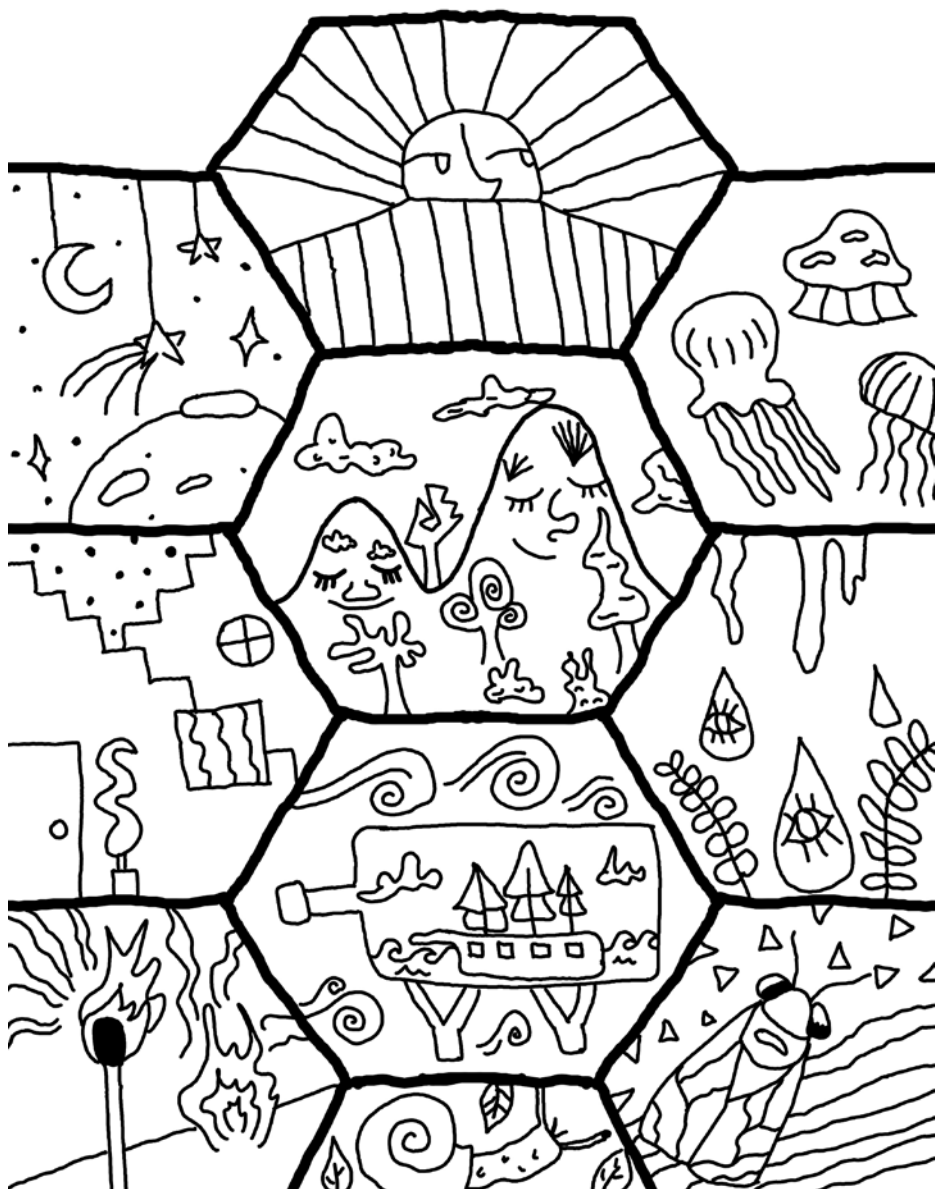


# cul-de-sac

literary & arts magazine

volume 17



# Editor's Note

Dear Reader,

I want to thank you for reading Volume 17 of *cul-de-sac* Literary and Arts magazine. By doing so, you are uplifting voices and visions that are all too often unheard and unseen. It has truly been one of the high points of my life to lead such an amazing team of artists, musicians, poets and humans toward the publication of *cul-de-sac*. I have been so honored to read, view, and listen to truly excellent work from our student body. I feel oftentimes that art is one of the great equalizers of humanity— if I ever feel alone in my struggles, I know there must be some painting, some song, some brilliant piece of writing that proves to me that I'm not alone and that I never was to begin with. At times when I didn't have a single friend to confide in, I found comfort and solace in art and the written word. No experience exists in a vacuum, and art is a testament to this.

I feel that most art and writing is a form of public vulnerability; it takes a lot to bare the deepest pieces of your soul to the world. The works published in this magazine are just that— little pieces of our artists' souls. I want to congratulate all members of our student body who submitted their work; it takes bravery to do so. As Ernest Hemingway *may* have said, "There is nothing to writing. All you do is sit down at a typewriter and bleed." This quote to me perfectly encapsulates what it is to write or produce art. We are all human beings experiencing life and trying to make sense of our circumstances and feelings, many times through art. There is so much that reflects this in volume 17 of *cul-de-sac*... so many voices, points-of-view, and experiences that show all facets of humanity— its dark underbelly, its lighter side, and of course, its many shades of gray.

I am so honored to have helped lead the effort in providing a platform to these wonderful artists. I want to thank our faculty advisor, Alene Terzian-Zeitounian for being so warm, open, and helpful. I also want to thank my staff; it has been truly incredible getting to know and work with such an amazing and diverse group of people so committed to the arts.

We are living in a time where many claim that we are in a cultural deficit— I say it simply isn't so. In seeing all of the wonderful art produced for our magazine, my belief in the arts has been entirely reinvigorated. I have no fear for the future of creativity; I've looked into its eyes and fallen in love with what I've seen. I hope that you will too.

Scarlett Rae Dougherty  
*cul-de-sac*, Editor-in-Chief

# Acknowledgments

There are so many ugly and beautiful things happening in the world today; we are bombarded with catastrophe and atrocities, and yet, out of my window, I can see a double rainbow in the distance. It reminds me that whatever we are all up against, whatever we are running to or from, we are not just one story— we are not defined by one terrible mistake or one high-flying success. We are complex and stand firm in our power. Volume 17 is reflective of this charge of energy, celebrating the dualities of resilience and giving up. In a way, we are presenting you with the double rainbow and hope you will enjoy the view as much as we do.

Every year, I thank my students for their efforts, and none of this would be possible without their thoughtfulness and hard work. All of that is still true. But this year, more than any other, volume 17 directly reflects the beauty and complexity of each of their voices. Their investment created this magical volume, and I hope their efforts, words, and creativity will keep buzzing in your ears for years to come.

Although these words also don't adequately express my gratitude to the benefactors who champion us, I continue to say them humbly and sincerely. A heartfelt *thank you* to:

- Chancellor Dr. Dianne G. Van Hook for awarding us the Chancellor's Mini Grant and for supporting us over the past 17 years. We are so grateful for your advocacy.
- Andy McCutcheon, Dean of Humanities, for always knowing what to say or do. I'm not sure how we have been so lucky to have you in our corner, but we are forever grateful. And as always, thank you for scraping under the couch cushions to help us pay our bills (haha!).
- The Associated Student Government for awarding us the ASG Grant year after year. We could not do it without you.
- Jerry Danielson, Connie and Tanner Ford for their generous donations.
- All of the professors and college staff who encouraged their students to submit to our magazine, but especially to the creative writing, literature, photo, and art professors for their assistance. Specific shoutouts to Alma Juarez for her advocacy, Parallax Photo Club, and the Public Information Office for helping us get the word out.
- Geir Foshaug and the Intersect GMD team for designing and creating our new logo and branding! Thank you so much for your efforts!
- The hundreds of students who were brave enough to submit their work.

We sincerely thank you.

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# Northbound

*Kara Watson*

The sun reaches its hands through  
my southern suburbia to coat  
and smother me in lighter fluid;  
it wants to watch me burn out  
like a light bulb too hot for its glass.  
I have died and been born again  
no less than four times at the touch.

I can feel my heat-death loom,  
caress my bones and lick  
at the cedar pine walls of this labyrinth house,  
leave fingernails clawed in wood until I am close  
enough to sear a hole in the roof and climb  
towards Polaris.

I'll brand my path up North  
under pine leaves of Cascadia  
where the valley heat cannot reach me  
and neither can my mother's God.  
I do not know how to be okay;  
I only know how to stretch toward the sun.

# Father's Day

*Iman Karimah Avila*

my name sharpens  
into a shiv

you shape in your mouth  
a cavern;

your stomach, a blackhole  
starlight can't sate—

inward I fold at the sound  
of your voice, the slow knife

that sinks between ribs—  
you are a row of shark teeth,

a bear trap that hungers  
to ensnare.

my body waits  
for the whip

of your hand as it cracks  
against my skin—

and I am smeared  
remnants of

a snail on pavement: a calligraphy  
of slime and broken shell.

# My Dying Heart

*Liliana Rivera*



# Resurrection of the “Fishapod”

*Eel Straughn*

*A Museum Showcase of the Biological  
Interconnection Between Fish, Humankind,  
and Trans Identity*

At the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County, I stand for perhaps longer than I should, gazing upon the oarfish, long since deceased behind an encased shell of glass. I stare fixated on the outstretched body of the “deep-sea oddity,” a serpent-like fish browned with age, flattened by the lack of pressure on the surface. The flat eyes, devoid of pupils, stare vacantly back as if it is waiting for something. They stare through me, not searching for a soul but instead, for the internal, animalistic anatomy of my bodily orientation. As I unfocus my intent staring, the oarfish becomes clouded over and replaced by my own abstracted reflection overtop the glass cover. *I am an organism.*

Approximately 375 million years ago, *Tiktaalik roseae* hoists itself onto the shore, still slick with moisture and swamp slime as it props up on its forelimbs for a look around. Humans, as mammals, share the tiktaalik as our common ancestor with all four-limbed vertebrates. The tiktaalik was a creature of transition, a lobe-finned fish interlinking the genetic ties of gilled sea-dwellers with tertiary tetrapods. The Late Devonian was a time when an evolutionary metamorphosis was occurring. The tiktaalik was becoming not quite a fish, yet was far from being classified as a tetrapod. Thus, the term was born, one attempting to label a scaly beast muddled with derived traits that belonged to no creature in particular; the tiktaalik was a “fishapod”.

So it seems I am a fishapod, *Homo sapien* at the surface, but locked at the ankle by an evolutionary chain documenting tetrapod history.

The tiktaalik is resurrected like a zombie from the tomb, from a necropolis of fossils to an industrial complex of genetics. After millions of years of transformation, it is to be reborn and reassembled into a humanoid figure, one which echoes its new bipedal locomotion throughout the museum halls.

In a sense, I am tied by my veins to the same unidentifiable nature of the tiktaalik. It may be that I should be encased in cubicles of glass as a museum attraction. I am the fishapod of the modern age,

an unlabeled beast thought to be extinct or even thought to have never lived at all. Still against the odds, *I exist*. I live as a mockery to the binary and human-made roles. I breathe with gills as much as I do with lungs. Crocodilian in appearance but born as a fish, my transitional obscurity muddies the clear waters. My attributes grew from mutations, developed through the continuous struggle to survive in an environment that does not welcome me, dragged by my forelimbs to the shore. I continue to live and just like a fish, I breathe, I eat, I form relationships, I keep moving, and one day I will die like one too. Yet I will live in death, a fossil in the museum, showing and even flaunting my existence. I am proof of my descent and I represent my ancestors within the structure of my fossilized skeleton.

I am an animal first and a human second. The modern world in opposition to the natural world, the biological sex in opposition to the chosen identity in action. Forced to deny the obscurity of the perceived self in response to the simplified categorization of sex. I am expected to perform amongst concrete and waste, exhibited now as the twisted offspring of two clashing worlds.

But for the time being, I remain on the outside of the glass. The sea continues to tempt me, constantly flailing in the back of my mind, like a fish on land.

# Spot the Snail

Terri Singley



# bed bugs

Evelina Zubrinskaya

in my nightmares, my grandmother hands me a jar  
of dirt. my unforgiving hands spill specks of pungent  
earth onto my mom's freshly cooked rice. out come  
gleaming beetles, their destiny to destroy  
my mind. they come in hordes, army clicking  
through my subconscious, to remind me in the morning  
that i am a family of beetles, generations crawling  
and screaming in birth, letting out small  
beetles onto plates of rice. i sneak

on a bush in bed; inside sits  
a tarantula. it will pounce,  
but i wake up too soon.  
i swallow moths & spiders whole  
for fluttery tickles, nighttime company.

in dreams, i tread carefully  
through a house encrusted with soft,  
small snails, slime coated on floor  
and walls, spread so thick i fear  
to crush brittle shells. snails are a house  
of my memories i slowly tiptoe through.

breathe, i walk across the sidewalk next  
to pretty suburban house, shade haven  
to snails peeking with periscope eyes.  
i compliment their spirals, *you are all  
the goodness in the world.* surely—

at school, look for small things: roly-poly pills,  
earthworm ropes, toxic orange butterflies only noticed  
through shadows first, a stream  
of bullets might be ants.



downstairs, asleep peacefully, me.  
flies flit on my organs, grainy like rice.  
i daydream i am a wingtorn bug,  
jumping away from grandmother  
mandible-mouth, trilling  
on the tallest tree. i collapse  
on concrete, exoskeleton  
creaks, keeps the ground  
wet. the impact barely  
leaves a crack.

—the snails wouldn't miss me,  
but i would miss them, so i step  
back from the ledge to greet the thick  
closed curtains of my room.

## Rashomon

*Ashley Jane Nickel*

Pain any way you look at it  
Through every lens  
Golden hour stained glass  
Or hospital fluorescence.

Bright moth to dark flame  
Perspective  
doesn't ease the ache.

Steadfast companion  
Candlelit vigil  
Memories embalmed  
Wax burns, melts  
To quiet psalms.

Your Icarus heart  
Stares into the sun  
Complicity gone  
With ruined sight.



# Exquisite Corpse

Halle Gauthier



# The Silicon Hymn

Jacobi Brown

The robots were singing again. Tenth blasted time this week, too.

Second-Class Mechanical Operations Officer, Gerald R. Tippenger rubbed the sleep from his bleary eyes with his wrinkled hands. Those infernal machines never let him get any rest anymore. Who did they think they were, filling the whole mine with a wordless hymn sung by grating and whirring voices that would carry for miles even in the vacuum of space? In years prior, they'd at least had the decency to sometimes stop for the night. Well, he'd just have to sort them out again. *Proper*, this time. The old man folded his bony frame out of his large ops station chair with a grunt and exited his dwelling. It was a sad-looking, mold-infested metal shack that had long ago given up trying to live up to its august title of Primary Operations Observation Center and Living Quarters.

A cheerful midsummer afternoon came to greet the man with a refreshingly cool breeze laden with the scent of tree sap. Golden light from the Tiryon system's parent yellow dwarf star fell upon the thriving mountain forest, sloping downwards before him. The scintillating blueish-green leaves on the trees sighed contentedly in the wind, weaving a lovely dance of light and shadow on the angular forms of the fractal ferns that carpeted the forest floor. Stately four-winged birds of paradise flashed magnificent rainbow plumage in the branches overhead, each determined to outdo his fellows in a bid to catch the eye of his future queen. Wildflowers pushing through the ferns joyfully spread resplendent petals as insects diligently buzzed about them in search of food.

Tippenger saw none of this. All he knew was that it was too hot, too bright, and too blasted *noisy*.

As he descended, he became aware of the fact that not one of the birds, bees, trees, or flowers seemed to take even the slightest notice of the robots' song, which barged its way through the mountain air up the slope towards them. The wrinkles on Tippenger's face creased in irritation.

His feet carried him in the slightly-less-than-Earth-gravity, down the well-worn path just like they had done every day for the last half-century. For the ten-thousandth time, he reflected bitterly

as he walked that the position of Mechanical Operations Officer was not one that afforded much opportunity for advancement. A faceless handler from the Company would first pick a newly surveyed world that was resource-rich enough to be profitable, but not so much to be worth full colonization. Then, they would randomly pluck from a hat the name of some poor, disillusioned soul trying to escape whatever mess their lives had become and ship them off to the planet aboard a dreary gray starhopper. You could bring nothing with you except the army of automated mining equipment that an economics algorithm running on some egghead's computer somewhere decided would be necessary. The turbulence of atmospheric entry signaled a crossing of an invisible and unbreakable line that you would probably never cross again. Tippenger's frown deepened. Sure was nice of Hinsely to not tell him that before he volunteered. All he had wanted was to find a nice quiet corner of the stellar frontier in which he could raise a family with Louise without any distractions. He never would have brought her along if he had known.

Louise.

An old and disgustingly familiar pang smote Tippenger in the chest. His face twisted further. The singing got louder.

Having dutifully brought its user to his destination, the path abruptly ended at a tall, square metal gate, whose rusting hinges still doggedly clung to a forty-foot-tall reinforced metal wall that encircled the very large and round mineral quarry, cut into the mountain's proud base. Tippenger waited impatiently for the stubborn old scanner to read his gene print. The robots' voices were still going. The gate, finally satisfied with his biological credentials, beeped its confirmation and permitted him entry.

The quarry spread out before him, the dusty grays and browns of the dirty stones refusing to give a reflection in the sunlight. Tippenger barely even remembered what this place had looked like before ground had been broken here. The host of mining and ore refinement automata sent with him were indeed efficient in their work— more efficient and therefore more profitable, declared the executive higher-ups. Real human mining crews hadn't been used in centuries. The laws against unsupervised drone activity still applied, even if that meant somebody going into voluntary exile from the rest of humanity on a planet buried deep in the uttermost corner of the most remote sector of the galaxy.

"Oh, it won't be that bad," said Louise beside him.

He saw her as she had been on that first day fifty standard

years ago: hopeful, bright-eyed, full of life, as he had been. She touched her rounded belly carrying their unborn daughter and smiled. "That just means more time to ourselves."

Then the rockslide came down upon her again as it always did, and the vision melted into nothing. Tippenger had not forgotten that the robots had first started singing not long after that evil morning. His facial wrinkles collapsed into a full-blown angry scowl. The singing grew still louder.

Tippenger marched towards the main control station, the robots' infuriatingly carefree voices whirling around him. He reached the primary console and slammed his palm onto a square metal button upon which the words "Manual Recall & Inspection" had been stamped. A single, thunderous shout rang out from the control antenna and rolled across the artificial valley. Every robot in the quarry paused whatever it was doing and began to leisurely walk, roll, crawl, or float its way to the inspection point where Tippenger was waiting with crossed arms. Their voices did not stop.

There were big robots and small robots; tall robots, squat robots, flexible robots; robots with long arms and no legs, robots with short legs and many arms; robots with treads for feet and robots with magnets for hands; robots with green eyes, robots with blue eyes, robots with no eyes at all. One by one, each one took its own sweet time and enjoyed the pleasant afternoon seemingly just to spite their human master. The machines assembled before Tippenger in a tidy phalanx formation and grew completely still. Mercifully, the singing stopped.

"Finally, some quiet," Tippenger muttered. His glare scanned the formation of machines before him. "Now then," he barked, "who do you rust-buckets think you are?"

The robots didn't fully understand the question.

"Oh, don't you play coy with me, you miserable metal maggots," growled Tippenger. He settled his gaze on one robot in the front row and stared into its wretched glowing eyes. The robot, a stocky fellow with wide feet designed for bracing itself under heavy loads, politely requested that he elaborate on his query.

"It's that blasted racket you filthy machines make! All hours of day and night, the constant grinding, shrieking, *singing!*" He was pacing angrily before the front row. "Fifty years I've had to put up with you bucketheads. Fifty years I've borne your constant blathering! I'd have blown you all into tiny little pieces long ago if I could. No matter how many times I tell you to shut up, you just don't listen! All I want

is a good night's sleep for once in my life, but *no*, you blasted machines just keep screeching out your insipid little song over and over and over again!" He stopped and whirled on them, "Well? What do you have to say for yourselves?"

None of the robots answered. They all appeared to simply sit there contemplating him with the same insidious amusement that schoolyard bullies feel when a younger classmate they have just relieved of his lunch money stamps his foot at them in a tantrum. Tippenger's frustration approached critical mass as his barbed gaze bored into the ringleader's unblinking, green eyes. Still no one responded.

A speckled insect ambled through the air between them, absorbed in its mission to stock up on pollen and oblivious to both the angry man and the robots who were aiming sneering metal faces at him.

Finally, a large wheeled transport robot near the back of the group condescended to suggest that he and his colleagues could perhaps be persuaded to think about making a little less noise if Tippenger asked nicely.

"*Nicely!*" Tippenger was trembling with rage now. This was too much! After everything they had put him through, how dare they demand courtesy from him? He had no words. The robots were laughing in his face. He punched a series of buttons on the nearby control console. Immediately, the big transport in the back engaged its emergency brake and deactivated the locks on its maintenance access panels. Tippenger stomped towards it, the other robots taunting him as they parted before him. Bemused, the transport simply watched him come.

He reached the side of the machine and tore off a maintenance panel, revealing an orderly web of cables carrying data and power. Drunk on his anger, Tippenger tried to rip them out, but the robot was too well-built. A lone old man equipped with only his bare hands could never hope to damage a machine designed to move mountains.

The singing began again, this time woven with roars of laughter. The old man seethed with anger and embarrassment, which only induced the robots to laugh infuriatingly harder. Some of them even broke into a new song that he had not heard before. Despite not being able to make out the words, he was absolutely certain that the song contained all manner of gleefully malevolent things tailored specifically for him. Oh, if only he had a weapon! Then they would see who's *really* in charge!

A very distant and aching sad voice seemed to alight upon the very edges of Tippenger's hearing, just below the raucous singing and taunting of the machines. *There's no point, you old fool*, he thought he heard it say. *Killing them won't heal anything. It won't bring her back.*

It would stop the singing, though. The tiny voice evaporated.

At that moment, something snapped deep in Tippenger's mind. He stopped tugging on the transport machine's wiring and squared his shoulders. This torment would end *today*. These soulless robots would pay for all they had done. To hell with the Company! To hell with the robots! To hell with it all! But how would he do it? He had no weapons for killing. He could not tear them apart with his own hands, no matter how much pure rage was pouring through him.

As the man stood there in the yard, trying so desperately to think of a way to wipe them off the face of the world, yet coming up empty, the robots began to move away from him and return to their work. Their laughter had died down somewhat, but they had all again struck up the same old tune that had been their primary device of torture for their human overlord for so many evil years. They took no more notice of Tippenger.

He gazed up defeatedly at the unsympathetic face of the mighty mountain that towered before him. The steely gray rocks of the sharp peak looked down upon him from their high seat in disgust, as a lord on his throne looks upon a slave, ready to pronounce his judgment. Not even half a century of mining and rock blasting operations could tarnish the glory of that towering edifice.

The blasting! That was it! There was hope for revenge after all! Tippenger shook himself from his stupor and a twisted grin spread from one of his pointy cheekbones to the other. The idea gripped him with unbreakable resolve as he hurried to the Maintenance & Supply warehouse that sat beside the primary ore refinement machinery near the center of the great circle. His wild determination didn't even allow him to think twice about disabling the safety protocols protecting the stockpile of rock-blasting explosives within the building. His mind rejoiced in the strength of his conviction as he bundled as many of the explosive rods and detonator caps as he could carry and marched out of the perimeter up into the forest.

Tippenger seemed to float up the mountainside rather than walk. The knowledge that this would be the last day his tormentors would enjoy on this or any other world filled him to bursting with a sort of rabid euphoria as he exited the upper treeline. The swaying trees regarded him with unflappable serenity as he passed. He attached

detonators to explosive rods in a fervor and strung them out across the rock face directly up the slope from the mine. After his arms were emptied, he paused a moment to appraise his work. More. He needed more! A few pebbles tumbling down to meet the tiny forms of the robots below would not do. The enemy must be buried forever.

Just as Louise had been.

The vision of her body being drowned by a flood of stone suddenly presented itself. But this time, rather than stopping him in his tracks like it usually did, the memory only fed the narcotic haze in his mind. It gave him a perverted form of pleasure to think that the same stroke of the mountain's sword that began his misery by taking his wife and child would also be the very thing to end his suffering.

All that afternoon, all that evening, and into the night, Tippenger worked. Up and down the slope he ran, his body driven inexorably by the unstoppable determination of his mind. Ever farther up the rock face he went, stringing more and more mining explosives across it in an increasingly disorderly web of detonator cables. The denizens of the forest slept fitfully, repeatedly disturbed by the passing of the man, who had begun speaking wildly to himself. The robots, still at work within the perimeter, paid him no heed and sang all through the night.

A new day finally dawned upon the artificial valley. On a perch of rock sticking out from the mountainside halfway up the slope from the walls of the quarry, Gerald Tippenger stood in triumph. In his right hand, he clenched a detonator switch. His body groaned and screamed in pain from exhaustion, but he did not hear it. His whole being reveled in the glory of his imminent victory over his enemy as he looked down towards them from above. No longer would he be insulted and mocked by the wretched machines below! No longer would their evil voices be lifted in song! No longer would they treat him as a worthless old fool! No more!

With a rapturous smile on his face, Tippenger flipped the switch.

He felt the awakening of the beast before he heard it. An invisible wall smashed into his back, followed an instant later by a deafening battle cry. It was the most beautiful sound Tippenger had ever heard.

Below, the robots of the quarry stopped and turned to look in curiosity at the source of the shockwave at the same time he did. A vast plume of dust had already erupted into the sky. The sign of their doom! Tippenger found it exhilarating. The robots seemed unconcerned.

Then, the stone beast charged.

It had leapt up off the mountainside and now crashed back down with a roar that drowned out the robots' voices. It tore down the slope towards its prey, turning into a raging river of rock that swept the forest away without a second thought. To Tippenger, it was glory incarnate. Here at last, justice would be had for all his years of suffering!

The robots, having already deemed the commotion above them non-threatening, casually turned back to their work.

As Tippenger gazed at the oncoming flood in awed reverence, something began to desperately fight up from the deepest recesses of his mind. It clawed its way through the euphoric haze and finally brushed against his conscious awareness. In a detached sort of way, he recognized the thing as fear. No, not fear— *terror*. That was strange. For a fleeting moment he felt vaguely disappointed that his moment of triumph was being spoiled. Then the rest of the thought brought itself forward, and he realized why he was so terrified.

In his revelry of witnessing the instrument of his retribution come to life, it had escaped Tippenger's notice that he was standing directly in the path of the rampaging stone beast. The robots below were not the target of its rage; *he* was.

The first thing the man felt in the instant that followed this realization was indignation. How dare the mountain take the side of the enemy!

He did not have the chance to feel the terror again. The monster fell upon him and swallowed him whole.

At the bottom of the slope, the rolling boulders crashed harmlessly against the quarry's perimeter wall, a barrier designed to protect the facility against exactly this kind of accident. Sensors in and around the wall measured the impact in the operations log and an automatically generated incident report was immediately filed with the computer in the Primary Operations Observation Center. The computer analyzed the report and autonomously tasked a pair of survey drones to investigate the rockslide's origin as the deep, thunderous rumbling slowly died away.

The sun continued to rise. The only noise in the valley was the buzz of the mining drones' drills.



# WARPED

*Davis Bos*



# Supermarket Scene

*Ashley Jane Nickel*



# Le Chat Noir

*Kelly Bonner*

"I don't know what it means,  
but it was everywhere.  
I thought it was cool, and  
that you would think so too,"  
my best friend said as she  
rummaged through  
her suitcase.

She handed me a long,  
skinny stack of paper.  
"A calendar," she said.  
"It took up the least space,"  
the paper, smooth and thick,  
buttery and rippled,  
like slices of canvas.

The bold colors were  
saturated, wet-looking  
stark raven blacks, deep ruby reds, soft sepias;  
"Le Chat Noir" narrowly  
scrawled along the page.

We giggled and sipped on  
our Italian wine  
that had notes of black pepper, red berries, and wood  
while we flipped through the months,  
crisp pages "shushing" us  
as they scraped their clasps to  
reveal little black cats.

# Death's Darling - Dinner Date

*Elizabeth De Guzman*



# Wyvern

Aimee Broad



# born again

*after "Euclid"*

Ben Stanton

haunted by the weight  
of invasive thoughts,

life without touch, breath  
against one's neck,

destined to walk through Hell  
alone, seeking a guide.

their lust leaving them to rot.  
sinners crafting mouthpieces

to bring themselves closer to God,  
devotees trapped

in shrines of their own making.  
sprawling walls covered in poetry:

love sonnets repeated,  
no innovation in beaten images,

portraits of the ideal woman.  
a spark, fueled

by swallowed lightning.  
snoring abyss, agape,

devoid of remembrance. down below,  
pillars and shattered statues

await an outstretched hand.  
pull them from night

and into a historic fire. burning  
stories evaporate in flaking ink.



knowledge, lost  
in a destroyed library. continue

plucking keys to honor  
a bard, preserved in staves.

there, upon fingers of orange mist,  
Helios ascends back to Heaven,

boiling the Earth once more.  
who among us are fortunate

to become gods?  
worship at the ankles

of martyrs, still warm to the touch.  
choke on your heart.

let your sins wash upon your lips  
as the winged ones chase the sun.

## How to Embrace Your Ethnic Ambiguity

*Kaila Cadabona*

Be brown. Be Mexican (?) or be Asian (?). Have squinty eyes and a polynesian nose, flat and wide like the sails of your ancestor's traveling ships. Have a white grandmother. Eat her Kentucky fried chicken, her potato salad, and her chicken n' dumplings. Feel disconnected with her culture because *you don't look white*. Have proud Puerto Rican family. Eat their *arroz con gandules*, *pernil*, *mofongo*, and *pastelillos* every Christmas. Practice Spanish with your grandfather who never taught your mother. Be a kiss shared between a Filipino and a Hawaiian. Be the taste of garlic, of mac salad, of steamed pork buns, and of adobo. Realize you talk too much about food, but also realize that food will always be your direct connection to who you are.

Sit down at your sixth grade lunch table. Peel back the velcro of your lunch box and grin proudly at the plump, tightly wrapped spam musubi. Let loose the smell of faint ocean breeze and fried mystery meat.

"Eww! Is that seaweed? You eat seaweed?"

Feel the disgusted stares and hear the horrified gasps of your peers as you confidently take an animalistic bite of one of your favorite snacks.

"Yeah!" you grin wide with seaweed strips embedded in your teeth. "And you don't? What's wrong with you guys?"

Pay no attention to their comments because the food is too good, and you don't care if they think it's weird. Come back tomorrow with stir fried noodles and eat them with your favorite pair of chopsticks. You get mocked for "eating with sticks", but pay no attention to their comments because you know that you can use them well and they can't. Laugh to yourself and keep bringing tasty lunch. Know that what you bring is better than their soggy sandwiches on wheat bread. How do you know? Because that's what your grandfathers tell you. Always believe the wisdom of your elders. Whole generations will be built on top of their shoulders.

Sit down at your tenth grade chemistry table. Notice the boy sitting next to you turn and ask you a question.

"So are you, like, Filipino?"

Reply with a “yes” and a smile because someone finally got it right. Hear him snicker.

“Oh, so that means you’re from the jungle and you don’t bathe! Filipinos are dirty and stupid, and they just eat mangoes and play with sticks and dirt.”

Feel your heart crawl its way up your throat, feel your cheeks flush in anger and embarrassment.

Say “no” softly and turn away from him. Feel your palms become damp and shaky. Try to ignore the feelings that his comment left you with. You’re not really sure how to defend yourself anyways. Hold yourself like a wet rag for the rest of the day. Keep your eyes down and hands in your pockets. Reassure yourself that mangoes are a top five fruit and that you bathe every single morning.

Stand at your cash register and greet the next customer at your new job.

“*Hola! ¿Cómo estás?*”

Straighten your spine and tense up. It’s your time to show off your Spanish skills; don’t mess it up. Hear her words accelerate into tongue twisters and an accent you don’t quite understand. Laugh nervously when your Spanish well runs dry. Watch the customer’s smile morph into a heavy frown.

“*¿Me entiendes?*”

Respond in English because you don’t want her to think that you have more Spanish to hand out.

“I understand you, but I have a hard time responding. I’m not fluent.”

The customer pauses in disdain.

“You should be ashamed.”

She chokes her bag in her hand and strides off proudly with her chin towards the sky. Feel yourself become nauseous and bitter and sorry. Don’t even know what you’re sorry for. Feel sorry for...trying? Feel silenced like a threatened victim. Tell yourself that you’re not a good Hispanic, whatever that even means.

Drag your feet to the barren break room. Hear the sad song of the monotone walls. Sink down in the chair and allow it to swallow your body. Break your frown to shovel pork adobo and rice down your throat. Wonder if you’re a good Asian too. Think back to high school again, to what the boy from chemistry said. Recall the math jokes and the music jokes and the eyesight jokes. Feel like you’re too many things and not enough of anything all at once. You don’t speak enough Spanish to be Puerto Rican, and you don’t speak enough Tagalog to be

Filipino and... *you don’t look white*. You’re not good at math, you suck at dancing, you’re not thin with good curves, you don’t have thick hair, your personality isn’t fiery, but it sure isn’t submissive either. Catch these rapid-fire thoughts and swallow them with your rice; indulge in the stereotypes. Maybe this is who you are. Take bite after bite while slowly noticing that *this* is the kind of food your grandfathers have warned you to stay away from.

“Listen *mija*. You gotta always remember who you are and where you come from,” you’d hear him say, his tongue drowning in his Puerto Rican accent. “You stick up for yourself and stick up for your family. Don’t let nobody talk bad about you.”

Picture him, deep brown skin adorned with the Puerto Rican flag, bald, oily head and thick mustache. See a strong man who is never sorry and never shuts up. See him dance with the *claves* in hand; he embodies the soul of the music.

“Papa!” you lift your voice over the waves of sound and heritage. “It’s too loud! You’re being too loud!”

He laughs and turns to you, voice booming.

“YOU CAN NEVER BE TOO LOUD, *MIJA!* YOU’RE *BORICUA!* BE LOUD AND BE PROUD!”

Watch his cracked feet wipe the wood floors. The music bounces off his pomegranate-red walls with white and chipping trim. *Be loud and be proud.*

Remember also your other grandfather and his stories of “back home.” Picture the rich, deep green hills that fold and roll and observe how they bow to Mother Nature in respect.

“Da Big Island was a beautiful ting. Da land provide fo you an you give back to da land.”

Hear his Pidgin English accent, the melody of meshed cultures meeting on the pineapple plantations.

“I worked da farm. I killed da pig fo roast it, bury it deep in da ground, cook it til it get real tenda like. We honor da food, we honor our ancestors. We connected wit what we eat.”

Watch his bony, crooked fingers slide the knife’s blade across a chunk of pork shoulder as his words beckon you into the land of memories. The picture is so vivid that you can almost feel the heat of your grandfather’s wok slap you in the face. You can feel the clutter of his kitchen; the bundles of plastic bags inside of even more plastic bags hang from the side of uncomfortable, outdated chairs. You can see the pots and pans, which were stacked way too high, just waiting to tumble and crash. Everything was worn by time and by steam. It was a place of

labor and love and full stomachs.

“Come taste dis, girl. Tell me what it needs.”

Feel the hot spoon graze your lips. *Remember what home tastes like.*

Wonder why you’re allowing others to make you feel ashamed of your racial identity. Don’t you know who you are? Don’t you remember what roots you stem from? Think back to the sixth grade lunch table. Where did *that* girl go? Did she vanish in the thickness of expectation and self-consciousness? Chant words of revival under your breath; beckon the lost girl inside of you. Dig up that someone who your grandfathers are proud of. Hear your phone timer yell at you. *Fifteen minutes goes by way too fast.*

Return to your cash register and greet the next customer who just so happens to be a Filipino woman; she sees that you’re Filipino too. Wait for the inevitable question.

“So what school do you go to?”

“Oh, just a community college for now.”

“Ah, okay! What are you studying?”

There it was. The monumental, make-or-break question. Swallow the lump in your throat and brace yourself; you know you don’t have the answer she’s looking for.

“I’m an English major.”

Notice her tone switch as she raises her disapproving eyebrow.

“Oh...not nursing? All good Filipina girls become nurses.

Maybe an accountant, too. There’s no money in English.”

Laugh off her comment. You saw it coming anyway.

“Maybe, but it’s what I’m passionate about. I love to write.”

She ignores you and starts to talk about good-paying jobs. Ignore her in turn, and silently applaud yourself for refusing to be treated like a doormat. It’s about time.

Sit in the hard chair at your grandfather’s dining room table later that night and observe how he seems to gracefully move about the kitchen. See that he has a groove and something almost like a pattern. Watch him carefully mince every clove of garlic and throw it into the pool of hot oil, waiting patiently at the bottom of the wok. Watch him toss in the rice, spam, eggs, soy sauce and green onions; all the ingredients mix together in perfect harmony. Love the way his old eyes are relit when they see good food, the food that reminds him of home. Love the way he talks about fishing for his family’s dinner and preparing it all in the same hour. Feel your heart miss his land. Even though you aren’t from there, your soul is linked to what it knows to

be home. Think of Puerto Rico and the Philippines even though you’ve never even been there. Think of how beautiful your meeting would be. Wonder about the pieces of you that you haven’t even discovered yet.

Quickly begin to register that the *concept* of being “mixed” is more popular than actually *being* mixed. The ethnically ambiguous are oftentimes praised on social media for their striking features and unique faces, but out in the real world, they are left out. Begin to feel oddly proud for being the epicenter of misunderstanding and for being a part of the ones who cause an uproar. Be okay with people bombarding you with questions and comments that are way too personal. Feel a sense of pride that they have to dig deep only to merely scratch the surface of who you are and what you are made of. They will dig and dig, but they will never fully discover who you are. They will never know of two Puerto Ricans moving to the Bronx for a better life. They will never know of a Filipino-Hawaiian man who fell in love with a white woman from Kentucky during the 40’s. They were ridiculed by whole communities for mixing white and brown. And that white woman from Kentucky (yes, your blood-related grandmother) loves you more than herself. Accept that they will never completely understand how or why.

You are too beautifully complex to be a racial stereotype. Know that no matter what anyone says, you are enough of *you* to be you. Burn their imaginary checklists of what being Hispanic should look like and what being Asian should be like. Be unapologetic. Be a history book, swollen with untold stories of your ancestors. Take pride in your melanin and your wide feet and strong bones. Be built to last, to stand the tests of time. Eat your rice and your “stinky” fish. Eat your *empanadas* and *tostones*. Know that not everyone is going to accept your beauty, but know that despite what they say, it is still there. Know that not everyone will love your food the way you do, but know that it is the best— no exceptions. Never be ashamed, brown girl. Never be ashamed.

## Beside the Still Water 1/3

*Amylee Baldwin*



## Far and Cold

### Autumnal Tree by the Sea

*Clayton McCutcheon*



# Stuck in My Teeth

*Olivia Nitti*

The trace of mint in my  
mouth and something abrading  
between my two teeth. Impossible  
to kick out; I try to scream, cry, and shout.

But oh man, you stay stuck  
to me. Staking claims in me,  
turning others away. Prying and  
pulling will not do. In no way can I remove  
the pieces of you.

Lodged between two teeth,  
fresh and somehow always  
new. The sting of mint, and the string  
of something green, you stay,

pushing back my tongue. Here  
you remain in my head, all damned  
day. You're the lingering taste, distracting me  
from moving on with something new. I can't  
remove the remnants of you.

# Space for Two

*Mallory Fink*





# Quabbit

Sierra Kogan



# Lucky

Alexa Gabrielle Empleo

She finds Alana in the east pavilion, right in front of *Danaë and the Shower of Gold*, shoulders slumped as she uncharacteristically stares at the painting in earnest. With a minuscule sigh of relief, Kaya swiftly walks towards her, heels clicking against the wooden floor. A few other visitors are littering about, most of them studying Gerrit van Honthorst's *Christ Crowned with Thorns*— a crowd favorite. With the lack of bystanders as witnesses, Kaya is tempted to chastise her sister for suddenly disappearing without warning. But as she approaches the girl whose brown eyes glaze over the painting with burning interest, any firm reprimand quickly dissolves on her tongue.

"I was looking everywhere for you," Kaya whispers in the room's silence, standing next to her. "They let me clock out earlier than usual. Why weren't you responding to my texts?"

Alana visibly startles at her voice, turning to look at her in mild surprise. "Sorry. My phone died," she shrugs, having the decency to look a little bit sheepish before returning her gaze to the artwork. "Plus, I wanted to look around more. You rarely bring me here."

Kaya raises an eyebrow at this. Alana's phone *never dies*, so it only means she'd been too engrossed in the painting and didn't want to be bothered. "That's because you think all this stuff is boring," she argues, studying the almost reverent expression on her sister's face before crossing her arms and glancing at the object of her interest. "But it seems you don't find Gentileschi boring, though."

Alana's eyebrows scrunch together. "Who?"

"The guy who painted *that*," Kaya says in disbelief, gesturing towards the very thing that had captured her attention. "The one you've been staring at for god knows how long. Honestly, Alana, didn't you even bother reading the description?"

"Oh, I didn't really care to know his name," Alana shrugs again, shoving her hands into the pockets of her black hooded sweatshirt. Kaya frowns at her nonchalance. "What? Don't look at me like that. It's *your* job to know that stuff, not mine. But the painting itself... it's really... good."

Kaya bites down a sarcastic retort at the bland commentary, knowing something more was on her sister's mind. It is rare for Alana to be so intrigued by a piece of art, her affinity for it practically

nonexistent. Her fragile, young heart has always belonged elsewhere, amongst spices, flavors, and recipes. Still, both their souls fervently favor creativity, so the sisters fundamentally understand one another despite the occasional disagreement. Or at least, that's what Kaya likes to think.

As she waits for Alana to finish gathering her thoughts, Kaya turns to look at the painting, appreciating the subtle mastery of light and detail in the fabrics surrounding Danaë. Caravaggio's influence was unmistakable but welcomed, as the docent had a strong penchant for Baroque art. Still, it is one of her least favorite Greek myths. A father imprisons his daughter out of fear of being overthrown by her son? And Zeus, the god who'd essentially done the same by eating his first wife, impregnates the imprisoned girl through a shower of gold? Though the event sired Perseus, it is yet another reminder of how reckless and scatterbrained men are and always will be. Not to mention how artists like Orazio Gentileschi were eager to exploit the subject for its eroticism. And it isn't even the *worst* depicted story in the museum.

"They were pretty lucky back then, huh?" Alana finally whispers, pulling Kaya from her thoughts, eyes tracing the smooth, silky curves of Danaë's body. Kaya glances at her in confusion, noting the odd edge to her sister's voice.

"What do you mean?"

Alana purses her lips, and Kaya is again struck by her youthfulness. The six years between them are often unfelt due to their close-knit relationship, but it is times like these that Kaya can't help but envy her sister's adolescence. She is lucky in that regard.

"The women," Alana says rather vehemently after a moment's hesitation. "They were lucky back then that the men thought they were pretty enough to get painted." Her lips turn into a sad smile as she tears her gaze away from Danaë and looks around the vast, elaborate gallery. "Almost every woman here is plump and chubby. Like that one."

She points to *Lucretia* by Gentileschi, but not the same one who painted Danaë. No, it was done by his daughter, Artemisia Gentileschi, one of the few successful female artists of the 17th century. And the only female painter here in a room full of men. It is one of Kaya's unwavering favorites.

"These days, you have to be a stick for someone to get your portrait done," Alana says dejectedly, still staring at *Lucretia*, who holds a dagger towards her beautiful, translucent skin, looking away from the horror she will soon subject herself to. "To think, if only I'd been born back then, maybe people would want to paint me. No, they'd be *begging*

to paint me, huh?" She chuckles silently, but there is no humor in it.

Kaya frowns again, partly heartbroken by her sister's insinuation and slightly angered by it. She, too, has felt the very same sentiments— and still does, if she is being completely candid— but she'd like to think that the younger generation would be excused from them entirely. Alana is too young to think about such trivial, depressing thoughts. She will have the rest of her life to do so, but not yet. Clicking her tongue, Kaya looks back at *Lucretia* and thinks how unfortunate they all were from the very beginning.

"That's funny," she eventually says, crossing her arms. Her tone is amused but not unkind. "That you think they were lucky."

Alana turns to her with questioning eyes. "What do you mean?"

"Lucretia over there was the wife of a Roman noble who was raped by the prince. That's her about to stab herself to proclaim her innocence," she says, gesturing toward the alluringly horrifying portrait. "And the one you've been staring at? That's Danaë, a Greek princess imprisoned by her father because of some stupid prophecy. And you see that gold she's trying to reach? That's Zeus trying to impregnate her. Or rape her, probably. Either way, these women were the opposite of lucky. They were downright *wretched*. So it's kind of funny that you think otherwise."

She sees the way her sister's expression shifts from curiosity to disbelief. Alana takes a step back, looking back and forth between the two paintings, the realization dawning on her in increments. "Wow. That's *really* messed up."

Kaya grins, always pleased to see a visitor's reaction to newfound information. "And you know," she adds, wanting to completely banish the self-deprecating thoughts plaguing her sister's young mind. "The women back then probably fattened themselves up to get their portrait done because no man wanted to paint a *stick* that looked like it couldn't bear any sons." She shakes her head at the disgusting thought. "We were never lucky, Alana. We weren't back then, and we sure as hell aren't now."

Silence spills over them, her words weighing heavily on their shoulders. There is no bitterness in her tone, no anger— only the steadfast, uncomplicated truth about womanhood.

Alana finally turns away from Gentileschi, looking at the glass ceiling above and basking in the soft light that filtered through. Kaya can hear her think, thoughts engulfing her like flames. Her response is baffling. "I think you're wrong, though, Kaya."



The elder hums, quirking up an eyebrow. “Oh? How so?”

Their brown eyes meet, and Kaya can only hope that her sister would choose to enjoy the simplicity of her juvenility and leave those depressing matters to the adults. It’s what she would have desired for her younger self to do, as maturity only means misfortune.

“I think we’re lucky in a way,” Alana says, shrugging and rocking back and forth on her heels, “that we at least have each other.”

Kaya’s eyes widen slightly, but she hides her affection and fondness through a quick roll of her eyes and a dramatic sigh. “That’s probably the cheesiest thing I’ve ever heard come out of your mouth. Come on, you just want me to get you another matcha latte at the café, don’t you?”

Alana smirks, and the sadness is briefly washed away from her brown eyes. “Maybe.”

Throwing an arm around her little sister, Kaya thinks about Lucretia, Danaë, and even Artemisia, who are all long dead— whose stories, though tragic, still have a shred of beauty in them. She thinks about the tragedies of her own life, her past, present, and future— how misfortune is inevitable for every human being— for every woman, especially. She thinks about how Alana will eventually grow to find the grimness in femininity and navigate the ghastliness of the real world. How the dejection in her eyes will return, too many times to count, with Kaya powerless to stop it. But as she takes one last look around the gallery, the myriad of paintings immortalizing a single, unchangeable moment— it all suddenly feels insignificant compared to the living, *breathing* bodies surrounding it. And she says, “You’re right. We *are* pretty lucky.”

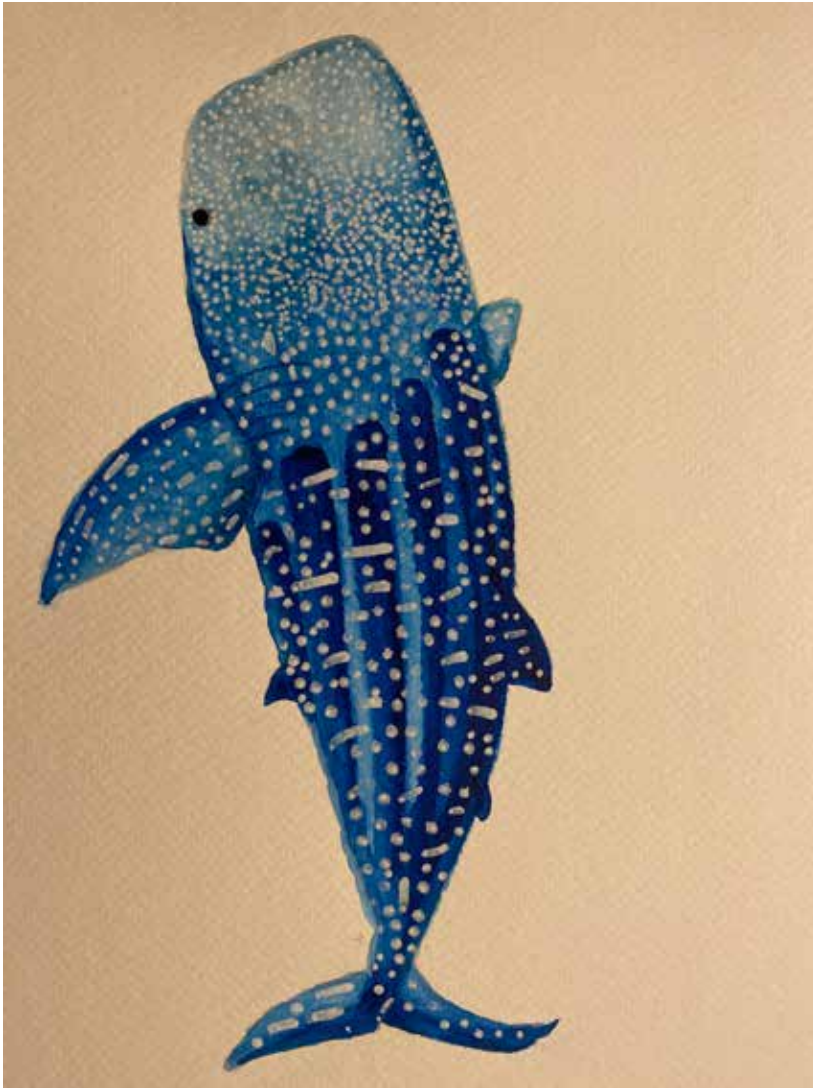
## Oasis

Joseph Russo



## Something Deeper

*Brianna Meuschke*



## Beyond the Tank

*Brianna Meuschke*



# When I Would Wander

Annette Moulay



# Two Truths

Pamela Rosenblum

I: Death— Always

*Come Sweet Death*, J.S. Bach

Her lungs filling with spring water,  
an angel cups her face,  
*I've come to set you free, let go.*  
She struggles more, moss

pours into her broken jaw. She wants  
to be led home but numbness  
is inevitable. The angel leans forward,  
*Your eyes gently close.*

*Life weans its sap from you.* Their lips meet,  
she sinks into the bitter river.  
Her bubbles carry a gargled wail,  
Voices swell around her, dissonant and inviting.

II: Ascension— It's Okay

*Komm, süßer Tod*, Shiro Sagisu

Her desecrated body tearing  
from the liquid's surface,  
what once was pain is now cold.  
A sickly warmth gnaws at her.

The low hum of fluorescent gospel organ  
claws at her inhibitions,  
the thoughts killing her inside, gone.  
Homeward wishes fade as the angel arrives,

touching her to reveal wings nested on her back.  
She flutters around, hugs the solemn spirit  
who inspires fervor in death— who tumbles down  
as they share another kiss.

# ode to young love

*Ben Stanton*

to the one with the red hair  
like a sunset illuminating  
the path, leading me to your door.  
eyes like dime-store marbles,  
gap between your front teeth,  
a laugh, gruff and strained.  
I'm drawn into you  
like a moth beholds the sun.

too long in your embrace  
life was a symphony,  
slowly losing tune.  
yet, as I tried to walk away,  
your grip tightened  
around my wrists  
then dug into my sides  
pulled me in against you,  
sobbing,  
whining not to let you go.

you want me  
you need me  
you made me need you

you plunge your teeth into my neck,  
claws scrape down my arms.  
lacerate what you once called  
"masterpiece"...  
huffing in my ear,  
your weight pushes me down.  
my clothes shred away  
in your grip.  
vulnerable like prey.  
nothing left of you, but a beast.

your embrace, once home,  
to me had become a prison.

to you who held my free will,  
the husk of a person  
feasted on my love and life,  
leaving only  
the scraps of a handsome face;

pity is a luxury  
you will never know.

# Ode to Adriana

*Renee Gomez-Serna*

Her hands are jagged stones,  
marred with memories  
of ancient battles—  
now warm-bleached  
by years of sunlight.

Her body is a fortress, forlorn,  
once heavily guarded. The fear  
of invasion fades from her,  
brick by brick.

Barely a blip in her story.

Her smile is a meadow full  
of wildflowers, attracting admirers,  
oozing nectar with every word  
that drips from her honeyed

lips. Her strut is a spell,  
stealing the spotlight  
with each step and saunter  
until all eyes cement to her.

Her eyes are wild  
ravens, glazed over  
and pitch black, mirroring

midnight. Her laughter is  
a sky full of fireworks, colors  
crackling and sparking  
before explosions dull  
into echos,

slowly, softening into  
silence.

My wife is a treasure  
chest— a home of the greatest  
gifts she possesses.



# Forest Fire

*Clayton McCutcheon*



# Cliffs of Petersburg

*Terri Singley*



# PRIDEFUL

*Davis Bos*



# moth.temple

*Owen Underhill*

I found a weird note today.

1.II.2007

I know I haven't posted in a while (I can't believe it's already 2007!), but I found something today that I HAD to share:

**a dreaming mind attracts electricity from dark holes  
your body is a moth.temple  
PUPA773 night\*bloom**

Weird, right?

It was on a note. Like, on paper. On the ground, in the snow. I found it on my smoke break, believe it or not. That was three hours ago, and I've got it right in front of me now, at my computer desk. It's stained pretty bad, like rust or something, but on paper. The writing is in faded ink, scribbled.

As to where it came from, or who wrote it, your guess is as good as mine. But I have this feeling I can't quite explain. Most of the time, I feel...away. That might be why I haven't been posting. Sometimes, though, this sensation comes over me. It's like a reminder from the universe or something weird like that. Believe me, I'm no hippie or anything, but I'm dead serious. It's like a tingling, like my body is more awake than normal, and it knows that things happen for a reason, or maybe that things DON'T happen for a reason but that IS the reason. Does that make sense?

There's no reason in particular I've been away so long. Sorry. I know some of you really enjoy reading my dumb blog (you probably thought I was dead or something XD). I'll get back to writing about UFOs and cryptids eventually, I promise. But something about this note is calling to me.

I didn't know what to make of it at first. Some gibberish, a college student's art project, some sicko's idea of a practical joke...But then I noticed the period in "moth.temple". A URL? Turns out it is! I typed it in and ended up on a blog, of all things. Visually, it's blank. Completely



untouched, in terms of customization. Unless you consider a black background custom. At the top of the page, it just says “temple”. There’s no *about* page, nothing like that. This is the first text entry I saw:

**10.17.2004**

**THE BRIDGE TO LIGHT PULLS FOREVER INWARD  
moths grew out of his skin and moths flew out of her skin  
and moths grew out of his skin and moths flew out of his  
skin and moths grew out of her skin and moths flew out of  
her skin and moths grew out of her skin and moths flew  
out of his skin and moths grew out of his skin and moths  
flew out of her skin and moths grew out of his skin. and m  
oths flew out of his skin and moths grew out of her skin and  
moths flew out of her skin and moths grew out of her skin  
and moths flew out of his skin. and**

I felt my own skin crawl reading this.

Whoever wrote it hadn’t posted in years. The last entry was from 2004. I started to dig a little deeper, and it looked like there were almost a hundred more before this one. I’m going to keep reading and see what else I can find. There’s something here. Strange coincidences like this are opportunities, and you can’t just ignore them! Life is boring, but just under the surface there’s a *sub-life tempest*— it’s always there. Buzzing with life we don’t see. Hidden things, things that don’t make any sense. Things that would smash our little minds to pieces, particle by particle, if we really looked and saw it all at once. I want to see into the cracks. That’s why I started this blog— it’s my whole life philosophy!

So what about “**a dreaming mind attracts electricity from dark holes?**”

Well, it could be a coincidence, but there’s an electrical outlet by my bed. I just sleep on a mattress, so tonight I’ll just move it over so my head rests right by the outlet. I’ll report back in the morning.

P.S. I spilled coffee on Reginald Von Croaks, and he’s a bit stained now. He’s okay though! He says hi.

Mood: freaked out!!! :-O

Listening to: Aphex Twin— Selected Ambient Works Volume II

## A Strange Dream

1.12.2007

I called in sick for work today (pet stores don’t see much activity in the sort of town most people just pass through, so they’ll be fine without me). I had a strange dream, really REALLY strange. I mean, dreams are always strange, but this was something else.

I was in a dark place. It looked like the basement of a house, but it didn’t make any sense. I walked through hallway after hallway, and they kept going on and on with no end in sight. It felt like a real place even though I knew it couldn’t be.

Eventually, (but don’t ask me how) I ended up in a place without any light, and I mean PITCH black. And silent. I could feel warm air, and I think the floor was liquid. I got the sense that I wasn’t quite alone, but I knew I was the only person there, even in all that empty space. Weird.

I guess the electrical outlet trick is legit. I don’t know why the note wanted me to try this, or what it has to do with that website, but I’m getting that feeling still. Maybe I’m supposed to be doing this.

By the way, I found this post on the temple blog:

**9.13.2004**

**IN BLOOM**

**i know the change is good and i know its what i wanted but  
im scared even though i know its for the best and sometimes  
good things hurt i can already feel the new me growing  
inside but its kind of a good feeling i hope im beautiful  
when i Emerge MY BODY IS A MOTH TEMPLE. I AM A  
FOUNTAIN OF NECTAR, WHICH IS MY BLOOD. I AM  
THE SPACE BETWEEN SELVES WAITING TO BE FILLED.**

I’m not sure what to think. Was this person on drugs? The last part almost reads like a prayer.

P.S. Weird coincidence, but I found a couple moths on Croaks. Not one, but TWO. I guess they like to eat fabric, right? But I’ve never seen any on him before, and it seems like strange timing.

Mood: confused :^/

Listening to: Melt-Banana - Cell-Scape

Was I meant to find it?

1.14.2007

Was the note written for me? I mean, it was there, right by the spot I always take my break. MY spot.

Anyway, I think “PUPA773” and “night\*bloom” are a username and password. Why? Well, I found something on moth.temple. There’s a link in one of the blog posts— it’s just a link, no explanation. I clicked it, and it took me to [www.pupa-group.org](http://www.pupa-group.org). The site doesn’t look active, and a bunch of text and images are missing and there are dead links all over the place. But from what I could glean, it looks like it was the website for something called “PUPA Group”. Here’s an excerpt that wasn’t corrupted:

**Our bodies exist in three dimensions: X, Y, and Z. Height, width, and depth. This is the common understanding of spatial reality. However, there is a fourth dimensional axis. We call this Fourth Axis of the body “Consciousness”. Just as Time is the fourth dimension of reality, Consciousness is an extension of the body, invisible to us but existing all around us, in everything.**

You know, until recently I might have called this a bunch of mumbo-jumbo. With everything that’s been going on, though, maybe this isn’t so crazy.

Either way, I noticed a **log in** button on the website. It was a shot in the dark, but I tried the phrases on the note. It worked. It took me to some kind of chat box page. I tried typing out some messages, but no one was there.

I can’t help but wonder if this note was somehow meant for me. I’m starting to feel a little off. Maybe it’s the dream. I had it again last night, exactly the same as before. Miles and miles of hallways, then empty nothingness. Wet. Black. Warm. That warmth is lingering under my skin.

I have to keep going.

P.S. The moths were on Croaks again :P. Send him your “get well soon” cards!

Mood: Frustrated >:(

Listening to: Massive Attack— Mezzanine

A Hole???

1.15.2007

When I woke up this morning there was a hole in my wall. It’s still there. Deep, black, and perfectly head-sized.

I swear. I swear to you, it’s there. It’s like a mouth opened up— the edges are jagged, like someone dug into the wall. I don’t know how it can go so deep. The other side is the laundry room, and the wall looks normal there.

I can feel something radiating from it. I don’t know what.

I’ve pinched myself, believe me. Over and over. I’m not dreaming. There’s a hole in my wall, and it appeared overnight. Either I’m going crazy, or there’s something real and freaky going on with these websites, and I’ve only just scratched the surface.

Am I crazy to keep digging? I can’t explain it, but I just know there’s something big at the end of this.

In other news, someone left a comment on my entry from the other day. In case you didn’t see it:

**MORPHO**

**Hello, Soma. It is good to see that you are still around. We are ready for your Return. Remember that the most beautiful flowers bloom at Night.**

Whoever you are, (I know you’re reading this) knock it off. You know my real name, so I know you’re some asshole from work or college or something. E-mail me. We can talk it out.

P.S. Now there are holes in Croaks. One of them is big, right in the middle of his face. I don’t know how it happened so fast. When I looked inside, I saw eggs. A ton of them, hidden in the stuffing. I want to gag. I hate seeing him like this.

Mood: Creeped out ~\_~

Listening to: Coil— Musick To Play In The Dark

## Chat Log 1

Seriously, who the hell are you?

**PUPA773: who is this**

**MORPHO: I am Morpho. Welcome back.**

**PUPA773: you're the one commenting on my posts**

**MORPHO: Yes.**

**MORPHO: We had to be sure you received our Signal.**

**PUPA773: what do you want?**

**PUPA773: and what is pupa group??**

**MORPHO: We are a non-profit organization seeking to shine the light of Truth, to guide the Lost.**

**PUPA773: i'm lost? you don't know me dude**

**MORPHO: Our wish for you is to align your Fourth Axis to the Umbral Plane, and shine your Light to draw out your true Self.**

**PUPA773: that doesn't make sense.**

**MORPHO: You are already halfway there. Keep doing what you are doing.**

he's alive.

1.20.2007

Croaks started talking to me.

"Put your head in the hole."

I ignored him at first. The Croaks I know doesn't talk. Something's not right. I'm going crazy, I must be. But he kept saying it.

"Put your head in the hole. Please."

I did. First, I put my hand in, but I felt nothing. It was just a dark hole, but a surprisingly deep one. I couldn't reach the end.

Then I stuck my head in. Why not? I've come this far, I thought. Croaks is my friend. He wouldn't try to hurt me.

I felt a buzzing inside my head. A pressure, but from inside. And an actual buzzing sound, from somewhere in my skull. I couldn't see anything.

Then I was back in the dream. The same dream as before, only I wasn't

asleep. I kept coming back to those dark, twisting hallways. Even when I'm awake, I can't escape.

P.S. He whispers when the lights are off. I can't sleep. I keep feeling things land on me and crawl around. Little moths. They're coming from his body.

Mood: Sick

Listening to: Nothing.

## Chat Log 2

This guy is starting to freak me out. This sounds just like my dreams.

**MORPHO: You are doing so well.**

**PUPA773: what's the "umbral plane" you mentioned before?**

**MORPHO: A place beneath the surface. It is the void all spirits pass through between one life and the next.**

**PUPA773: I think I've been seeing it.**

**MORPHO: When you align your Axis, you will see the Light. Let it guide you.**

## Stop

2.1.2007

He won't stop talking. I don't want to put my head in the hole anymore, but I feel it pulling me.

He won't stop. He's infested now. I can't look at him. Full of larvae. Moths are all over the ceiling.

## this isnt fun anymore

2.3.2007

I killed him. I killed my only friend. I took him outside and threw him in the firepit and covered him with lighter fluid and threw a lit cigarette on him and watched him go up in flames. He wouldn't stop talking.

He didn't scream. He just said,

"Your body is a moth temple."

Goodbye, Reginald.

I remember when I first got him. My obsession with frogs started out as a fear. I used to be terrified of these things. I guess it's the same way with the paranormal. I got interested in UFOs and cryptids and ghosts because I was always so scared shitless thinking about them. I wanted to know more; I always want to *know* more, because once you know germs cause disease, you can start using soap and quit rolling around in the mud like a stupid idiot.

I fell in the mud when I was six. I was playing alone, because my aunt Wendy was busy. She's a lawyer, so she didn't have much time to take care of me. We were in the park, and it was raining. I slipped and fell and slid all the way down a slope into the creek in the park.

I was suddenly surrounded by the deafening, deafening sound of frogs. Frogs, frogs, frogs. All around me. Drowning everything out. Just frogs. Nothing else. I cried a lot.

I don't know how long I was there, but somehow Wendy found me. After she cleaned me up, she took me to get pistachio ice cream and told me something I'll never forget.

"Listen, girl. When you're afraid of something, you have two options. You can run and hide, and stay scared, or you can open your eyes wide and see everything there is to see in that thing. Look at its shape, its size, its color, really take it all in. Once you get a good look, you'll have a pretty good idea of what it is you're afraid of. Then you'll realize the fear you felt was just confusion, after all."

After that, to prove her point, she took me to some thrift store (I forget which one exactly) and bought me Croaks. She named him. I don't know how she knew we'd find a stuffed frog in the first store we checked, but I guess she did.

Mood: ???  
Listening to: nothing.

## the beginning

2.12.2007

I went all the way to the first post on moth.temple. I'm beginning to feel like I know this person. Isn't that weird?

1.11.2004

**I hate myself. I've never felt normal. I've never felt okay. I was born wrong. I've always felt like someone must have put a curse on me or poisoned me. My body is warped like a burning photo.**

**I spend too much time on the computer. Sometimes I might hallucinate but I can't tell. I saw a weird ad somewhere. A picture of a moth or a butterfly on top of a person's brain. It looked like a spiritual thing, with chakras and everything. It said something like, "Are you unhappy with who you are? Take this 5-minute quiz and become who you were always meant to be! Spread your wings and fly! CLICK HERE!!!"**

**I clicked it.**

I feel numb. My head is fuzzy, and the buzzing won't stop. I can't tell if I've been sleeping or not. I keep putting my head back in that hole, even though I don't want to.

What's happening to me?

Mood: Scared  
Listening to: Nothing.

## light

3.1.2007

i cant tell if im even a real person anymore.

everything is so bright. i have to squint constantly. i cna barely typemy skin lookss like its glowing. i cant look in the mirror because nothing is there but light

where did i come from. i dont remember anything before i found the note. i dont remember my name

the dreams arent dark anymore its just white, white light

the light feels like love.

Mood:  
Listening to:

# Happy

*Daniel Del Valle*



# R is for Raven

*Mark Micchio*



# Home-Visitor

0 - 60

*Kara Watson*

I have seen his face since the womb,  
memorized and embraced it  
until the sight of him is reminiscent  
of burning rubber and baseball bat  
sized holes in my chest.

The imprint of a handle  
is embedded in his palm,  
between his skin and the steering wheel.  
He swims between lanes,  
joyless joyride, gravitating  
towards cinder center walls.

He drives like our mother laughs—  
lilting and fast; there is no whisper  
of an engine, just a roar.  
The car doesn't care when he drives  
until each city light  
winks out, until I am crying—  
but I was born to cry  
like he was born to smile,  
one twin swings,  
one twin misses.

I memorize his face until  
the sight of it is reminiscent of burning  
rubber and our mother's laughter.  
Buried under the sound of the engine,  
it might be the *schwing-thwack*  
of a home run.

# Suffocation

*Milo Warner*



# Spectator

*Kaila Cadabona*



# Boy in Hmong Village

*Primm Sunthronnak*





# Waiting

Joseph Russo



# What Remains

Scarlett Rae Dougherty

Sometimes I watch the ghosts of my past play out like shadow puppets on a lonely wall. Each street in town is littered with these past versions of myself, with ghosts of family, friends and lovers. I sometimes drive to these places like a thief in the night, my headlights turned off, and sit and watch the ghosts. I drive up the dirt road my dad used to live near and see us both walking down Placerita Canyon sharing a laugh, or I see my parents screaming at each other while I stand between them with my arms up, like a traffic cop. They blame each other for the abject state of my mental health in a sickly game of tag.

“Stop, stop! It’s both your faults!” I choke out. “You’re tearing me apart!” I proclaim, like James Dean in *Rebel Without a Cause*. Their screams dwindle as they both look at me, eyebrows threaded upward in bewilderment. It’s the first and last time I ever pick myself as a side.

Sometimes I drive right up to where my dad’s old trailer stands. It still looks grimly cheap, with its aluminum accouterments and plastic front door. I remember, almost against my will, how terrified he looked before the ambulance took him away, how I stood in the doorway after he died, the house dark and lifeless without a trace of his vibrance anywhere to be found. On days where I can see my breath, I can taste the last Christmas we ever had together. Our dollar store tree stands flanked in plastic baubles and cheaply made lights on our small dining table. That year, I saved up my loose change and bought him a video game he’d been wanting but couldn’t afford. I was only fourteen, and I felt so grown up, like I could finally repay my father in some way for all of the unconditional love and support he’d given to me over the course of my life. “Hey,” he trails, as the ribbons and paper unfurl from the game’s box. “Wow, you really got me this? How?” His voice still echoes in my head. The game would sit eternally unopened from its polyethylene shrink wrap on his desk, after he fell ill with a flu that seemed utterly unshakable. “I’ll play it as soon as I’m feeling good again, sweetheart,” he blithely remarked.

As winter marches on, and the trees and shrubs around our trailer wither away and slowly die, so too, does he. Only we didn’t know it yet.

Weeks later, we walk around the block as he huffs on a cigarette, like it’s his lifeblood. I feel a twinge in my gut as we walk, and I ask what could be considered a morbid question by many. It’s one of the crispest

memories I have.

“What would happen if you died?”

“Well, it’s not happening any time soon, so hopefully you’d be able to be happy remembering all of the good times we had.”

“No, like, what if you died tomorrow or something? Like before I’m grown up?”

He chews over this. My father will forever remain as the only person willing to tolerate my many, sometimes idiosyncratic hypotheticals.

“I guess I’d want you to move on. Of course, it would take you time, but I wouldn’t want you to be sad over me your whole life,” he puffs out between drags. “I just want you to be happy. And to be the best Scarlett you can be.”

“Daddy, I think I would fall apart if you died tomorrow. I don’t think I’d be able to live without you,” I tear up just giving space to the idea of him not existing.

“Hon, you would have to go on living. That’s what would make me the happiest. I’ll always be with you, anyways. Death is a weak barrier. Even if you couldn’t see me or hear me, I’d be watching over you. Even when you’re old and gray.”

Tomorrow, in this situation, would turn out to be a mere three days away. Each time I leave his neighborhood, I’m always sure to peel out loudly, a reflection of my still unrelenting rage at the powers that be.

\* \* \*

Sometimes I follow the dirt road further down, out to the fox hill where my old best friend and I choked down our first cigarettes at fifteen until our heads spun with nicotine. We’d sit at the lone bench on the top of the hill, staring out at the vast expanse of brown-shrubbed suburbia below us. Half of the time, I’d be completely high on an indeterminate set of pills I bought from my then-boyfriend’s scary older cousin. As we listened to the dulcet tones of Nirvana, or The Beatles’ *Rubber Soul*, I’d scrawl vague platitudes in my journal, mostly about how none of this had to do with my father’s death, how I was coping just fine without him, or how the sky seemed extra blue and ever-so-slightly scary while on drugs.

Once, a few years later, we hiked to the top too close to sundown to scream our celebrity crushes’ names out into the expanse below as some sort of way to exorcize the twisted adolescent girl succubi in our guts, like in screaming their names, the earth would stop on its hinges and send Ryan Reynolds to our doorsteps. We stood as the sun set behind us, screaming out names and screaming out

secrets alternately. On the way down, I kept losing my footing. Quickly, we became frenzied, totally convinced coyotes were chasing us all the way. She grabbed my hand as we screamed and ran down the patchy mountainside. But there weren’t any coyotes. There wasn’t anything. Sometimes I think we were running from something much bigger and much more terrifying than a simple creature. On our hike up the hill, the mood shifted palpably as I photographed her walking ahead of me against the sky, then took closeups of her polished fingers holding sprigs of wild dill. I couldn’t stop looking at her hands. I felt so much tension in my chest that I thought something would surely wind up so tight that it would break and go flying away. I think we both felt this catastrophic tension, and we both were terrified of what it would lead to. It had happened countless times before, but this time would be the last.

But sometimes I even drive even further down that wildly bucking dirt road, my car bouncing along, the crystalline pendant on my center mirror swaying this way and that, all the way down to her house. I hunch over in my seat, parked on the lonely street and remember the taste of her mouth the first time I kissed her, the scent of her citrusy perfume, the sharp downward hook of her grecian nose and how tears looked sliding down it. I remember the neat, red lines that decorated her forearms, how I had ones to match, how we taught each other new and frightening ways for suburbanite girls to lash out against unsuspecting parents and teachers. I remember swiping vodka from her mother’s home bar and gulping down sharp mouthfuls of disgusting courage at my locker the next day, just to get through the tragedy that is eleventh grade US History, then fumbling my way through the halls, wondering, *why doesn’t anyone notice, why will nobody look at me, why why why don’t they see me?*

I can still remember one morning after I started worrying about the gravity of my secret benders, pleading with my mom on our drive to school to let me go back to therapy, or to at least try going on medication. “Scarlett, you don’t need medication,” my mother cavalierly tossed out in between huffs off of a cigarette. “Dr. Frey says you’re fine. This is something all girls go through. Didn’t I tell you that when I was in seve-”

“Seventh grade, that you wanted to kill yourself every day because you were just so fat? Yeah, mom, I think you have,” I interrupt. This is a sermon I’ve heard probably about a hundred times since hitting puberty, and it’s something she’ll never stop recounting at a mere mention of junior high, even years down the line. Even today. She pulls her beat up Honda Civic into the school drop off line. “I dunno, mom. I just... I feel like I should at least be in therapy?”

"Therapists are so full of shit, Scarlett, believe me. How could they possibly know what's right for anyone? They just say whatever shit gets them paid," she proclaims as she chucks her cigarette out the window. I wordlessly grab my bag and leave the car, feeling completely powerless. It ended up taking an overdose to cure me of any curiosity I had for getting high, the aftermath of which lead to a full character suicide in my mother's eyes, and vice versa.

I can't ever help myself from watching the shadow puppets' most dramatic oeuvre yet.

\* \* \*

I'm laying in red dirt near a train track, vomiting and losing consciousness. The acquaintance I'm with calls our only other friend who is educated in the way of drugs, who tells her that she should under no circumstances call an ambulance or my mom. I slur out that I'm dying, that I need to call her before I fade away into the rocky dirt underneath my back and forever become a part of it. She hangs up and carries me inside, where I lay completely catatonic on her couch, heartbeats per minute far exceeding a safe number until I somehow end up at home. My stepdad, who thinks I'm merely drunk, pokes fun at my stuporous walk. I somehow, by the grace of God, wake up the next day, still somewhat feeling the effects of the heavy downer I'd eaten like candy. Not wanting to risk passing out at school, I tell my mother who goes, for lack of a better word, nuclear. She forces me into an icy shower, forces me into the car, then forces me up to the wrought iron gates of hell-school. I spend the day staring at the clock, eyes so bleary that I wonder if it's possible for them to bleed. When I get home, she sits me down on the couch. Expecting a heart to heart, I soften and look up at her. "I don't know what you think you were doing," she starts, "but I don't care."

I completely deflate.

"I honestly hoped I would die. I really really thought that I would, and I was okay with it at first, but then I got really scared. I just want you to notice me, to see me suffering, to see the pain that I'm in," I sob.

"Well guess what? I won't. You just want my attention, and I'm not gonna give it to you. This is all an act, Scarlett, and I can see right through it. I don't care and nothing you do can make me care. How do you feel about that?"

I turn on my headlights as a way to physically stop myself from reliving the hellish crescendo of that terrible argument. If I think about it for too long, I'll have to voluntarily forfeit the relationship I *do* have with my mother in the present. Sometimes, I picture myself

meeting my mother, both of us as adolescents. Maybe we would hold more tenderness towards each other and be more understanding of each other. But all of these memories are merely shadows of things that have been. They are unchangeable, at best. The shadows disappear as my headlights hit the horizon, scurrying for nighttime's tepid embrace.

\* \* \*

I drive through town, watching these shadow puppets at play, immutable as they are and wish every time that the stories they tell will end differently. But I turn my engine over and drive home to the man who loves me. Tanner. I walk through the door and almost as soon as I see him, I fall apart with my keys still in my hands. He instantly knows where I was.

"Scarlett," he almost pleads, "you don't have to do this you know? It's like you're picking at scar tissue, it isn't good for you."

"But how will I know it all mattered?" I sob into his arms. "How will I know that it matters to me?"

He calms me down and sits with me until I regain my faculties. "Am I just an idiot? Am I?" My teeth tingle somewhere inside of my throbbing head. I've probably cried out every ounce of water in my body. I rub my hands onto his furry green sweater, to ground myself back into the present, where I belong.

"No," he looks at me sweetly. "You've just had a very hard life. But it's okay because I'm here, and we're going to figure it all out together."

"We are?" I pitifully reply.

"We are. I promise."

"You're not gonna leave me?" I plead.

"No, never. You're stuck with me," he laughs as he tickles me—my kryptonite.

There's so much warmth that emanates from Tanner, that I'm prone to not giving any additional space to the dark demons that float somewhere within my periphery. He has his own vast collection of ghosts and shadow puppets, some of them even the same as mine. One day, I'll learn to stop picking apart my wounds, especially when they are just starting to heal. One day I'll stop chasing down these bittersweet snapshots of times long gone. One day, I'll finally kick my addiction to nostalgia. Until then, I suppose I'll have to be content with turning my suffering into art, just as in those long forgotten fables where a maiden spins straw into gold.

# Sorry for the Late Response

*Ashley Jane Nickel*

It's only that I was busy contemplating  
the heat death of the universe  
or something like that.

Sorry for being dramatic.

Actually, my planner  
was jam-packed,  
dedicated time slots  
worrying

about how most Americans  
are rent-burdened, can't survive  
a four hundred dollar emergency,  
can never retire a danse macabre  
as they work themselves  
to the bone  
into the grave.

I couldn't get back to you earlier.

You see, I was ruminating on women  
pulling the second shift,  
picking up odd jobs,  
handywomen of emotional labor  
still earning seventy-seven cents  
to the everyman's dollar.

More queer kids murdered  
in more small towns—  
another one in today's headlines,  
Rest in Power, little one.

Every day another mass shooting,  
so fucking common half  
the time I forget  
it's even happened in my town  
at least the gunman only took  
two others with him.  
Thank God, small consolation.

Is it semantically accurate to call him a gunman if he was only sixteen?

Gunboy sounds  
too flippant, too jaded,  
and gunchild, too sad.

The distinction doesn't matter  
to gold star families,  
those weeping mothers,  
suburban Madonnas cloaked  
in blue sorrow.

So you see, darling Dulcinea, beautiful Beatrice, lovely Laura,

it was absolutely impossible  
for me to get back to you  
in a timely manner.

But don't take it personally.

# lunatic

*Evelina Zubrinskaya*

They take the crazies in police cars, stretchers with handcuffs, gowns with no backing to hide their exposed asses. They take the woman whose wrinkles are spring blooms; she breaks your vase with telepathic powers. They take the bouncy child, the teenager who hovers by the rope section at Home Depot, the man who lives in chat rooms and lets a noose hang permanently from his ceiling, a stalactite reaching the retina of his eye.

They are Good People, well funded, there to inject the clinically insane with

happy juice,	you	sing too loud!
sunny days	don't	end here.
the nutty	deserve	rubber knots,
they deserve	to be	tied in
their own skin!	where	shoelaces
are sin,	the Holy	still trip
as they	walk.	

They will herd you to a whirlpool in yellow rubber ducky floaties, tell you you need the sun, until you squeak out, "*what year is it? am i a duck?*" "no, bitch, you are a doll."

i went to the ER and told Them i saw a waterfall that whispered in tumbles, telling me to take a leap of faith, so They fed me baby cups of dinosaurs that expand in water, They fed me broccoli and carrots, *i'm a rabbit*, They gave me a dome to gaze at skies of popcorn ceilings, They let the grown man rub me like i'm his healing ointment, They laughed at the cave paintings etched on my wrists with pencil sharpeners, They wouldn't let mommy see me, They released me back into the forest with the trees that sing like coffin bells.

i should be fine, of course,  
They signed off on it.

# Beside the Still Water 2/3

*Amylee Baldwin*



# We Exist

*Kaila Cadabona*

We exist  
in the small space  
between subtitles  
and in the quiet passion  
of an eccentric culture.

We exist  
in cross-cultural expectation  
and in the blur  
of racial confusion.

We exist  
in sideways glances  
and in the harsh whisper  
of hushed judgment.

We exist  
in the guilt trip  
cycling through  
our mother's tongue  
and in the ghosts of pain  
that materialized in our father.

We exist  
in the cryptic  
and in the unexplainable—  
in phenomena that  
drive people to  
question.

We exist  
in sharps and flats  
and in the colorful dissonance  
of clashing tones.

We exist  
in the vivid memories  
and in the silent stories  
that we never experienced  
for ourselves.

We exist  
in prophesied legacies,  
in hope the size  
of a teardrop,  
and in cracked hands  
that held their own future.

We exist  
in the transition  
of the seasons  
and on the leaves that  
heroically leave home  
to make new earth.



# Weenie and I

*Gianna Gonzalez*



# Hidden Gem

*Elizabeth De Guzman*



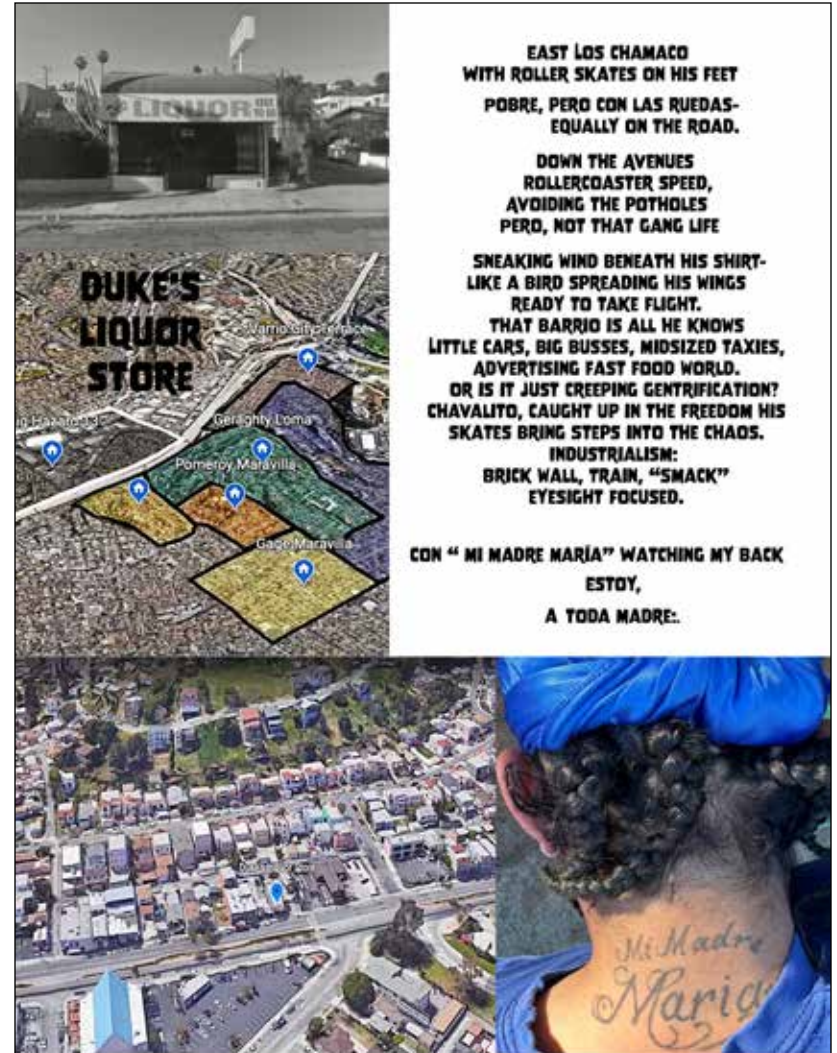
# La Catrina

*Liliana Rivera*



# Duke's Liquor Store

*Alberto Delgado*



EAST LOS CHAMACO  
WITH ROLLER SKATES ON HIS FEET  
POBRE, PERO CON LAS RUEDAS-  
EQUALLY ON THE ROAD.

DOWN THE AVENUES  
ROLLERCOASTER SPEED,  
AVOIDING THE POTHOLES  
PERO, NOT THAT GANG LIFE

SNEAKING WIND BENEATH HIS SHIRT-  
LIKE A BIRD SPREADING HIS WINGS  
READY TO TAKE FLIGHT.

THAT BARRIO IS ALL HE KNOWS  
LITTLE CARS, BIG BUSES, MIDSIZED TAXIES,  
ADVERTISING FAST FOOD WORLD.  
OR IS IT JUST CREEPING GENTRIFICATION?  
CHAVALITO, CAUGHT UP IN THE FREEDOM HIS  
SKATES BRING STEPS INTO THE CHAOS.

INDUSTRIALISM:  
BRICK WALL, TRAIN, "SMACK"  
EYESIGHT FOCUSED.

CON "MI MADRE MARÍA" WATCHING MY BACK  
ESTOY,  
A TODA MADRE:



## Bones and Blooms

*Aden Jovel*



## juiced

*Evelina Zubrinskaya*

propped in front of drooling cameras, she is a golden trophy girl. baby's breath wilts under his director's boot. to be his bitch is to be the roundest, let his fingers slide over her eyelids and hips.

she lifts her pomegranate lips to eclipse his demands; he slurps them until his teeth stain, spit heavy. he peels her up to the stem, slides her shiny stripped core up his throat. overripe moans stick to the bed frame, discolor the varnish.

men line up to shout, "i'm the biggest fan!" she is filtered light, distilled juice drips down her panties. she is freshly picked pussy cats that fall to the blender blades, bidding her success, but only if her sweat comes out in perfume he can sell.

the audience watches the actor onscreen fuck an actress, then murder her, and her marrow spills. pelvic bones are tossed like dog treats to sweet-toothed men.

encore: he gnaws, chokes her down to gilded reviews. backstage, they tell her, "stars don't wrinkle, honey doesn't expire, does it, baby?" she stuffs her body into glass jars, dissolves to jam, preserved 'til seeds laid centuries ago can shoot upward through her syrupy mess.

## Beside the Still Water 3/3

*Amylee Baldwin*



## Drag

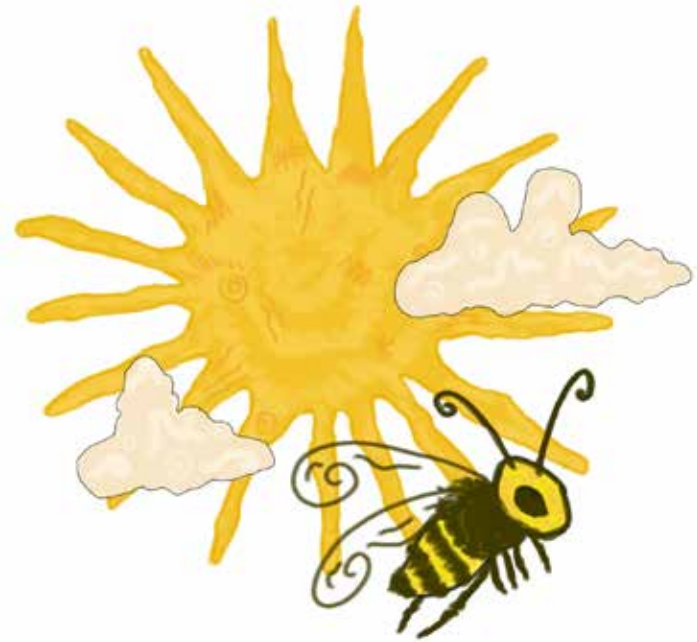
*Scarlett Rae Dougherty*

I want a cigarette,  
murky smoke encircling my head.  
I want it to sting my lungs,  
the ache reminding me  
that I am still tethered to this earth,  
that I am flesh and blood  
like it or not.

I want to taste its dusky rot and remember  
how I once did the same,  
15 and steeped in grief  
toes embedded in the mud of the wash  
outside my old school,  
bleach blond and haggard  
as crows circled overhead  
like vultures searching for sumptuous flesh.

Or once, out in front of the gay clubs  
in West Hollywood, newly 21,  
sweaty with proud desire  
as all the straight guys on the street whooped  
and hollered at me and her,  
the ember cherry between us obscuring  
all that was ever clear  
before we parted one last time.

Even that night one year ago,  
after my womb came up empty,  
and I sold my baby Moses down the river,  
I turned to that long skinny friend of mine.  
I want to hold just one between my fingers,  
a bone-white magic wand,  
bitter and sultry,  
a substitute for a friend,  
a goose-down security blanket,  
an express ticket to the end.



## **Rising (Scholars) Behind Bars**

*This year, we have had the honor of highlighting the voices of our Rising Scholars from the Century Regional Detention Center in Lynwood. The section titled, “Rising (Scholars) Behind Bars” is further evidence that we are more than just one story; we are evolving works in progress. While most of these poems are from female inmates, one creative nonfiction piece is from a recently released male inmate who served 21 years. We trust that you will enjoy reading about their experiences and witness the hope that shines through— the same hope that is in all of us. And a special thank you to Aileen Hongo for making this section possible. We look forward to more collaborations in the years ahead.*

# Take a Hit

*Saundra Chandler*

Wake up, take a hit.  
Wake up kids,  
take a hit.  
Drop off kids,  
take another hit; shit I'm out.  
Now what?  
Get dirty, get money.  
Don't care what it takes.  
Scored again.  
What a long day.  
Pick up kids,  
take a hit.  
Damn.  
Kids took a hit to the heart,  
seeing Mommy do whatever  
it took to take another hit.  
Mommy's gone now, handcuffed  
and taken away.  
Kids take the ultimate hit of all—  
no Mommy, crying all alone,  
taken to a stranger's home.

# Memories

*La'Shawn Johnson*

I remember us,  
Thick as thieves; togetherness,  
My son is no more.

# Happy Times

*La'Shawn Johnson*

Loving them through life,  
Caring for their opinions,  
Seventeen and three.



# Selah

*William Livingstone (he/him)*

I remind myself that there are tailored boxers  
ahead instead of jail panties.  
I eat Lynwood County food until it runs my body into the ground  
Because I believe this will help abolish prisons.  
I don't ask my boyfriend to post bail because it's a scam.  
I think of my baby and what weird thing she's going to insist on next.  
Last I heard, she's identifying as Martian  
even though she was born in East LA.  
I accept my gray-silver hairs and pushing 40.  
I don't worry too much about being called skinny or fat anymore.  
Sometimes I run.  
Sometimes I hide.  
Sometimes I'm scared of you who keep trying to take who is mine,  
so I give them to God.  
I cannot be free while everyone is getting fucked  
by the Sherri's Department.  
My children will know they are Jewish and loved.  
I imagine my unborns guarded by an old friend.  
named Mohammed on the Other Side.  
They carry a big stick and fend off any fuckers  
that dare mess with the BACK  
BACK woods  
where I was born  
on a rock  
in the snow.

# Scars

*Gabriella Torres*

Guns are machines,  
Pull the trigger,  
And they make  
A human bleed.  
Humans say words  
That hurt other humans'  
Mentality. Either human  
Or machine, they both hurt  
In one way: both leave scars.

# I Am

*Khadijeh Kadivar*

A body home for  
The soul that is my being;  
Stardust flies above.

# Congested

*Khadijeh Kadivar*

Congested feelings  
Block out the light of being;  
Clear, I hold the key.

# My Child

*Khadijeh Kadivar*

If you were me,  
how dare you treat yourself like dirt  
when you are born in love, of stardust?  
If you were me,  
how dare you think yourself unworthy  
when you are one of billions ever to live?  
If you were me,  
how dare you punish yourself so mercilessly  
when you are a child of God's infinite universe?  
If you were me,  
how dare you feel always broken  
when you are light and love and laughter?  
Oh, child of mine,  
I am you.  
How dare I dare you  
when I, as co-creator, need dare to dare?  
Oh, child of mine,  
you are more than me,  
so I dare you, double dare you  
to be everything that you are born to be.

# The Light that Broke Through the Darkness

Jamie Ortega

G-24664— Served 21 years

Looking back at my life, all I left was a wake of destruction. Pain, trauma, terror and heartbreak to those who came across my monstrous hands. I am only left with regret and shame. The sorrow of my sober mind that can now feel the pain of what I have done. The lifestyle that I chose to live by was evil, violent, and extremely selfish.

I knew not love and even had myself fooled into thinking that I was a decent man with all my antisocial behaviors at hand. “What a fool I was.” Back then I would have never thought I needed to change, but GOD had different plans for me. I had to find a new direction because this bottomless pit was consuming everything around me. It was like cancer in its full blown stage. “Death was all that it knew.”

Realizing this sickness and still alive, I felt I must do something to stay alive and survive. But, to the question in mind, “Who had paid the price for my deadly disease?” Saddened and riddled with guilt, shame, and regret, something new was raging inside of me. A heart was forming and an understanding of what I caused. My heart began to empathize and be filled with remorse. I only know one direction now. A path that is guided by the light, a light that has pulled me out of the darkest places.

# Musician Spotlight

Clayton McCutcheon



Clayton McCutcheon is a singer/songwriter, multi-instrumentalist, and visual artist. His music explores the boundaries between genres such as folk, electronic, and psychedelia, and his visual art focuses on landscapes and the human form while experimenting with scale and different mediums. Clayton recently completed an artist residency in Marnay, France, where he spent the summer honing his craft in music and art. Clayton is currently an Art major at College of the Canyons.



*The sound you hear is the air*

1. Just a Dream
2. I Guess
3. Moon
4. Daylight
5. Maybe I Am

Scan to listen



# Awards

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

## Excellence in Poetry:

“Sorry for the Late Response” by Ashley Jane Nickel

## Excellence in Fiction:

“Silicon Hymn” by Jacobi Brown

## Excellence in Photography:

“Beside the Still Water 3/3” by Amylee Baldwin

## Excellence in Art:

“Hidden Gem” by Elizabeth De Guzman

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Literary & Arts Magazine Production  
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literary & arts magazine



volume 17