is there to make? They either keep doing what they're doing or they stop. Either way the result is the same, eventually.

SLCSS: I think they're worried about the water supply. That it could get contaminated if they don't speed up the cleaning process.

M: Oh. Well, I guess that is something to worry about.

SLCSS: There's lots of things to worry about.

M: You don't have room for all of that.

SLCSS: I've got 10 whole acres.

M: You know what I mean. It's not your fault, remember?

SLCSS: Yeah. I just... I've been watching people pass on the road to the north. The people who live nearby.

Silence. The Mother waits.

SLCSS: ... And I've noticed... I've noticed more shaved heads recently. More and more, every year.

M: Could just be the style. A fad.

SLCSS: Yeah. It could.

Long pause.

M: Healing takes time.

SLCSS: Everyone says that. Like it's comforting. Like it's ok for something to take forever.

M: It is.

SLCSS: It's not. You said it, we don't have forever. You and me.

M: I think I do. In one form or another.

SLCSS: Why did you say you didn't have eternity?

M: I was being cute. I meant everything else. You won't feel this way for the rest of your existence. You will heal, whether you do it on purpose or not.

SLCSS: What am I supposed to do in the meantime?

M: Remember.

SLCSS: Remembering is the problem! I'd like to remember less! I don't want to stew in this anger and sickness anymore. I don't want to keep hurting people.

M: It's not your fault.

SLCSS: I know.

M: It's not, though.

SLCSS: I heard you.

Silence.

M: It will feel like a long time, but one day you'll realize twice that much time has passed, and more of your existence was spent in the after than in the during.

SLCSS: I didn't come here to be told to "wait and see".

M: What *did* you come here for?

The Superfund Site does not immediately answer. They think.

SLCSS: Ask me again in 1,600 years.

M: Is that when you plan on being forgiven?

SLCSS: No. I expect to be halfway there.

The Shadows Beckon Your Attention

Jay Diekman

The little kitten wiggled her rump, her pupils dilated to the size of quarters. She pounced onto the shadow on the floor, tail flickering as she finally removed her paws and caught sight of—

Nothing.

Her ears pinned flat against her head, tail thumping angrily against the floor. *It was right there!* she thought, letting out a deep sigh as she laid down on her stomach, paws tucked neatly underneath her chest.

“Big sigh!” her beast laughed as he reached down to pat her small head. Her tail stopped its retaliating twitches only for a moment as she accepted the comfort he offered her—he wasn’t good with words, or taking care of himself, or... really anything for that matter, but it was the thought that counted. Even if she was the one who had to work tirelessly to hunt and deliver his meals for him (which he so rudely tossed outside every time), she still loved her weird, hairless, two-legged beast.

This, however, was different than her typical hunting extravaganza. This shadow had been bothering her for months, coaxing her to chase it around and leap on top of it only to catch absolutely nothing. Her beast called it “greebles.” Whatever that meant. He must not be able to see it anyways, since he always got upset about her chasing it. It’s not her fault that it would lead her into niche corners of the house and make her knock things over.

Ok maybe not *make* her knock things over, but it sure did take her to areas where it was impossible to avoid!

She’d show her stupid beast. Then he’d really have to apologize for shooing her away from the shadow.

It was getting harder to avoid lately. It was bigger, faster, more frequent—it was driving her nuts! There had been another cat hanging around, too. All the while her poor beast had come down sick.

He didn’t want to get up out of bed anymore. He didn’t even want to take his normal walks to the kitchen—it was making her more and more worried the longer it went on. The only time she could ever bring comfort to him was while he slept. Like a paranoid mother, she

curled up beside him, listening to his breathing. He twitched and spasmed often, but she knew he didn't mean it when he accidentally kicked her and she went flying off the bed.

She tried her best to wake her beast up when he got like that, but it seldom worked. Her meows and purrs and trills were too quiet for his rattled sleep-brain to hear, and she was too afraid to walk over him as a last resort—she didn't want to hurt the thing like the last time he couldn't get out of bed! Except that time, he did smell of blood and the hospital...

Sometimes in the night after she fell asleep on her vigil, he'd wake her up and pull her into his lap. She didn't mind, but seeing the tears in his eyes made her curious. Why was this shadow torturing her poor beast?

One night, she made the decision to stay up all night on watch for the shadow. She refused to let her beast be in pain like this. Taking her usual post, she curled up behind his legs, her ears acting as little sonar dishes to catch even the faintest whirl of the devilish shadow.

For many hours, silence was the only thing that breezed in the room.

It almost lulled her into contented sleep.

Until a purr estranged from her own slipped into the airwaves. She leapt up, tail thrashing from side to side. Her fur stood on end and her back arched, but before she started her seething hiss, she realized—there was no other cat in the room.

Confused, she walked around the bed, looking high and low for what could have caused the purr. *It wasn't me*, she concluded, *I know my own purr*. Soon she sat at the end of the bed, puzzled and upset.

"You're right, it wasn't you," a strange voice chimed in. She couldn't believe her eyes.

Perched on the delicate side of her beast was another cat. Like before, she assumed her defensive position: fur, back, lips into a snarl, but the strange cat met her anger with nothing at all.

"If you're quite done, I'd like to have a word with you. Beast-owner to beast-owner," he offered, gently walking down from the beast's side and across the bed to join his much smaller feline companion. She was not all pleased with the situation and took a precise swat at his shoulder, only to find it passed clear through his body.

His shadowy body.

"It's you! You're the shadow, greebles!" she exclaimed, though she could barely wrap her mind around it. All this time, and it was never a simple shadow...

"Indeed. And I would appreciate it if you stopped pouncing on me all the time. It's bothersome, you know." He sighed; the shaking of his head revealed a small bell on a collar, much like her own. Though she was burning with questions, she stayed silent, waiting patiently for the ethereal cat to take the lead.

He let out a booming purr. "I've been with this beast since he was a lad. We met as mere youths, grew up together, you see. I've seen him through the best and the worst of it." The shadow cat's eyes never left the beast on the bed.

"Why were you not here when I arrived, then?" she whispered, her large green eyes boring holes into the side of his face. His ears pointed outwards like little airplane wings as he gave her a side glance; she knew to stay quiet from then.

"For 12 years, I joined him on his journey. Inseparable for 12 short years. I had been with him since I was a wee few months old, but those were the best 12 years of my life." His head turned downwards, his ears flattening against his head completely. "My heart gave out on me. I didn't want to leave him, but I had no choice."

"Oh... so, that must be you, there." She motioned to the small picture tacked above the bed of a rather large tabby cat. He glanced up and gave a solemn nod, letting out a long breath before turning his green eyes down to her own.

"Listen to me, little one. This beast can be a handful. He'll yell at you for things he won't understand, he'll kick you off the bed, hell, sometimes he won't even get *out* of the bed—but, regardless, he loves you. Just like he loved me." He relaxed his shoulders before standing up and walking over to the sleeping beast, looking at him with fondness. "He likes it when you sleep next to him, so he can find you in the middle of the night. And don't forget to purr."

She nodded and took mental notes. She wasn't quite used to the beast yet, but she would figure it out. "So, when's the next time you're going to visit?" she asked, enjoying the wiser cat's company already.

A stretch of silence filled the gap between them. That was all she needed to know.

She looked down and thought for a moment, but when she brought her head back up to speak, he was gone. She stood at the end

of the bed in contemplation, but the shifting from her waking beast beckoned her attention. She raced over and curled up right beside his chest, purring as loudly as she could muster.

A tired, beastly arm wrapped around her body, pulling her in close. Sleep tugged at her weary soul, soothing her tireless mind to rest. Just as she was about to close her eyes, though, she could have sworn she caught the glimpse of a little moving shadow, darting across the wall to the photo of the cat tacked above the bed.

Box Braids & Broken Oaths

M.C. Bellow

A crisp silence intoxicates the air
My battery dies on my phone
Questions ring but no one's home
Monthly letters turned into your language as calls turned into my translation

My battery dies on my phone
My heart yearns for your affection like the growing grasses of a monsoon
Monthly letters turned into your language as calls turned into my translation
How many months before my oath is in vain?

My heart yearns for your affection like the growing grasses of a monsoon
When I was a child, I only knew you as the aunt who lived in the countryside
How many months before my oath is in vain?
You've braided many roots using the solid gel on your fingertips

When I was a child, I only knew you as the aunt who lives in the countryside
I paid my respects by unweaving each of your tight and tangled locks
You've braided many roots using the solid gel on your fingertips
Chatting with you began as a simple favor but transitioned
into spotting a flower wither

I paid my respects by unweaving each of your tight and tangled locks
Questions ring but no one's home
Chatting with you began as a simple favor but transitioned
into spotting a flower wither
A crisp silence intoxicates the air
That

Wasn't

My

Promise

Never have I promised to compromise my identity for your peace of mind
Never have I promised to marry or start a family in my twenties, thirties, or forties
Never have I promised to believe the scriptures in the letters you sent me
My one oath to you is to finish my manuscript before you wither away

That

Wasn't

My

Promise

Never have I promised to marry or start a family in my twenties, thirties or forties

You would agree wholeheartedly, that I'm living in a different age

My oath to you was to finish my manuscript before you wither away

And to my dismay, you have a permanent hospital stay

That

Wasn't

My

Promise

You would agree wholeheartedly that I'm living in a different age

"Bless your little heart" are words that made me feel a connection between us

And to my dismay, you have a permanent hospital stay

How many times have we spoken about the pieces I've written?

That

Wasn't

My

Promise

"Bless your little heart" are words that made me feel a connection between us

After, two years of communication you're still smitten with my reality

How many times have we spoken about the pieces I've written?

Monthly letters turned into your language as calls turned into my translation

After, two years of communication you're still smitten with my reality

Questions ring but no one's home

Chatting with you began as a simple favor but transitioned

into spotting a flower wither

A crisp silence intoxicates the air, my one oath to you

is to finish my manuscript before

you

wither

away

That. Was. My. Oath.

The Healing of the Ocean

Sydney Tow

The frigid water sends a shock through me.
I charge through the waves of the ocean
and dive headfirst, feeling the purity.
The waves wash over me in one motion,
the chilled Pacific revives my energy.
I'm at once free of the world's commotion,
and I feel like the water of the sea
has purified my mind, body and soul.

Hot, rosy cheeks from the sun's loving rays
and sand hidden in every crevice
serves as a messenger of revival.

Back at home I must wash the day away.
As I step into the steaming shower
I watch the grains of sand fadeaway;
down they flow for the drain to devour.

Rejuvenated is my fresh, clean skin;
into my softest pjs I am dressed.
Revived is my soul, I can't help but grin;
the ocean has saved me, I am so blessed.

Bridget Couzin



Tie Dye

Dilinna Ugochukwu

My English teacher ordered
us white t-shirts for our
senior sunrise, I asked for
an XL and everyone laughed.

On the day the shirts came in,
we were all excited to
tie dye them our favorite colors.
There was an awfully beautiful
array of colors, and I couldn't
decide if my shirt should bleed
red or blue.

Jen said use blue and red
and purple, so I did; it was always
easier to let someone else do
the thinking. My shirt leaked
with water as I sprinkled the red
and blue and put the purple in
between.

When the red dried pink, wearing
the shirt felt like coming out
except it was so large it could hide
all of me.

Companions

Trinity Winslow



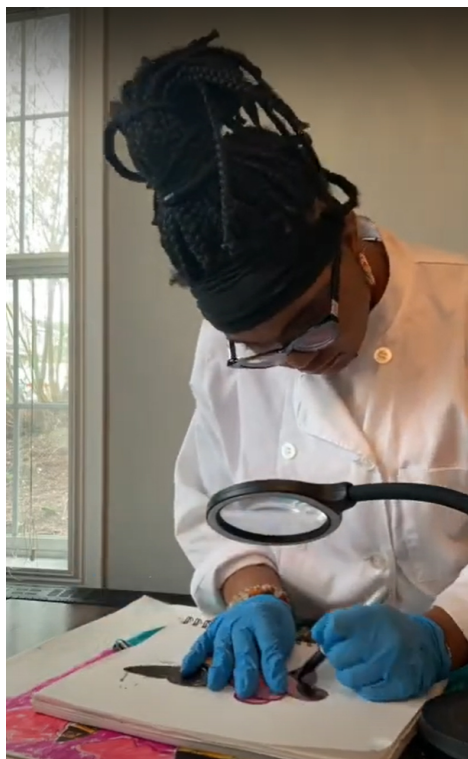
Pigeon Point

Jessica Flores



The Life of a Blind Artist

M.C. Bellow



Scan for video



<https://youtu.be/jjQOpmPFG3o>

What I Had, What I Wanted, What I Ended Up With

Jay Diekman



Parking Lot

Sachi Kojima

(Imitation of "Salt" by Yusef Komunyakaa)

Mark, Marty, Marvin?
He's driving in the parking lot
By Macy's, dressed in a
Polo & grey slacks.
He looks up at me,
Grabs the door
& yanks it open,
Unhinged. I want to say
We're just here, shopping
In the mall
Me & my family.
Marshall, Michael? I feel him
Strain to not hit my father.
Lines are now furrowed
Deep in his wide,
Thick forehead. Does he know
I know his kind
Who locked up American children
At Manzanar
Because they looked like me,
& stole their parents' land with lies?
& now he's screaming "Jap" in my
Father's face, venomous spittle flying. I remember
He was a grown man & I was five
We were leaving the parking lot
With my father driving, mother beside him
& me & my brothers sat silently, stifled
In the back seat of our family van
Suffocated by bitter bile in the air.
We looked out the window
& saw the man yelling
At our father that he almost hit him. Once
The other man moved so close
To our father we thought he'd hit him.

What the children of grownups
& grown men saw was enough
To sink strong hearts,
& it's hard now not to walk over
& mention how his type of hate
Killed his fellow man
& sowed division & bred more hate
In a parking lot, in a world, that became hell.

No Ordinary Dyke

M.C. Bellow

Once on the way to work, I had on a snapback and jean jacket.

I wasn't your ordinary dyke.

I was a stud.

A

smooth

confident

stud

Once on the way to the movies, I had a dress on, and my nails painted.

I wasn't your ordinary dyke.

I was a fem.

A

girly

confident

fem

Once on the way to the gym, I had on my regular get up.

I wasn't your ordinary dyke.

I was a nerd.

An

eccentric

woman

And every time my brother would say,

"So, this is who you are today?"

This is who I am today.

This is who I wanted to be today.

This is who I wasn't yesterday.

Fem

Stud

Chapstick

Biting my lip,

I tossed out my jean jackets for flannels

Like a teenager on the first day of 9th grade.

I tossed out my flannels for snapbacks

Like a teenager on the first day of 9th grade.

I tossed out my high-tops for appealing sandals
Like a teenager on the first day of 9th grade.

“So, this is who you are today?”

My head was pounding
Among the mess I made in my closet,
Rainbow shoelaces entangled with dresses
I

Never

Wear

My ears were anxiously listening.
Among the dozens of videos, I've selected
Lesbian TikTok, YouTube, and Instagram
I

Never

Use

My eyes were looking at me
Among the sticky notes full of ideas on the mirror.
Hairstyles that I was uncertain to try.
I

Never

Tried

The

Styles

Once, on the way home from the hair salon,
I was back to wearing braids.
I was back to my blue glasses.
I was back to my ripped jeans.

I had that goofy, contagious smile,
And my brother said, “So this is who you are?”
I

Was

Your

Ordinary

Woman

Public Library

Madison Fink



An Email to the “Jesus of Suburbia”

Chloe Mendoza

The following piece is a response inspired by the Green Day song, “Jesus of Suburbia,” in which a suburban teen flees his town to avoid the future that has been prescribed to him.

An Email to the “Jesus of Suburbia”

Re: Admission Decision Regarding You Leaving Town

2:45 am

Dear “Jesus of Suburbia,”

We regret to inform you that you’ve emptied your guts upon the blinding concrete for nothing, because we can not offer you admission anywhere outside of your cul-de-sac at this time.

You may be tempted to ask what was lacking in your application. However, we feel it would be inappropriate to point out these weaknesses when we know you’ve completed your youth with thoughtfulness and care. Unfortunately, out of more than 2.9 million applicants, almost all of them *also* consider themselves to be a product of their father’s rage and their mother’s love.

We hope you understand that this decision in no way reflects your potential. In fact, we encourage you to apply again once you realize that the following items are not spotlights: the artificial yellow encircling your silhouette from the streetlight outside of a 7 Eleven, the white of your laptop screen as the text cursor blinks back at you, the interior lights of your mom’s 1967 Ford Mustang, etc. We encourage you to understand that these lights are not only unflattering, but they are never permanent. Streetlights will always exhaust themselves to a weak flicker. Laptops will always be folded, collapsing upon themselves. And moms will always be there to tell you that you’re wasting the car’s battery.

We encourage you to save up for the next string of bus rides that'll get you out of town, skipping you from stop to stop like a stone on still water. We encourage you to make note of who's eyes dilate when you wax poetic about your plans to get out of "this shithole." We encourage you to consider white picket fences and timed sprinklers as a landing point as you slice through clouds and hurdle towards the ground.

We are sending this email from deep inside the earth of which we encourage you to dig your hands into, because perhaps you'll find the cigarette butts planted there by your disciples, forever waiting for germination, so they can sprout between cracks in neighborhood driveways. Perhaps you'll find thorned roots to freckle your arms with blood. Perhaps you'll find the gutted heart you regurgitated up and buried in your backyard. Perhaps you'll find the atriums and aorta full of rich soil, and perhaps you'll hold it in your hand and realize that it *still* beats out of time.

But most importantly, we hope that you suffocate in the ground, your hands digging further and further to the core only to realize that the end of the world is nowhere to be found. And when you are left to fertilize the flowers on your grave, you will see that life is always desperate to grow on top of death, despite any and all protests.

Ultimately, these heavy decisions are made with clarity and confidence, and we *do not* conduct an appeal process.

Best Wishes,
Your Dearly Beloved

This Morning

Dilinna Ugochukwu

While Ukraine is under attack,
I go for a walk,
and the cool air feels nice on
my skin. My mother
wakes up at 6:00 am
for work, and my dad gets
my younger siblings ready
for school.

On the news,
they talk about how Russia
is invading Ukraine,
and then cut to an advertisement
for the new Doctor Strange.
It's strange how the world
changes, and my life
still feels the same.

While Ukraine is under attack,
I get ready for school.
At school, my teacher has us
discuss the invasion,
makes us research all the ways
it will affect our lives, and we
talk about frivolous things
like gas prices and the economy.
While Ukraine is under attack,
we discuss the economy.

Rise

Ciara Asberry



Saturday

Chloe Mendoza

Art piece uses lyrics from Fall Out Boy's "Saturday"



Thirty

Abigail Royster

I've spent years
Trying, trying
To dissect you
Perfect you
Polish you
Correct you

And then flip you
Belly up
No amber
Just recluse

But you refuse
And defuse
Until your
Skin sallows
And I see-through

The peach rouge
And green roots
That your fingernails
Sink into

The sand stays
Like rocks do
I wonder
If they notice

To My Leather-Bound Ancestors

Jay Diekman



Thank you for the work you've done.
You were cast aside—
Castaway,
Made to feel passed on,
And now passed away.

1940s, the original counter
To the culture that never wanted us.
Motorcycle men, leather clad
Opposition to the mainstream
Boot, refusal to assimilate
To the culture that never wanted us.
Strength, empowerment, independence.

Gay.

The dirtiest of words.
Most mental of illnesses.
Most lavender of scares.
Sick. Perverted. Gay.

Motorcycles, camaraderie,
Leather. The things that bind us
Hold us together, becoming family,
Becoming friends.
Foster community, flourish sexuality;
I am not afraid to know my history
And to say it's gay.

I am not afraid to wear leather.

1980s, the near extinction event
Of my people,
Of my ancestors.
Motorcycle men, leather bound,
Family bound, first responders—
I am not afraid to say heroes.
When Reagan ignored us
And Laughed at our dead,
When Doctors recoiled
And Refused to touch our wounded,
They were there,
Holding hands, watching friends
Flitter,
Extinguish,
Die.

First responders, not in white coats
Nor gloves or donning scopes,
But in vests and chaps,
Giving care, watching brother by brother
By sister drop
Like tears of the dying
Like tears on the living,
Into a ravenous, thirsty bottle,
Knowing it could be him
Or her
Or you.

To my leather-bound ancestors:
Thank you for the work you did.
You are the reason why I exist
As a free man, bound but unchained.

Embrace of Darkness

Karina Avila



Birds of a Feather

Michael Prezioso



Dear Buddy

Jay Diekman

Dear Buddy,

I was thinking about you the other day. I was talking with Chels about how we grew up, and naturally you came up in the conversation. It reminded me that I should write to you—I know you’d prefer I call, but this is the best I can do.

I’ve been wanting to ask how you’re doing. It’s weird not having you around so close by. It’s weird not having you in the trailer you’ve always been in, the one with the horrible grass-green carpet that didn’t match the interior at all. Do you remember when Dad used to take me over to your neighborhood to go trick-or-treating? I would always be the kid with the pillowcase because we couldn’t afford anything else. But it was ok. I never minded it; it helped me net more candy, anyways. Remember when you also helped teach me how to ride a bike? You used to stand in the street for hours while I would go back and forth, having the time of my life ramping over speedbumps and nearly giving myself a concussion when I would inevitably fall and smack my face on the pavement.

I think my favorite memory is when we used to sit on the swinging porch and talk. I don’t remember what about, due to my memory being so shoddy because of Dad (I don’t want to burden you with it); but those times were certainly my favorite. What about when I used to crawl into your lap and curl up against you, and we would watch TV together until either Mom was off work from the hospital at 8pm or Dad remembered he had a kid? I was so small compared to you. Hell, I’m still pretty small.

All of the aunts always called me “Buddy’s little girl” because we were so close. I mean, we hung out damn near every day. And then, do you remember giving me Nanny’s pressed wedding ring on the gold chain? And how angry everyone got because you gave it, the hallmark of your undying devotion, to your high school sweetheart and true love, to me, a stupid kid? Yeah, I still get a laugh out of it. I’m sure you would too.

Well, I guess I’ll stop beating around the bush and man up and tell you what I’ve been meaning to tell you. I’m not your little girl; at

least, not anymore. I came out as trans when I was about 13 after Dad died, a handful of years ago. I was too chicken-shit to ever tell you. So I didn't.

I spent years like that. Just... living as someone I wasn't. Everyone in the family told me not to tell you. By then dad was dead and couldn't advocate for you or me anymore, so I just let his sisters bully me over. They told me that it would be too hard on you, that you wouldn't understand. That my very existence as a man would disturb you or upset you. And I didn't want that. I didn't want to ruin the good memories we had together. They had me so afraid that you would hate me, or that I would make you so distraught. They made me choose between my happiness and comfort or yours, and I chose yours. It killed me every day, thinking that if you somehow found out, you would be upset. But you were old, probably in your 90s, and I didn't want to burden you. I guess sacrifice like that is what love is about.

I was able to pass it off for a little while, but then I started taking testosterone. Slowly, my voice deepened; I built more muscle. I even had a beard now! I was so proud that I was finally able to grow one (not a good one, mind you) after all this time. But once that all started happening... suddenly I couldn't call you anymore on your birthday or for Christmas. And then I couldn't see you. I phased myself out of your life because of this lose-lose situation I was forced into. Every single day I hated myself for it. I knew that cutting contact was making you sad, but the alternative that had been placed in my mind was worse. So I did what I thought I had to do. I chose you. In the end, I always chose you.

And then someone (I think Aunt Margo, but I never found out), moved you to Colorado without telling me, mom, or Chelsea. It took us months to figure out, but by then it was too late. It was cemented to me then that I was never going to be able to see you again. I was never going to be able to talk to you again.

There was so much I wanted to ask you. I wanted to ask what growing up Amish was like, how you felt after getting excommunicated for enlisting in WWII. I wanted to hear your war stories, even though I knew you would never tell me them, because I just wanted you to know that I cared about you and how you felt and give validation for what you saw. I wanted to shoot the shit like adults and talk about the good old days. I wanted the fatherly advice that dad was never able to give me; I wanted someone to teach me how to shave my beard properly, how to tie a tie, how to dress in suits or business casual, how to just be a good and decent man like you were.

I wanted the man who raised me back.

I wanted my grandfather back.

But I resigned myself to my fate. I thought I was doing good by you, even though looking back, it only hurt us both. I can't imagine how lonely you felt, how terrible it must have been to not hear from your grandkid that you helped raise. I beat myself up for it constantly. I should have just reached out to tell you, but I wasn't as brave as I am now.

And then we got news of your death. A month after it happened. Never an invitation for the funeral. Even after all that mom did for you as a nurse at the request of your daughters whenever you were in the hospital... they never even had the decency to tell us you had passed. We were an afterthought. A part of me still doesn't think it's real, you being dead. I guess my brain just wants to keep you in suspended animation forever, the man who I thought I was saving. The saying "don't be a hero" really hits me different nowadays.

I like to think you'd be proud of me. I have my share of problems and haven't always been the best man, but I'm working on it. But I like to think you'd give me a shot of Jim Beam for what I've done with my life. I'm trying my best as a writer, but I'm still pretty shy. I've written quite a lot, even a couple novels, but I don't think I'll ever get them published. I want to be a creative writing teacher, so I guess I still have a lot of manning up to do. There's not much to say, other than that. I'm living a rather quiet life, but that's alright by me. I think of it as following in your shoes.

I promise every year on your birthday, October 17th, to take a shot of whisky for you, you 6'6" Amish bastard. I hope now we can both rest easy, knowing that everything I did, I did for you. Even if it was bullshit in the first place. I still don't want to say my final goodbyes. I don't think I'm ready for that quite yet—I don't know if I'll ever be ready. So, goodbye. For now.

—Your Favorite Grandson

Says the Spider to the Fly

Rachel Stubblefield

silk may be delicate beautiful luxurious
silk is deadly constricting entrapping
invisibly thin spools weave their way around you
weightless until you feel three thousand twirls
there is strength in beauty silk is no different
once the bands are tight enough vulnerability comes
no wrong move there is no move to make
you wait
wait for inevitability to rear her head
at least you accept it at this point

how did you get here little thing
did you lose your way
knowingly took the road less traveled
how could you have strayed so far

a spider bite
deadly for some a mere inconvenience for others
how will your scene play out

may her stinging bite be but a needle prick
and her poison mere melatonin
let the wind loosen the silk chains
and the rain wash the spider out

Marzipan and Vanilla

Dilinna Ugochukwu

My dad hates queers. His face wrinkles in disgust when we watch a show and two boys kiss. I am not shocked that all the romantic hints went over his head, because in his mind, how could two boys fall in love?

At the dining table, my mother implies homosexuality is immoral. If you ask her, she'll say she is not homophobic because two of her friends are lesbians, and that she doesn't mind gays because God will be the final judge. But later, she'll tell you a story I've heard too often: the story of a poor, straight woman, who married a closeted, transgender woman. My mom calls the transgender woman a man the entire time. She also makes the transgender woman the villain of the story, calls her crazy for existing, for daring to be herself. I'm almost certain I'm a villain in my mother's stories too.

On movie nights, we watch Nollywood films where the evil witch puts a hex on an arrogant man, cursing him to fall in love with men. He acts more effeminate and paints his nails beautiful shades of hot pink. My parents laugh when other characters mock him, and they cheer when God finally breaks the curse.

When they're not home, I steal my mother's wigs, smear on red lipstick, walk expertly in her heels, and practice imitating Jessica Rabbit's voice because I have a crush on her, and every woman I've ever crushed on I've wanted to become. My older sister helps me put on eyeshadow and concealer, she lets me wear her prettiest dresses, and calls me she. We pretend to be girls we've seen on TV.

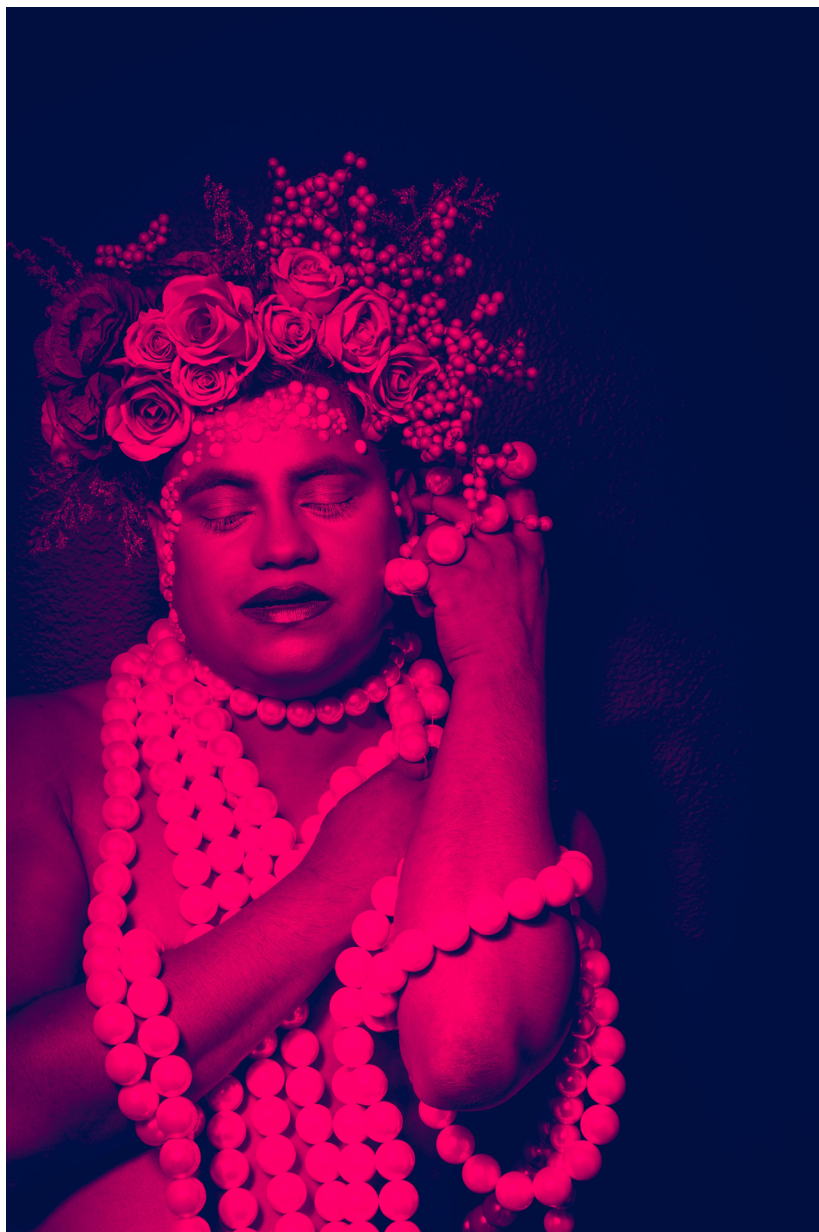
I'm devastated when the garage door opens, and everything ends. I swiftly remove my sister's frilly dress, throw off my mother's stilettos, carefully return the wig and makeup kit, and fervently wash the makeup off. Knowing not one remnant can remain.

One day I take a pencil and scribble in my fingernails gray, pretending it's hot pink. My mother sees this and calls out to God. My father is speechless and looks at me like I'm not his son. I realize they will never love me as I am.

The first time I fall in love, I hide him from them. I'm afraid that once they know, they will use bad juju, or the credits will roll, and I'll find out I am just an arrogant, Nigerian man, cursed.

Material Pearl

Mike Marsalisi



Awards

We are pleased to announce the winners of the
Dr. Michael McMahan Award for Excellence in Writing and the Arts...

Excellence in Poetry:

“There’s Something Wrong With My Body” by Dilinna Ugochukwu

Honorable Mention:

“Rise” by Ciara Asberry

Excellence in Fiction:

“Rampion” by Ren Canfield

Honorable Mention:

“Intake Survey” by Margaret D’Isa-Hogan

Excellence in Photography:

“Material Pearl” by Mike Marsalisi

Honorable Mention:

“Serendipity” by Mallory Arden Fink

Excellence in Art:

“There’s Plenty of Trash in the Sea” by Bridget Couzin

Honorable Mention:

“Wendy” by Madison Fink

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