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THE HUMAN CONDITION

VOLUME 19

THE HUMAN CONDITION

VOLUME 19

JOURNAL OF ART AND LITERATURE

CONTACT INFORMATION

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MISSION STATEMENT

The Bridge is managed entirely by students. Our charge is to serve, as we are dedicated to showcasing the artistic talents of our student body. Our goal is to excel, as we wish to pay a debt to our alumni, keep a promise to ourselves, and set an example for our successors.

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A LETTER FROM THE EDITORS: The Human Condition

After one and a half years of virtual meetings and online discussions we were finally able to gather back in person. This year has really shown the difference it makes to be together in person working and creating the journal. It allowed for free-flowing ideas, hands-on activities, and even on-campus promotion, which helped to re-excite and create a sense of normalcy. We wanted to develop a journal that elegantly displayed everyone's impressive work. To achieve that, *The Bridge* and its whole identity was revisited and looked at from a different perspective.

Something *The Bridge* has always been known for is its unique design. Every year for the past decade, the design teams have started from nothing to create a brand-new visual style suited for that year's direction. We began this year thinking about how we could modify this trend, with the idea of standardizing *The Bridge*'s look while also allowing each concurrent issue its own visual flair.

Our natural first step was to create a new logo that could be instantly recognizable to the campus at large. The designers went about this process with determination, sketching and drawing out any and all ideas including playing around with the T and B from *The Bridge*, different fonts, and layout of words. To come up with more ideas, we all conversed about the true meaning of *The Bridge* and began to reconceive its purpose. Although a bridge brings to mind the obvious, being a connector or a means of transport from one place to another, we wanted to take it further. With keeping some of the traditional sense in mind we worked to define it in terms of what it meant to us; an University art and literary journal while also presenting a professional identity. We landed on the finished logo because it displayed inspiration and innovation from past influences but also carries over to represent our hopes for the future with wishes of continuing this new legacy. Our logo draws on the classic idea of a literary journal while also bringing in a modern look, something that contains both text and design, bridging the gap of both art and literature.

This is also the first edition that includes a title and takes inspiration from art in the issue to display on the cover. Previously, the cover designs were meant to act as an extension of the theme that showed itself in the submissions. We still wanted to tie all the pieces together with a common thread, which spurred our creation of a working title that was decided on as a group. Likewise, we thought it important to include artwork from a piece that was thought to perfectly encapsulate the theme we had discovered upon reviewing all accepted works.

The great Aristotle once said the famous words "art imitates life," and more specifically, it tends to reflect the world around which it was conceived. To set the tone and expectations of the entire volume, we began it with "Radiance" by Megan Brodeur, which encapsulates a hopeful, optimistic, and bright portrayal of reality and how society is beginning to emerge from a tough time. Beginning with this piece seemed appropriate to juxtapose volume 18, where we as a whole, are leaving behind and growing from the negativity and pessimism of the past. In addition to its bright and vibrant imagery, "Radiance" is in the style of a collage, which intertwines the element of unity amongst incredibly different perspectives, experiences, and media to create something beautiful and unique.

Further, Volume 19 struck us with its inventive world of imagination. Many of the art and writing pieces dove into themes encompassing memories and dreams, while finding positivity even in the darkest of times. We were intrigued and touched by this common complexity. People are in touch with their creativity and are rediscovering comfort in their imagination. Whether it be a rapturous art piece depicting the incandescent beauty of nature—like Brodeur's "Radiance", or an enchanting poem depicting the more alluring side of imagination—like Olivia White's "Land Siren", the attention to our imagined worlds fuels our creativity. Dreaming is what makes us human.

This year, our submissions showed us the transition of the community's experience of reacclimating to a world that is both so familiar and so new. While the pieces submitted showcased a diversity of voices and conveyed unique meaning, there was one thing many had in common: an exploration of the human experience. As the works and themes came together, so did the idea of titling the journal—something that had not been tried before. This edition of the journal, now aptly titled "The Human Condition", explores exactly that.

In the coming pages, you will find that the words and images deliver various degrees of truths and lies, convey pain and joy, illustrate creation and loss–all of which make up the unique and intricate concept of life. Although not one life is the same and everyone has their own special journeys, we are all connected by the shared experiences and feelings that make us human. We hope that all the readers can enjoy and appreciate the beautiful work and exploration of self that this year's volume presents.

Sincerely,

The Editors of Volume 19

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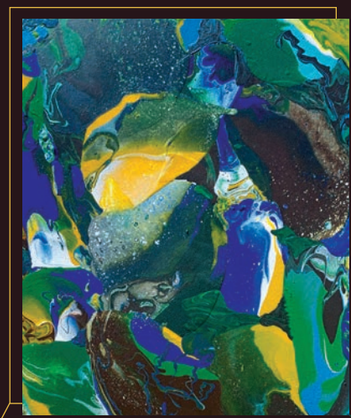

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RADIANCE

Meagan Brodeur

THERE IS TOO MUCH KNOWN

Lindsay Everson

BRIDGE AWARD

Backyard solar lights reveal
what should be the darkness
of a storm but is now
the rustles of trees
in open view held captive
in motion because the wind
wants to see how far they'll
bend before they break
and so do we

It is in these moments
I feel like I am interrupting theirs
and when I wake in the morning
wondering why the scattered branches
end up where they do
the wonder disperses into
a new world where privacy is taken
and the changing leaves can no
longer hide in the tallest of oaks
because we need a new photo
to post every fall
and when they fall in a
zig zag to the ground
the crunch beneath our feet
is ignored as we hurry
to our classes and ten hour
work days

I miss the unattainable
which distracted my young mind
security cameras take away
the freedom of the raccoon
who sneaks in our garbage late
at night and takes what is left to rot

nature is no longer hidden
in this obsession of the known
secrets of the night
are becoming scarce
the shadows are becoming real

LAND SIREN

Olivia White

She loomed underneath the luminescent shower of the moon
She ceased
As if frozen over by marble
The ebony silk that swirled amongst her pale legs
Was entranced by the haunting breeze that clung in the air
Like a cat on its ninth life
She moved
Like a chess piece
Towards me
Her lips were elegantly doused in a lavish red
Or maybe it was blood that
Artfully stained her shimmery moonlit chin
As it was the same color of the puddle that
Orbited amongst her ethereal being
This figure of a woman with midnight hair
And daylight eyes
Was not supposed to be here
But then again, neither was I
As she swayed
Towards me
With a sneer of daylight fangs
On an eternal midnight
Senza dormire

GIRL IN BLUE!

Nia Alvarado-Rodriguez

THE HOUSE WE HAD

Douglas Breault

When you told me
you didn't want to make your writing permanent,
I knew what you meant was:
You wanted me to be able to erase you.

So, when you leave
and I pick up old books,
I don't have to remember us.

And when I told you I wanted you to
permanent ink, chicken scratch all over the pages
what I meant was:
Here
look at the words I have written,
come inside of my head,
climb up all the parts of me I love
and tell me you understand.

What I meant was:
Here
make yourself at home within these pages,
creep your way inside the hollow letters
and get comfortable
within the words that you may not have known.

What I meant was:
Here
I want to remember you
no matter how this turns out.
So please
chicken scratch away

and maybe
when you're done

maybe
you'll want to be with me.

PLEASE, MAKE YOURSELF AT HOME

Kathleen Bazarsky

SEKENOME; GOLDFISH BOWL

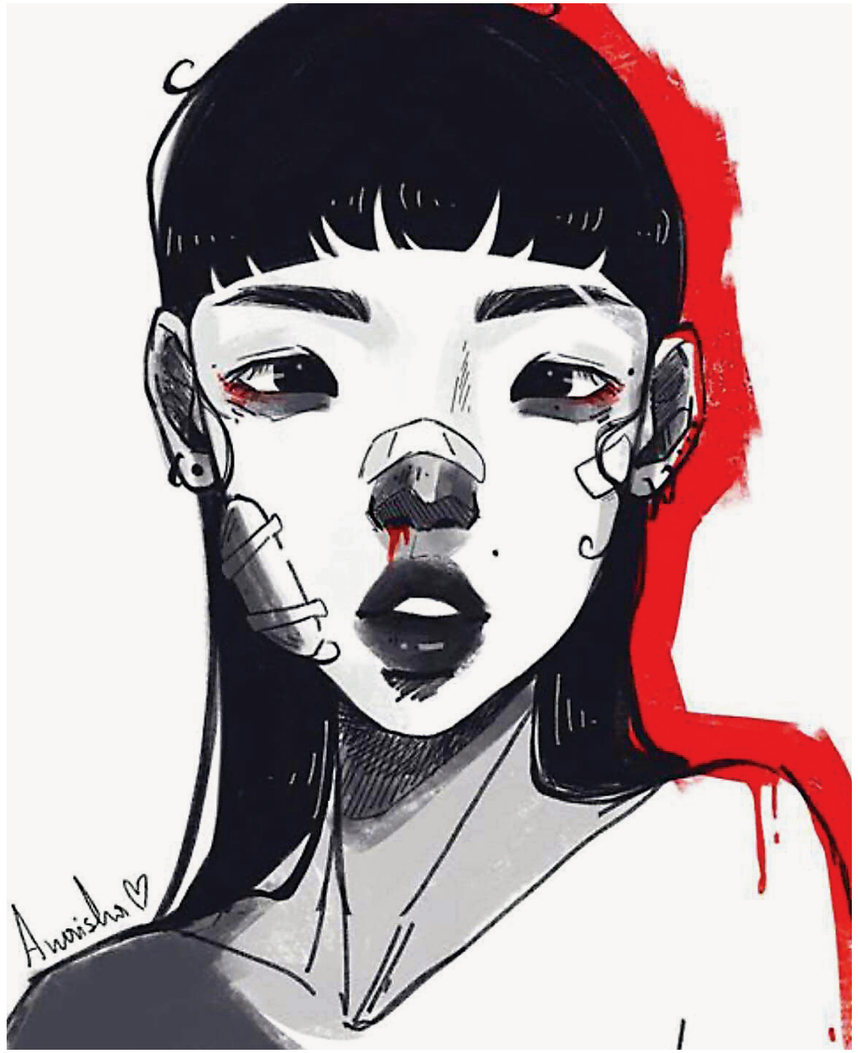
Terel Bowens

I love these crippled arms, these crippled legs to my toes from my fingertips and elbows. Weighed down in a self-pity that felt so explicit for centuries. Even my face has realized the growing warmth inside me, a black sun has its tendrils cascading from the heavens to guide my dimly lit smile to another place. A place without people's conscious thoughts parading around my expectations and what I have to do to meet them. Shouting heavily, 'I don't care!'

to the masses, it really helped at the time as I would begin cutting off people's opinions entirely from my life, growing lighter and more buoyant in the wake of my struggles. The faces I used to see boldly clicking their tongues at my stance, the suede remarks on my skin as it left a turning free spirit finally making waves through my chakras. It says this time, tear your mask off and present an actual smile, it's about right to love yourself again. Into this small window of opportunity. A limelight finds an escape safely into the dead of night.

I'm twenty-six and they say, who is that healthy looking boy playing in the meadows at this hour. Frolicking in the lilies. I'm making an angel in these hills of grass, but to me it was more like sand. The sky is clear and gifs inside the mind of a nine-year-old along with the passages told by the swaying trees. Rainbows tell me lies and what they would not say to you, is that a ring of arches floating in the sky cannot ooze any color at all. From Byzantium chrysanthemums, tall lily head poppies, spider lilies to cacti tulips, coneflowers and tall Rothchild's orchids. The atrosanguineus chocolate cosmos, corpse flower and the canna spotted lily. It's placating off an encyclopedia of colors, the fields that cause it to shine after a sudden storm of grief passing. An electronic network of high playing flute sounds dinging into the index cavities of my head, traveling into several canals like water rushing into a secret chamber;

'A music box,' I say with a gitty expression. Laying down I hear them whistle and finally listen to the birds' chirp to a boy who was so close to life as his womb. I hear people talk about their schedules, what they would do after lunch or after work. I admit, it was boring, however it's quieter than people being trashed by our own karmic cycle of violence. In the meantime, wishing to float in this peace a little while longer, just enough until the moment I am able to accept people's words of critique and hang on to my self worth. I want them to get the fuck off me. Until my feet soles grow lighter with the leaves and dance with the wind.



LADY IN RED

Anisha Gomes Mauricio

A SPECIAL REQUEST

Samuel W. Tarr

I used to button-up my chef coat with great ceremony. I would start at the bottom and feed each knot of cloth through each corresponding hole, all the way to the top. I'd roll my sleeves up to the elbow with even, creased folds. I'd tuck my hair under a black beanie, rolling the bottom up a quarter inch all the way around, so it just made contact with the restaurant's logo stitched in white cursive.

These days, I splash cold water on my face as the first step in remedying the day's hangover. I put on a plain, black beanie that I can wear in any restaurant if I decide to leave again. I opt for the casual, breathable, more relaxed short-sleeve dishwasher shirt. I leave the top two snaps undone, revealing just a sample of whatever subversive t-shirt I'm wearing that day. On Wednesday, it was a hammer and sickle, and today, the Hunter Thompson double-thumbed fist clutching a peyote button. The short sleeves leave more exposed skin for burns, but as my faded scars crept all the way up to the elbows, I decided what's the difference? That was the point. I had worn the thick white chef coat and two different custom-made ones complete with my name and title inscribed over the left breast pocket. As I climbed the ladder within two rungs of the top, I saw nothing up there worth a dime. Chef coat, dishwasher shirt, white or black-striped apron, blue t-shirt at the diner, there wasn't any difference.

I took one last look in the streaky bathroom mirror and took a deep breath. I pulledmy shoulder blades back, as if to touch them, cracked my neck, put my polyurethane shoes on and walked out to meet another dreadful day. I began the countdown. There were only twelve and a half hours to go.

I used to love this. Now, a dull numbing pain flowed through me as I punched in. This crazy, twisted, impossible business. The pressure, the pain, the agony of defeat had a perfect contrast to the delirious thrills of victory and fleeting moments of uncontrollable laughter. My comrades and I used to stand defiantly on the line in Orion formation ready to defy the new set of expectations. The printer ratcheted out tickets so fast that they hit the floor, but you wouldn't sink into despair, you'd snag them and twirl the chain of orders around like a gymnast's ribbon. When it was over, we reapplied tape to old wounds, greased a burn with a cooling gel, and drank celebratory beer out of plastic cups, so cold it hurt. Now the killing machines I shared the line with have moved on, and I try to survive the day with this inadequate staff, a shell of its former self. Now I count the hours down, seemingly so willing to sell 12 hours here for three later, trading away my irreplaceable days.

Nostalgia is a powerful thing, but I try to think about the good old days as little as possible. I know now, that that fire that burned inside all of us, that bit of desperation that keeps a professional cook kicking at the surging tides, the one that keeps him or her in a kitchen for any length of time is less a source of pride or valuable trait, and more of a character flaw exploited by this industry. It is the reason the schedule has ten names on it, all with corresponding social security numbers filed in an office drawer, but only five actual people punching the clocks. But I try to forget that as I poured cold soup into saucepans, beginning the morning preparations for the day's lunch service. I pulled plastic wrap off aluminum containers and talked a little trash with Alberto about the closing performance of last night's crew. I think about what I'm going to cook up for the dishwasher for lunch. But I don't let my mind wander back to the million minor tragedies that bury a burnt-out line cook. I tell myself it's just a job, that my decision to go back to school will pay off, and that these will all be good old days, soon enough.

I used to fall in love quite easily, but I don't anymore. I stood up to a kind word and a flirtatious smile with all the defiance of a dandelion against a steamroller. The gnawing agony and residual effects of sharing such close quarters with the ex-partner of a disastrous, ill-conceived attempt at normalcy had built up bitterness within me, pushing my misery index to a level I had no desire to dabble with again. Now I resist the trappings and silliness of falling in love, yet hoping I'll be overwhelmed again, someday. Danielle, the hourly front of the house manager, would have been an obvious candidate for the folly of my affection. She's kind and beautiful, but not obnoxiously so. She's quite married, but such situations seem to be a minor detail after a decade in the restaurant world. I whisked the puree of white beans, garlic, and extra virgin olive oil given to tables as a dip for their focaccia. Nearly all twelve cast iron gas burners were occupied as the stainless steel began to present the spatter of sauces. Steam rose up into the loud exhaust vents overhead. When someone from the front of the house crossed over from the aisle, onto the line, they either made a terrible mistake or were about to deliver the bad news. So, I was concerned when Danielle walked the five-step mile half-way down the line and led with a whispered, "So." She told me that Kathy, the owner, was here and that her brother-in-law was dying of cancer. She wanted me to make him some pasta.

Danielle scurried off. I turned back to the stove. Alberto had made his way out back to pound chicken and various other knifework. I stood alone and stared into the reviving butternut squash soup. Kathy walked up and stood on the end of the line, asking if Danielle had talked to me, I nodded and offered condolences.

"He always loved our pasta," she said. "He can't really swallow, but I can cut it up into small pieces for him. So, just like, I don't know, a shrimp spaghettini and chicken parm. I'll be back in what, a half hour?"

I said that that would be plenty of time. Kathy thanked me and walked back to the office. I turned the soups off, cleared two burners, and made my way to the walk-in.

We used to have a veal parmesan on the menu. The filets dressed with slices of prosciutto and leaves of basil and then pounded paper thin. It came with roasted potatoes and broccolini. We melted the fontina cheese in the oven, topped it with marinara sauce and drizzled the plate with a balsamic reduction. It was simple but popular. My chef resisted putting a chicken parm over pasta on the menu, but not because it wouldn't sell. Cooks would scoff at the tickets and reluctantly make it on special request, calling it "kids menu." Sometimes, you just want a chicken parm. Whether it's a wild mushroom pate or a cheeseburger, any dish can be made great.

In the walk-in cooler, I loaded a large, white dinner plate with all the ingredients. On a large sheet pan, all the mise en place for a shrimp spaghettini would be in small metal containers from the night before covered in plastic, but I rummaged through the newly delivered produce order, grabbing fresh ingredients. I pulled a branch of basil for the chicken. I gathered lemon, garlic, arugula and cherry tomatoes for the shrimp. Nick, the small, sleepy kitchen manager asked me what I was doing. "Don't worry about it," I said. I kicked the walk-in door open and dropped my prep on the fresh snow of a first-shift cutting board. I heard Alberto's mallet thudding against the flesh of chicken breast. I shuffled to the back kitchen and snagged two of them. I grabbed a bag of shrimp from the freezer and defrosted it in the back sink, as fresh as it gets nowadays.

We used to peel fresh stands of lemon zest for the shrimp dish. Over the years, we stopped. There were many essential methods and hard rules that my chef had let slide. I didn't even know where the zester was, and fumbled through the giant and dangerous "misc bucket" looking for it. I tried to avoid the small pitchfork that nobody had ever used, surely buried beneath. I emerged with the small, black zester with a handle the size of a rabbit's foot and made it back to the line. I put a pan on the burner for searing the shrimp and turned to zest two lemons. I washed the fruit and peeled the sticker off. With two firm grips, one on the lemon, one on the zester, I ran the business end over the rind. Small hairs of lemon rind fell onto the board below as essence spritzed, as if propelled by aerosol, hanging in the sterile fluorescent lights for a moment before falling to the board as well.

I pull another tool from another crevice of the restaurant and wash the age off. It is a small, miniature mandolin, a truffle shaver. These days we don't chop garlic so much as mutilate it. Spinning mechanical blades reduce three pounds of garlic into a neat, little pan of minced product in a matter of seconds. That garlic was fine for various prep and the calamari accompaniments, but it was never good enough for the spaghettini, until recently. I turned the small knob with wrist-watch precision and shaved the garlic. The first time I executed this preparation, I thought of the jailhouse scene in Goodfellas.

Paulie, in charge of shaving the garlic with a razor blade so it would "liquefy in the pan with just a little oil." Every cook worth his salt, knows that line, that scene. Now I know that the vast majority of professional cooking is less like that, and more like the bedlam of Scorsese's Copa kitchen tracking shot. Small steps like the shaving of garlic cloves have phased out over the years as we shifted the focus to ease of execution and mass production. For a dying man, I figured it's the least I could do.

I quartered the cherry tomatoes, the artichoke hearts, and segmented the zested lemon for juice. I cut the shrimp into manageable pieces that could pass easier through the man's throat and placed them on a separate plate. I pinched the kosher salt, rubbing the grains between my fingers as it rained on the shrimp. I grabbed the pepper mill from the garde manger and twisted coarse peppercorns onto the plate as well. I placed the two chicken breasts on a cardboard plate used for retrieving freshly fried food. I seasoned both sides and then took the back of my chef knife and pounded crosshatches into the flesh, perfectly thin, ready to bread and fry. I coated the breasts in flour, egg wash, and breadcrumbs, patting in the panko crumbs. I brought them over to the fryer, dropped the basket and eased each one into the oil as if setting them to sail. They sunk into the oil with a diver's grace and the fat began to churn and bubble.

Turning back to the stove, I saw the sauté pan had just begun to smoke. I poured two tablespoons of blended oil into the pan and brought it to temperature. The shrimp hit the pan and began changing color as immediate as the sizzle. I swirled them in the pan to sear all sides and then did a half twist to the cutting board behind me, pinching the shaved garlic and tossing it into the hot oil. As it browned, I waited for the perfect moment between having your garlic toasted and having a pan full of garbage, and I poured in the white wine as this deglazing sent a burst of orange flame out of the pan. As the alcohol extinguished, I retrieved the shrimp with my tongs, placing them in a separate dish so as not to overcook. Always in one fluid motion, I spun back and forth from the pan to the prep, adding the chili flake, the capers, the artichoke, the splash of heavy cream, and the squeeze of fresh lemon juice. I pulled a plastic cup of plastic spoons off the top of the line and gave it an initial taste, and then took four long strides to pull the chicken out of the oil.

We used to cut our fresh pasta every day. More and more, we've been experimenting with different shapes of dry pasta shipped in large cardboard boxes. The small pans of bundled yellow noodles were replaced by three or four large sheet pans wrapped in a plastic baker's bag, making it a weekly project. The result is a loss of elasticity that leaves with the freshness. I placed the two golden brown chicken breasts in a pan and covered them with marinara and fontina cheese. The heavy oven door squeaked as I opened it, placing the black steel pan on the rack. I kicked it shut with a familiar slam. I grabbed my towel and swirled the pan of reducing spaghettini sauce with a few twitches of the wrist, then hustled back to the walk-in

to pull off two fresh pasta sheets made the night before. Kicking the walk-in door open again, I lumbered into a trot out to the pasta machine, which was in the pizza station, in the open part of the kitchen. I flipped the switch. The motor hummed, and the rollers spun towards each other. I fed one sheet into the bottom row and retrieved a handful of fine-cut noodles for the shrimp. I fed the other in the top and bundled the tagliatelle for the chicken. Returning to the line, I dropped the pasta into baskets, into the vat of boiling water. I was ten minutes ahead of schedule, but Kathy was always early.

The pasta floated to the top. I took the chicken out of the oven and caramelized the cheese under the broiler. I put the spaghettini into the cream sauce, adding the shrimp back in, as well as the tomatoes, the arugula, and the zest. I tossed the tagliatelle with olive oil, salt, and pepper. After a taste and an adjustment of the spaghettini sauce, I twirled the pasta with my tongs and laid each dish in their respective to-go boxes. After another ladle of marinara, I layered the perfectly browned chicken on top with a crack of pepper, a few crystals of salt. I tore fresh basil leaves by hand, passing up the clumsily bruised chiffonade from the night before, and let them fall over the dish. I reached over to the expo side of the line and retrieved the Microplane and grated some more fresh parmesan over the top. I zested another few curls of lemon rind for the spaghettini. I looked down at the two to-go boxes. Two of the most basic, cliché, common pasta dishes on quasi-Italian/American menus everywhere. They were simple, but they were perfect. I eased the two boxes and extra sauce into the paper bag. I then walked it back to the office where Danielle was playing on her phone. I laid it on the desk.

> "That's the finest meal I've ever made."
> "I bet. How far behind are you now?"
> "It doesn't matter," I said. "It doesn't matter."

I used to make it a point every year to watch The Green Mile, or Of Mice and Men, or It's a Wonderful Life and get a few tears out of my system, but that hasn't worked in years. I don't cry anymore. I know that I am approaching the age of definite devastation and that I will cry again someday, but it's been a while. My efforts at unaffectedness have been all too successful. It was when I laid that bag on the desk, that I felt the lump in my throat, that surge in my chest. It didn't matter that I was hopelessly behind in the day's preparations. There was a man somewhere, dying of cancer, resigned to his fate, and all he wanted was some pasta. As I walked to the bathroom, I thought about the travesty of my trivialities, the years of self-pity, the greed of desire.

I never met Kathy's brother-in-law. I don't know if he even ate the meal. If he did, I just hoped he could taste that I couldn't have done any better. Maybe those two simple dishes provided just a moment of pleasantness as he hurtled towards death. I wasn't sure if such a thing was even possible. For years, I wasn't sure if cooking would ever matter to me again. For a half hour that Saturday morning, it did. I looked in the mirror, leaned forward on the sink, and took a few deep breaths, stuffing this peculiar sentimental rush deep into my shoes. After gathering myself, I walked back out to start the day over again. I can't remember what time it was.

What About Us?

Anthony Garcia

ESCAPING MY BUBBLE

Kimiko Clark

BRIDGE AWARD

It was a Sunday morning. John Clark was sitting in the church pew, listening to the lesson, as he did every Sunday morning. The lights from above reflected in his glasses as he looked back and forth from the front of the room to where the speaker was, then to his notebook where he kept his notes. He swept his thin gray hair away from his eyes as he looked to his notebook to write something down. It was a normal Sunday morning.

Suddenly, his chest began to hurt. He felt as if a bomb had gone off in the middle of his sternum. The pain got worse and more constant when his body began to feel warm and tingly. As much as he tried to make himself believe it was nothing, he couldn't help but worry that he was having a heart attack. Now, any sensible person would alert someone of this emergency, but instead of doing so, John decided that in order to not disturb the service, he would sit quietly and deal with it. He decided that death was a better outcome than interrupting church.

Years later, John lives on to tell the story to his daughter, me. The funny thing is, he wasn't having a heart attack. Instead, what he had was a really bad case of heartburn. Each time my dad tells me this story, it gets funnier and funnier. However, I also learned something about my dad from this story. He doesn't like rocking the boat. He would rather sit, observe, and ignore the problem than call attention to it. I realize I'm the same way; I'd rather sit quietly than speak up. Maybe I learned it from him.

. . .

"Mommy, why didn't you want me to have an Asian name?" I once asked my mom, with my thin, dark hair tucked behind my ears. Perhaps I was 7, when I first asked this question.

When my sister and I were younger, we were fascinated by the thought that my parents had other ideas of what to name us. Names like McKayla, Diana, and Alexis filled the list of possible names. What surprised me was what wasn't on the list: Asian names. My sister and I had both been adopted from China by a white man and a Japanese woman. My parents had always made an effort to make sure I was connected to my heritage and culture, like making us go to a program run by Chinese college students for Chinese adoptees called Dumplings. Each month, they taught all of us about a certain aspect of Chinese culture. One month we learned about popular games played in China; another, we learned about Chinese mythology; we also learned about mooncakes. It surprised me that my parents weren't considering giving me a name that reflected where I was from.

"Well, Honey, we didn't want to make it harder for you to get into college," my mom replied, looking directly into my eyes.

"What does that mean?"

"Colleges are less likely to accept you if your name is Asian. That's why your grandparents named me Alice, and my brothers Scott and Henry," My mom's parents emigrated out of Japan and moved to the United States when her mom was pregnant with Scott, my mom's oldest brother. Despite all their children being born in the U.S., my mom's parents did as much as they could to assimilate; perhaps giving them traditionally "white" names was futile with Uyeno as a last name.

"But, Mommy, why? That's not fair," I questioned, my face scrunched up in confusion.

"I don't know," she said with a sigh, as if she tried to answer this very question a dozen times before. "I don't know. That's just how it is."

Clearly, my parents did end up giving me an Asian name, Japanese to be exact. It was my dad that found the name and decided that he liked it more than he feared how colleges would perceive me. I remember feeling hopeless. How would I get into college with a name like mine? I have never disliked my name; I thought it was a beautiful name. What I didn't like was that it automatically associated me with these unfair expectations. How is it fair for strangers to judge me more harshly just because my name gave my race away?

I can remember, for the longest time, I didn't believe my mom. Maybe it was because I didn't want to believe that anyone would really do that, or maybe I really was that naive. Perhaps I wanted to stay trapped in my little perfect bubble where nothing could ever hurt me.

. . .

It was during my junior year of high school that I began to notice the small, seemingly insignificant comments. I had just gotten out of my Spanish class. My classmate, Emily and I were on our way to our next class when we started talking about our courses. Our high school organized its classes into 3 difficulties. The first, and lowest level were college prep, or CP, classes. The ones in the next or second level of difficulty were called honors classes. The hardest and highest level were advanced placement, or AP, classes. By junior year, we knew the drill. It was almost a tradition to talk about your classes with your classmates. It was a convenient discussion point to talk about and, even more importantly, it was an opportunity to brag about any difficult classes you might be taking, without outright bragging. We wore our classes like a status symbol.

"Are you taking any honors classes?" Emily asked me as we rounded the corner and followed the crowd down the stairs. The other students who filled the crowded hallway towered over us. Our bags weighed heavily down on our backs and our arms were filled with notebooks and folders.

"I'm taking five honors classes. The only core CP class I'm taking is math, and obviously, my electives are CP too."

"Oh, I thought you were smart," Emily said with a sigh.

I don't remember the rest of the conversation. I can assume that I made a quick effort to defend myself and give a reason as to why I was taking a – gasp – CP class. Maybe I asked her about her classes; maybe we walked in silence. I'm sure that we continued walking together until we reached the point where we went our separate ways; I went down the history hall and she continued down the hallway towards the library. Despite the moment lasting only a few short seconds, it stuck with me. My bubble seemed to burst, if only for a small moment, before closing itself back up.

Until this moment, I had merely experienced small microaggressions: people constantly mispronouncing my name despite me correcting them; people making sword slashing noises at me; people saying "ching, chong" and the like. Nothing that affected me very greatly. The moment it left Emily's mouth, I thought, Oh, because I'm Chinese. Perhaps she hadn't meant it that way; I am almost certain she meant it to come out differently, but by the time she had finished her statement, it was too late. She fed into that stereotype that Asian people are smart. I guess it didn't help that most of our other Asian classmates were high achieving people; they were all in the highest-level classes and always seemed to excel. Perhaps I was the odd one out. I've definitely felt that way a time or two.

Growing up, I had always been aware of my privilege. I grew up in a nice, small town. I understood that while I would face racism in my life, it would never be to the degree that other people would face. However, in doing so, I ignored and wrote off the ways I had been mistreated. I realized that I had, in fact, faced racism, not only by individual people making little remarks here and there, but by a whole system.

. . .

During my senior year of high school, I decided to learn more about how Asian Americans have been treated by the education system. I had the opportunity to take a class called "Race in America", which I thought was the most amazing thing. I thought that it would be a great opportunity to educate myself about racism and learn things that normal history classes don't teach you; perhaps it would have been better if a white woman hadn't taught it. Throughout the year, we learned a little bit about Native Americans; we spent a day learning about the Asian Exclusion Act; most of the semester was spent learning about African Americans. It wasn't surprising to me that we spent so much time on that; there was so much the history books don't talk about. I did enjoy learning about significant historical figures, eugenics, and important events I had never heard of before; however, I secretly wished we had spent more time learning about other races.

It was at the end of the year when we were given the opportunity to research any topic we wanted, as long as it had to do with race in America of course. I chose to research Asian Americans and education. The assignment stated that we had to write a research paper and give a short presentation about our topics.

"So, I researched Asian Americans and education," I explained, pointing to my first slide. "One thing I found in my research was the story of a few Asian families fighting the school board. Prior to the Brown vs. Board of Education case, which ultimately decided that segregated schools were unconstitutional, the Lum family fought for the right to attend a white school in Mississippi," I went on to explain how the definition of "white" was evidently confusing and difficult to pinpoint.

I continued with my presentation. "I also looked into the supreme court case involving Harvard Admissions and some Asian Harvard students. The students claimed that the Harvard admissions process was biased against Asians, making it more difficult for Asian students to be accepted," I paused, waiting for the slide to change.

"In one article I found, it actually talked about how Harvard has different standards based on the race of the applicant. So, for example, an Asian applicant would have to have a higher score on their SAT to be admitted than a white person or African American student would."

This statistic honestly baffled me. It revealed to me how deep-rooted the problem is. Racism has always been a problem, one that I have always been aware of, but one that I have not always been comfortable talking about. I think it was because I felt like it wasn't my place to speak on something I hadn't experienced.

Except, I had experienced it. I experienced microaggressions and little remarks.

Maybe, I was always aware of the small comments people made and the looming idea that the education system was against me. Perhaps I was afraid that what I had to say didn't matter. I mean, what can one person do? Perhaps people would shut me down if I tried to speak up.

Until recently, I had been living in my little, safe bubble, content with where I was. I saw what was happening to other people, but it prevented me from seeing what was happening to me. In this bubble, I could stay hidden away from my problems; it was easy to avoid talking about if I pretended it didn't happen. Maybe I'd been afraid that if I spoke up, people would tell me it didn't matter or that nothing could be done to change it. I felt that it was safer for me to stay silent, hiding in my bubble.

I think the pandemic was my turning point. George Floyd had just died, and I thought back to the night just a few months before. I scrolled through Instagram when I came upon a video highlighting the racism and violence Asian people had been facing in Chinatown due to the Coronavirus. Videos and images of Chinese Americans with their faces black and blue with bruises, and their faces swollen and bloody from being hit so hard littered my phone screen. I was horrified by what I was watching, but what had horrified me more were the comments:

"Who Cares?"

"That's not even racism."

"They're finally getting payback for how they treated black people."

"They deserve it."

Even though the comments hadn't been directed at me, each comment I read was like a punch in the gut. I tend to expect the worst, and I became afraid that people would say these things to me; I was afraid people would spit on me or attack me in the streets just because of where I was from.

I went to a Black Lives Matter protest that summer to protest police brutality. As I sat on the ground, grass tickled my legs, I listened to the speakers. I saw on social media how many people came together to fight for justice; I saw the impact speaking up could have. I realized that perhaps speaking up was better than sitting quietly. If I wanted to fight for black people, I also had to fight for myself.

The final straw, however, was the shooting in the Atlanta nail salon that killed 6 Asian women. Before this, I had never feared being shot out in the open due to the way I looked, but suddenly, I couldn't help but worry every time I stepped out of my house.

"Stop Asian Hate" rallies began to take place all around the country. Again, I saw how people rallied together to press for change. While it's unfortunate that it took 6 Asian women dying for something to happen, I was moved by how people came together, fighting for a common goal.

. . .

I realized that maybe rocking the boat isn't necessarily a bad thing. I often think about what would have happened if I spoke out to Emily. What would I have said? What would she have said? I think back to my dad's story. What if he had spoken up; there was a doctor sitting two rows behind him that could have helped him. The obvious answer is that it is better to interrupt a church service than die quietly in fear of disrupting things. He would have realized that people would happily stop service to tend to him and he would have received the help he needed. Nobody would have shushed him or told him that he was over-exaggerating.

Maybe it's all in my head. Perhaps, like my dad, I always knew deep down that there was a problem. I knew that I, along with many other Asian Americans, was falling victim to the stereotypes and mistreatment. I wanted to pretend that nothing was wrong and that I was okay, but with each comment, my bubble got thinner and thinner, until...it burst.

UNCERTAINTY

Hanna August

WITHOUT A WHALE TO WHACK

Gabriel Abram El Khoury

Boris Baklanov's unmatched success as a bare-knuckle boxer had become incumbent on his being able to find and to practice his punches on beached whale carcasses, for quickly had he outgrown pummeling pork for practice, and soon, too, had beating beef become a bore. Besides, Boris was banned from entering any of the village slaughterhouses, as a pugilist and as a patron, on account of his, in the words of the weak-stomached butchers, "sea stench" (but Baklanov rather took offense to this, preferring instead to call it his "aquatic aroma"). These same butchers, in fact, having all uniformly decided to bar Baklanov entry into their respectable establishments, even went so far as to level a petition against the pugilist. Boris Baklanov's being barred from butcher shops had secretly been a blessing, however, for truly had he come to believe blubber to be the best meat to beat in preparation for a bout of brawling.

Every Sunday, Boris Baklanov excused himself several minutes early from the Divine Liturgy before the service had been formally dismissed.

"Just skipping out a few minutes early," he would suddenly declare, in a voice he would swear had been softer, for Boris would hate to cause a disturbance. Large men like Boris Baklanov, however, are utterly incapable of anything but disturbances,

Parting his way through the sea of his fellow praying parishioners, Boris would "just slip out for some air," interrupting the priest mid-prayer as he did so by noisily unbuttoning his shirt and unfastening his belt, slapping his sweaty hand across his still more sweatier forehead to swab away the perspiration that had collected during his "high-intensity spiritual worship," and, just before making his way out of the front door, loudly smacking his lips in preparation for planting a whopping kiss on the icon of St. Andrew.

Once outside, Boris would practically skip to the water's edge where he would stake out a spot on the Siberian shore of the Bering Sea to wait, digging his heels impatiently in the sand, listening for the last of the church bells to clang. Then, as it had happened time and time again, a lifeless whale would invariably wash ashore, which Boris believed to be a gift from God.

One day, however, the whales stopped coming—and at a particularly inopportune time for Boris Baklanov.

"Fedya, Fedya!" cried a sweaty out of breath Boris one evening as he came running up to Fedya, the village gravedigger, and the only person not repelled by Boris's smell.

"What is troubling you, Boris Baklanov?" asked Fedya. "Can you not see that I am busy digging graves for a family of five?"

"Fedya, it's the whales: they have stopped coming. Fedya, the whales have stopped coming, and I have a big match tomorrow! What am I to do if I am without a whale to wail on? What's a man to do without a whale to whack?"

Now Fedya was hardly a marine biologist, nor was he much of a wonder-worker. Fedya knew little more than the blade, step, shaft, and handle of his shovel (or, more accurately, it was a small rusty trowel, and the last remnant of his father, who had been from boyhood until his own burialı a gravedigger before Fedya and who, just before his passing, had given to Fedya, as a gift for his son's fifteenth birthday, his own personal shovel, a keepsake, in order to carry on the family trade). From dawn until dusk, Fedya dug, and dug he did, digging with few to no distractions, save for the occasional but brief borscht break. Digging for Fedya was meditative, wholly entrancing, so that when Boris Baklanov did come scrambling towards him, Fedya had been so utterly immersed in his digging, so in sync with his shovel, that Boris had very truly startled him, nearly causing Fedya to fall into the hole he had designated "father."

"Perhaps you ought to wait just a little while longer," said Fedya. "Some things in life take time. A whale is bound to wash ashore sooner or later." "Lord knows that I am enough of a patient man already!" exclaimed Boris.

"Tell me, how am I to practice my dizzying hammer-fist without a whale?" A recent increase in illegal commercial whaling Fedya knew was to blame for Baklanov's misfortune, and yet Fedya found himself unable—afraid, more accurately—to share this key bit of information with Boris. Why exactly was Fedya afraid of sharing this secret with Boris? Rarely is a fear unfounded, and Fedya's fear of divulging the exact cause of Boris's vanished whales was entirely sensible. Fedya was compromised. Out digging late one night, Fedya had simply "seen too much" (as all gravediggers have, especially if they happen to be out digging graves late enough) and, as a consequence of his having "seen too much," had been explicitly ordered not to say anything to anyone; that is, unless he wanted "to dig himself a grave."

Wanting to help Boris, but unsure how precisely to be of service without endangering himself in the process—not to mention wanting very much also to resume his digging, for the bodies kept on coming and coming, and whenever he took breaks they seemed almost to pile up faster and faster—Fedya leaned on his shovel and sighed, stumped as to how to help his friend until, taking off one of his rubber gloves to wipe the sweat off his forehead, Fedya suddenly had an idea.

"Boris Baklanov, if blubber is out of the question, why not instead try rubber?" "Rubber?" Boris asked.

"You are an esteemed fighter, Boris Baklanov. There is a new factory not far from here, and I am sure they would be more than willing to let you punch what they produce."

And so, while Boris Baklanov was forever thereafter without his beached whale carcasses for practice, he soon came to find rubber, which was far bouncier than blubber, a far superior punching bag—and even something of a formidable opponent, for many of Boris's punches, almost as soon as they landed, were quite immediately returned. Yes, Boris Baklanov truly was the greatest fighter that Boris Baklanov ever encountered.

FLOATING AMONG THE LILIES

Lindsey MacMurdo

SCENTED

Lindsay Everson

She was a lavender plant
during harvest season,
picked apart by rough hands,
drowned and drained
as part of her identity
dripped down like water
from a damp twisted rag
into tiny bottles and fancy soaps.
Her being once confined
with no choice in what shaped her
as she was told how to feel,
she wondered how others could grow
and hold onto their essential peace
as she continued to crumble,
losing herself in the dust
of what could've been,
but soon the wind picked up
and the air welcomed her scent,
revealing the endless passions
hidden by the brutal hands
of those who created her.

Brunch

Aliyah McGibbon

APARTMENT 23B

Adlai Greene

Down Christopher Street, past an ancient elm tree, sat a short brick building sandwiched between a hostel and an apartment complex with beige side paneling. The bricks had mellowed to a deep maroon, darkened by the city smog. On the right side of the building, hanging on by ancient screws, a wrought iron fire escape clung to the wall. Overrun vines, more gray than green, coiled around the metal rungs compromising the integrity of the contraption. Across the street, past the lines of bumper-to-bumper parked cars, Kelley, the "pretzel guy," situated his cart next to his favorite wooden bench. Wieners and twisted bread slowly rotated in the glass warmer on his bright, yellow and red cart. Kelley tied a grease-stained white apron around his thin middle and leaned back on his bench to wait.

Across from his perch, Kelley could admire the old brick building with its rusty drain pipes and cracked cement stairs. He imagined it had been something of some importance at one point with the majestic archway and scrollwork over the door, but today, forgotten in the world's run towards innovation, the building was nothing more than a stepping-stone for poor artisans and struggling med students. Kelley had admired the building for many years, watching young dreamers claim a place in the city, only to move on or be evicted. His greatest fascination lay in the three large windows directly in the center of the brick establishment. They jutted out from the flat wall creating an idealistic window seat for the renter of apartment 23B.

As of late, much to Kelley's disappointment, the large windows had remained dark, sealed tight against the brimming sunshine by thick blinds. Kelley supposed the room was vacant because, as he would tell you in a deep New Yorker accent, "Forget it! I'm hea' from dawn to dusk nea' every day. Don't nothing happen hea' on Christopher Street without my knowing." However, regarding apartment 23B, Kelley was wrong. Perhaps he had been sick, or late to work that day, but however it came about, 23B was rented out to the most peculiar individual, at least, that's what the neighbors reported to the agents.

On that bright May day, as Kelley soaked in the sunshine and contemplated the dark windows across the street, the woman in 23B was watching him back. She didn't take any great interest in him other than to wonder whether his pretzels were really quite as tasty as he made them out to be, but she noticed just the same.

Her attention was focused elsewhere. Curled up on the window seat, she peered out the right-side window, propping the blinds open but an inch, so that her dark brown eyes might catch the foot traffic just below. Her eyes brightened as they aligned upon a tall, wiry lad dressed in faded blue scrubs and yellow converse sneakers. He shook his shaggy brown hair, the mismanaged tangle flopping around like a mop. His steps were long and energetic, almost as if a gust of wind blew constantly at his back.

A small smile played on her lips. She didn't know his name, but she fondly called him 24B. He adjusted the canvas bag across his chest and shot a comment to the fellow next to him. The smile left her lips, and a slight crease marred her forehead. Who was 24B with? 24B's companion wasn't as tall, but he was much broader, his cheap, red t-shirt stretching taut across his chest. Upon his curly blonde head, he wore a Yankees baseball cap with frayed edges. Unlike 24B, the companion dragged his feet, his sneakers scratched along the pavement as if it was just too much work to lift his legs with each step. She decided immediately that she did not like the companion. 24B had no right to disrupt this beautiful May day by bringing him home. She scowled but didn't leave the window. The two young men sauntered toward the building taking the steps out front two at a time. She heard the jangle of keys at the front door and quickly stood up, her breath coming fast. With shaking fingers, she smoothed her starched white blouse.

The living room she stood in was simple. A large, gray rug, two white upholstered chairs, a black ottoman, and a white loveseat. Nothing hung on the walls except a large, ornate, empty, black frame the size of a poster. Not one pillow or throw adorned the upholstery. No bright magazines fanned out welcomingly on the ottoman. Her feet, clothed in white tube socks, quietly bore her across the tiny living room to the large oak door in the center of the apartment. The door wasn't particularly special, but to her, it was the last line of defense. Above the brass doorknob a deadbolt, with a slot for a key, snuggly held the door in place. Above the deadbolt, a small swinging metal bar attached to the door frame, was hooked to a ball fixture on the door. Above the swinging metal hook, a gold chain dangled from its fastenings. She closed her brown eyes and craned her neck to listen closely. Their footsteps, quiet at first, then grew louder, walked towards her. It was easy to tell the difference. 24B jumped from step-to-step, ever energetic. His companion took every step with a sigh, pulling himself up by the old wooden banister. Their voices carried to her and her lips parted in anticipation. The companion was going on about the Yankees, droning on about names like "Aaron Judge" and "Gerrit Cole." She had a moment of sympathy for 24B, convinced he didn't care about such things. As they drew closer, she placed one foot in front of the other until she could reach out and touch the door.

"Hey, hold up a minute," 24B said, interrupting the companion's stats on home runs. The companion stopped and turned.

"What's up?" he inquired.

"I have to drop off some mail for Mrs. Winters," 24B explained, rifling through his knapsack to pull out a pile of white envelopes, bright advertisements, and a yellow manilla envelope.

"Who's Mrs. Winters?" the companion jeered, peering over 24B's shoulder. "Who has a name like 'Ruby Winters'? She's gotta be old." On the other side of the door, she rolled her eyes.

"Oh, she's just this lady that lives in 23B—the guy who rented the apartment before me used to bring her mail up and he asked if I would do it," 24B shrugged, shuffling the papers into a neat stack.

"Whoa! Good Samaritan—are you hoping for a jackpot when she's belly up?" laughed the companion, much to 24B's chagrin.

"No," he insisted quickly.

"Sure," the companion complied, snatching the pile from 24B's hand.

"Dude, what are you doing?" protested 24B.

"Just checking out the old lady's mail," the companion replied with a chuckle. Inside, she gave an indignant 'hmph' no louder than the sound of a leaf falling from the elm tree down the street.

"I'm not sure this is a good idea," 24B said, but his voice held no real conviction.

"Don't freak, Keith, she's not even home or she would've gotten the mail herself," the companion argued.

"Keith," she uttered softly. Her tongue hitting her teeth in a pleasant, soft tap. She touched her fingers to her lips in pleasure.

While the boys rifled thoughtlessly through her personal effects, she took the opportunity to do something she had never dared do before. Convinced they were satisfactorily engaged, she crept right up to the door and placed her hand gently on the cool wood. She listened for a change in their behavior, but hearing none, she slipped onto her tip toes and peered through the round glass peep hole. The magnification made the boys look disfigured. 24B's upper body had grown considerably while his legs had shrunk. His head suddenly looked too large for his body. Never had she been this close to him and yet for her, it wasn't quite close enough. Her pink fingertips turned white as she pushed her body against the door. Arms. Chest. Stomach. Thighs. All flattened by the wooden barrier. Her mouth opened and she breathed hard, desperately hoping to materialize on the other side of the door.

She hadn't made a sound, not that the two engrossed boys would notice. The companion had found something odd and was pointing it out to 24B with great laughter.

"Dude, listen to this. 'Get skinny in just weeks with SkinnyPill. Eat what you want with SkinnyPill. Exercise—or don't, with SkinnyPill. Results guaranteed!' What a load of crap! I'll tell you why she doesn't leave that apartment, she's obese—probably can't get her fat ass through the door," he laughed obnoxiously.

His words struck her hard. Although she remained at the door, the moment had passed and she pulled herself away, her lips forming an undeniable pout. Shaky hands dropped to cover her stomach and she looked down in concern. Who was he to call her obese? He didn't even know what she looked like.

"Yeah, sure, obese," 24B laughed, but she heard the doubt in his voice. That stung more. She crossed her arms over her chest in irritation.

"Let's see, the yellow package is from some publishing house. D-oar-ance? D-u-rrance? What would they send an old, fat lady?" the companion asked.

"Eh, let's leave this, man, we really shouldn't be going through her stuff. Technically it's illegal," 24B reprimanded, suddenly gaining a conscience. The companion shrugged, already bored of the game.

"Yeah fine, we've got a game of Call of Duty to get to anyways," the companion conceded.

24B reshuffled the papers and knelt, shoving them in the crack under the door and straight into her tube-socked feet. The jolt sent the papers awry. The quick gasps from the other side of the door were undeniable and she backed up hastily cursing herself for getting so close. Her eyes darted as she waited, wondering what they might do. Their hasty whispers were undecipherable. Finally, 24B called out to her in a hesitant voice.

"Mrs. Winters? Hello? Is anyone there?"

How long would it take them to leave, she wondered. Then again she didn't want them to leave. She didn't want them to leave her all alone.

"I'm here", she said and in horror, her hand flung to her mouth and pressed hard against the betraying lips. "I'm here. I'M HERE". She yelled desperately.

"Ah, hell, it's all a fluke," 24B concluded, pushing the companion away from the apartment door and down the hall to his own tiny apartment.

"I'm here," she choked out, hanging her head. Stupid boys. Stupid mail. Stupid closeness. She jerked her head and blew heavily through her nostrils. Crawling on her knees, she gathered the scattered mail and made her way into the tiny kitchen, careful to step over floorboard one-hundred and three, a chronic 'creaker.'

At the same time, down the hallway, Keith paused to look back at apartment 23B. He watched the envelopes disappear from under the door. He pursed his lips into a straight line and gave a brief nod. She was home. It would have to be tonight, he decided.

Her kitchen, like the rest of the apartment, was bare, but pristine. Nothing on the dark gray counters except a Frigidaire stainless-steel microwave, not even a

crumb. The adjoining dining room, more of a breakfast nook, housed a black dining set. She had securely placed large wads of wool on the bottom of each chair and table leg. Nothing sat in the middle of the black square table. No jug of water. No vase of bright flowers. She placed the mail here. Pulling out a chair, relieved it didn't make a sound, she sat down to rifle through the contents. Across the room, she could hear the steady tick-tick-tick of her bedside clock and the thrum of a motor outside. She licked her index finger and sifted through the white envelopes, stacking the unwanted mail in a neat 90-degree pile. She paused upon the SkinnyPill ad, crumpling the paper in sudden emotional rage. No sooner had she crunched the ad into a ball than she quickly smoothed it back out, placing it in her neat pile of unwanted mail. Her thoughts sat uncomfortably on the companion. Papa had always told her to bide her time—opportunity would arise if she was patient.

Next door, through the thin, whispery walls, she heard her Chinese neighbors in 25B begin to talk. She knew where their talking led. Their voices were already starting to rise. She stared at the yellow manilla envelope still on the table, suddenly much afraid of its contents. With a timid straightening of shoulders, she gently pulled along the seam, releasing the seal. The smell of packing tape and office supplies hit her nose. It wasn't unpleasant. It smelled important and communal. The couple was getting louder, her head started to squeeze. She pulled out a paper packet fastened together by a chunky, black paper clip. The front page was a cover letter from the chief editor at Dorrance Publishing Company. The correspondence was friendly and to the point—he wanted more. She didn't expect to feel proud. She didn't expect to feel excited. She did expect relief and it arrived promptly.

A crash against the wall made her jump and cinch her eyebrows together. Last week they had fought over the remote control—the words "my show now" flowed awkwardly to her ears amongst the foreign strands. The week before, it had been his lack of attention. The woman in apartment 23B didn't mind the noise. In fact, she rather enjoyed the way it pierced her silence, as long as it remained on their side of the wall. The couple had moved in shortly after she had. She had thought they would be rather entertaining; a regular Soap-Opera. She usually couldn't understand them, but above the yelling, cursing, and crying, she felt the overwhelming passion that swayed their lives. One moment, besought with passionate feelings of rage, they would scream at each other, desperate to be heard. A moment later, they would cling to each other and sing sweet caresses into each other's ears until their passionate love made her feel invisible. They might not be consistent, but at least they were living.

With a small sigh, already hearing the softer change in tone from beyond the thin drywall, she rose from the table and carried her neat stack of overdue bills, ridiculous credit card offers, and lame advertisements into her bedroom. She turned to a dark corner, pulling out a small, electric paper shredder. One by one, the offensive letters rattled through the slot on top, dissected by the sharp metal teeth. She leaned back on her feet, her arms wrapped around her knees, smiling in pure satisfaction. Papa always said to keep a clean profile, that way the real you stayed hidden.

Her reverie was interrupted by the mellow voice of Adele. She raised her head in surprise and then sunk it back onto her knees in deep sorrow. Turning from the destructive machine, she inched along the floor until her back hit the bedroom wall. There she sat, next to her white bed, and mourned. In 21B, there lived an artist. A spry, thin girl with long, red hair, knee-high socks, and eyes made for tears. Her name was Brooke. She was a sculptor of paper. The woman in 23B could often smell the strong scent of polyvinyl acetate-based glue and oil of cloves, Brooke's method of turning paper scraps into papier-mâché atrocities. Brooke favored the uncomfortable and unusual. Brooke molded humans tearing themselves apart. Women curled in fetal positions. Limbs missing bodies. Brooke often used the paper shreddings from apartment 23B. She would jump into the green dumpster and pull out the clear bag of paper pieces, cradling the free supplies.

She liked Brooke, but Brooke, swayed by her desire to feel life, was susceptible to great pain. Heartbreak was Brooke's fate, and nearly weekly, Brooke played melodies of lamentations while mixing her foul-smelling glue and creating expressions of torment. The woman in 23B endured each despairing heartbreak as if it were her own, not because she genuinely felt for Brooke, but because she craved the capacity to feel. She could only fantasize over what it might be like to love someone so intensely that she would risk it all despite the inevitable fall. The only love she had experienced had been volcanic. An eruption of emotion, raging liquid lava seeping from her eyes and now a crusty heart concealing a boiling interior. Sitting against the wall, she let Brooke cry and sing Adele's mournful tune. The lament took her back, reminding her of people she had once loved. If only…no, it wouldn't do any good to dwell.

Four hours away, in a high-security government building in downtown Washington D.C., Clark Pierce settled down at his desk with a cup of strong, cheap coffee. He pulled off his blue suit coat, revealing his concealed handgun. In the middle of his desk, on top of random paperwork and yellow legal paper with illegible handwritten notes, sat a brown file with the words "Federal Witness Protection Program" printed in black letters. Pierce took a sip of coffee, blinking rapidly as he swallowed.

"What have we got here," he muttered, opening the file. The file was messy, not that Pierce minded. "Tum-tum-tum," he sang, flipping through the information on Rachele Sisca, a witness protection subject under the alias "Ruby Winters."

He recalled her story, a messy case. He had been briefed on the case when he first started at the Bureau a couple months ago. She was the daughter of the notorious La Cosa Nostra Mafia member, Alphonse "Funzi" Sisca. Only she wasn't really his daughter. It was the reason she had agreed to witness in the first place, he remembered. The inner workings of the mafia are never neat, it's all about the code. Funzi lost it when a mafioso, by the name of Giuseppe, broke the code by sleeping with Funzi's wife—a deadly offense. Pierce glanced at the file. Funzi had been in prison at the time—maybe his wife had been bored. The Cosa Nostra rules of conduct are clear on marital relations—mafiosi don't go looking at each other's wives. Pierce didn't know how Funzi found out, but the report claimed all hell broke loose on Rachele's eighteenth birthday.

"Happy Birthday," Pierce muttered sarcastically. He kept reading.

Funzi found out it was Giuseppe, either by gut or science, and demanded justice—after all, the code must be upheld. Documents reported the mess resulted in ten wounded and three casualties; however, the documents didn't say how the catastrophe had started an underground mafia war. Law enforcement was quick on the scene and desperate to cage as many mafia members as possible to bring some normalcy back to the streets. And that's when she had come forward. Hair in knots, black and blue bruises marring her skin, and eyes of steel. Apparently Funzi didn't take too well to housing an illegitimate daughter. Pierce guessed Funzi had underestimated her because she didn't take too well to his treatment either. She sold him out, giving the FBI critical information to break up his drug trafficking operation and send him back to prison. Trouble was, Funzi's influence was widespread and the mafiosi were eager to put an end to their little rat. She had been admitted to the program immediately. Multiple death threats and two near-death experiences riddled the last three years, forcing her to move around every couple of months. The threats had seemed to slow down, but she was scarred. The program called her their easiest witness. She didn't leave her house, didn't get close to people, and never drew attention to herself. She was easy for them, but Pierce couldn't imagine she had much of a life.

What he didn't understand is why the program was bringing her case back up. Funzi was in for life and she didn't leave a paper trail. His fingers drummed the desktop and he stared at the photograph of Rachele. Her hair was shoulder length in the picture—straight and brown with feathery bangs. Her brown eyes were large—and disturbingly empty. Her stature was average—her bony shoulders and elbows made her look thin.

"Rachele Sisca," Pierce said aloud. "Hm, what's this?"

Pierce pulled a clean, crisp envelope from behind the picture. The postage stamp was dated 5/1/2021. He lifted the edge of the open envelope and pulled out the letter. In a sloppy, careless hand, the message was clear—she was out. Pierce frowned. It was common enough for witnesses to get tired of the drain the program placed on them. Some witnesses couldn't earn money without reverting to their criminal pasts. She wasn't clean of course—she had lived with a mafia capo for eighteen years, but surely, she wouldn't be trying to get back in after all this time. There was no way Cosa Nostra would let that fly. So why the letter and why did it seem so out of character? Pierce grabbed his office phone and punched three numbers.

"Hello?"

"Dirk, I'm gonna' need a team to do a check for me."

"Uh, sure, who's the target?"

"Rachele Sisca, New York City."

Ruby Winters had deserted her place by Brooke. She roamed into the kitchen and grabbed one of her many jugs of bleach from under the kitchen sink. Donning yellow rubber gloves, she doused a wet rag in the bleach before scouring her already spotless kitchen. Papa always said the best tools to do a job were in the kitchen. Next door, the couple in 25B were laughing. The sound bounced off the walls and reverberated through her empty apartment. She liked it when they laughed, it made her think of times she had laughed, back when Papa threw her lavish parties and Mama took her shopping at Bloomingdales.

"No," she hissed and flung the rag in the sink, tossing the gloves in the garbage bin. "They didn't make you laugh, they made you cry." A sharp honk made her jump and she turned to the window seat to peer out. Just outside, 24B was climbing into a yellow taxicab with the companion. Where were they going? When would he be back? Her shoulders sunk and she leaned her chin on one bony knee. Brooke's melancholy tunes wafted to her ears just as the couple in 25B giggled in a passionate embrace. Her hands leapt up to cover her ears, squeezing her head as tight as she could. She wished she could follow 24B. He felt the sunshine and it made him smile. He walked the earth and it made him vibrant. The earth made her scared—there were too many opportunities for disaster, namely in the way of death. The thought made her spiral.

One year ago. Boston. Traveling on the "T." Prudential to Park Street, she had told herself repeatedly, clutching her handbag tightly in fear of pick pockets. Strange glances. Was everyone staring at her? What did they see? Did they know? They had to know. Knuckles white. The train car lurched and the momentum moved a man towards her. Her hand shot out instinctively and the distinctive crack of the nasal bones let her know she had hit her mark. The man screamed, clutching his nose as blood seeped past his fingers. Collective gasps. If they hadn't been before, everyone was staring at her now. She pulled back, folding within herself. Park Street would have to wait.

Ruby squeezed her eyes tight, hugging herself even tighter in an attempt to push out the memory—in an attempt to push out Rachele.

That evening, as the sun crept behind the brick establishment, Kelley untied his apron and packed up his red and yellow cart for the long walk back into the inner-city.

"Wait!" called out a young man with yellow converse sneakers. The lad strode up to the stand and smiling sheepishly asked for a pretzel. Kelley shrugged.

"You can have the last one, but it's cold," Kelley told him, waving off the three one-dollar bills the young man handed to him. The lad grinned and grabbed the braided pretzel from Kelley.

"Thanks," he called, starting across the street and throwing Kelley a wave. As he waved, Kelley thought he saw a glint of metal from something tucked in the back of the young man's jeans. But with a rub of his eyes, Kelley called himself old and disregarded the sight, plodding his way down Christopher Street.

Keith wasted no time reaching his floor, but he didn't take the long hallway to his apartment. Instead, he paused in front of 23B. As usual, no light shone from under the door. No sound permeated the wood. Even though it was supper time, no scent of cooking food wafted to his nose. He hesitated, not out of fear, but because he suddenly realized he had never knocked on her door before. He had never truly thought she was home. Over the past six months, he had dutifully delivered her mail, but not once had he stopped to inquire after the inhabitant. He hadn't thought she would be there to respond. His companion's words that day

had struck him with an impeccable opportunity, making him decide he wouldn't go another day without meeting Mrs. Winters for himself. With determination, he lifted his scrawny arm and rapped twice on the sturdy door. He didn't hear anything, but he suspected she was there.

"Hello? Mrs. Winters? It's me, Keith. Um, yeah, I live in apartment 24B—I'm the fellow who delivers your mail," he explained, feeling rather absurd about the whole thing. Suppose she wasn't there, and he was making a grand fool of himself. Still no sound. Still, he needed her to be there.

"Well—please, I know you're in there. I just wanted to…" he racked his brain for something plausible, "apologize, I guess—my friend and I were kind of stupid earlier…I brought you something."

Keith couldn't have known the turmoil building on the other side of the door. She had been startled to hear his rapping, but now she was tormented. She didn't get close to people. It kept her alive, but here was this boy with little care in the world saying sorry and offering her a gift. Maybe the couple in 25B had taken their toll on her. Or maybe Brooke's sad ballads messed with her head. Either way, she didn't want to keep silent this time. With trembling fingers, she slid the gold chain off its hook. It rattled noisily against the door frame. Keith smiled, nervously excited. His trigger finger tapped incessantly against his jeans in anticipation, but the door didn't open. He heard the sound of another lock being dismantled, and yet another. How many locks did she have? Eventually, the sound of bolts and levers turning stopped and the brass knob rotated to open the last defense. Keith hadn't quite known what to expect, but the girl on the other side of the door was not it. She hid her body behind the door and peered curiously at him with deep brown eyes from behind long shaggy bangs. Keith hadn't quite known what to expect, but the girl on the other side of the door was not it. She hid her body behind the door and peered curiously at him with deep brown eyes from behind long shaggy bangs.

"Hi," he said breathlessly, adrenaline pumping painfully.

"Hello," she replied quietly.

"Um—here, I have something for you," he said, thrusting the golden pretzel out to her. "It's not hot—'fraid I was bit late. Just managed to get the last one." He wouldn't have known it, but that pretzel was the best thing he could have given her—a taste of the world she was perpetually hiding from. A rare delicacy not from a can or box. Her eyes shone.

"Would you like to come in?" she asked after a brief hesitation, her voice barely louder than a whisper.

"Yeah," Keith nodded, crossing into her dim threshold. As she closed the door behind him, he stared. He took in the bare apartment, blank walls, and smell of bleach. She mechanically fastened each lock before turning around to face him. He noticed her hang the small key to the final lock on a tiny nail next to the doorframe. He took a moment to really look at her. Her clothing hung loosely on her thin frame. Her large, dark eyes and slender facial features weren't flashy, but they held a natural beauty that he didn't find unpleasant to look at. Her arms were wrapped around herself and she didn't make any motion to address him.

He laughed nervously. "You weren't really what I was expecting," he told her. No response. She didn't meet his eyes. How was she supposed to respond to that?

"I thought maybe you were older, or ill and that's why you couldn't get your mail," he explained, his voice much too loud in the empty apartment. She smiled softly and his shoulders relaxed.

"I'm not old," she finally said, her voice still soft and low, "I just don't like leaving." He nodded as a pretense to appear like he understood . There was no doubt now in his mind that she had overheard their conversation earlier.

"Well, I felt real bad about going through your mail and stuff, so I brought you this pretzel," he told her. Rubbing his free hand behind his neck, he looked at the breaded treat suddenly in a new light. What kind of creep brought a pretzel from a cheap food stand as an apology?

"But you don't have to eat it," he stumbled, "it's cold anyways."

"No," she retorted quickly, snatching the bread from his hand, "I want it—thank you." His throat was dry. Had he forgotten how to talk to girls or was it just this girl?

"I have a microwave," she told him, "I'll heat it up." Her voice had grown stronger, and he heard the lilting accent so common in the Italian districts. She gestured to her couch and he smiled, removing the knapsack from around his body and walking towards the white chair, but a motion from her made him pause. She put one finger to her lip and pointed to the floorboard at his feet.

"It creaks," she told him. He nodded slowly and made a conscious effort to step over it, much to her pleasure. She swept silently into the kitchen and put the salty pretzel in the microwave, setting the timer for three minutes. She wasn't sure how long it took for pretzels to become warm. When she walked back over to him, she found him stiffly seated on the loveseat. His yellow converse sneakers tapping the wooden floorboards nervously. Strands of hair fell into his eyes and she had the peculiar desire to brush them away.

"Are you uncomfortable?" she asked bluntly.
He blushed.

"Well—kind of," he admitted. Her face mirrored his—a dark red spread across her cheeks.

"Say, why don't you ever leave your apartment?" he asked, desperate to draw the strange creature in front of him closer. She drew a thick lock of hair behind one ear and tilted her head at him.

"It's safe inside."

"Safe from what?" he asked.

She shrugged her bony shoulders. "Everything. Everybody."

He didn't know how to reply. She gestured to the window.

"I watch you sometimes, you seem happy," she told him. It didn't seem an odd observation to make at the

time, but any normal human being would have the decency to be slightly creeped out by her declaration. Keith cleared his throat.

"That's not creepy," he chuckled. She didn't laugh and he cleared his throat again.

"Yeah, I suppose I'm pretty happy. I'm going to med school so that's a pain." He began to tell her about his school, the demanding doctors, preppy nurses, and elusive professors. She liked hearing his voice. It was even and low. She had unconsciously crept closer, and Keith was afraid she would bolt if he stopped chatting. She could smell him now. The faint scent of aftershave. The musky smell of leather. The microwave went off. Beep. Beep. Beep. Beep. She repeated the sound under her breath but didn't leave his side.

"Beep. Beep. Beep. Beep."

"I guess I'll be out of here in the next year or so, my friend—the one who was here today, he's got a real nice place closer to the school. It's all fixed up, not like this crappy building," he felt foolish speaking. She was watching so intently that he felt like an exhibition. He didn't want to be there any longer.

"Say, my friend, Giuseppe, didn't mean all that stuff he said earlier. He's just a jerk sometimes and says stupid things." He watched her closely from beneath his unruly hair, curious as to how she might respond.

"Giuseppe?" she repeated.

"Yeah, kind of a peculiar name, pretty sure it's passed down from some mobster," he added, rubbing his hands on his jeans. He quickly pulled them away and balled them into fists.

Beep. Beep. Beep. Beep.

Her eyes had narrowed on him and he suddenly didn't find them so very beautiful.

"I think your pretzel is ready," he said quietly, shrinking back into the sofa, his right hand sliding behind his back.

"Beep. Beep. Beep. Beep," she repeated under her breath.

Two days later, Pierce stood in the middle of apartment 23B and gazed around the room with a permanent frown. When Dirk had called him with news that their "check-up" had gone horribly awry, he hadn't been prepared. That hadn't changed when he had boarded his plane at 6am or opened the wooden door with the three locks at 9am.

"What've we got, Dirk?" he asked, choking down a cup of poorly brewed thick, black coffee. Dirk shook his head, "It's not pretty, Pierce."

Pierce followed the U.S. Marshall into the adjoining bedroom. He paused for a moment to glance at a framed picture on the bedside table. The picture was of three people and a black Labrador Retriever. A man, woman, and child embraced the dog, but the dog was the only one with a face. The other faces were violently scratched off, revealing the white underbelly of the portrait.

Pierce cleared his throat uncomfortably and entered the bathroom where Dirk was standing. It was the smell that hit him first. If he weren't in a three-story, crumbling apartment building, he might have thought he was at an indoor pool.

The intense smell of chlorine threatened to burn his nostrils and he quickly pulled his hand up to protect them, but upon seeing the bathtub, he dropped it in horror.

"What the hell?" he exclaimed.

"I warned you it wasn't pretty," Dirk repeated.

The two men stood over the white porcelain tub. The sheer shower curtain had been pulled back to reveal a pink, chemical stew slowly disintegrating something—somebody.

"What is this?" Pierce insisted, suddenly angry. This was all too much. Where was Rachele?

"Look, Clark," Dirk insisted, pulling the man from the bathroom. "We've already questioned everyone in the building—they're all accounted for except the kid in 24B and Rachele Sisca—Ruby Winters. One of them is in that tub and the other one is who knows where."

Pierce felt sick.

"Who do you think is in the tub?" he asked, not really wanting to know the answer. Dirk shook his head.

"I'm not sure—forensics will have more details. We found a yellow converse sneaker under the couch and a bullet hole in the middle of that frame in the living room, but no blood. There are half a dozen empty gallons of bleach in the kitchen and wads of brown hair in the sink. We've checked the drawers and all her clothes are still here. I don't know what happened, but we better find out quickly. Either Rachele is on the wanted list, or the mafia got rid of their rat. Guess she should've kept that door locked."

The irony was not lost on Pierce. Rachele had kept herself locked up for a reason, only now did he wonder if it was to protect herself or to protect others.

He exhaled deeply and glanced around the room once again, his eyes fell upon a stack of white paper on the dresser. Not a sheet was out of place. On top, in neat, precise handwriting, she had left a simple remark on a yellow sticky note: Look what you did—I'm proud of you.

Confused, Pierce peered under the top page to find the note left by the editor of Dorrance Publishing Company. He flipped back to the sticky note and stared at the offensive yellow paper as realization began to dawn on him. She had never written that note in his file. She had never contacted the bureau. Dread seeped in as he glanced back at the bathtub then over to the gaping gunshot hole in the wall. What exactly had gone down in apartment 23B?

THE ELEPHANT ROPE

Mei Fung Elizabeth Chan

STORIES

Megan Moore

She loved his stories.

There was a ritual to his storytelling, a set of rules to follow. He always sat in his leather recliner, with her on his lap or snuggled in next to him on the seat. When she got too big to sit in the chair with him, she'd settle cross-legged on the floor. There was always hot cocoa and a hand-made afghan, crackling logs in the fireplace. Sometimes her cousins would join them, but she was the only one who heard all of her grandfather's stories.

He told the first one when she was five. The snow storm had cancelled school, knocked down the power lines. They had no heat, so her grandparents invited them to stay the night. She was scared. Her teddy bear had been forgotten in the rush, and she had never slept without it before.

To save her from tears, her grandfather scooped her into his lap. He knew just the thing to help her sleep, he said. He'd tell her a story about another snow storm. When he was young, they didn't have heat. The Massachusetts winters were cold, and there weren't enough blankets to keep all eleven siblings warm through the night. One January evening, a storm blew through the town that left snow two feet deep on the doorstep. Up in their attic bedroom, he and his brother shivered all through the night. In the morning, they saw that the glass of water her grandfather had brought up to bed had frozen solid in the night. But the sight of the perfect snow, decorating the roofs of the houses like icing on gingerbread, made them forget the cold for a moment.

From then on, he greeted her with stories. Every visit brought a new tale. She heard of stealing bread from bakeries when food was scarce at home, the loaves plucked by nimble hands from cooling racks when back doors were left open, whole loaves devoured while still warm. She heard about the time a group of young and mischievous boys thought it would be fun to drag discarded Christmas trees across the road. They piled the trunks high, forming a blockade. What they expected to happen, her grandfather couldn't tell her. What he certainly hadn't expected was for a Brinks truck to roll through, fresh from picking up the day's earnings at the grocery store down the road. The driver came out with a shotgun raised, and the boys ran for the hills.

Later, she would visit while home from college. His hair was whiter, his smile lines deeper, but his eyes still shone when she asked for a story. She was

studying to become a writer, but her own stories kept slipping from her grasp. She felt as though she was doing nothing with her life, a complete failure at only nineteen. The despair was the kind only a child could feel, one who didn't realize that the world still had so much left to give. His stories comforted her, showed her the magic that could be found in an ordinary life. They allowed her to escape from her own problems for a little while.

During one such visit, he finally told her the story she'd been asking after for a while now: the story of how he met her grandmother.

The year was 1964. Her grandfather was freshly nineteen, the same age she was now. The threat of the Vietnam War loomed over his head, but he didn't let it bother him. He was invincible, working a steady job, driving a car he paid for all by himself. It wasn't anything fancy, just a solidly built Ford from the '40s. It was enough to catch the eye of a girl standing outside the drug store. She asked for a ride home, and he obliged.

Five years later, the two would be married. Of course, first he'd be drafted to fight in Vietnam, buy a ring in Thailand in case he didn't make it home to her, hitchhike his way back across the country after he was discharged and dropped in California. But they didn't know that yet. They were just two teenagers in love.

The years continued to pass for her. She chased ideas for novels, magazine articles, and short stories. Some she loved, and some just paid her bills. She always held on to the stories her grandfather had told by the fire, year after year. They gave her a smile on a hard day, a comforting memory when things looked difficult. His stories grew beyond simple tales of childhood mischief and teenage love. They became something beautiful.

One cold winter day, she went to visit her grandfather again. He still had that leather recliner, still made her a cup of hot cocoa. By now, she was twenty-five, and he, eighty-one. She'd been toying with an idea for a few months now, and wanted to see what he thought of it.

She asked if he'd ever thought of writing a book about his life, a book of the stories he had told her over the years. He laughed, that same shine in his eyes. He had not, he told her. The idea of sharing his stories with anyone other than his grandchildren had never crossed his mind. But, he trusted her. If she thought he had a story to tell, he would do his best to tell it.

She smiled, pulling a notebook out of her bag. It was already filled with scribbled notes, fragments of tales she remembered. She knew he had a story to tell. Several, in fact. And she wanted to help tell them all.

EVOLUTION

Hanna August

MID-AUTUMN FESTIVAL

Sam Roberts

There's no difference between the inky black
Of the Atlantic and the midnight sky,
Aside from the Moon.
The stars could just as well be detritus.

Who's to say a million microscopic
Corpses, suspended in a primordial
Brine is any less impressive than the
Decades old death-knell of a burned-out Sun.

Does the other half of the planet look
Back with nostalgia? A longing
For those spent hours which have all but
been
Relinquished to us.

I boil water and separate tea leaves,
While you arrange mooncakes on a plate
That says: Cookies for Santa.
The
lapsang
tastes delicate, tonight
The lotus-seed paste tastes sweet.

You told me once that Su Shi wrote a
Famous poem about the Mid-Autumn
Festival, but that it was hard to translate
Into English. We too write our memories in
A language that is difficult to translate.
But I'll try my best.

Animal Portrait Aliyah McGibbon

RED STRING OF FATE

Elliot Philie

EXPLORING FICTION

Bea Henschen

How many people would create a new version of themselves if given the chance?

When I was sixteen, I realized I didn't feel the same way about gender as others did. I don't know how well I could explain it now, especially since I didn't even have the words to explain it then. It started to feel wrong being called a girl, being referred to in feminine terms. At the time I wasn't aware there were words and identities that could fit what I felt. I didn't feel comfortable telling people because I didn't have the words for it; and that made it more uncomfortable to bring up to people. I felt as if I should only mention it if I had words to explain it.

I didn't know how people would react. I knew that a lot of people around me were pretty supportive, or I assumed they would be. That didn't get rid of much of the fear though. I didn't want people to pass it off as me being "too young to know". I can't say for sure that I would've gotten negative reactions, but I wouldn't have been surprised if someone did say that.

I was quiet and a pretty reserved kid at sixteen. I didn't talk to many people. I had a small group of friends and I grew to be uncomfortable with how people perceived me. I didn't have a way to truly express myself and who I was inside,. My hair was long, my clothes felt too feminine, and everyone around me knew me as someone who I wasn't.

I started wearing my hair in a ponytail. I never wore my hair down at any point throughout sophomore year. It helped a bit because sometimes I could convince myself that my hair was short. All sophomore year I wanted to cut my hair. My parents weren't fully on board for a while, but I still asked. Along with ponytails, I tried to wear the least feminine clothes I had. I had two specific hoodies that became my favorite pieces: one was a black, baggy Fall Out Boy hoodie and the other was an All-Time Low hoodie. I donned pants and baggy clothes hoping that somehow it would change how people saw me.

It was late May, possibly mid-June of 2016, and my grade had an ice cream social by the football field. My friend and I sat by the entrance of the football field while everyone else ran to get ice cream or find somewhere to sit and hang out. This friend and I had been friends since middle school, and we became friends mostly because we had all our classes together in 8th grade. Unsure of what started this conversation, we talked about how we were perceived by people.

"I hate being seen as female. I don't want to be seen as female. Can I just be perceived as a person?" I had said. This was probably the closest I had gotten to admitting that I wasn't a female and that I hadn't felt like a girl in a while.

"Same! Like why do I need to be perceived at all? Why do we only ever see people as male or female?" he said, and it was nice to know that he felt a similar way.

"I just wish I wasn't so feminine, especially with my face" I had said, which then made him comment, "I feel like your face is pretty androgynous actually, like you don't really have much feminine facial features.

I don't remember much of the conversation after that, but that comment always stuck with me. Even now when I think about it, it makes me feel a lot better about my gender expression. To some that may not make much sense, but I had been so used to compliments about me being feminine, that hearing the opposite actually managed to make me a bit more confident in my identity.

Identity is a struggle sometimes. It is not something that is completely black and white, it's a gray area. It's fluid and always changing. Identity is a spectrum that some people have a hard time defining when it comes to themselves. Wouldn't it be easier for someone to create a version of themselves that fits who they are? And with this version, start to explore all the things that may make up their identity.

They can figure out how they feel more comfortable expressing their gender and their gender identity. They can use this character to find how they don't want to express their gender. They can use this character as an outlet to create the person they want to be or think that they might be.

Summer of 2016, I ended up convincing my parents to let me cut my hair. I went to a hair salon that is owned by my mother's friend. It's a small salon in the harbor of our small town. I was filled with excitement as we walked in and as I showed the hairdresser some reference pictures of what I wanted. The small talk I had with the hairdresser escapes me, but I do remember that when the hairdresser finished and I looked in the mirror, my hair was short, the back and sides barely touched my ears and the front was slightly longer than the rest. I was surprised but so excited at how different my hair was. I felt lighter, like I was closer to actually being who I was on the inside. I kept touching my hair, running my fingers through it and being happy when I felt it stop at my neck.

The way I felt most comfortable with exploring these thoughts was through creating characters. I've always enjoyed using fiction to express myself and use it as a tool to escape. Creating characters was something I started doing at twelve, but I didn't make any character as a way to express myself until I was maybe 16. I mostly saw it as a way to express creativity, but then I realized that if I wanted to, I could make a character and have them be an outlet to express myself. Making up a character and using them as a way to explore my own identity was something I thought would help me and make me more confident presenting my gender.

I've always liked playing male characters more than female when it came to games and roleplaying. While it isn't the thing I identify with, it's always been more comfortable for me than having to play the girl. If I were given the choice between playing the binary genders, I would've chosen male. I can't exactly explain why this is. I think sometimes when girls play games and they play a female it's "expected," and I don't want to do what people expect– especially if it makes them perceive me incorrectly.

I can't exactly say I hate playing a girl, that's not really correct. I have characters identifying as female, and I honestly have no problem playing them. But at times, it's nicer to play a character who isn't a girl. I feel like I have to play a girl in real life anyways, so getting to play a different gender in these situations is a good break from that. It's a break from having to play a role I'm uncomfortable with.

Fiction is a tool that many use for escapism. With fiction, we no longer need to think about the world we are currently in or the lives that we currently live. In fiction, there are no rules and in fiction, we are given the chance to create a world and create characters.

It would make sense that many people see fiction as a way to explore their identity and find themselves through creatingafiction. Whether it's by doing things by playing Tabletop role play games like DND, or other forms of roleplaying, where they may make a character that somewhat resembles them, using fiction can be a good way for someone to explore their identity, especially if they are very unsure of their identity.

The character they make doesn't even need to be like them. It can be a character who is completely different from them, but still allows them to explore their identity. There's really no correct way to do it. If the character makes someone feel

more comfortable with exploring, then they should continue to be and use that character.

I decided to create a character who I always saw as the person I wished I could be. I drew this character all the time and I still have drawings hidden somewhere in old notebooks or folders. This character was important to me at the time, and by creating this character, I felt like I was slowly finding a way to explain what I felt.

I named this character Alex because at the time, that was the name that felt right for me. They used gender neutral pronouns and I started to wonder if I used them as well. Alex was a short-haired blonde. They were open about who they were and they were confident. They were surrounded by support and they didn't let people bring them down for who they were. Alex was happy and confident in their gender identity, which was something that made us different. I wasn't confident but I wanted to be, so I put my confidence into them. Whenever I drew them, I wanted them to give off the vibe of having confidence in who they were, they always were smiling and posing with a peace sign, not hiding anything about them.

I did eventually tell someone about this, and that was my close friend, Rachel, who I have known since second grade. The two of us had met during recess and we quickly became close friends. She's still a very close friend of mine. She's always been a very open-minded person and very accepting, so I was comfortable with her being one of the first people to know. I remember feeling a weird mix of fear and relief. I was scared of what she would say, but I had finally told someone about it, and that was something that made me feel more comfortable with it. I decided to text her about it, because I had thought that doing it that way was less scary than in person. This happened in March 2016. I had been at home in the living room alone when I texted her.

Me: [Hey I just think you should know that I don't identify as a girl, but I'm not a boy either. I think the term non-binary explains what I am]

Her: [I will admit I'm a little confused, but I fully support you]

Even though she had been a bit confused, I still appreciated that she said she supported my identity. We never actually talked about this exchange again until a few years later. I never brought it up because I wasn't sure how, and she never brought it up again either, possibly for a similar reason. I still didn't feel comfortable telling anyone else besides her so, I continued to explore through types of roleplay and character creating.

Dungeons and Dragons, otherwise known as DND, is a Roleplaying game in which you can create a character and choose almost everything about them–such as what they are: a human, wizard, elf, or other possibilities– and their skills/powers.

The entire game is about creating a character and group who you are comfortable around. The community and friendships you create in your group are an important part of the game because you need to bounce off each other to keep the story going, especially if it's a campaign that lasts a while.

If someone wanted to explore their identity using their character, it would be a good way to figure it out because people will be talking to them and about them as if they are that character. If someone wanted to try using he/him pronouns, they could give those pronouns to the character and that person in the game would be referred to by those pronouns because the players are treating them like the character. While it may be common for people to make characters who use the same pronouns as them, there are definitely people who decide to give their character a different set of pronouns–which is why this is a good way to explore identity.

There's a small chance anyone will question it.

I still haven't had the chance to play DND, but I do plan on it eventually. I have already started creating characters, and , I think using these two characters would be a nice way to explore my gender identity. I already know that I like gender neutral pronouns. I don't enjoy feminine pronouns and think giving these two characters different sets of pronouns would be a good way to figure things out. In DND, I can write a story where the language for my identity makes sense, and I can explain it in a way that I understand. I can find a way to explain my identity and who I am by storytelling.

This is a thing that people do, especially with DND. I cannot say how common it is, but I do know that there have been a handful of times where someone has managed to explore and figure out their gender identity through something like DND. I don't know anyone personally, but I know of people that this has happened to. It is probably more common than people think, using this kind of tool to explore gender.

I think it's good that this type of concept can be used for people to explore their gender identity. Some people may not fully feel comfortable talking about their gender identity without exploring it and in some ways, this could easily be the best way for someone to

figure it out. If they aren't ready to actually tell other people or if they can't tell other people, they can roleplay as characters who identify in a way that they want to explore. Another thing about this way of exploring is that they can explore it however long they want without having to tell people about their identity. With this form, they are free to explore for as long as they need and actually start to understand themselves.

When I do imagine myself eventually playing DND, I imagine myself with a wonderful group of accepting people who want to have fun and be creative. I would create a character who is confident and outgoing. In the game, they'd be open about who they are and what they want in life. They'd be surrounded by friends and adventure and wouldn't back down from life. Imagining playing this type of character always makes me excited to find people to play with, especially when I imagine them talking about my character with neutral pronouns. Being referred to the pronouns I want to be, would make me feel seen the way I want to be seen.

For a few years, I didn't think about my gender identity or expression. I continued to let people perceive me as female even if deep down I knew that was incorrect. I think it felt easier than trying to find out this whole new thing about me. Letting people see me as what they thought I was was less scary than having to explain it. It was strange. It didn't feel great that I didn't have the confidence to try and come out. Every time someone used feminine pronouns or said feminine terms, something felt wrong. But, I continued to push it down and keep those thoughts away.

I stopped creating new characters who I could've used to explore my identity and tried to make more characters who matched the gender that people saw me as. I stopped exploring for a while and the characters who I had made for the purpose of exploring my gender were forgotten. I stopped writing the story that would help me find who I was.

I didn't actually start exploring my identity again until around Fall 2020. I can't put my finger on what exactly started it, I just one day realized things about my identity again. This time I did come out to more people. I came out to a few of my friends and I re-came out to the friend I had originally told. I texted her in between my classes as I sat on my bed. It was mid-November and I was nervous, but I don't think I was as nervous as I was the first time. I was more confident this round, and I had a better understanding of what she would say.

Me: [Hey I don't know if you remember but a few years ago I told you I wasn't cis, it's been a few years and I'm still not cis]

Rachel: [I think I remember that, what do you think you are?]

Me: [Non-Binary]

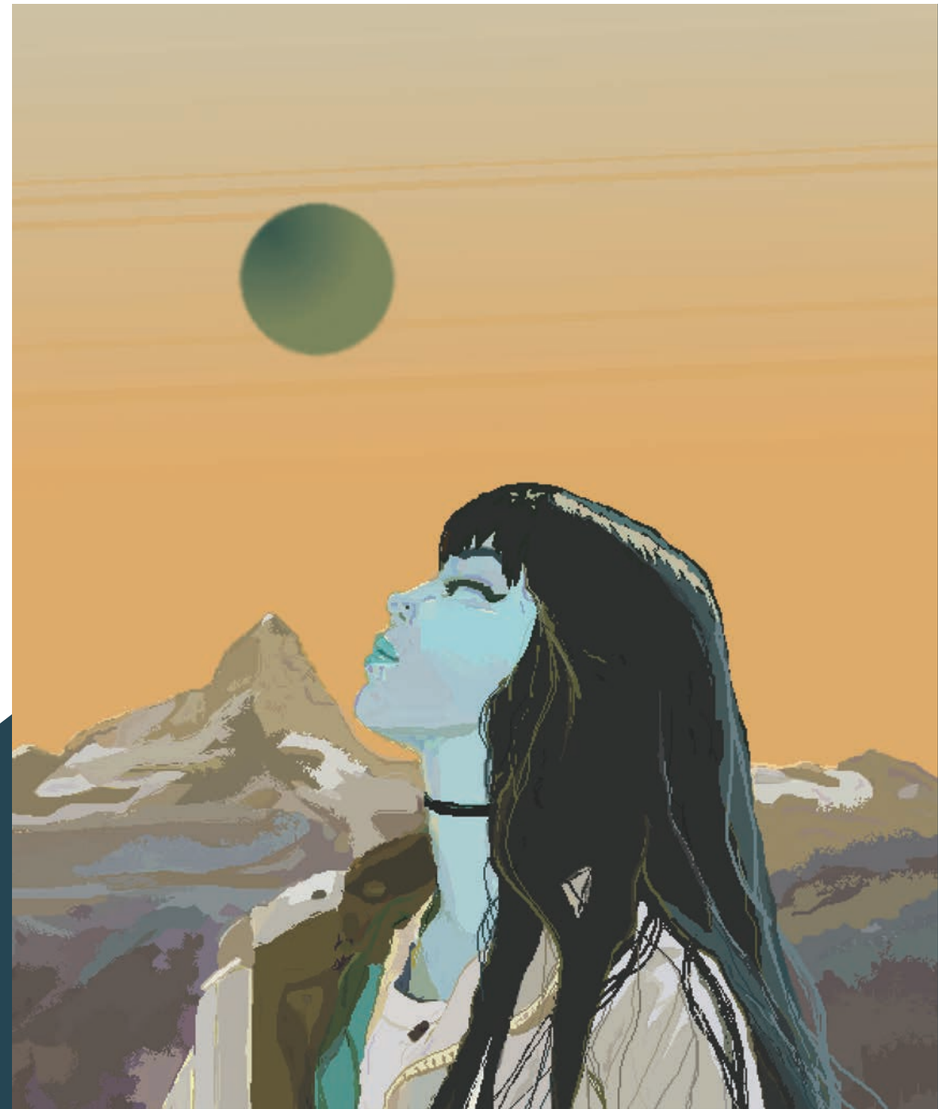
Rachel: [Okay, just know that I support you <3]

Even though I knew that was how she was going to respond, seeing her support meant a lot. It helped me feel more confident in wanting to come out to others. It took a while for me to come out to more people in my friend group, but there's still some who I'm not really out to yet.

I created a few more characters who I use to explore my identity. I've even taken some of my old characters and changed them so I can explore certain parts of my identity. I want to keep making characters and using them to explore this. That's why I'm excited to eventually play DND and maybe even find players who are playing it to explore their identity as well. I don't know if I'll truly figure out what I see as my gender identity. But using these characters and giving them my thoughts and ideas has definitely helped a bit in learning to figure out who and what I am, and other people should see this form as a way to explore if they are comfortable with exploring in this way.

PIXEL PORTRAIT

Keri McKenzie



THE INFINITE RAINBOW

Gabriel Michael Alexander

Autistic. That's the word for me.
At least, that's the word they use.
I've never had a problem with what it means.
I've always been good with my mental muscles but not with my social muscles.
I've gotten better, but my talk used to be so small you couldn't find it with a microscope.
Okay. I learned that in elementary school. If there's a specific scientific word for it then okay.
It's just that I don't really like that specific scientific word.
Autistic. What does that even mean?
It sounds like one of those words from YA fiction.
Those words that are real words but don't sound like real words.
It's a nightmare to say too.
The "Au," pulling my jaw to the floor like The Scream.
The "tistic," stretching my mouth to the side like The Joker.
My mother says that I can tell people that I'm autistic, but why would I want to do that?
"Hi, my name is Gabriel Michael Alexander, and I'm autistic."
Just writing it down sounds obnoxious.
There is a word for me that I do like.
Actually it's a few words.
On the spectrum.
Spectrum. What a fun word for a fun thing.
Pink Floyd's Dark Side of The Moon.
Into the spectrum goes one white light.
Out of the spectrum comes a rainbow, any color you like.
First question for assorted lunatics:
What's your favorite color?
Rainbow. It's a beautiful thing.
I'm on a rainbow to see the great gig in the sky.
No, I'm not mad or sad and I'm most definitely not suicidal. Just thinking and speaking.
My brain isn't damaged. It's just playing and listening to a different tune.
Maybe I missed the starting gun, but I don't need anyone to tell me when to run.
I am a rabbit, the starting gun missed me.

DAYDREAMER

Emma Paulhus

I wake to the hazy darkness that covers the sky before dawn. Birds float across the sky. Before the world has awoken, I open the glass door and slide outside, barefoot, into the dew-soaked grass. The heat has already begun creeping across the fields. The sun tries to peek through the trees, begging to come over the horizon, but she is not quite there yet. The kettle hisses at me to go back inside and take it off the stove top. While I wait for my tea to steep, my mind wanders off to other places and times. A tiny crow taps on my window and brings me back out of my head and into the kitchen. I turn around just as she flutters off. With the window closed, I left her alone in the near darkness.

When the sun finally reaches up over the tree-line, a prism hanging in my window catches a ray of sunshine and spills a rainbow across the floor. The room is filled with color. I step into the sunlight. The bright, white light blinds me. Moving away from it, I let the warmth leave my skin. Even though the sun floats high in the sky now, the moon refuses to set. She lingers in the sky, not wanting to rest. The floorboards creak upstairs telling me that they woke up. The humming of an unknown melody floats down the stairs to me, soft and steady. Their sounds are so effortless and beautiful. After the shower turns off, I hear them coming down the stairs to me, to embrace me and love me.

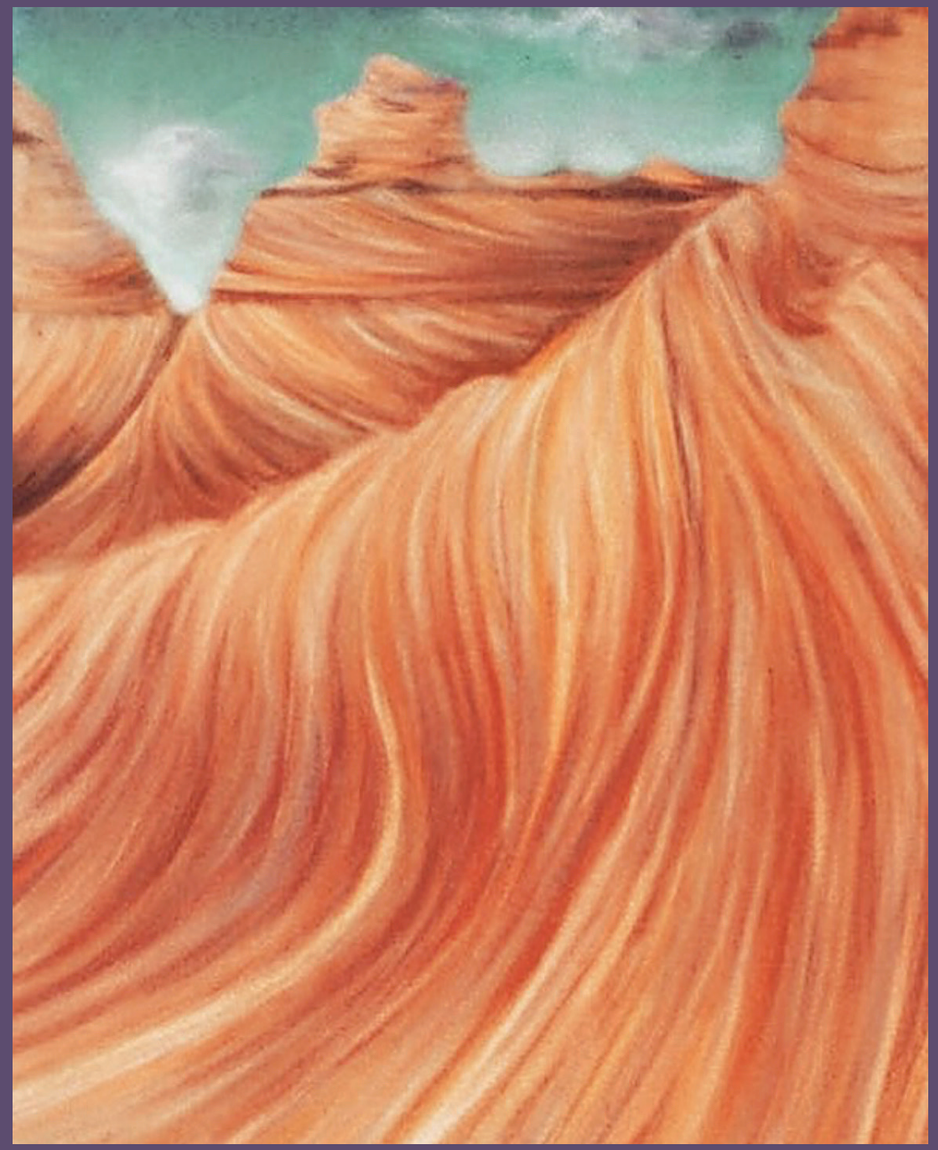
Stepping into the sunlight in the kitchen, their hair glistens. Its' shades of auburn with highlights running throughout seem to dance in the light. I place a gentle kiss on their lips. I take their hand and lead them outside. A soft chirping in the distance pulls my eyes up. I spot the tiny crow perched up on a branch. She seems to have found her partner, as another bird sits next to her. The pair flutter from branch to branch, dancing on the edge of the wood. They sing to each other as we look on. We bask in the warm glow of the sun. My cheeks are flushed red, while beads of sweat trail down my spine. I have found my partner, and now, I too can dance on the edge of the wood.

WINTER IN THE WOODS

Holly M. Hogan

RED ROCKS

Michelle Landry



MISCOMMUNICATION

Kaylie St. Ours

Is it selfish of me to want more
out of the love that you give?
Am I being discontent?
Should I learn to appreciate
that which you give and
not expect you to change?
I know that you love me,
but to feel it is another.
I know that you
understand that, so why
is it you think your
words alone are sufficient?
I know that you love me.
I only wish you would say
it in away that I hear it —
no, the way that I
feel
it best.

HANAHAKI DISEASE

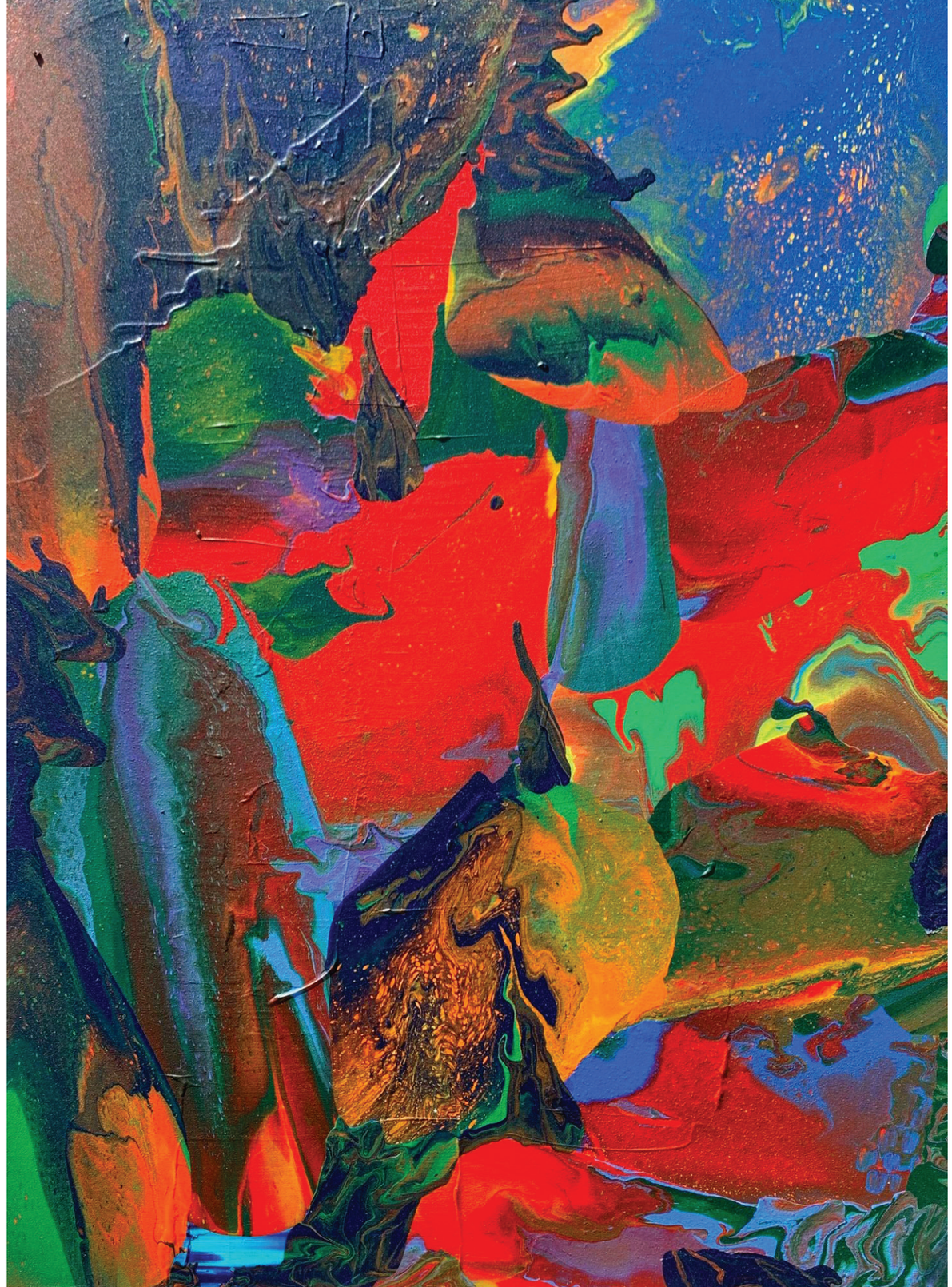
Jeanie Nigro

A pain rises in my chest
Heart beating against ribs
It's crawling up my neck
The petals fall from my lips

There are thorns at my throat
It's filling up my lungs
Vines constrict and crush
My destruction at my fingertips

Clutching bloodied daffodils
Sink my nails into my chest
Claw the flesh from my breast
Rip this traitorous organ out

Blood trickles as heart spills
Crimson lips twitch unkissed
Unrequited and unidentified
This love is ruby-throated homicide



LIBERDADE Nicol Da Silva

COLORS OF THE CONGO

John Lambiase

AN ODE TO NATURE

Adam Fernandes

Nature, my mother and father,
Brother and sister, whom I love!
Our lives are interwoven like an antique
quilt knitted by the same artisan
and conceived by the same father.
How I love you, sweet mother!
My love burns like an all-consuming fire,
my passion for you grows
with the dawning of a new day, and your
perpetual maternity brings a smile to my face!
Alas, my love for you isn't enough!
You suffer from your children's negligence and utter disregard of you!
How long will humanity continue to batter and abuse you, our dear mother?
When will your cries be heard?
Is humanity so heartless as to not care for its mother?
How much more can you take, dearest brother?
Fairest sister, why are we deaf to your pleas?
We are of but one substance,
From the dust of you and the mud, we were made.
Oh what a shame! Humanity has lost its respect for
Its fearfully and wonderfully created mother,
Has defamed the name of its father,
Made a fool of its faithful and wise brother,
And made its sister cry in shame!
Our days of corrupting you are drawing
To a fast and screeching halt! You
Have made this clear, our first family
Is reclaiming their rightful place in the hearts and minds of their children.

A DREAM AWAY

Selin Marino

YOU WIN SOME YOU LOSE

Tru Kwene

In the fifth grade you learned how to fight.
It was—
Head up.
Light on your feet.
Do not cry.
Hands up to your cheeks to protect what's left of your beauty.
Let your opponent strike first.
When they miss, and you will make sure they miss, that's when you strike.
You give it everything you got, and you land your shot
preferably in the face.
In the sixth grade you translated your knowledge into a reputation.
If they questioned your nature things could quickly get dangerous.
In the ninth grade you had to introduce a whole new school to your talents.
A few folks took more beat downs than classes but what they referred to as crazy,
you knew was survival.
By the twelfth grade you knew that your hands were the only things that kept you alive
so you brought that same energy into adulthood after you graduated,
and the first time you got arrested, you learned how to fight.

It was—
Head down.
Shut up.
You should cry now. It might be the only thing that makes you look human.
Put a 'sir' and 'ma'am' on the ending of them sentences.
Your fists are of no use here.
You scared?
Fast forward a few years and too many tears to count and now you gotta learn how to take care of yourself and I guess, in a way, that means you gotta fight.
The first time you go get a job to pay your own bills with a record and nothing but a high school education,
once again
you learn how to fight.
This time it's—
Head straight.
Look this man in the eye and accept the 9.25 he's offering that will barely help you pay the rent in your apartment.
Go to work.
And smile like you like it here.
Make fake friends with all the snakes who make more than you make and be sure to work your hardest.
This 9.25 is the difference between eating and starving.
Now hold all this pent-up aggression and transfer your knowledge.
You go home.
You feed this aggression to your family.
You watch it s p r e a d like wildfire.
You watch your children learn how to fight.
Look at how you've taught them by your actions.
You didn't have to.
And yet you had to.

Because there will always be fighters

Who
Lose.

REPEL Nate Stephen

THE STORIES OF IMMIGRANTS

Alexis Tavares

The train car is full of people much taller than me,
speaking in languages I don't understand at all.
Later, I'll learn them but for now the sounds blend together.
It is a comfort being around so many people, but also frightening.

I hold one of my moms' hands as my other mom holds my brother's.
They are bringing us somewhere new. I am hungry and await our stop.
It is warm in here, the smell of hot meals in lunch bags permeating the air.

The cab honks outside, bright yellow like sunshine itself.
I'm not sure if I feel like the embodiment of sunshine right now,
I've never lived more than 10 minutes away from my parents but
the walls were starting to make me itch and their grip too strong.

I think about the houses I pass by, on the way from one home to the next.
I've never thought about these towns or people, but I imagine the people
who live there, the old owners, the ones to come, when it was built even.

The pod speeds across the sky, destination: unknown.
A planet I've never been to, but an opportunity not everyone will have.
Stars of every color, shapes too far away to understand, I see them all.

Palms pressed up against the glass, eager to see all that awaits us as the rain pours and pours and pours
as though the sky won't run out of water ever.
It continues, the sound so comforting and warm, like a hug from my mother.
I'm ready, not impatient, no, we have all the time in the world.

We're getting closer, but I nestle into my small corner of the universe.
We're getting closer, but I nestle into my small corner of the universe.
We're getting closer, but I nestle into my small corner of the universe.

Still, I wonder,
in these quiet moments
Who will I be and where will I become?

HARBOR Katie Sheehan

KISHIUMIBE; SEASHORE

Terel Bowens

How much power does a person hold in the palms of their hands, when fireflies dance? How long would their buds burn from the fragrance?

Drinking a ginger ale right now and the mellow end is envied green as crippled and bubbly as I ever saw it.

Ornery legs swaying back and forth in connotation, smelling the aftershave of grass and soil aboard a play of intensive undertones.

Somewhere the veins of my sorrows touch my heart broken soul and recede just as gently. The aftermath of my adolescence.

My prime years are ahead, still giving my past full scholarship and yet, would I rather think of you again and again until I pass out?

A fully swaying moon in the distance providing moonshine to an absent healer.

And further off I stride to a beach in plain sight. A reflection of a sunken ship washing over these retired bones.

BOX LANTERN

Terel Bowens

BRIDGE AWARD

Catalyst Magazine

Keri McKenzie

LETTERS FROM A FRIEND

Sara Gifford

MADE WITH LOVE AND LIMA BEANS

Madeline Gosselin

There's something about being the child of an immigrant that makes everyone assume your parent must be a fantastic cook; that when I say I'm Dominican, people can nearly smell the platanos frying. My mother didn't really cook Dominican food growing up. The only taste of it I truly got as a kid was when Mom went on her occasional trips to Haverhill, a nearby city known for its high Hhispanic population. She used to be a hairdresser there, and when we were particularly short on cash, she would go to the homes of old clients and give them their usual cut and color.

"People used to ask for me by name at the salon," she continues to remind me to this day. After her appointments, she'd come home with fresh pastelitos from the bodega, and my mouth watered would water at the sight of the grease- spotted paper bag. Not unlike an empanada, pastelitos are a fried pastry pocket filled with generously seasoned beef or chicken and vegetables. The smell of the garlicky, tender meat would fill the kitchen. If this is what they eat in the Dominican Republic, I remember thinking, I don't know why the hell my mom left.

My mother doesn't know how to cook Dominican food, but I certainly remember being subjected to her funny attempts at American or Italian dishes growing up. Chicken alfredo that for some reason contained corn, and shepherd's pie with a generous helping of Kellogg's frosted flakes on top, because to her, corn flakes were corn flakes. To this day, I swear her cooking is what made me the least picky eater I know. Mom's dishes were never inedible though, in fact, I remember them fondly. They were always warm and coated the inside of your tummy in a way that left you feeling full, but not overstuffed. My sister and I never went hungry, even when times were extra tough. For as long as I can remember, Mom has always worked tirelessly. Oftentimes, she'd pick up side work on the weekends, like helping an elderly friend with gardening. During the holidays, she used to hand- decorate Christmas wreaths and go around the neighborhood to try and sell them.

I think that's what made her unusual dinner renditions taste so good; many times, she moved mountains to get them on the table.

Her nontraditional cooking can only be matched by her nontraditional parenting style. Sleepovers were a "no way, Jose" until the age of about 14, and anything more than one missed call from her, if I was allowed to hang out with friends after school, resulted in panicked Facebook messages to all my friends asking them where I was. I'd come home to a frantic lecture and a nice hot plate of American chop suey with lima beans. Back then, I never understood why she'd goet so worried about me all the time. Many times, I felt as if she didn't trust me, thinking I would be foolish enough to accept a ride from a stranger or something. The truth is that she didn't trust the outside world, but more importantly, she didn't trust herself. She didn't trust that her lectures would be enough to keep me from harm or that. That her mothering would allow me to keep coming back to her. I'd always be home for dinner, though. And If I happened to bring a friend, Mom would happily serve them up a warm, heaping pile of whatever curious dish was on the menu that night.

Over time, Mom's dishes saw a lot of improvement. Broccoli eventually replaced the corn in the chicken alfredo, and the cornflake topping on the shepherd's pie was mnixed altogether. Her cooking today isn't void of her by any means. It still maintains an unmistakable flavor, not from an ingredient, but from a feeling. Looking back on it, Mom wasn't the only one who changed. As I grew, I pushed back at her old traditions and she graciously stepped back and allowed for space. At 24, I look forward to coming home to have her examine me with loving eyes and pull a loose thread from my top. Next time I'm there, I think I'll request her American chop suey, with extra lima beans.

ALL THE WISER

Catherine Kaiser

MY LAST DINNER WITH PERRI

Caitlin Faria

The bottom of the stairs was my bed for that night; as it had been for many past nights over the last couple of years. I foolishly believed it would be nice to celebrate our three-year anniversary, but Perri thought I had spent too much money getting a couple of steaks and sides and even splurging on a stupid tablecloth. He was right, of course. It was far too much for us.

We had been struggling at the time, but he would never say that. Men and their egos, I suppose. We were college students—seniors at the time, but had been dating since freshman year. There wasn't much money with rent payments, school expenses and car insurance, rising gas prices and all of those things that empty people's wallets. Perri always made sure we were dressed appropriately though. I always wore long sleeve t-shirts and jeans, so that no creepy strangers would ogle at my arms and legs. Nothing could be too tight, because he didn't want it to look old, as if I hadn't been able to get any new clothes since high school or something. No flip-flops either. He didn't want me to trip and fall.

Perri wore his rings when he pushed me down the stairs that night. He loved those rings, but he loved the ones that I bought for him more. He never wore those because he was always worried they would fall off and get lost so he kept them on his desk, in the drawer when friends came over in case any of them were thieves.

There weren't too many stairs so the fall didn't hurt that bad. Luckily, there had only ever been a broken bone once and it had been a long time ago by then. Perri came right down after he heard the crack, too. He was so gentle. He worked as an EMT for a few years by that point, so he knew how to handle the problem.

"Don't move it," he said. "Let me find something to stabilize it with first." The doctors were worried when I showed up with the broken arm, but they knew a mistake was a mistake. People fall all the time; they see that stuff daily. That day, when I broke my arm, was just another run-of-the-mill thing that got out of hand. But that was a long time ago and I haven't done anything that bad ever since.

This time, there wasn't even a need for a hospital visit because I was just fine, some bruising here and there and that was it. I shouldn't have been so careless with the little money that we had. I knew better and planned to do better after that.

Our anniversary was on that Saturday, and the following Monday I went into class. Our house was just a town over from the university so it wasn't a long drive. Perri was still angry at me and hadn't spoken since the whole stairs thing, but after I gave some genuine apologies for buying all the steaks and tablecloth and crap, he was back to his regular old self. It was about ten minutes of me apologizing and then three perfect minutes where he kept his hand on my thigh with a firm and caring grip while staring down the traffic we sat in. The world was perfect again and he was perfect and we were perfect in all of the perfect ways.

He parked outside of his building and after a quick kiss walked over to the stairs and inside. My class was on the other side of campus so I had about a fifteen-minute walk before I got there. I asked before if I could drive the car over to my side of campus but Perri loved that car and I knew he didn't feel comfortable letting anyone but himself drive it. That day, I wished we had a crappier car, though, so that he wouldn't have loved it so much. I wouldn't have to walk through the biting late-November wind.

By the time I made it to class, Mr. Salva had already been lecturing for around ten minutes about how marriages are represented in horror novels from early America. I didn't mind being late. It's not like that's the most interesting topic anyway—it's really pretty sad.

I found my seat in the second to last row right in front of Gloria. She and I grew up together. We were both from the same town and went to all the same schools from elementary to college. It was one of those things where we rolled in the same groups and went out to the same parties and everything. She came over to my house and we studied and talked about boys we liked or watched The Princess Bride over and over again. We never really went over to her house, though. Her dad was an asshole so she never liked having people over. She slept over at my house a lot, too. I felt bad for her and all that she had going on.

We went into college with that same mindset of sticking together and all of that. The first month of freshman year was the same as high school only we went back and forth hanging out in my dorm and hers. When Perri and I started going together, he would join our movie nights, but after a while he got really sick of watching The Princess Bride and even pointed out how Gloria was being selfish for always picking the same movie over and over. She and I didn't really hang out very often at that point. We were still friends then, but she never accepted any of my invites to come over to our new house. We always had to go over to her apartment and Perri always questioned that.

I made my way past Gloria who smiled and offered a silent hello. I smiled right back, as you do, and took my seat. Immediately, I felt a shooting pain run up my back when I sat. I had to close my eyes and stop moving to hold in the discomfort. It's pretty embarrassing but there was a bruise on my bottom from when I went down those stairs the Saturday before. The hard desk chair provided no cushion and I

had to lean to one side the entire class just to have some relief. I tried to focus on Mr. Salva's lesson and pulled out my laptop to take some notes. When I started typing, I remembered that I had landed on my wrist and probably sprained it. Typing hurt a bit. Under my long sweatshirt sleeves, there were more bruises as well and having to rest my forearms on the desk irritated them further. I must have looked ridiculous with my elbows up and my body leaning. I felt like I had finally found my bearings when I felt another sharp pain radiate from my shoulder when Gloria tapped me.

She whispered, "You alright?"

"Of course." She was always sort of snoopy—wanted to know all the goings about.

"Your neck is bruised."

My sweatshirt was one of those that rides up in the front and kind of chokes you until you tug it back down. I was so worried about the pain in my bottom and forearms that I didn't even think about the bruise on the back of my neck. Right on that part where your back ends and the neck starts where there's that little bump. It wasn't that big or anything, but my sweatshirt had slid down on my back a bit, and with Gloria right behind me she of course just had to see and ask.

"Perri again?" she asked.

God, it was like she was interrogating me. Her voice got all deep and felt like the words came all the way up from her Perri—always thought he was some sort of crazy asshole or something, diaphragm. She never liked my but she didn't really know him. She thought she was the expert because she saw the bruises and all that shit but she never would consider the moments like those three perfect minutes in the car. She ignored those and even went as far as trying to convince me to break up with him and stay with her. I just wanted her to see how good he could be. If she would just give him more of a chance I'm sure she would be less . . . prying.

"It was an accident."

Her tone was still firm, but she attempted to soften it. "Did you end up at the hospital again?"

"That was one time. And no, I didn't need to,"

She let out this long breath from her nose and leaned back in her chair. Gloria had a flair for the dramatics. She thought everything was a big deal with some big conflict needing to be solved.

Mr. Salva ended class and we all picked up our bags to leave. I made sure to hold my wince in from the pain of slinging my bag onto my shoulder so that Gloria would see that I was fine and stop being such a busy-body. She just stood there watching me the whole time, like she felt bad or something. We locked eyes, just for a moment. It was weird. She had her eyebrows tensed up and scrunched in the middle. Her jaw jutted forward a bit and her lips pressed together. She was thinking hard while looking at me and I wasn't thinking at all, otherwise I would have said no when she asked me.

"What do you think about having a dinner night or something at your place?" she said.

"You, me, and Perri. I think I've been a little too hard on him. I should give him a chance." Finally, I thought. She was coming around—using her head.

"That's great. I'll have to ask, but I'm sure we can find a night," I said.

She smiled, but thinking back I can't believe I ignored how stressed out she looked. Like she was gonna throw up or something. I was just so happy at the moment that she wasn't being uptight for once.

We walked outside together talking. At least, I talked to her . She kept pretty quiet the whole time and sometimes I felt her sad eyes staring at me. I should have picked up on all of this, but I didn't.

When we got out the doors, Perri's car sped to the front. It screeched to a stop at the entrance to the building with one of the wheels popped up on the sidewalk. When the window rolled down, we saw that Perri's friend Connor was the one in the driver's seat. The music blasted so loud that I could barely hear Perri shout for me to get in. I walked over to the window and told him the good news about Gloria's dinner night idea. "Just have her come over tonight. I'll go over Connor's."

"She wants to be with both of us, hun," I said.

He rolled his eyes and groaned.

"Jesus," he said before turning to Connor. "What do you want to do?"

Connor didn't look like he wanted to be involved and didn't seem to care enough to have an opinion.

"Whatever works better for you. I don't care."

"Let's just get it over with tonight," Perri said.

I smiled big and turned towards Gloria who stood a couple of feet behind me. "You good with that?" I asked.

"I'll be there at six."

Gloria showed up right at six o'clock for dinner.

Perri was still playing his video games upstairs when I called for him to come down so it was just her and me for a few minutes. She stared at my wrists that were just barely exposed under my white long-sleeved blouse. I noticed you could see, just barely, the tail-end of one of the forearm bruises.

"You can leave him, you know," she said. "You can always stay with Her nostrils flared and her eyes were wide. It was her last plea with me.

"No, no. We're not doing this tonight. You said you would give him a chance." She stayed silent but stood up when we heard Perri's thumping feet trudge down the stairs. He always did this thing when he walked down the stairs after a bad game where he sort of slumped down and dragged his feet one step at a time. He went slow, just thwump . . . thwump . . . thwump until he finally reached the bottom. Gloria looked petrified—overreacting as always. When she glanced over and caught my eyes, she shifted from a wide gaze to a more steady and determined one. me for however long you need."

"Let's eat. Let's go," Perri said, sitting down at the table next to Gloria.

I brought over the pot of spaghetti and placed it in the middle. While I grabbed the bowl of sauce, Perri began to load his plate. Gloria looked like she wanted to throw up as she stared at him. I tried to ignore her being so unfair because at least she showed up. I thought it was her putting in effort so I was willing to overlook a face that maybe she just couldn't control at the moment.

I pulled out the wine bottle that was on the bottom shelf of the refrigerator door. We were never sure if you are supposed to put wine in a fridge, but Perri likes it cold. I carried it gently over to the table, gripping the neck with one hand and the bottom with the other. It's not an expensive wine at all. In fact, I'm pretty sure Perri picked it up for something like six dollars on his last packie run. If you carry it like you're scared to break it people will think it's expensive. I tipped it over Perri's glass first and filled it higher up

than normal—the way he liked it. When I went over to Gloria's glass, I did the whole "tell me when" thing.

"Same as Perri should be fine, maybe a little bit more than him," she said. I have to admit, that sent off some red flags for me. Gloria was never a drinker growing up. At all the parties, she always was DD and took care of everyone. I had never seen her have a drop of alcohol and suddenly she wanted more than extra. I figured we hadn't been in great contact for a while so maybe she just didn't think to tell me yet that she started drinking. As I poured my glass, Gloria pulled hers off the table and started fiddling with the rim.

"Oh, looks like this glass has a chip," she said. "I'll grab another."

I knew none of our wine glasses were chipped. I made sure to inspect them carefully before putting them out on the table. I had made mistakes with dinners before though, so I wouldn't have been surprised if I had done it again.

"I'm sorry. Let me get you—" I started to say.

"I got it," she said with her eyes about to bulge out of her skull.

"Sit. It's okay. I know my way around a kitchen."

"Surprising," Perri said, "considering you've never felt the need to come over." Gloria didn't say anything back at him. She squinted her eyes a bit and turned up the sides of her mouth in a half-smile sort of thing before turning her back to us. Her body was blocking the glass, so I didn't know what was happening when it happened. Plus, once she wasn't looking, Perri took his foot and my ankle before slowly gliding it up the side of my leg. The cloth of his sock was a bit wet—probably from stepping in a spilled drink or something in his room—but there was such light pressure applied that sent goosebumps up my body. He kept his head low, but lifted his eyes up. Beneath his eyebrows, I could see his dark eyes staring me down. Heat spread upwards through my body and radiated in my head, making my face red and my mind dizzy. Perri was the one person in the world who wanted me, and I loved him. I loved him.

Gloria returned to the table and Perri's foot slipped away from my leg leaving me feeling cold without him there. She gingerly placed her wine glass on the table. It was filled almost to the brim with red liquid. There was maybe, maybe, a centimeter of space between the drink and the top. I wondered about it—thought, maybe she had developed some drinking problem and I hadn't realized since we hadn't been hanging out much outside of class. Or maybe she just hadn't poured wine before and thought that was appropriate. I didn't know. I pretty much thought about everything other than what the real reason was.

Perri had started eating already when Gloria raised her glass the tiniest bit off the table careful not to spill it.

"We should toast," she said, "to friendship." I smiled.

It was her reaching out an olive branch to Perri and me. We were finally going to get rid of all the pointless tension and conflict and jealousy and just be with each other as good friends—that's what I thought. I raised my glass high enough that it was above my head. "May we last forever," I said.

Even Perri, despite having such a long day at home, smiled at that and raised his glass up. He had a bit of broccoli stuck in between his two front teeth. Even then, he looked handsome. I clinked with Gloria very gently so as to not knock any of her wine out, then clinked with Perri. Then they clinked with each other.

At the moment, it was perfect. The two people stretching me back and forth were finally pulled towards each other and it felt like the perfect hug. They were finally together and we were all happy. Perri smiled almost like how he did when he was with his friends and Gloria was finally doing her part for once to make this work.

I noticed that some of Gloria's drink spilled into Perri's, but didn't think there was any malicious intent behind it.

I even thought her spilling the drink into his was symbolic of everything—yes, it was messy and one-sided but it was supposed to work just fine in the end. I should have known she did it on purpose. She was gentle with me and then almost shoved her glass into Perri's.

All of the dots should have connected in that moment. I should have slapped his glass out of his hand and ordered Gloria out of our home to never be seen again. The night should have become some wild story Perri and I could tell for years. He and I were supposed to get married, have a few kids and a pretty pastel house on the outskirts of Boston with a dog named Brady and maybe a cat called Skipper. We were meant to have a future together filled with our perfect moments, but we can't. I should have stopped her, but I didn't. The glasses clinked and Perri took a big drink of his wine, finishing the glass in one fatal gulp. Not even an hour later the whole place had turned into a chaotic madhouse. Perri writhed on the floor. His muscles flexed uncontrollably as he vomited all over the carpet. He tried to clutch his stomach, but his arms struggled to follow the instructions from his brain. He had fallen right out of his chair at the table and was convulsing against the legs of the furniture. Frantically, I dialed the police station while trying to comfort him.

"Perri, Perri, baby. It's gonna be okay." I didn't know if I was lying to him or not. My tears poured out of my eyes along with snot from my nose. The dispatcher finally answered.

"Hello? Hello. Send someone, please. Eighty-seven Pine Oak Drive. My boyfriend, he's having a seizure or something. Please. Eighty-seven Pine Oak Drive. Yes, in Allsworth. I can, yes." I left the phone on speaker as I tended to Perri. The dispatcher had told me that they were sending people over right away, but I was worried I had acted too late. I was too swept up in the dinner to realize he wasn't okay.

I should have figured when the color was starting to drain from his face, but I didn't notice until he was almost translucent. He had kept saying "I'm fine, I'm fine. Quit asking," but I knew something was wrong. I should have driven him right to the hospital. We should have been at the emergency room the moment he lost control of his hands to the point where he couldn't hold his fork. We should have been in a room filled with doctors the minute his words slurred and his throat seized.

The convulsions were slowly becoming less violent and more like twitches and spasms. I was kneeling in a pool of his vomit, holding him on his side against my legs when he threw up again. The warm puke seeped through my jeans but I didn't even care. I rocked him back and forth, shifting my weight in the throw-up.

"It's okay, hunny. I love you. They'll be here soon. I promise it'll be alright," I said. Gloria had been standing a few feet away watching this tragedy unfold before making her way over to me. She crouched down so that she wouldn't get her knees soaked in the vomit that continued to come out of Perri.

Her hand rested on my back and she rubbed small circles—the sort of thing you do when a person is mourning a loved one, not actively trying to save them. Looking over,

I saw that she was crying too, but stoically. There was no emotion behind her eyes. It was like she was in some sort of trance. Maybe she was crying because she had to keep up the act or maybe she was going through some sort of psychotic break, I don't know. She stared down at him while the tears slowly dripped down her cheeks. The red and blue lights shone through the window and on her face. She reached over to me and took one of my hands off of Perri to hold.

"I'm so sorry," she said, "I know you love him, but I couldn't let him keep hurting you."

It's been months now. The wake and funeral were lovely with lots of flowers and a decent amount of people. Not too many though because Perri was the kind of guy you never thought would die, so a lot of people who would have come were just in denial I'm sure.

Gloria was arrested at the scene. She didn't resist or anything, but just kept saying over and over "I did it for you. He would have killed you." She didn't know our perfect moments. All she ever saw were the bruises and the casts. She took everything from me, and I will testify against her whenever her court date is. I want that killer maniac locked up for life until she dies and burns in Hell. She took away my whole life.

I had to move out of the house Perri and I had in Allsworth. The landlord was very sweet to me and didn't even make me pay out the rest of our rental agreement. She just said "Hunny, you've been through enough. You can rest now for once, don't worry about the money." She used to text here and there making sure I was alright and that Perri and I were still getting along. She was invested in our relationship. I'm sure losing him was hard for her as well.

I'm back at my parent's house again. Mom and Dad have been trying their best to get me through all of this, but they don't know how to help. They've never lost the love of their lives—they've never lost each other—and have to navigate a world without the person who made it feel whole. I don't even know what to do anymore or what to wear. Perri always told me those things.

"Don't hang out with her."

"You can't wear that."

"Don't eat that, you don't need the calories."

He was always looking out for me. Perri was my eyes and ears, and now I'm facing the world deaf and blind with no one to take my hand and lead me through the piles of clothes and trash that litter my bedroom floor.

I quit all of my jobs and haven't gone back to school since that last day in Mr. Salva's class when that monster, Gloria, saw my bruise. My parents are fine with me giving up those things as long as I go talk to this therapist they set me up with once a week. It's some woman that Mom's old friend knew. She's very nice but focuses on all the wrong moments in my stories. We should be talking about losing Perri and the poisoning and the vomiting and Gloria and what the hell I should do now, but we never do. She always wants me to talk more about Perri and tells me to dig deeper when I talk about our perfect moments. Just like everyone else, she doesn't believe our lives were as wonderful as it really was just because of a couple of small incidents every once in a while.

The bruises, red marks, and broken bones weren't really us. They were just the leftovers of the moments when the love ran out for Perri, but it always refilled in him. He never stopped loving me even when he said he would.

I sat up in my bed for the first time in two days. I can feel the weight on my body melting away and can't help but think how proud Perri would be to see me losing those extra pounds I sat up in my bed for the first time in two days. I can feel the weight on my body melting away and can't help but think how proud Perri would be to see me losing those extra pounds he always thought I could get rid of. I step over the piles of clothes and empty water bottles that litter my floor and start to cross the room to get to a pair of mismatched socks I could put on my cold feet.

Halfway across the floor, I catch a glimpse of myself in the full-length mirror leaning against the wall. My hair looks ragged and my cheeks seem to be sunken in. I still look like myself, but there's something so different that I can't figure out. I try to fix my hair, but that's not the problem. Maybe it's the sweatshirt's color. I was wearing one of Perri's favorite old sweatshirts. It was a gigantic, navy blue Champion hoodie with a few miscellaneous stains covering it and holes in the armpits. It smelled like his sweat and favorite foods. I didn't want to take it off, but it's starting to drive me crazy that I can't piece together what looks different about me.

I pick up a pale green t-shirt off the floor nearby and peel Perri's sweatshirt off. I hold it tightly before pulling it in for a gentle hug. The things I would give for this sweatshirt to be him. I fold it and place it on the corner of my bed. I turn back to the mirror with the t-shirt in hand and look up to see my body in the mirror.

There it is. My clear, pale skin. I look down at my forearms and they are empty. No bruises from being thrown down the stairs or from Perri pulling me. I take two fingers and press them against the inside of my wrist. There's no pain. The discomfort from the sprain went away. I move back over to the bed and sit down without any feelings of agony spreading through my body.

I can't remember the last time I saw my skin so clear. I can't remember the last time I could move so much without any stinging or throbbing or aching or pain.

My skin was empty, not my life.

SWEET SUNFLOWER Melina Fernandes

ONLINE SHOPPING

Holly M. Hogan

They were starving for something more.
Scrolling for their feed,
But unable to get full.

You can't find sustenance in synthetic social circles.

The grocery store is filled with mannequins,
Posing and posting like they have their life together.

He's heading down the health aisle,
But there's cigarettes and beer cans in his cupboards at home.

She's buying baby food,
Wearing a wedding ring, when her man walked out a week ago.

They follow each other and their false facades,
Wanting more of what the other shows they have,

Feeding egos and influencing insecurities,

when our hearts are starving.

SPIRIT ANIMAL Alyssa Asci

12 Mason Terra

PENAS DE PERIQUITO Nicol Da Silva

THE RIVER BY THE WOODS

Samantha Gibson

Everyday I walk to the river and try to remember, or maybe
Remember when you held my hand?
Remember when I came and said goodbye?
The river resembled every part of you
The way you spoke to me was as soft as the waves that hit the shore
A part of me sat at the river because I felt guilty for not calling
You were right there, waiting for the phone to ring, stuck in a hospital room
Waiting to learn how my week was and how I was doing
I never called when you were here
You watched all my life events from the quiet hospital room
Now, I sit at the river,
Mourning a relationship I had, a supporter who is now forever lost
You won't walk me down the aisle
You won't meet my children, whom you would have loved
Every Sunday I will bring them to the river, show them who they are missing
I miss you
Now and forever I will sit by the river
I look into my reflection and the guilt washes over me once more

THE PAIN IN MY DARK CLOSET

Gaelle Sinsaire

There is pain inside of me. It's cold and loud. I close the doors.
Love that was forbidden but, in my eyes, it seems good.
Will I be punished for it?
The mother that could never understand what my hugs meant.
The stars that started falling seem priceless.
The tears that feed the anger that is burning in me.
I feel a coldness in my soul, deep like darkness was hugging me.
The wind breeze is like a messenger that is bringing hope.

A guilty soul yells inside of me, says "I feel like I'm in a cage"
Maybe I was wrong all along
Maybe her tears were the answers, and she did love me,
I don't know where to go.
Unwanted pain is eating my insides like worms.
Eyes, why aren't you able to stop the tears?
Heart, why is every heartbreak slowing you everyday?
Even the sky is sending the rain, and you two became best friends.
Sometimes I'm a happy, peaceful soul. Every breath is
Like the waterfall inside the roots of the tree.
The pain flows in part of my soul.
Maybe the morning when mother forgot me was shocking...
When my father's eyes said I love you, my child was surprised.

Last night the moon woke me up with a warm smile.
The wind from the North finally kneels down to pour his heart out
I want to be free

LOVE THY NEIGHBOR Noreen Timmoney

HANDFUL OF HAPPINESS

Elysia Johnson

ARE YOU MY MOTHER?

Kaleigh Rollins

Are you my mother? I ask
The woman who gave birth to me
Are you my mother? I ask
    The teacher who believed in me and saw my potential
Are you my mother? I ask
    The boss who bought me a cake for my birthday, surprised me with coffee,
and got me a Christmas present that I really did like
Are you my mother? I ask
    The girl who gave generous hugs that were warm and made me feel safe
Are you my mother? I ask
The man who bought me orange juice when I was on my period
because someone said it would help me absorb more iron and not pass out
Are you my mother? I ask
The neighbor who made me dinner and told me
that I could sleep in her daughter's empty bed
Are you my mother? I ask
    The cousin who had me live with her when I couldn't go home
Are you my mother? I ask
    The manager who let me sleep on the shelves in the back room
    So I didn't have to sleep in my cold car before my shift
Are you my mother? I ask
The ladies who smoked cigarettes out back in the cold,
never offering me one, but let me keep them company
Are you my mother? I ask
    The coworker who waited with me on Christmas Eve night
    when I was fifteen for my parents to pick me up
Are you my mother? I ask
    The grandmother who knew that my depression could actually kill me
Are you my mother? I ask
    The therapist who asked the questions that I needed to answer
    and gave the advice that I needed to hear
Are you my mother? I ask
The guy who I shared a life and bed with for over four years
Are you my mother? I ask
The drunk who stripped me naked and washed me like a child
in her bathtub, trying to get the vomit out of my hair
Are you my mother? I ask
    The face who looks back at mine in the mirror
No, but I can be, she tells me

BINOCULARS

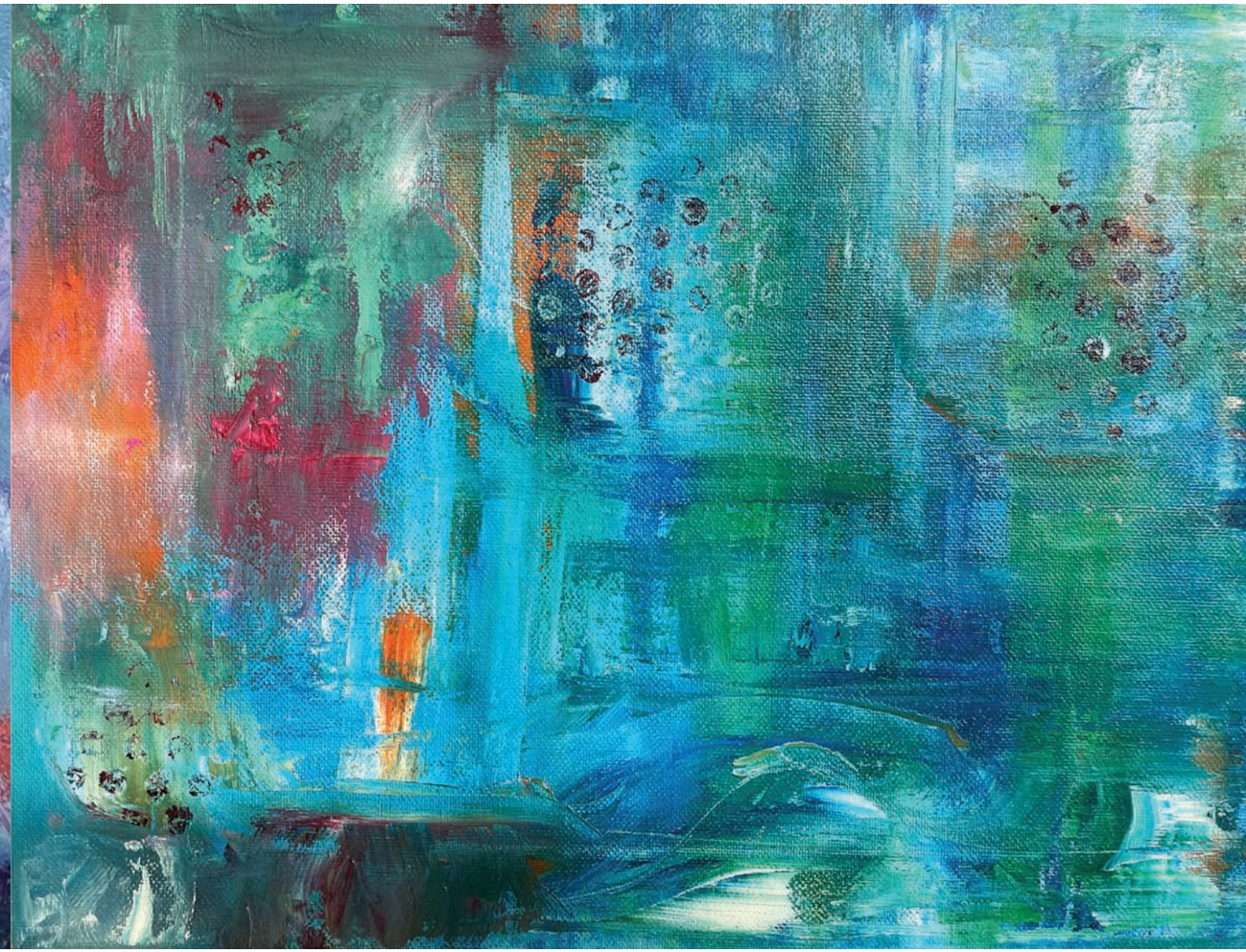
Hannah Coveney

6 YEARS OLD

Taylor Danzey

trying to explain anxiety is like trying to show a blurry image
there is complexity in the parts you can't see
when trying to explain your thoughts
when you can't understand them yourself
every time I try to write about anxiety
my head spins and my knees shake
my fingers unstable
too unsteady to type on the computer keys
anxiety is distorted frequencies
in my heartbeat
I open my mouth to speak the words to my mother
she asks about my anxiety
I tell her
anxiety is an invisible aura that wraps itself
around your fingers and never wants to let go
she welcomes herself into your brain
makes a home
with warm blankets wrapped around her
her feet kicked up on the couch
planting roots inside the places where your fears hide
she comes in and stays for however long,
leaves whenever she damn feels like it
she blabs and blabs to you
feeding you with doubts
with utter lies about reality
with worries about the past
present
future
therapists give you medications
in hopes of relaxations,
masking the voices inside
temporary.
trying to explain anxiety is like trying to show a blurry image
there is complexity in the parts you can't see
it's like trying to explain your thoughts
when you can't understand them yourself

COMETS TAIL Annie Devine



DAYDREAM Annie Devine

CALM

Yree Eery

JEALOUSY

Shayla Hinds

If anxiety is like a ball of tangled yarn,
Slowly rolling around inside my chest continuing to
Disorganize,
Then jealousy is that same ball of nothingness on fire.
And while she rolls she ignites
Burning the fleshy walls that line the inside of my skin
I'd scream in agony if my teeth weren't already clenched tightly together like a union
My top teeth and overbite make the perfect husband and wife
As my teeth move together, my jaw joins their sway
Blocking any verbalization that wanted to expose itself
It's necessary,
as the fire ball jumps between the spaces of my built in xylophone
Refusing to stop its tune until she's exhausted

TALES OF A TRAVELING THIEF

Alexis Tavares

I. Things I Have Stolen

I stole a bus ticket for the hell of it and traveled as many stops as I could, watching the colors of the sky bleed as the people became little dots through the grimy old windows as the germy streets got further and further away from the bus.

I saw many strange characters, and even more wads of gum. So much you wouldn't believe the sculpture you could make out of it. I'm not going to though because that'd be pretty gross. At least I saw Boston, its street performers, and life in motion at the speed of sound. I stole glimpses of strangers who could be friends or worse, but they'll never see me again. Maybe I looked at them each too long, just so I could try to remember their faces. I'd like to draw them in a nice sketchbook like a true artist with gray graphite pencils, or maybe some charcoal if I'm feeling kinda fancy.

It's nice to pretend like we're all traveling on this grand adventure together. For a bit. I thought about this in the grocery store while I was stealing some cheese and deli meats to fashion myself a charcuterie board for some friends downtown. The trick isn't to wear a big coat. It's all about the pockets. Anyways, when we're all in the grocery store I think that everyone inside is sharing an experience with me.

I stole some clothes, a lavender button-down shirt, crisp with factory-steam lines behind a plastic bag and envelope opening, pants that aren't denim, but black professional ones, no flaws whatsoever, the best the man in the suit could find. I very specifically wanted to make the tie match the pants, so I did. I gave it to a nice guy who looked like someone no one had given a chance yet so his life could change. He's got an interview tomorrow morning and found a place to stay.

If I'm heading there in the morning, I'll steal him a muffin and a coffee. A blueberry muffin for my buddy–I don't know his name–and a banana nut muffin for me.

There's an old brown dog with long floppy ears that wanders around the place. He can get some too. "Old fellow, there's always room at my table for you!" I say to him.

I gotta say, my favorite thing I stole was a pair of solid white Converse Chuck Taylors because I felt like the snazziest dude on the block with those shiny things.

II. Things I Would Like to Steal

I'd like to steal a street sign, not a stop sign though. Enough people tell you that every day through those angry red pens, passive aggression, uncomfortable silence, and anyone who is jealous of anyone else's success brewing with bitterness.

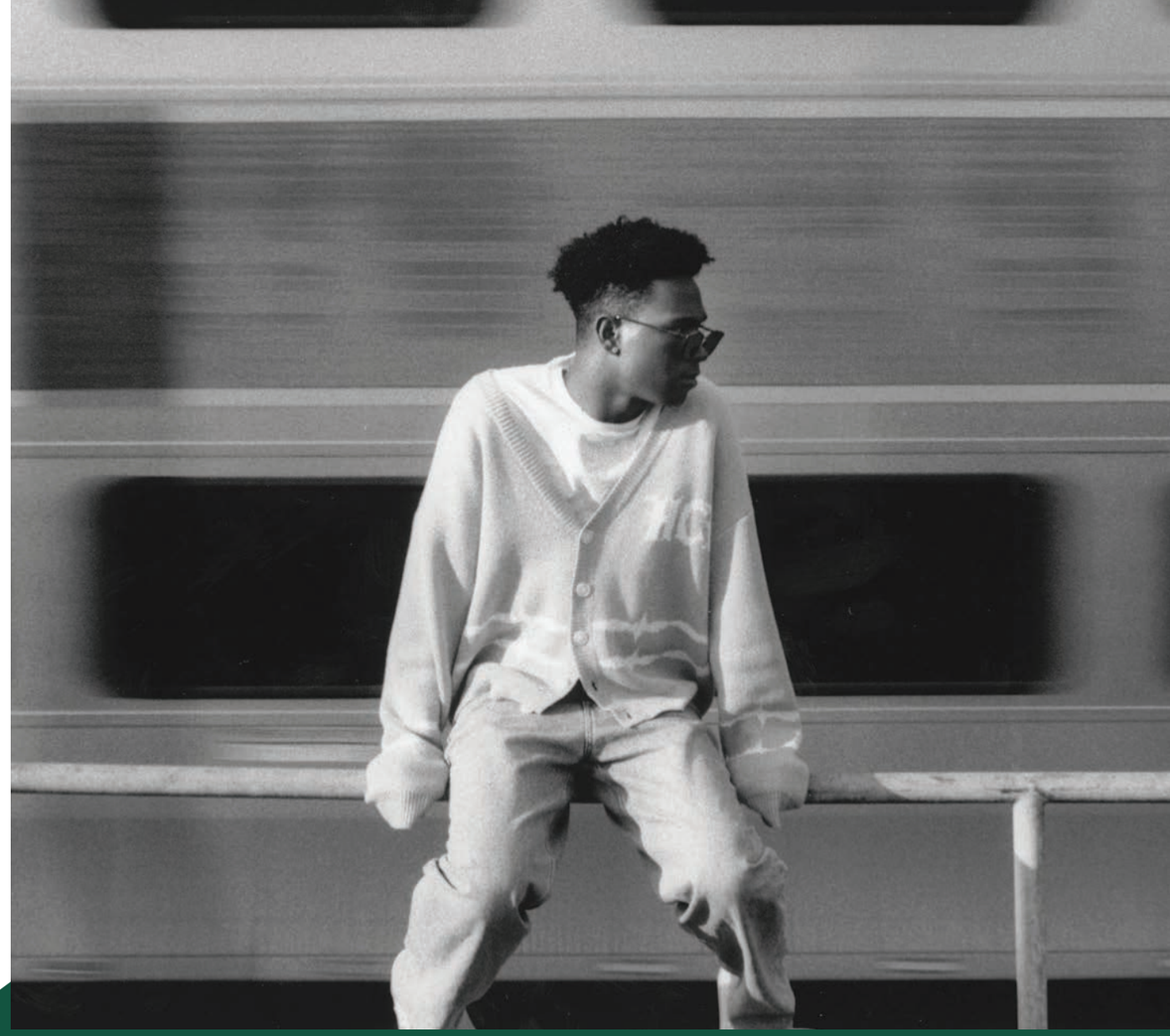
No, I want a sign that I enjoy. Not any yellow signs. I don't want to have to talk through where I'm at in life when I see the railroad sign. I don't want any directional signs. I don't need directions.

I mean, jeez, we're told what to do, how to dress, who to be, what to say, how to laugh at the right times, to smile. Oh my god, why does everyone feel like they're entitled to force a lady to smile? It's creepy, weird, and feels like I'm a performing circus monkey. Maybe I'll steal a sign from the zoo. A monkey. No wait! The sign at the monkey enclosure!

Let them rest. They don't owe you a smile or a dance. Or maybe, I'll steal the keys and let them be wild and free as they should be. That might steal my thunder, though,so I'll befriend the white tiger and (with permission, of course, I'm a respectful gentleman or woman) ride my way out of that zoo just before the authorities arrive. Wouldn't want them to steal my fun. With the tiger and the street signs that place me on the corner of Blueberry Ln and Washington Carver Circle.

I steal a Chevy truck to get out of there and boy does it feel good as my new sneakers hit the floor of the truck. The mats are nice and clean–pretty interior too!

While people sleep comfortably in their bedrooms, I steal the doubt and disbelief they have for me by creeping into their rooms with a skip and hop to the window. The dreams I give- dance in their mind, leaving them blurry-eyed and boggled when they wake, sheets and blankets tangled up, pillows just everywhere.



MOVING ON

Jared Ayotte

CONTRIBUTORS' NOTES

Gabriel Michael Alexander (he/him)

Gabriel Michael Alexander is a junior at Bridgewater State University. He is from Hingham, Massachusetts, and was born in Southampton, England. He majors in English, specifically the creative writing concentration. He has his own radio show called Star Stuff on 91.5 WBIM-FM Thursdays 3-4PM.

Nia Alvarado- Rodriguez (she/her)

Nia Rodriguez is a freshman majoring in studio art with a concentration in graphic design. She has a constant desire to create and loves to work with a variety of mediums. As of late, she considers the act of creating as an "escape" from her continuous battle with an unpredictable chronic illness. Throughout her life, art has been an outlet for her to express her passions, frustrations and everything in between.

Alyssa Asci (she/her)

Alyssa Asci is a senior with a double major in art and secondary education. She is pursuing a career in teaching art. She is inspired by nature and in her free time enjoys hiking, reading, drinking coffee, spending time with friends, family, and black cat, Sabbath.

Hanna August (she/her)

Hanna is a second-semester junior double majoring in secondary education and studio art, with a minor in special education in professional practices. She intends to become an art teacher. She has been finger painting since kindergarten, but has found an affinity for printmaking in the past year. Hanna utilizes her artwork to share personal experiences, stories, and feelings that viewers can connect with and relate to. She hopes her artwork celebrates and inspires creativity so that others can gain inspiration and create something wonderful of their own!

Jared Ayotte (he/him)

Jared is currently in his third year of college studying graphic design with a strong passion for photography. He loves to photograph people and hopes to work as a designer and photographer for musicians and artists. He has a passion for film photography and plans to expand his portfolio in the coming year.

Kathleen Barzarsky (they/them)

Kathleen Bazarsky is a queer poet from a small town in Massachusetts and a recent English graduate from Bridgewater State. In their free time, they enjoy repurposing scratched vinyl records by painting them and playing the guitar. Their other work can be seen in *The America Library of Poetry*, *The Watermark Journal*, *The Bridge* and *The Bangalore Review*.

Terel Bowens (he/him)

Terel Bowens is a graphic illustrator. Bowens's work experience world builds, creating characters and conceptual environments and spaces in development. His influences for illustrations, graphic designing included, comes from a passion for Japanese culture, such as manga or anime, native languages, and customs, among other things.

Douglas Breault (he/him)

Douglas Breault works as an interdisciplinary artist, frequently overlapping elements from photography, painting, sculpture, and video. He received his BA in studio art from Bridgewater State University, his MFA from the School of the Museum of Fine Arts at Tufts University, and he currently teaches art at BSU. His work has been included in exhibitions and screenings at various institutions, including the Museum of Fine Arts Boston, the Bristol Art Museum, the Stone Gallery at Boston University, and the Rochester Museum of Fine Arts. He is represented by Coastal Contemporary Gallery in Newport, RI and Nearby Gallery in Boston, MA.

Meagan Brodeur (she/her)

Meagan Broduer is a junior, secondary education and English major with an art minor. Art has always been something she is passionate about, and she loves sharing the joy it brings to others. She is also an animal lover.

Mei Fung Elizabeth Chan (she/her)

Mei Fung Elizabeth Chan is a Hong Kong artist who is currently working in New York. Mei was influenced by both eastern and western cultures in Hong Kong. Her work mimics her Hong Kong identity.

Kimiko Clark (she/her)

Kimiko is currently a sophomore here at BSU. She is currently majoring in English and elementary education. Reading and writing have always been incredible outlets for her to express herself. When she graduates, she hopes to continue writing, whether professionally or just as a personal hobby.

Hannah Coveney (she/her)

Hannah Coveney is majoring in graphic design and painting, and minoring in art history and will be graduating in May of 2022. She hopes to work as either a 2D art designer or illustrator for the video game industry or as an album cover artist for musicians.

Taylor Danzey (she/her)

Taylor is a senior at Bridgewater State University majoring in English with a concentration in creative writing and a minor in communications. She is from Cape Cod, MA and has a younger brother and an older sister. In the summer, she loves to go to the beach and paddle board. In her free time, she loves reading and writing poetry and going to concerts with friends!

Nicol Da Silva (she/her)

Nicol Da Silva is a BSU class of '20 graduate and currently in the process of getting her LSW license (in practicing Social Work.) She graduated with a double degree in social work and in fine arts. While studying fine arts, her main concentration was painting. She loved how art was her therapy; but she noticed that she was mostly drawn to abstract painting. Her art work was an inspiration from her trips visiting her family in Brazil; but with a touch of her emotions.

Annie Devine (she/her)

Annie Devine is a junior Fine Arts Major at BSU. She transferred after earning her Associates degree in Applied Science at Massasoit Community College. She began using oil paints at BSU.

Yree Eery (he/him)

Tyre Blevins-Shoulders, aka Yree Eery is a fashion, portrait, and nature photographer, based in Brockton MA. He bases his artwork off of his mental state.

Gabriel Abram El Khoury (he/him)

Himself a student here at Bridgewater State University currently in hot pursuit of a baccalaureate in English Literature, Gabriel Abram El Khoury lives for the written word, living especially for the Word, his wellspring of hope and inspiration. His favorite food is pumpkin pie, thus making him not only a lover of the Lord, but a lover of the gourd as well. Any success he might enjoy he owes first to his most sacred Sofia.

Lindsay Everson (she/her)

Lindsay Everson is currently an English major at Bridgewater State University. She has been writing poetry since elementary school, and she loves finding new ways to describe the world around her. Her favorite poems to write focus on the natural world, as she uses images of nature to help convey a deeper meaning.

Caitlin Faria (she/her)

Caitlin Faria is a film and creative writing double major at Bridgewater State University graduating class of 2022. She is on the women's ice hockey team on campus as a goalie and captain as well as a member of the sports broadcasting team often taking the role of commentator or director at games. Caitlin loves spending time with friends and family, writing screenplays, reading, playing with her dog Jax, watching movies, and playing hockey.

Adam Fernandes (they/them)

Adam Fernandes is a poet, author, and reviewer. They adore writing about nature and the natural world, as well as identity and culture. Adam's goal in life is to improve the world via writing and storytelling.

Melina Fernandes (she/they)

Melina is a 19 year old, sophomore at BSU, majoring in fine arts with a focus in painting. They have always been interested the arts and creative pursuits in general.

Anthony Garcia (he/him)

Anthony Garcia is a studio arts major at Bridgewater, with a concentration in graphic design, and a minor in art history. He commutes from Weymouth, MA. His goals are to pursue a career in graphic design after college, and to continue making art that people can enjoy and hopefully learn from, like his piece, "What About Us." In his free time he also enjoys watching movies, singing, reading, writing, and going out with friends.

Samantha Gibson (she/her)

Samantha Gibson is a sophomore who recently transferred to Bridgewater State University. Her major is secondary education with a concentration in English. One of her favorite hobbies is writing, and one day she hopes to publish her own book. She hopes you enjoy her poem!

Sara Gifford (she/her)

Sara Gifford is a sophomore at Bridgewater State. Her major is studio arts, and she is passionate about creating. Making art brings her peace, and she loves experimenting with new mediums such as paint, collage, and printmaking.

Anaisha Gomes Mauricio (she/her)

Anaisha Gomes Mauricio is an art/graphic design major and a freshman at BSU. She has done digital drawing as a hobby and is starting to take it more seriously.

Madeline Gosselin (she/her)

Madeline Gosselin is a senior at BSU and aspires to teach English to middle school students. She has always had a love for reading and writing and is happy to have had an opportunity to write this flash memoir piece for an English course. Creative writing is something she enjoys doing and finds to be a great form of expression. She is excited to continue to develop her love for English and to share that joy with young students in the near future.

Adlai Greene (she/her)

Adlai Greene is a senior at BSU graduating this spring with degrees in elementary education and English. Adlai has been writing stories, essays, and other creative pieces for several years now and is honored to have her first piece published in *The Bridge*. Her short story, "Apartment 23B," is about fear and isolation contesting with the innate need for human connection all while incorporating pretzels, the mafia, and yellow converse sneakers.

Bea Henschen (they/them)

Bea is an English major at Bridgewater State University. They have always had a passion for writing and enjoy writing fiction and non-fiction pieces. They have a minor in theater arts since theater is another thing they are passionate about.

Holly M. Hogan (she/her)

Holly is an art student at Bridgewater State University. She has been writing creatively for many years and is inspired by pieces of her life as well as those around her, from which she creates literary vignettes through her poetry. In addition to fine arts and writing, she enjoys creative photography to capture unique moments, the way her words do in her work. Her goal is to become an art therapist as well as illustrate her written works for publication.

Shayla Hinds (she/her)

Shayla Hinds is a recent BSU alumna with a passion for writing poetry. She likes to write about the emotions she's feeling at that time. Her writing is a view of her life.

Elysia Johnson (she/her)

Elysia Johnson is a senior at Bridgewater State University majoring in psychology and studio arts with a painting concentration. She loves exploring different themes, styles, and mediums, though oil painting is her absolute favorite.

Catherine Kaiser (she/her)

Catherine Kaiser is from East Bridgewater, MA. Aside from being an aspiring artist, Catherine is a full-time healthcare administration professional, a wife, a mother and a grandmother. She's enriched daily by the opportunities afforded by being able to learn and gain perspectives from the diverse student body and faculty at BSU. After a 30-year hiatus, she has thoroughly enjoyed the passion and love for creative arts that resuming her pursuit of a degree in studio arts, painting concentration, has brought her.

Tru Kwene (she/her)

Tru Kwene was born and raised in Boston, MA and started writing poetry so she could be just like her sisters and brother. There are some AMAZING artists out there today! Check out all of the voices adding to the collective! You won't be disappointed!

John Lambiase (he/him)

John Lambiase is an artist at BSU with a major in graphic design and minor in public relations. John's art features many different types of art from pencil and paint to digital artwork. There is nothing John likes to put in his art more than animals and the natural world and hopes to incorporate these skills in his future career as a graphic designer.

Michelle Landry (she/her)

Michelle Landry is a senior studying graphic design. She is an active member on campus, involved in various organizations and holding leadership roles. She hopes to go back to school to get her master's degree in the future.

Lindsey MacMurdo (she/her)

Lindsey MacMurdo is a fine art photographer and oil painter who graduated from Bridgewater State University in 2020. Her passion is to tell stories through her photography. She always has a set visual in mind of what she wants to create or portray and loves seeing what she envisions come to life.

Selin Marino (she/her)

Selin Marino is studying psychology with a minor in studio arts. She loves to experiment with different media, including ceramics, drawing, painting, and photography. Recently, she started getting into photography but has the ability to combine these styles, which motivates her to learn more. She hopes to start her career as a psychologist working with clients who have experienced trauma. She would like to be an entrepreneur and open a gallery café where artists can walk through my garden sharing their works for no fee.

Aliyah McGibbon (she/her)

Aliyah McGibbon is a senior at Bridgewater State University, who majors in fine arts and elementary education. She hopes to become an elementary school teacher who can use art to help teach her students. She has always been interested in art from a very young age because it was a creative outlet that allowed her to be expressive no matter what was being created. She has a particular interest in creating works that express emotion and invoke a feeling in the viewer.

Keri McKenzie (she/her)

Keri McKenzie is a studio art, with a graphic design concentration and a graphic artist finishing a certificate in UX (user experience) design. She studied graphic design because of her love for solving problems, visual expression, telling stories, and helping others. During years of working in various fields, she witnessed first-hand the power of effective design which inspired her to make a career transition. When she's not designing, she loves attending Comic-Cons, traveling, and playing computer games.

Megan Moore (she/her)

Megan Moore is an English and secondary education double major with a minor in American studies. Following graduation, she hopes to be an English teacher and continue to write creatively. "Stories" is the first piece she has ever submitted for publication, and she is very excited to be featured in *The Bridge* Vol. 19!

Jeanie Nigro (she/her)

Jeanie Nigro is an English major with a concentration in literature at Bridgewater State University. She plans on continuing school for her master's in English. Along with her passion for analyzing literature, Jeanie enjoys writing poetry and fiction about love and loneliness. She hopes to have her own book published someday.

Emma Paulhus (she/her)

Emma Paulhus is a junior here at Bridgewater State University. She is an English major with a concentration in literature and a minor in Irish studies. She hopes to go on and work in the publishing field after graduation. This is her first time being published and she looks forward to hopefully being published in the future as well.

Elliot Philie (he/they)

Elliot Philie is a senior majoring in fine arts with a concentration in painting. His work revolves around his identities and how they affect him and others around him. Being queer himself, the art he creates involves the queer community, whether directly or not. "Red String of Fate" emphasizes the stigma still in society about LGBTQ+ relationships.

Sam Roberts (he/his)

Sam Roberts was born and raised in New Bedford, MA. He currently resides in Fairhaven, MA with his loving partner, Sabrina, and their three children Vincent, Landon, and Caylee. He is in his junior year at BSU, majoring in English and minoring in Spanish. After graduation he plans on pursuing a career in education.

Kaleigh Rollins (she/her)

Kaleigh Rollins is a senior English major. While she dabbles in poetry, longer fiction writing is her passion. She plans to finish and publish her first novel after she graduates.

Katie Sheehan (she/her)

Katie Sheehan is a graphic designer currently living on the South Shore of Massachusetts. She has been immersed in art from a young age developing skills and exploring ideas and concepts in her creative works. Through art she strives to never stop learning and expanding on her skill set.

Gaelle Sinsaire (she/her)

Gaelle Sinsaire is Haitian, a student at Bridgewater State University, and an English major in literature. She has been writing since she was a little girl, loves poetry, and writes fiction and non-fiction. During the pandemic she started to write poetry again because poetry is the only way she can express her emotions. Poetry is the air that she breathes.

Nate Stephen (he/him)

Nate Stephens is from Brooklyn, New York and strives to be the best person he can be. He is into animation and would like to work in an animation studio some day.

Kaylie St. Ours (she/her)

Kaylie is a senior in the writing and writing studies program and is minoring in special education: inclusive practices. She hopes to bring the practices of inclusivity to her future English classroom, where all walks of life will be welcomed, represented, and celebrated. Her dream is to spark the same love for literature and poetry in the coming generations that her professors at Bridgewater State University gave her.

Samuel W. Tarr (he/him)

Samuel Tarr grew up in Bridgewater and now lives in Weymouth. He works as a teacher's aide after spending over a decade in the culinary arts. He now cooks for pleasure, at home and on his former Executive Chef and good friend's food truck. In 2021 he began the Graduate English Studies program at BSU, concentrating on creative writing.

Alexis Tavares (she/her)

Alexis Tavares is a graduating student of English and communication studies at Bridgewater State University. She loves reading fantasy novels and comic books, cooking meals, having a large home library, and is a big fan of dogs and cats of all sizes.

Mason Terra (he/him)

Mason Terra has been drawing his whole life, but began taking it seriously when he noticed his friends, family, and online supporters grew a strong liking to his art. He aims to reflect his emotions and inner thoughts to those who may relate or empathize with what he presents. He was born in Fall River, Massachusetts but moved to Westport early in his life, and he and his family have loved the town ever since.

Noreen Timmoney (she/they/he)

Noreen Timmoney is a student at Bridgewater State University with a graphic design major and a communication studies minor. They consider themselves a multimedia artist with artwork done in acrylic and oil paints, watercolor, colored pencil, graphite, charcoal, pastel, ink, digital art, graphic design, animation and more. Outside of art, she enjoys gaming, watching movies and TV shows, reading and swimming. After graduating he hopes to pursue a career in animation.

Olivia White (she/her)

Olivia White is a sophomore who is a double major in English and elementary education. She is very passionate about reading and writing. She is also a very creative person who enjoys making jewelry and drawing.

EDITORS' NOTES

Cay Berman (they/them)

Cay Berman is the Design Lead for this edition of *The Bridge*, and will be graduating this spring with a B.A. in graphic design. They enjoy experimental art and music, horror movies, and hanging out with their dogs.

Lucy Flaherty (she/her)

Lucy Flaherty has been studying graphic design for over 10 years. She is currently working toward a B.A. in graphic design. Lucy enjoys spends her time reading, drawing, creating handicrafts, and time with her family.

Jonathan Gillis (he/him)

Jonathan Gillis is a sophomore here at BSU, studying English and education. He has a passion for literature and prose poetry. In his free time he loves to write short stories, read comics, and train in martial arts.

Grace Guindon (she/her)

Grace Guindon is working on the editorial side of this year's journal. She is a junior here at Bridgewater State, and is majoring in English with a concentration in the writing studies, and a minor in biology.

Jessica Hayes (she/her)

Jessica Hayes is a junior at BSU and is working towrds her B.A. in Graphic design. Jessica comes from a long line of artists on both sides of her family. Jessica has always enjoyed the simple pleasures of looking at artwork. Her favorite types of art are landscapes, portraiture, and character design. Personally, her favorite art to create is portraits and character design. Jessica loves how every face is different; no two are the same, in most cases.

Bao Huynh (he/him)

Bao Huynh is a senior and will be graduating this semester in December. Bao is a studio art major with dual concentrations in graphic design, and fine art. He likes the beauty of nature because of how it evokes emotion. Therefore, Bao believes that emotion is a form of Art. As a designer, and painter, Bao likes to study and play with colors scheme. Also, he aims to be a master of portrait painting.

Meghan Joyce (she/her)

Meghan Joyce is an editor on *The Bridge*. She is a senior with a double major in Communications (with a concentration in Film and Media Production) and English (with a concentration in Creative Writing). She is heavily involved in school life with her sorority and planning events for the University through different club activities.

Dakota Lopes (he/him)

Dakota Lopes is a senior and is working for *The Bridge* as an editor. He is a fan of small things like mugs of tea and a good typeface. He spends his days acting, writing poetry, and breathing.

Stephanie Pizzella (she/her)

Stephanie Pizzella is a senior at BSU. She is a communications major with a concentration in film, video, and media studies. Stephanie is passionate about writing and music. Her biggest dream in life is to travel the world.

Michael Seguer (he/him)

Michael Seguer is from Fairhaven, Massachusetts and is currently pursuing a B.A. in graphic design with a minor in management. He changed his major from biology to graphic design sophomore year so he can do what he loves, and he is the logo designer for volume 19 of *The Bridge*. Some of Michael's hobbies are photography, drawing, cooking, and gaming.

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