



North Texas Review 2025

Copright © 2025 by The North Texas Review

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or used in any manner without written permission of the copyright owner except for the use of quotations in a book review.

Published by The North Texas Review

Interested in getting involved?
Email: ntr@unt.edu
Social: @northtexasreview
Website: www.northtexasreview.com



Dear Reader,

We circle back again. We, the North Texas Review, hold high pride to be able to publish your work in every form possible. We race to field every opportunity to unveil your art, your music, your innermost thoughts, your loudest ideas. We long to give them a home, as much as your work yearns to find one. I thank you, the students, for putting your trust in us.

I extend the most gracious of thanks to our friends at Eagle Images, *Cheryl Breedlove* and *Leon Welterlen*. I've had three years of wonderful work with you, and each year is better than the last. Thank you for your swift help and support with bringing this journal to life. I thank the English Department—our professors and administration—for believing in us, supporting us, being excited with us. We are nothing without our UNT English family. To the well-oiled machine that is our 2024-25 staff of executives, editors, writers, designers, and event planners—I love this staff. I am so endlessly proud of this staff for holding the line, for every edit turned in with insightful commentary, for every event that brought our group together, for every hilarious and introspective essay written each week. A thank-you to *Lauren Kalstad*, for being the yin to my yang. Grateful we got to take this all by storm. Proud to climb higher and higher every year, to set new goals and precedents and records together.

This year, NTR has expanded our work with the English Department to stretch with the College of Music and the College of Visual Arts and Design to create the Foundations Prize. We started our Spring Series publication for the countless talented students we couldn't fit into this journal. We opened NTR nationwide—with submissions from Bennington College, Colgate University, the University of Denver, and more.

As each year blends into the next, my love and pride for NTR bleeds further and further into every page we publish. This is my third year with the North Texas Review, and my second year serving as the Editor-in-Chief. This magazine has consumed every second of my college experience, burrowed itself into every corner of my mind. I wake at night in a cold sweat, remembering to change the line and letter spacing on page 18. When making my pasta sauce, I drop the whisk to send a last-minute email about what pen name a student wants to use. You, the North Texas Review, my pride and joy, are a wonderful thing to stress about. I wouldn't trade it for a good night's rest.

Dear reader, enjoy our year of NTR in this hallowed museum of your gilded, labyrinthine art.

The Mil

Nafeesa Mohid North Texas Review | Editor-in-Chief, 2024-25



2024-25 STAFF



EDITOR-IN-CHIEF
Nafeesa Mohid

Maia Pacini

COPY CHIEF
Riley Nevarez

ONLINE EDITORS

Ella Caine Richie Magnia

DESIGN DIRECTOR

C.K. Peebler

EDITORIAL ASSISTANT

Marcie Martinez

EVENTS DIRECTOR

Theo Johnson

Publicity Director Shelby Wells

ASSISTANT PUBLICITY
DIRECTORS

Reina Moore Eva Thor (Fall 2024)

ASSISTANT DESIGN DIRECTORS

> Genesis Juarez MaKenzie Givan Alessandra Garza

ART DIRECTOR

Alessandra Garza

NUSIC DIRECTOR
Alejandro Garza-Laínez

POETRY EDITOR
Helen Saunders

ASSISTANT POETRY EDITOR
Richie Magnia

PROSE EDITOR

Alex Briggs

ASSISTANT FICTION EDITORS

> Jackie Frazier Ruby Aldana

ASSISTANT FON-FICTION EDITORS

Alejandro Garza-Laínez

STAFF WRITERS

Mizneh Alam Paige Janner Kylie Wallace Santiago Alexander Ruby Aldana Shelby Wells

EVENTS COMMITTEE

Mizneh Alam Kennedy Baird-Thomas Lejhin Mason Veda Kolipakula

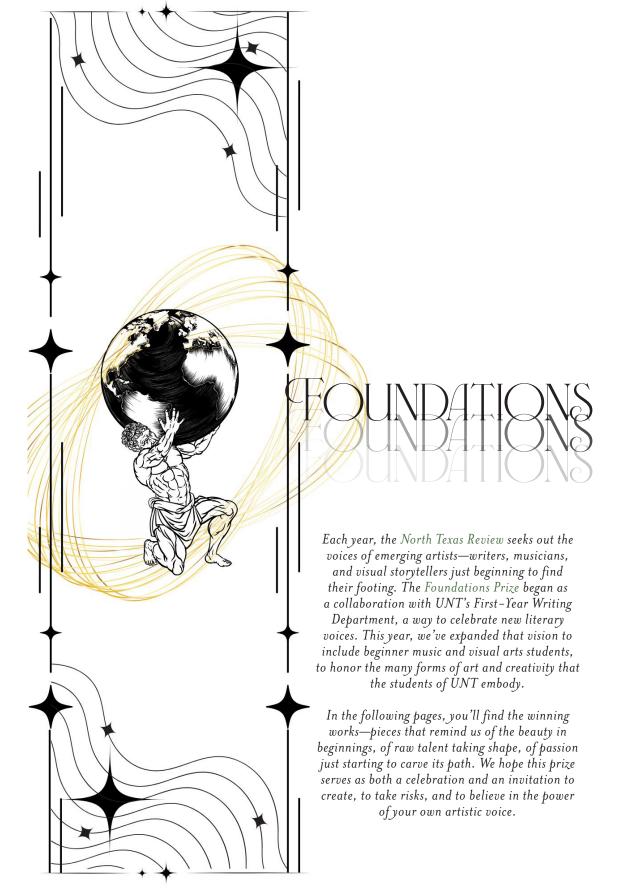




FOUNDATIONS

A Journey Beyond The Known – Ian Báez Matos. 9 16 Feet Underwater – Alexander Christensen. 10 Passive Prettiness – Lizbeth Bernaola. 12
POETRY
Dad and the Little Cat - Ram Shovlin14
benevolence - Evelyn Vi
benevolence - Evelyn Vi
My Own - Abby Dickhaut45
attachment – Daniela Ventura46
After the Storm - Lindsey Marie Leggett. 48
Non sono intero. – Amelia
Humanity - Ava McDonald50
St. Thomas Becket Dies - Lane Armentrout51
Learning Lull - Michael Ewing52
BA WA TOKORO MA – KNND53
Jim Bean Responsibilities - Star Elizabeth55
By the Lake - Amirah Khan
Starwalker - M. Corbin Crain
Where did all the fireflies go? - Gianna Ortner-Findlay
Between – Felicity "Torrin" Nguyen
Bucket List for Horse Girls and MMO Ditches - Felicity "Torrin" Nguyen74
There is a Certain Feel - M. Corbin Crain
Khaane Ka Waqt (Dinnertime) – Mahvish Shah
Cotton Pages - Star Elizabeth79
Wysteria – Gabi Baca81
mother(thetitle, nolongertherole)-M.W. Graham82
Our Souls Touch for the First Time – Marina Lukens84
Of Despair - Ashley Barcenas
War's Womb - Amelia
What has become of us? - Gianna Ortner-Findlay
Cataract – Lillian Pruett90
everything means nothing – Aaron Kessler
Cold Spoon — Rhianna Lewis
Fair Winds and Following Seas - Lane Armentrout
Love Letters to the Indescribable – Maria Zaki
Shooting Stars - Trey Thornton
Are You Sure? - Rae Flores
Tre 10u Sure: – Rue Piores

4	
	Iron and Lavender – Rae Flores
	FICTION
	The Huntress – Duncan Sullivan. .57 Cielito Lindo – Esme Aranda. .59 The Spartan Boy – M. Corbin Crain. .94 The Coachman – Wesley Junker. .102 Homunculus – Numair Baig. .105 GREEN – Matthew Willingham. .111
	MON-FICTION
	When the Lights Go Out – Alexis Melendez. 16 The Best Days – Sofie Carlin. 19 The Spinsters Pipeline – Rylee Thomas. 24 My Experience Studying Abroad – Alice. 25 Anointment – Tyler Moore. 33 Home – N. A. Ambler. 35 A Prayer – Lerymar Rivera. 40
	c ART
	Burning time. — Valentina Valecillos Guerrero
	Music
	St. Augustine Moonlight – Rona Williams



A GOURNEY BEYOND

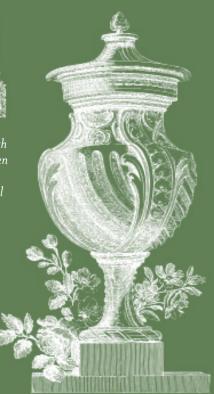


This song is meant to encapsulate the continuous back-and-forth feeling of the wonder yet overwhelming fear of space. You're taken aback by its beauty, taking it in slowly, and suddenly, you're blasting through space, watching galaxies go by. Endless ethereal beauty whirrs by you for the first time.



THE

Ian Báez Matos



16 FEET UNDERWATER

Alexander Christensen

ingernails tear into skin, clawing and ripping against the one who holds you below the surface. Screams escape the mouth through distorted bubbles, bodies thrash and convulse as the craving of air becomes deafening to your mind. Sentience escapes you as the grim reality of mortality greets you as water invades your lungs. Drowning elicits a fear so primal that every land-based organism stressfully responds to its mere possibility. A human who has experienced aquatic suffocation will have received a profound change in their cognitive function. It trains a response so primitive and seeds a fear so raw that those who experience it never look upon water the same way again.

Two years into my career as a U.S. Marine on active duty, I wished to seek a challenge unlike any I had experienced before. I elected to attend a course known as Marine Corps Instructor of Water Survival, it was known throughout the military as being one of the most difficult and demanding that a service member can possibly attend. I did not understand the world that I was entering. My time during the course was filled with extreme oxygen deprivation, a degree of physical exhaustion that was previously unimaginable, and freezing Days go by as slow as molasses as battle hardened men are reduced to babbling amalgamations of terror and agony within the water.

Feeling exceptionally exhausted after numerous rescue dives and miles of swimming, it was then that I was asked to perform one more exercise. Although I had been performing aquatic combative both real and simulated for weeks, this time I was to rescue an instructor who had a particular fondness for pushing

the bounds of effective training and with it, legality. I reached the instructor and executed all sub surface self-defense techniques of abusing pressure points on an individual's arms and martial arts grip breaking per my training doctrine to perfection, still I found myself restrained feet underwater. Although strategies I utilized had proven effective in real rescue situations they are not effective against someone who anticipates them, pushing through the nerve pain and countering all defensive maneuvers. I can only speculate that they desired to train me to respond when nothing works, perhaps to show me how awful aquatic death is, or merely because they could.

I became the victim of the constricting grip of this individual who intended to keep me submerged until my body could take no more. Panic set in as precious seconds of sub surface exertion were exhausted to no avail, I could not remove myself. I fought and thrashed as hard as I could, the harder I worked the more oxygen my body depleted. My moment of bleak acceptance came as water breached into my lungs with a searing sensation. Consciousness slipped from my mind, my vision left me gone along with any sensation that was not the unfathomable craving for air and utter desperation. My next memory is that of forcefully ejecting saltwater from my lungs while my bare body tears itself as it writhes on coarse concrete. No thoughts move through my mind in this moment other than the reptilian urges of breath and escape. But for me there was no escape, back into the water I returned as a result of a kick to the chest by another instructor to experience drowning once more. This cycle repeated itself countlessly for hours.

Seconds stretched to hours and hours morphed into an eternity as all rationality of my humanity and its place within the world was lost. The profound sensation of aquatic suffocation erodes a competent and practical mind to that of a cornered animal, willing to do anything to survive. If I was to break this cycle of my drowning, resuscitation, and subsequent nonconsensual reimmersion, I would have to level the playing field. Taken down 16 feet once again, I feigned an attempt at the martial arts techniques I had been trained to use knowing that they would again fail. The instructor would then expect me to move onto joint manipulation, leveraging against their knees, wrists, shoulders, and elbows. I had to do something they did not expect if I was to have a hope of escape. I formed an ape-like grip on the index and middle finger of the instructor's left hand, which was held against my skull while their right arm snaked around my neck firmly in a chokehold, I proceeded to bend their fingers backwards with speed and force. I felt the sensation of their tendons strained until they were not but one pound of pressure away from severing. I held this position for half of a second as a warning, as if to say, "If you desire the functionality of your hand, you will let me go." And let me go they did, I learned then what I needed to do to survive. During subsequent selfdefense situations I changed my tactics accordingly, ripping hair from scalps, tearing at ears and nostrils, and pressing my fingers into eyes, pausing each attack for half a second as to give those drowning me the opportunity to let me go and continue their life without a disability or deformity. Fighting dirty would be an understatement, yet I felt no guilt.

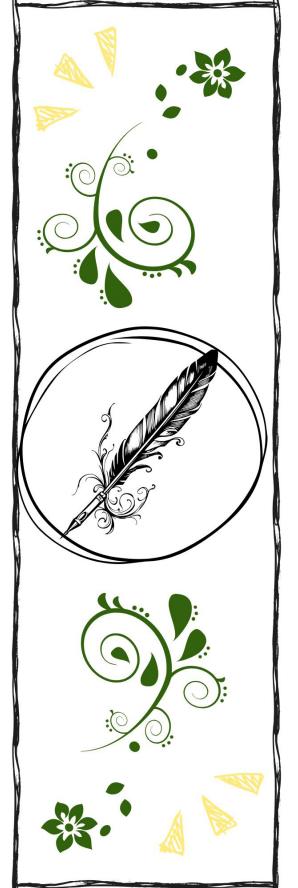
Two weeks later the course had concluded. Although I had physically moved on, mentally I had not. I could not look at water the same way. Fear and aggression would fly through my body like electricity if a person merely touched me while I was in the water. Countless days were spent embarrassed and isolated as friends would swim and frolic in swimming pools, lakes and oceans while

I could do no more than observe from' the shore. I was an expert at swimming and rescuing those in need, but the only way I knew to rescue myself was to fight as viciously as needed to preserve my own survival. I could not bear the thought of exposing those extreme feelings to my friends. For years this fear persisted, I could not even hold my face under a flowing shower head without the same sensations of panic returning to my body. Cold rain would transport me back to those desperate and depraved times. I could not forgive those who brought such ferocity out of me, and I was horrified of myself for succumbing to it. I felt just as I had held 16 feet underwater, that there was no escape.

Dare I expose myself to my fears, or forever remain victim to their haunting plague? The answer was clear yet horrifying to face, into the water I needed to go and as soon as possible. As I stared into the rhythmic rippling of water extending from my partially submerged body, I found myself transported back to those desperate days and locked within the past. The memories vivid as ever and fresh as though they were in front of my very eyes once more, yet one look beyond the water would reveal the conflicting reality of my removal from that place and time. Underwater I went, by my own will and in the security of solitude, to face the depths of the water and of the mind.

"Fear is the mind-killer. Fear is the little-death that brings total obliteration. I will face my fear. I will permit it to pass over me and through me. And when it has gone past, I will turn the inner eye to see its path. Where the fear has gone there will be nothing. Only I will remain." A quote published by Frank Herbert in 1965. Although some memories cannot be forgotten, acceptance can be found within them. Existence is akin to the ocean's current, moving unvielding and everlasting whether participated in or not. I had found myself unwilling to continue sitting on the shore afraid to enter the water.

PASSIVE PRETTINESS Lizbeth Bernaola



PART ONE

DAD AND THE LITTLE CAT

Ram Shovlin

Always a tall and lean man, my Dad
Is also so vast and solid, lumbering,
While happening to stand in our living room, near the center,
Its lighting dim.

Below him, accordingly, walks the kitten
My aunt named Haesha. That part
Of the room appears to me like a great space,
For my father's aged head is peering
Down, as if from a far distance,
Onto the kitten
Making its way with shaky steps.

And myself, from the side of the room
I look at him,
His shirt an earthen gray
Like pottery,
His long hair tied loosely back,
His white stubble beard laying on his relaxed jaw,
With even the neck hairs unshorn.

Now rushing, I look down again at Haesha merely Scampering by, then I, finding myself weighed down, By worry, look back Up at Dad; his head is in a tilted position, With a face that emanates the quiet of his life. Like water? Or rocks? I wonder For just an instant. Not frantically thoughtful, not shaky.

My mind gets in a swirl, my thoughts start jumping from connection



To think, so young an animal,

Born to so wild a mom (the stray

We took in), and then Dad with such presumption,

Representing what had to be authority and society—

Control-

Making Haesha the vulnerable victim, now about

To be in ... in the grip of—it.

Like the painting of Saturn devouring his children.

Here he is about to pick her up.

I am wanting to backstep

While my eyes and legs stay focused,

On the moment despite their shakes,

And that is when Dad does his act that he resolved to do.

For he leans down and with a swiping motion, gentle and sure, he scoops her up.

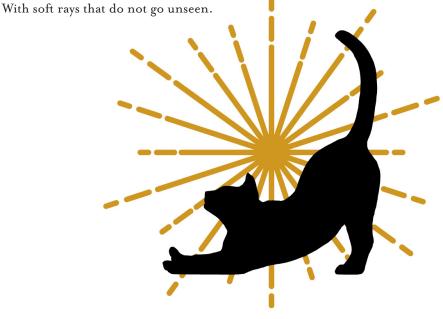
He touches her, in all his vastness that was just curving

Like a ring around the gas giant—but no,

We're at home in our living room.

He holds her, at his chest firmly.

He looks down to her with a calm face,



WHEN THE LIGHTS GO OUT

Alexis Melendez

Then I was around 6 years old, my mom would lock me in the garage for misbehaving. Tears rolled down my cheeks and dropped onto the cold concrete floor. My side grew numb pressed against the pavement. I cradled my legs to stifle the terror. It was dark.

It's strange how a place changes when the lights go out. I spent countless hours playing in that garage, albeit in the comfort of the residual light pouring in from the kitchen. I knew that room and the many things that filled it up—a red vacuum dedicated more to clamor than cleanliness, WWE action figures with contorted limbs, and mounds of clothes. But that all seemed to disappear when the door shut. Maybe that's why I was so afraid-maybe I too would disappear into that strange void. Maybe I was scared that I'd be forgotten like all those toys I once loved. Maybe I was just a troublesome kid who happened to be afraid of the dark.

Last week, I was working on my car. I had everything I needed, short of jack stands stored away in the shed, which replaced the garage when it was converted into a shabby bedroom. Every modicum of motivation in me seeped out when the thought of facing that immovable mess crossed my mind. Still, I mustered up the courage to swing that wooden door open. My mind always struggles to make sense of the clusterdump before me. My eyes ricochet between corroded cooking ware, old luggage, rusty car parts, decommissioned chairs now being used as shelves, rows of plastic bins filled to the brim with who knows what, and more clothes. The jack stands became an afterthought. All I could do was stare

at the amalgam of forgotten things and wonder how it all came to be.

I tried listening to Jordan Peterson's 12 Rules for Life once, which was a mistake, but one of his rules did manage to stick with me. It was something like, "clean your room," for which he made the case that maintaining an orderly room assures you maintain an orderly life and something about lobsters. Maybe this time the crustacean man had a point.

As I look around my room, I see a microcosm of our family's mess. Trinkets, seldom-used hair care products, and half-read books litter the furniture. The floor is flooded with tools, yet more clothes, and a plethora of paraphernalia pertaining to a dozen different hobbies I didn't keep up with. Any attempt at sorting the mess leads to an endless list of subtasks;

- Buy film for the Minolta
- ☐ Clean and port the throttle body
- ☐ Return those pants you impulsively
- bought only for them to not suit 'your style.'
 - Find and hang up my whiteboard so I can write this all down
- C .1 .

So the mess stays.

My eyes often wander to the various notebooks hidden in the mess, like shiny rocks in a gravel pit. None of them are filled in. I'm reminded of the stories my parents would tell me about growing up in Mexico with just enough to eat. My dad shared a single notebook among his fifteen siblings. They wrote in every crevice of the paper, leaving no blank space. They were happy.

A pit grows in my stomach and blotchy pools of red crop up on my skin. Maybe

I'm allergic to gluttony. I often wonder what would happen if it all burnt down. Would I miss any part of that mess? Would I even realize what I lost? Would I finally be able to start life anew far from the shackles of passivity? Maybe nothing would change. Maybe I would find things to fill the empty space and, out of the ashes, the clutter would be reborn, like some sort of assemblaged phoenix.

Whatever the case may be, this mess is mine to manage. Perhaps this is my inheritance passed down from my parents' calloused hands. A mess they carried in dirt-caked palms with pails of water resting on their shoulders. I don't know how it came to be, and I may never know, but maybe that doesn't matter.

Staring at the mess doesn't make it go away. Turning out the lights doesn't make it vanish. Maybe one day I will learn to look past the pestilence and finally be able to make sense of it. And, maybe, I too will pass down what results from my lifelong endeavor to those who come after me. I don't know.

All I know is that tonight, I will carve my silhouette into this cluttered bed, lay my head on my second hand pillow, and hope to see more than just dark.

BURNING TIME.



Valentina Valecillos Guerrero



THE BEST DAYS

Sofie Carlin



Remembering any moments relating to my family is usually a struggle, mostly because every time I dive into the memory caves of my mind, I am unable to remember anything other than fragments and blurry images. Still, I hold these fragmented memories close as they are special to me.

One fragment that I can pick out amongst the rest: my family's visits to Kemah Boardwalk. We didn't often find ourselves there. When we did go, it was an event that took up the whole day, making it reserved for only special occasions.

In reality, the boardwalk was pretty average, having only a few restaurants and some games. But there was the aquarium. To me, the aquarium was the most exciting part of going to Kemah. They had stingrays. What other places had stingrays this close to home?

I think that's why I loved going there. I could see these cool sea creatures, and I didn't have to ride a plane, train, or bus to get there. Just two hours, and we were there, this ordinary place that felt so special to me.

I can see myself going up to the pool they swam in, reaching down, touching their slimy heads, and seeing their simple joy at being pet. It reminded me of how happy life could be. It still does. That's why I hold onto this moment with these stingrays. Seeing their wide fins flapping slowly through the water, so at peace. It made me wish life was that easy.

After visiting my sea friends, we would always go to Bubba Gump's. It had some of the best seafood I have ever had.

On days when the weather was nice and warm with a cool breeze blowing

through, my family and I would decide to sit outside on the patio, our table adjacent to the harbor.

I could glance to my left and see different boats going in and out of the harbor. Even better, my father, who owned a sailboat in his younger years, would describe each detail of them. From the helm to the sails to even the certain type of boat and what it meant.

It was a nice change from the conversations I normally had with him: critiques on what I was eating, a how-to talk on achieving success, or, even better, Time Management IOI.

Here, it was just my dad and I talking about boats. And for one blissful moment, I could just sit there and pretend all he would talk to me about was boats.

Eventually, the waiter would come by. My older brother and dad would order the grilled shrimp and veggies. I would get the popcorn shrimp platter (small, fried shrimp, a pile of fries, and hushpuppies!), and my mom would order the same. My younger brother would get chicken tenders.

Other than the boats, my family never seemed to talk about much. There were a few pockets of conversation here and there, but never any questions about my life or my brothers.

It felt like years had passed before our food finally came out. Once it did, my stomach was growling for the crunchy, delicious shrimp, so I wasted no time digging in.

To me, few places get fried shrimp right, as most restaurants' shrimp is soaked in grease and makes your stomach hurt. But the popcorn shrimp at this restaurant tasted like the shrimp I ate back at home – equally warm weather, my older brother out in the garage frying shrimp. That's how I've always known if a restaurant gets it right.

Back at the restaurant, I popped a hushpuppy and a few popcorn shrimp into my mouth. I smiled.

Smiling, just being happy with my family is a rarity. So I cherish those days I can remember smiling, especially because I know I didn't used to hate the idea of being all together with my family. I would rather try to remember life like that instead of beating up my brain for forgetting. After all, forgetting might actually be protecting me from something far worse. So, I place my hope into the fact that, at this period in time, I did enjoy my family's company.

Yet sometimes, I am unable to put full faith into hoping for something good. Sometimes, the darkness stares me right in the face, too obvious to be ignored.

It was something that I often faced back at home in my teenage years.

In that house, past the entrance, the only thing staring back at me were empty, brown walls. There were never any family photos of us altogether, never any loving photos of my mom and dad on their wedding day lining the walls. Not a single reminder that a family lived here.

I do remember a short time when there were a few portraits of me and my brothers hidden in the upstairs portion of our house. I remember loving going up the stairs and seeing the familiar photos of a tinier version of me and my older brother side by side. My now lanky younger brother's chubby baby cheeks. As I got older, these photos were taken down so we could 'sell our house better,' and I never saw them again.

Just as I was aware of the sudden absence of our photos, I was also aware that certain areas had rules. I knew that if my dad was in the living room watching TV, I wasn't allowed to choose anything other than what he was watching. If I misspoke,

this would cause further annoyance in my dad. So I would sit there suffering in silence, waiting until the perfect moment — When is he leaving? Is he going to be in a good mood? — and I would watch my shows.

Another area that was his: the kitchen. Pure freedom if he wasn't there, but if he was cooking, and I just so happened to get thirsty, it was going to be a battle.

I would first creep in whenever he was distracted. Make a beeline for the fridge. Pray that my drink will be easily accessible. If not, I would be exiled, with a wave of expletives stringing after me.

Always a variation of:

'MOVE!'

'YOU'RE IN THE WAY!' 'GET OUT OF MY KITCHEN!'

This doesn't help me move any faster because then I am stuck, shaken to my core. How could someone so close say things like that?

But sometimes a rarity occurred. He would invite me in.

It was summer, the air heavy with humidity, and inside our home was no different. My dad controlled the AC, so it was always set to 75 or higher to save money.

Because of this, I often found myself on our soft, green couch (the living room was safe without him), silently hoping the large ceiling fan would cool me down enough.

I knew that if I moved at all, my efforts to cool down would be useless. Still, I was hoping for something good to happen. I was hoping that I could stay in the comfort of the couch for a while.

After a couple of minutes, my dad called me into the kitchen. Knowing it was best to give up my paradise to save my skin, I reluctantly slunk off the couch and made my way into the kitchen.

I passed by our dining room table which remained empty as we rarely had dinner together. I don't even remember if we've ever had dinner together in the dining room, apart from the holidays.

As I walked into our open kitchen, my dad greeted me at the sink. He had just unloaded some bagged shrimp into a bowl and was carrying it into the laundry room.

As I followed him, I wondered what he was cooking. Shrimp was not something he usually made, so there must have been a sale or something going on. I didn't care, we were having shrimp!

As we entered the laundry room, which is through the kitchen and almost to the garage, it occurred to me how colorful this room was. Even though the walls were white, they were overridden with funny sayings and beach decor, all hung by my mom. In a way, this is one of her rooms, one of the few that holds my mother's personality.

At the utility sink, stuck in between the washer and dryer (like me, very much in between it all), we shelled the shrimp together.

I wish I could say I wanted to be there, but being so close to my father always filled me with high anxiety. He was a ticking time bomb. In a few seconds, he could go from smiling and laughing to completely blowing up in my face.

I don't know what happened to make him this angry. It makes me jealous, even a little bit angry myself, knowing that I will never fully meet the father who used to, whenever I was baby, cradle me until my cries softened. Where does such softness come from? Why did it go away?

I can think about this forever. I used to. But sometimes I didn't think at all, and I just shelled the shrimp, gambling on what dad I was going to get. I would like to say I was well-prepared whenever I was around him, but to be honest, I never was. How could I be whenever his moods switched so quickly?

I could only listen and guess right.

This is what it means to shell shrimp. I can count on one hand how many times I have actually done it. Technically, it's a fairly easy process, but it's grotesque. The shrimp is cold, slimy to the touch. And I

feel guilty that I am unable to be emotional about the poor shrimp's life before all of this.

I can't be emotional about anything. I can't tell him how his moods constantly confuse me, how his yelling is like an electric shock to my system, how I wish he would just be gentle.

Instead, I stay on guard, making sure every one of my movements is precise, that I am doing everything EXACTLY RIGHT.

Because of this, every moment has to have some emotional distance. If it doesn't, I will end up like the shrimp, broken and shattered into a million pieces. These pieces that are important to me, that make me who I am.

This mindset is something I held onto for a long time while I was living in my teenage home.

After I moved away to college, I slowly realized I could not stay like this. I could not be the shelled-out shrimp anymore. Yet now I was faced with a new problem.

How do I grow into a better version of myself? How can I prevent myself from sinking back into the depths of my ocean?

Luckily, at college, I met some lovely friends who helped nurture my soul, who made me feel like sunshine, instead of the dark heavy rain clouds that I often got with my father. Still, having friends who were supportive wasn't enough. I also needed firm reminders of the good, something so bright I just couldn't look away.

Memory: my friends and I were grabbing lunch.

Ironically, it was a rainy day. Not a light sprinkle but a rain so heavy that, as soon as I stepped outside, I was soaking wet. I didn't have an umbrella at the time.

And then the memory stops.

I know it was raining, and I know we got po' boys that day, but why can't I remember? It's not like the day was unimportant. I am left to speculate and rely on the few facts I have.

Fact: my friend and I have a deep love for Cajun food and shrimp po' boys. Fact:

it is the best kind of sandwich you could ever have, usually consisting of Cajunseasoned fried shrimp, lettuce, tomatoes, and pickles, all spread on a baguette style bread with remoulade sauce. Fact: this sandwich hails from New Orleans, Louisiana. A state, I found out, my friend had called home for ten years. Which is not far off from Southeast Texas, a place that I used to call home.

And here is where memory returns to me. I remember whenever I met him, I was so excited to find someone who understood the flavor complexities of Cajun food.

Maybe this is why I have a fondness for a day I don't quite remember. It's evidence of our friendship, of the fact that someone wants to hang out with me. It's that brightness that's so blinding, it is futile to deny it. But I am speculating again.

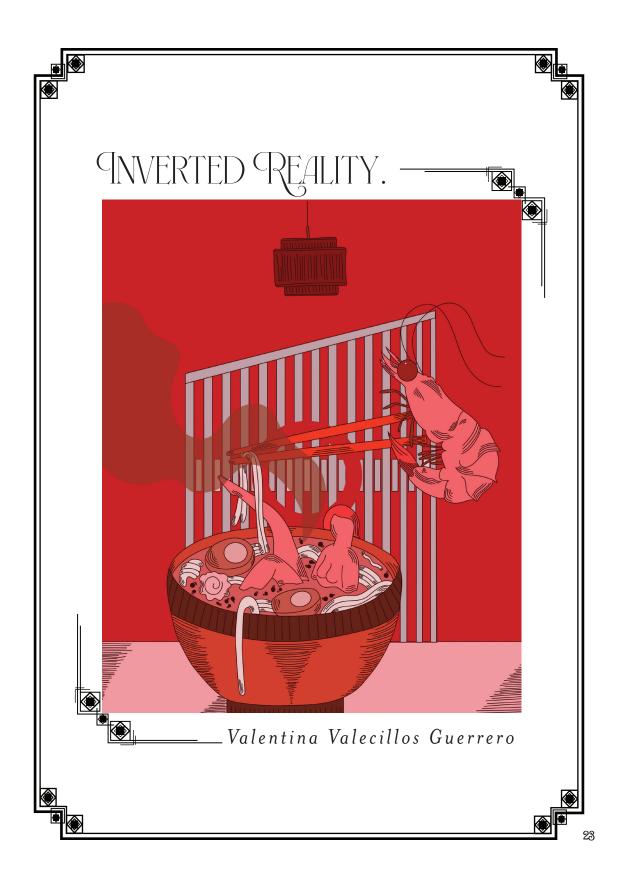
Fact: I knew I enjoyed that day. This assumption is safe to make because with this friend, I can count on one hand how many arguments we have had in the three years we've been friends. And these arguments are never ones that end in explosive anger and slammed doors. Usually, it's a mature conversation about our wants and needs.

Fact: I have confidence that his generosity will continue to bleed into new days.

Fact: I can smile around him.

Man, do I smile!







THE SPINSTERS PIPELINE

Rylee Thomas



The Hook
I don't remember when I learned
how to crochet. I was maybe 9 at my

Grandma's townhome in Decatur when I asked for help. She took me to Joann's, bought me a book and hooks, and asked my aunt to give me some pointers. I didn't learn how to crochet that summer or the summer after that or the summer after that. It probably wasn't until high school that I really cared to try.

I didn't like it.

I don't like the way it looks or the way it feels. All of the cheap acrylic yarn, too heavy a weight for the project, squeaking against the plastic hook. All of the terrible crunching noises my wrist was starting to produce.

But it didn't really matter to me. Then I met her, The Knitter.

II. The Needles

She let me add some rows to her scarf and even smiled when I dropped stitches. Just as I had before, I learned, then I forgot, then I fell in head first. The scarf, my first attempt at knitting, sitting in the corner of my memory, unfinished. Next to it, are all of my loves that I have completed since. I love the feel of metal points digging into my fingertips and wool roughening my hands and the textures I could produce. I take a moment to consider the fact that I didn't dive in until after- after I had been taught a garter stitch, after that bottle hit my face and changed my life, and after I had packed up and abandoned my childhood home, my crochet hooks along with it.

None of that matters now.

My Ravelry queue is flooded and old ladies won't stop asking me how much I charge and everybody compliments my sweaters—when they know I made it.

My solace is the Mistake. The Irish Mistakes littering my projects— too many cables on that sleeve and the uneven decreases on that sweater and the fucked up shortrows on that one. My soul has never once been trapped by a project.

But it still wasn't enough, then I met The Sheep.

III. The Fleece

The first time I felt carded wool in my hands was at my previous job. I was excited, but not that excited. I couldn't understand the magic I held. I felt it, then forgot about it, then fell in head first. I found an Ashford Kiwi 3 on Facebook marketplace and practically ran to Oklahoma to pick it up. I got him home, set him up, and failed. And failed. And kept failing.

But none of that mattered.

It's just like an Irish Mistake, I would tell myself every time the guide strand ran away from me. I was too happy to care. I had made yarn, the very thing I didn't appreciate all those years ago. I giggle every time I think of the unwashed fleece in the back of my car, waiting to be cleaned and carded and spun. Spun by my hands. This gift from the Earth, this fleece, to a finished art piece that I will produce. I was able to spin and ply and knit. My feet finally getting a hang of the treadle, my hands finally getting the pinch and draw, my back finally relaxing. Is this not art? The fibers making their way through my hands. Being this close to my art warms my soul in a way nothing else could.

Spreading like weeds, people refer to my growing interest. Spreading like seeds, I must insist.

Weeds will take over and destroy, but seeds will feed and grow.





TRY EXPERIENCE STUDYING ABROAD

Alice

ell, I do not know how to start to talk about the story of my life. This is completely complicated since I chose to study abroad, to come to a strange country that is far from my home, on the other half of the Earth. I do not know why I chose America to study, but maybe all my friends just chose Australia because it is closer to Vietnam than America so they can easily visit home on long holidays such as Winter break. It is so weird when I just want to do everything different from every friend. But I think the big reason I chose the United States is because I love the peacefulness in my life. I want to come to a place where I do not know anyone, even friends, so I can live independently and do anything I want. Now, thinking again, that is not as easy as I thought.

I am writing this story, and I still do not know if my choice is good or bad? Will it change in the future? A bunch of questions just run in my mind day by day. I cannot explain it, I am still finding the answer for myself.

The day I came to America was really sunny and hot. I felt like I would burn up in the sun in Texas. Jet lag is the worst thing in my life. I woke up every night around 2 a.m. and felt sleepy at 4 a.m. It lasted for two weeks. Too exhausted to do anything, I lay on my bed all day long.

It was a hot sunny day, but the Orientation had finally come! Both the excitement and nervousness took over me because I was happy to meet new people

but also nervous to speak to them since my English was pretty bad. I was so lost in the team, I did not understand twothirds of the words flowing out from other people's mouths. I gave my leader a hard time trying to explain what I needed to do. In the team, I made some friends, and we still keep in touch. Google Translate and body language were the only [things] that helped us communicate with each other at that time. It was an awkward moment. but it made the connection between us really quickly. I'm the only international [student] in the team. We ended up exchanging our culture, language, and education. I taught them Vietnamese, and I taught them how to use chopsticks. They taught me slang words that are widely used in English. One of the guys in my team noticed the way I used English strangely -[my] Vietnamese accent and bad grammar. That person opened himself [up to me] to help me feel comfortable. I was not the only one being left out.

Time was really flying, I still had two weeks left before the first day of school. To kill time, I took a small note of paper out of my bag. It was a list of "foods I have to try when I arrive in the U.S." The top one on my list was Wingstop. I had really high expectations of this restaurant because I watched a lot of Mukbang videos of people eating [this] food in front of the camera. After the first bite of the chicken wing, the salty sauce came [to me as] fast as a lightning punch to my gustation. The taste was too strong for me to handle.

My face was frowning. I quickly grabbed the bottle of water and chucked down as much water as needed. Can not imagine I will step into this restaurant ever again. Same as Dunkin Donuts (their donut was like a lump of sugar, too sweet). Next was tacos. I could not stand the strange smell of them. Luckily, Cajun was the best for me. I loved it from the first bite. Bursting with flavor – it was in my mouth, and it was so good. I felt this was the best meal [I ate] since I came to America and after being disappointed by all the food before.

Although the food was not as I expected, all of the drinks in Texas were really good. I have tried bubble tea, coffee... It was so good, all the flavor in the coffee, and I fell in love with it. I think the reason I love the flavors in coffee is because it has a little bit of cinnamon in it. The funniest thing I have seen in America is that everyone always has cinnamon in coffee or cake. I think this is the signature flavor here. When I first heard about it, I thought it was kind of weird, but when I tried it, it was really scrumptious and "moreish." Trying new food, new cuisine in a new country was really interesting for me. Even though some food I could not eat, it was a good experience for me, and I feel I really want to try more in the future.

After I spent two weeks eating, the only thing I gained from this was weight. When my parents heard that, they were laughing a lot.

"Honey, you have to control the food you eat or you will not have a boyfriend. There [will be] no boys noticing you in college."

Änd I said, "No, I do not need a boyfriend. I can love myself."

It was just a joke, but I felt like if I did not control my weight, I could be lonely and single in the next four years in college. I did not want that to happen to me because my friends in Vietnam have girlfriends or boyfriends already, and I really want to have a boyfriend in college like them. I feel like if I have someone in college, it will be more fun and not boring. I can have someone to share my story, my bad or good feelings, and someone that can stay with me when I cannot tell my parents.

However, it was just a thought in my mind when I was talking to my parents. I had gone back to reality: that I would come to college, start my first day, and try to make friends.

Well, the first day at college was so weird and strange. I did not know what to say on my first day. The only thing I remember on the first day at college was that I was late to my second class, and it was so embarrassing on the first day. Even though no one noticed me, I was scared that the professor would not like that, and I was scared that was a bad [thing] in her eyes. That whole thought ran through my head during the lesson, especially [because] I had just come to the United States. I did not know a lot of things at that time, so I felt really anxious. Also, like I said before, my English was really bad, so I did not understand what professors said, and I was really anxious that I would miss any important information. Not being good at English was also part of [why I did] not make friends easily like other people in classes.

Right now, when I am writing this and thinking again, I feel it is normal because a lot of people can be late on the first day like me. It takes time to find a class because we are Freshmen. We cannot know where our class is on the first day.

Back to my first day. I met some friends that I knew from orientation, and then that was the way I had friends in classes. It was not bad on the first day, but sometimes in class, I felt lonely. I did not know why. It might have been just a feeling at that time. When I went back to my dorm after classes, [I felt] broken. I cried a lot for no reason. Then, I knew. I felt I did not belong here. Everyone communicated a lot – they were talking about their high

school, the TV shows in America. All of these things were strange, and I did not have any information about it.

I miss my home, I miss my friends, I miss my parents...

I felt I really wanted to give up everything and go back to my country after that day. Then, I remembered what my mom said.

It can be really hard the first time, but you have to remember that you can pass the hard times in the new environment, you can be successful, you can be anyone you like if you do not give up.

That was how my first day happened. I did not expect too much for the whole week because I did not make a lot of friends and we did not talk too much. When I was making friends in class and told them that I had just come to America for a few weeks. They were really surprised when they heard about that. All of them ask me the same questions, such as, "How do you like Texas so far? Where are you from? Why did you choose this college?" And it happened with everyone when they knew I had just come here. Honestly, at first, I was still shocked and surprised, but after a few days, I felt it started [to be] normal, and I answered these questions the same. It made me feel like I was a robot, answering these questions just like I was programmed.

Different cultures were always what I really wanted to see when I was still in my country, and I saw it when I came here. Sometimes in class, there was an action that, until now, I did not know the meaning of. I know [now] that is normal with everyone here, and it really strengthens me. But I was shocked when it happened to me. When I sneezed in class, everyone who was sitting near me, all of them, said, "Bless you." It happened even when I was outside and a stranger said it to me. Sometimes I still have not adapted to this, but I think it is a good signal or a good behavior when people say that. It can show the care between people, even if they

do not know each other.

I feel comfortable living in America. People can do anything they want and not be scared of anyone judging them or saying bad things about them. I love to have tattoos, but in my country it is still a thing that most of the older generation do not like, including my parents. It took a long time to let them know that tattoos are not bad, and I prove it through my study, that I am not forgetting my studies. I just want to do the thing I want. Luckily, after a long time, my parents started to open their minds about tattoos, and they let me do it. However, because a lot of people do not accept tattoos, I do not have enough ability to show it or I have to lie when an adult asks me about it. I was really surprised when I saw a lot of people in America have a lot of tattoos and that they really opened their minds about it. I feel really comfortable when talking about my tattoo here. They give me a good signal about my tattoo, and they make me feel confident in it. By these actions, I think, in the future, I will have more tattoos and not be scared of people judging me.

The funniest thing that I can tell you about might be the weather. It is completely different in my country. In my country – it might be just the place I live – it just has a hot and rainy season. Sometimes, it might be cold, but it just happens when the weather is rainy. In recent years, the weather has not been rainy, so it has just gotten hotter and hotter in my country. I came here when Texas was still in the summer, so the weather was so hot, but I felt really comfortable with this weather. I was thinking "The weather is really cool, and it could be cooler when it comes to the fall season."

Now, I think I was wrong. The weather started cold, and I got a shock on the first day. This can be normal with someone just like me, am I right? I do not know if I am right or wrong, but I just know that I feel cold when I go out,

especially in the evening. It was really cold, but my friends said the weather is still hot to them. I feel like I am so different from everyone when they are still wearing shorts and crop tops but I am wearing pants and a sweater to go to classes.

Everything went really well for the next few weeks [after my first day] - I started to adapt to a new environment, I had friends to talk to, and we hung out a few times – except one thing that was so terrible, I thought I could have "died" at that time. (I just used "died" to overstate the situation at that time because I think it was not a big problem, and I heard that [this is a] thing almost [all] Freshmen will have). I did all my assignments on time, but I did not know how to have a good schedule. For instance, I checked my Canvas, and I knew the deadlines, but I did not know what assignments I should do first. And then it was done in one day! To be honest, I felt like I was a superman because how did I do everything in one day? I was not supposed to do that. I felt really bad. It made me stressed and anxious, and my feelings were sometimes not good. I knew if I did not [make] a good schedule for my study as soon as possible, it would be really hard to get a good score, and I would be really tired for the rest of the weekend. I had to meet my advisor to ask about this, and they helped me to relax and reduce stress, gave me advice, and let me know how to make a schedule [good] for me. It was better than the first few weeks. I was really stressed at first.

Now, I think again, and I just want to ask myself why I was so scared of a lot of things. That is just a small thing. If I do not have these feelings at first, how can I grow up and know what I need to do? These feelings were the baby steps that started my life. It will have a lot of difficult challenges for me in the future. But who cares? I can figure it out, pass these challenges, even if it is hard.

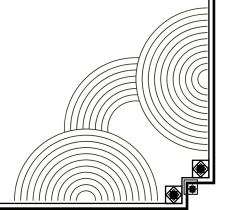
How can I say that?

I do not know why I have enough ability to say that, but the only thing I know is that I have family and friends who always stay here and encourage me whenever I need them.

It has already been two months since I came to America. All kinds of good and bad things [happened to] me. I went through all the hardships to improve myself. I learned that it takes time to learn to adapt to a new environment. There was no shortcut to success. "Time" was the factor that decided everything I did at that moment and in the future. I used my time to work hard at school, I used my time to expand my relationship, and I used my time to practice English everyday. Time was the best answer for me.



scan here for a reading of Alice's experience



BENEVOLENCE Evelyn Vi

when small, my mother gave up her turtle.
the tiny thing would outlive her.
when small, I gave up who I was before
knowing how to be a giver.
when small, I read of a fire-possessed bird,
and thought of my mom's incense ash
breaking off and falling to the red cloth
slivered by photos like a gash.
when small, other girls adored unicorns.
I enjoyed watching the lion dance.
red and scaled and gold and hoofed, my mother's
bad luck scared off by what enchants.
when small, dragons were the kings of the sky,
rising up from the sea with sense
of sovereignty and more than just four legs.

Long, Kỳ Lân, Phượng hoàng, and Quy, all in benevolence.



HOMECOMING

Mahvish Shah

Bittersweet nostalgia haunts the doorway Of the place I left. There is a strange sense of romance— Returning to a place you detest.

For all the memories, This house Was never a home. The montage playing in my mind Still doesn't make me feel Any less alone.

I weep.

I am here now,
But my life has been built across the sea.
I am here now,
But there is nothing here for me.
I returned,
Like I promised I would.

I returned
To the childhood
Where I never felt known or understood.
I weep.

I was a fool.

I thought absence would make a mother's heart grow fonder— I thought absence could make our relationship stronger, but the chasm between us only cracked.

Until the chasm between us was a chasm no longer—it was only space.



I never called, texted, or emailed, & summer break turned to heartache, turned to the present tense of right now, where I am lost in reverie, of the memories of the August I left you, drowning in regret, for the August I almost wish I could go back in time to undo.

I weep.

Did Baba ever tell you, this house was built on a graveyard?

Every night, I went to bed knowing we slumbered over a thousand loved ones.

I look around right now. Things come full circle, don't they?

A house that was a graveyard before has become nothing but a graveyard once more.

An etch a sketch of what it used to be A ghost town Haunted by memory

I always wondered, where did all that grief go? And now, alone in the cavernous, empty wreckage of my childhood home, I know.

I sink into the carpeted floor, in defeat.
The grief rages in my ribcage, I drown in it.

I weep.

For the motherland that mothered me, the motherland I chose to leave,

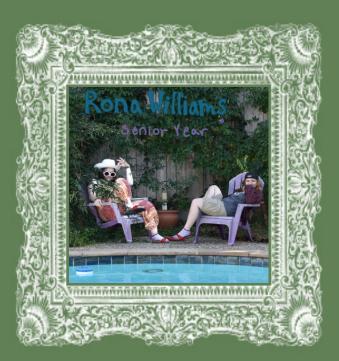
I weep.



ST.

AUGUSTINE

MOONLIGHT



Rona Williams

This song is an exploration of the experience of being queer in a small town. It's the feeling of being a member of a community that you value, yet still having a part of yourself that you need to hide. The song was inspired by a relationship I had in high school, where I dated a girl who was closeted from everybody else around her. While I was out and proud, she held onto this shame about our relationship, as we continued to present ourselves as "good friends." I like to think that this song reflects the jealousy I had over "normal" relationships, and the different experiences that queer teenagers may face.







Deacons are the lowest-ranking members of a clergy since they assist Lthe pastors in both administrative and liturgical duties. I looked up the exact role of the deacon, and I found a commonly asked question is whether or not deacons can get married. I found this funny because my dad used to be a deacon. He has since been promoted to elder, and being married to my mom hasn't taken away from the spiritual authority he wields. These days, I don't read the Bible very much, I don't go to church consistently, and I'm more afraid of his disappointment than any holy being. One day, I'm sure he'll see my shaky faith and I find myself afraid that being cast out would feel like I'm plummeting to earth, even though I have been on earth all my life.

II. Pierre Bezhukov from War and Peace, Alexei Karamazov from Brothers Karamazov, the Priest from Fleabag, and Ronit from Disobedience are all characters that resonate with me. They, like me, have an undefinable, shaky, yet consistent faith. They need a God and that's why there is one. They see God because of the God they need, but they also can't unsee it and it scares them. Maybe I love them because they seem Biblical in their flailing, giving me representation I never had. After all, when Christians bring up the times Bible characters question God, it's sinful. Despite the fact that David was to God as a rebellious son is to his dad, despite the fact that Jacob wrestled with an angel, despite the fact that Abraham made a deal about the IO righteous men in Sodom and Gomorrah, all I can remember is Isaac who lay motionless on the altar as his dad raised the knife. Maybe

if I was less like Ronit-the-Rav's-daughter in Disobedience and more like Isaac, I could ascend to the role of my father's son, instead of his daughter. Maybe if I was like Isaac, I'd finally be absolved of guilt.

III. Guilt is my most consistent feeling, It arrived in my life around the time I was 8 and never really left. When I was little, I had a routine to make it leave. I would lay under my little duvet and confess to God, and apologize. I would get out of my bed in the middle of the night, my path only lit by the night light in the living room, wake my mom up (never my dad), and tell her my sins. If the feeling still didn't leave, I would relentlessly pursue a third party to confess to, to apologize to. If the guilt was still there, I would repeat the process, over and over and over again. Now, I know this was OCD, a disorder that thrives on intrusive thoughts and rituals. But how was I to know that then? I thought God was simply always telling me off me for something I did wrong. Religion, for me, became shame.

IV. The most I have thrived in a religious setting was when I would help my dad with after-church deacon duties. I would help him pick up old programs that fell beneath the seats, pick up plastic cups from communion, and stack chairs. Once, I told him afterward that I wanted to be a deacon like him when I was older. He told me that women don't do deacon work. This isn't always true, in my research I found that in certain congregations, there are female deacons called deaconesses, I just didn't know about them at the time. Still, I don't think being a 'woman deacon' is what I would have wanted, and certainly I would rather be a deacon now. I wonder if becoming a proper one would

fix my relationship with religion, making it feel less like a construct and give me the spiritual relationship with the church that everyone else seems to have.

V. The most I thrive spiritually is in a hot bath, shower, by the ocean, or swimming in just about anything. Water just seems to absolve me in a way that nothing else can. Maybe this is why I obsessively try not to waste water. If I fill a cup that grows old and forgotten, I use it to rinse dishes, to pour over the plants, to scrub my sink. It used to be more obsessive, though. I used to spend hours emptying my bath water into the tank of my toilet. I used to put out cups around me on the floor of the shower to catch the extra water. I used to feel guilty that I had only used the spare water from the kettle for my boiled eggs and then for rinsing the dishes and nothing else.

VI. In the church, water is used for baptisms and christenings. In the Bible, water is what Jesus was baptized in as God claimed him as his son, what is constantly referred to as a source of life, what Jesus walked on during the storm and what Peter almost drowned in as he failed to walk on water to get to Jesus. In the Bible, water is what wiped out everyone except for Noah and his family, what surrounded Jonah as he was swallowed whole, what Moses parted so the Israelites could flee the Egyptians, and then what he brought out of the rock by striking in an act of disobedience. Water is certainly not always life-bringing, but it is powerful. For me this makes sense. I am pretty sure that God is life and death as well as fear and love.

VII. The first time I knew my dad didn't know everything about God was the time I was 18 and fighting with him about queerness. I knew it wasn't a sin, that there was no way I could be condemned for something that was so unremovable and intrinsic. My dad was unrelenting. He had no idea I was fighting for myself. When I told him I was, he faltered.

VIII. When I was 19, my college

pastor approached me about taking on a leadership role within our study. I was elated. I got to pick out the liturgy a couple of weeks in a row, something that felt almost deacon-like in nature. It made me realize that I never stopped wanting to be a deacon. Even now, as I am unsure of where I stand with organized religion, I would drop everything to be one, to pass out the communion crackers and offering bowls with my dad the way we used to. After all, in his mind, women can't be deacons, so if I became a deacon, I could finally be his son.

IX. I saw my dad falter a second time when I was 2I and had just reminded him of that argument from three years earlier, and told him nothing had changed. He admitted he didn't know everything. My face was soaked with tears both times, only this time the tears were partially that of relief. The fear was still there, but this time there was love there as well.

X. I don't know if my dad will ever see me as anything but his daughter. I don't know if he will ever fully except my queerness. I don't know the next time I'll go to church, read my Bible or anything of the sort. What I do know, though, is that I can pray, and if there's a God who listens, he'll give me the answers soon enough.



Colgate University - Hamilton, NY

crept over the glass countertop, my sticky eight-year **L**old fingers grasping for a lollipop. We kept a bowl of candies at the front desk, they were meant for customers but I couldn't help myself. I made a name for myself, the candy thief, and all the employees at Al-Farid Grocery were commanded to keep me from the candy bowl by our boss, my mother. These rules only made me sneakier, and I learned to map out times for my heists between switching shifts and prayer times. My most lucrative heists were during nighttime Isha prayer. I had all the time in the world during the four mandatory rakat, and thirteen optional rakat (which wasn't optional to my parents).

Every week, I added to my secret candy stash which was nestled into the corners of the dusty toiletries aisle. Al-Farid's patrons came for the halal foods and Desi spices – a rarity in Northern Illinois, and no one was looking to buy Dove soap from a Bengali grocery store. Still, my parents always kept their stock saying, maybe the white people want soap. The quietude of the overlooked corner aisle became mine.

My mother was afraid of driving, still is, and we would drive back home only when my father was able to pick us up. But, grocery stores weren't the most lucrative business, and soon after I turned six he began working night shifts at a local pharmaceutical factory. We drove home most nights due to the generosity of our community, long-time customers and friends from the mosque drove us to our home most nights. Look at how giving our community is, that's what Muslims do is what my mother would tell me for years to come.

On nights we didn't go back home, we

would stay in the store by placing a king sized mattress on the floor of the back office, making it a temporary apartment. My mother, brother and I shared this space. We'd sleep, eat, play, pray, read, write, all in this home. But the toiletries aisle, that was all mine.

Scattered throughout the aisles was my hidden life, starting with the candies. Then, at ten, it was J-14 magazines and Teen Vogue. I bought my first J-14 magazine, after being drawn to its cover page with Edward Cullen (the love of my life at that point) at Barnes & Noble during a class field trip. I equipped my 20 dollar bill that my parents gave me and rushed over to the cashier. At home, I carefully pulled along the perforated lines of the magazine to get new prints of Twilight for my side of the room. I took what was left of the magazine with me to school the next day, eager to parse the remaining pages with my friends at recess. As we carefully annotated the pages on our favorite celebrities, they asked me, where'd you put your posters? I promised them I'd take pictures on my school-sanctioned Ipad for the next recess.

When I got home, my posters were gone. I found them in the kitchen trash can, crinkled and torn. I immediately went to my mom. Why did you throw them away? You can't go in my room, I said to her. You're a Muslim, you shouldn't be looking at a boy and you shouldn't have pictures of them, she said. And that was it, my posters were beyond salvaging and I never tried to put them up again. My room remained barren until I was in college, and there were no more eyes on me. But, I still had remnants of my magazine and I knew a place I could hide them.

Finding solace in the corner aisle, I

stashed away my magazines and candies and CDs. During the day, the fuss of the store kept everyone occupied. When it was busy, my mom was doing laps around the store trying to help anyone she could. When it wasn't busy, customers would sit at the coffee table at the front of the store and they'd chat with my mom. They'd discuss their kids, the mosque, and most frequently, they'd gossip. Aisha's daughter married a white boy, no marriage but they live together. Saqib's daughter works in marketing, what kind of job is that? Lost in these rhythms, they'd forget all about me and I was left to spend my days in my own world. There, no one stopped me from reading my magazines, listening to music or watching Twilight interviews.

As I got older, I spent less time at the store. During middle school, we moved into a new house and my father took on fewer night shifts and stayed home with my brother and I most of the time. No matter how busy he was, my dad always made time for us. When I insisted on joining the track team, theater, and yearbook (even though I knew it would cut into the time my dad got to sleep before work) he never once complained. One day, as he was picking me up from practice I watched him struggle to keep his eyes open. His compounding exhaustion crashing down on him, we almost ran a red light. My seatbelt dug into me as we halted to a stop and pulled over on the side of the road. I just need some water, my dad said. We didn't speak the rest of the way home.

By then, I was well aware that the life I had was built by sacrifice. And all that was asked of me was to be a good Muslim girl, but I couldn't even do that right. I came home in my track uniform, baggy jersey and knee-length shorts, after forgetting to take it off after practice.

What are you wearing?, my mother said, coveryour legs. The embarrassment rushed to my face as I hid away in my room. I kept myself protected by covering myself head to toe, worrying about any sliver of a leg

I'd reveal. But, I slipped up again and was branded with a scarlet letter.

All of my relatives had gathered for a celebration of eid al-Adha on a mid-June day with the sun blaring at us. Instead of traditional wear, I opted for a cardigan over a tank top with jeans (in middle school I thought I was too cool for dresses). My face flushed from the summer heat, and I took my cardigan off, revealing a quarter of my back to the world. For the rest of the day, I ate good food, had fun with my cousins, and enjoyed the weather. I didn't notice the eyes of aunties shifting across my back and arms – but my parents did. During the car ride back home, my father didn't speak to me, while my mother screamed at me. What is this you're wearing again, who told you to wear this, she said.

I was wearing a jacket the whole time. Why are youyelling? I felt like I should defend myself.

We saw you outside with no jacket, you know what Saba auntie said to me?

I don't care why can't I wear what I want, I yelled back.

In the following weeks I would make frigid eye contact with my mom around the house, both of us unwilling to waver. But, at each crossing the tension eased between us. My father wouldn't even look at me.

By high school, I had learned my lesson. We moved into a house that was a five minute walk from my school, and those few minutes were my time to act. I wore tank tops and shorts by stuffing them underneath sweatshirts and maxi-skirts. Each morning, I would smooth out the tufts of clothing on my body as I rushed out the door, hoping no one would notice me. Frantically I would peel off my outer layer on my walk to school and enter as my new self. At school I hovered over my body, watching it as it transformed into what it never was at home. I was too afraid to shatter that person, so I hid away any of this life from my friends. I was scared they would think my parents were bad people,

worst of all, I was afraid they'd pity me.

My cousin, Sarah, was the only person that understood me. Four years older than me, and the eldest daughter, she had adopted the ways of our world much faster than I had. She taught it all to me – making a secret instagram account, how to stuff party tops into sweatpants, and most importantly how to sneak out. My bedroom in our new house was positioned straight across from the back door. I learned fairly quickly that if I skipped the creaky third step coming off the patio, no one would even notice I left home. Just behind the school was a part of the Des Plaines river, 133 miles of marsh between Illinois and Wisconsin. Gleams of light emanated from streetlights in the school parking, but otherwise the river trail was pitch black. There, I'd meet Sarah and her friends and we'd spend time out on the trail. They all had fake IDs and I took my first sip of alcohol one of these nights. My first drink was half of a seltzer, but with it came an overwhelming sense of guilt. Before that sip, I could be a good Muslim that had never touched alcohol, but afterwards I could never say that again.

At some point during these nights, Sarah and I would lag behind everyone else as we got lost in conversation. When she'd talk about her family, I felt guilty for ever complaining about mine. I also secretly felt good about having an easier, happier life than her, and then felt guilty again for feeling that way.

Her parents were conservative to the core, even amongst the rest of our family. She went to an online school from a young age, after her parents feared that American values would ruin her. Instead, she spent most of her days at an Islamic school learning to perfect her Arabic and understanding of the Quran. Her family also believed that women should be married at 18, and since she was 18 we felt the clock ticking. We mapped out different ways she could run away: she could move to a new state (where we'd live together

with our other cousins), try to stay on her college campus (she was entering Loyola in the fall), or go live with our eldest cousin in Texas (she was 15 years older than us and left Illinois at 22). We talked about these things casually, as if they were weekend plans, never imagining how we'd put them into play.

I awoke at 3 a.m. to a phone call from Sarah, and texts flying in from my cousins.

I left, she sobbed.

 $\begin{subarray}{ll} \it{What?} I \ couldn't \ think \ of \ anything \ more helpful to say. \end{subarray}$

Eight hours prior, her dad threw a glass vase at her head, which she only barely dodged. Sarah had two younger siblings, both over ten years younger than her, making her more their parent than their sister. That day her father asked her to prepare dinner for her siblings, but she had an essay due at midnight. So an hour later, there was no dinner. Her little brother got up to ask for a sandwich, and when their father caught wind of this he got up off the couch and grabbed the vase in the dining room where my cousin was working, and threw it at her. The vase didn't land, but shattered glass shards scraped her arms. She cleaned the blood off her arms, and then she knew. Eight hours later, when everyone else was asleep, she had packed a duffel bag and left home.

Amongst my cousins we had two different group chats – one with everyone, and the other with just the girls. Aside from Sarah and myself, we had two other cousins around our age that knew what being a daughter in our household meant. When Sarah left, it was the latter group chat that was the first to find out.

We listened to her explain her feelings and what happened, moved her into a women's shelter (we were all in high school and had not much else to offer), and helped her file a restraining order against her father. I was the youngest, fourteen at the time, and didn't have a car or any money to offer. I felt useless, unable to help the one person that made me not feel

alone.

Then, the rest of our cousins found out with my male cousins responding in righteous anger at first. He was completely out of line, I can't believe he did that I'm sorry Sarah. I'll talk to him if he dares show his face to the family again, they said. In a week that changed, Uncle was just tired from work - he worked a 12 hour shift that day, one cousin said. What good will it do you alone out there, just go home. I didn't have money, an apartment, a car, or anything else actually useful to offer to Sarah, but I did have a lot of anger.

Shut the fuck up, my dad works too and he isn't throwing glass at my head. You're telling her to just go home, you don't even know how hard it is for her right now. You just want to defend your poker buddy, I yelled at him. My brother pulled me away before I could finish and it only made me angrier. We may have all grown up together, but no man in my family really understood anything.

Both Sarah's parents, and all the cousins kept her escape a secret. Over summer break, the rest of our family was under the impression she was visiting her mother's side in Bangladesh. Us cousins kept the news quiet out of respect for Sarah, but for her parents it was out of embarrassment. They were embarrassed not of their actions, but of their daughter's, because being disobedient was the greatest crime a girl could commit.

I got my license the next summer, by that point Sarah had a little apartment in West Chicago with her boyfriend and was enrolled in a city college. I'd often drive into the city to meet her, but hid it under the guise of doing an SAT prep course. My parents knew about what happened at this point and insisted I didn't see her. There was only so long Sarah's parents could hide her absence, and eventually the whole family heard the news. But, the story they heard was not of blood, glass and violence, but just that she was a silly eighteen year old who left to be with her boyfriend.

When I asked my parents what they thought of my uncle, they agreed that he was too extreme and not a good father. Even though most of my family agreed, it didn't matter.

He's still her father, do you think it's okay to do that to your father? My mother was referring to the restraining order.

He threw glass at her! I would leave too if you did that to me, I said back.

She just wanted to move in with Hashir that's why she did it.

No she left because her dad threw glass at her. Do you think that's what Islam teaches? Is that what you follow, that you should beat people?

My mother laughed in response, a nervous chuckle with a flushed face. She knew I was right, but that didn't mean she changed her mind. There was no way of overcoming the divide between me and my parents.

Two years after his daughter left home, my uncle turned to missionary work. He often left his wife and young children at home to go on missions to Italy, and Spain, and Cyprus – he traveled the world on his wife's dime. I saw him again right before I left home to move into my college dorm.

In hell 99% percent of the people there, they're women. Sin follows women, remember that when you're in New York and you don't have your father and mother to guide you, he told me.

I found the freedom to breathe in my tiny college dorm. I shared my space with a random roommate, and marveled at my ability to do what I wanted. Of course, at home I still did what I wanted, but now I didn't have to stalk around in the dark all the time. Being out of state was an easy default to avoiding my family.

Sorry I can't be at your wedding, but congrats, I'd say (I could have made it, but booked a late flight on purpose).

Sorry, I'll be interning outside of Illinois this summer, I won't be at eid, I'd say to a different relative (I only looked outside of Illinois).

I didn't know how to admit it, but I was straying away from my religion and in consequence my family. How deeply I wished I could treat those things separately. I went out to dinner with my friend's family at an upscale Italian restaurant. It was the type of place that gave you finger towels and had bathrooms that smelled of lavender. I couldn't remember which fork was used for what, and sat small in my chair starting at my plate.

Do you go to a lot of restaurants with your family? We try to go as a family whenever we can, Gemma, my friend's mother, asked me.

Oh not much, my parents actually don't like to spend money on restaurants, I said, they didn't like spending money at all.

And where are you parents from? You have a beautiful name, I was wondering where it was from, she said.

Thank you, we're from Bangladesh but my name is Arabic.

You seem like you grew up here, did you move here young?

I was born here, in Illinois, my parents immigrated here.

Ah, so you're a real American, Gemma sang. Yeah, I smiled, staring at my salad fork, or maybe it was a dinner fork.

Are you Muslim? Oh no no you're not, you're not wearing that head scarf they always wear, she laughed.

Yeah.

I wondered if this was what my parents came to America for, to have a daughter that couldn't stand up for them or their culture. I betrayed my people, and I felt crushed by it despite the many times my people turned their backs towards me.

Back in my dorm, I thought about calling Sarah, or maybe texting in our "The Girls" group chat. It had been years since any of us had really spoken. As we each entered different universities, we became scattered across the country. Each of us found a reason not to be home during the holidays, and in turn became even more cut off from one another. The last I heard of Sarah she decided to come home, for her mother, and held a small Islamic wedding between her and her boyfriend. I asked her why she did it, she spent so many years saying she wouldn't do

it, getting married didn't seem like her.

The ceremony took like three hours. Hashir was on board so I figured why not, I want my mom in my life, Sarah said.

It wasn't just her, one by one all of my cousins found their way back home, doing what they promised they would never.

I think I'll just find a Muslim guy when it's time to get married, my parents would never talk to me again otherwise, another cousin would say.

Those words felt like betrayal, we were meant to be black sheeps together. There was nothing I could say, they all made their choices. But I stood, frozen and unsure of anything.



A PRAYER Lerymar Rivera

Padre nuestro que estas en el cielo, santificado sea tu nombre; Venga a nosotros tu reino; Hagase tu voluntad, en la tierra como en el cielo.

Danos hoy nuestro pan de cada dia; perdona nuestras ofensas como perdonamos a los que nos ofenden; no nos dejes caer en tentacion y libranos del mal.

Dios te salve Maria, llena eres de gracia, el Señor es contigo, bendita tu eres entre todas las mujeres y bendito es el fruto de tu vientre, Jesùs.

Santa Marìa, madre de Dios, ruega por nostros pecadores,

ahora y en la hora de nuestra muerte. Amén.

"ve repeated these prayers too many times to count. It is comforting, and, ▲like a mantra, it has grounded me. When I was a child, I developed anxiety. I learned about death at a young age. I was constantly afraid that someone would come into my room and kill me and my entire family. I would hide beneath my Tinkerbell blanket, myself head to toe and securing the ends of the blanket beneath my body. I breathed quietly and shallowly so whoever came to end my life wouldn't think anybody was under the blanket and hopefully miss me in his violent tirade. While hiding from an invisible murderer, I would repeat the lord's prayer over and over, adding a layer of protection over me. Eventually, I would fall asleep. When I woke up, I would sit up and place a hand over my heart and the other to the pulse in my neck. Just to make sure my heart was still beating and I hadn't died in my sleep.

My dad used to tell me stories about what would happen when the end of the world came around. First, when we die, we either go to heaven, hell, or purgatory, depending on how we live our lives. I was convinced at the ripe age of 10 that I was going to hell for not listening to my parents, lying, fighting with my brother, or just being a kid. Then, if you made it to heaven, you'd get to live forever in happiness and bliss. Except it's not truly forever because, at some point, we will all be resurrected at the end of the world. If you are a 10-year-old girl with an overactive imagination and developing anxiety, all you would imagine is waking up in a casket or waking up to a world on fire. My dad used to tell me this story with a beaming smile, as if resurrection and war were our ultimate purpose and the highest honor for any human soul.

Of course, after learning all of this, I had my first major panic attack. My parents tried to laugh it off because how else can you calm down a child from a rational fear that will occur someday? I refused to calm down. All my parents could do was pray. All I could do was pray. But praying was starting to lose its luster in my mind. Every time I stepped foot into a church, I would zone out, count all of the letter "E's" on the bulletin, do the children's puzzles on the pamphlet, anything to not pay attention. I was afraid the priest would start talking about armageddon, or death, or heaven. I would have quiet panic attacks sitting on the pews, thinking I was doomed. Padre nuestro que estas en el cielo...

By II, I had received my first communion and became an altar girl. This was probably the only time in my life that I truly believed in the church, religion, God, and Jesus. The priest of the little church in my small mountain community was one of my favorite people. He was like Garfield. He loved lasagna.

He had a heart attack in the middle of Christmas celebrations once. When he recovered, my mom made him a homemade family-sized lasagna. He always had a smile on his face when he saw me. There was an innocence in him that I found comforting. He was also spiritually gifted. My Dad had left my family behind at home to set up our new lives in a different country. When we attended church without him for the first time, without asking questions, the priest saw my family and instinctively knew we were going through a hard time. He guided us inside, sat us down on one of the wooden pews, closed his eyes, prayed for us, and blew air over us. Small little breaths that washed over us. I could feel the holy spirit embracing me at that moment. Santificado sea tu nombre; Venga a nosotros tu reino ...

This high point in my spirituality wouldn't survive the move from my small parish in Puerto Rico to a new community in Texas. By 12, I discovered something about myself that went against everything I had been taught. I was a sinner. I tried to pray my sin away. It didn't work. Hagase tu voluntad, en la tierra como en el cielo...

I buried my sin so deep I wouldn't acknowledge it until I knew better than to blindly follow the beliefs I was taught. From that moment on, I started to doubt everything I was ever told about religion. My Dad and I would constantly bicker about significant moral and philosophical differences, but I loved our fights. My Dad and I were incredibly similar, not just in our appearance but in the way we defended our beliefs, our mannerisms, our mental health struggles, and many other wonderful and irritating traits. My Mom, ever the Switzerland, stayed out of it. Danos hoy nuestro pan de cada dia...

My Dad passed away before I could tell him who I am. I was too scared to tell him. I was afraid he wouldn't love me or that he would try to change or shame me. I was afraid that if I told him every time he would look at me, he would see only sin and failure. I tried to be his perfect catholic daughter. I

really did. I thought that maybe I could live without acting on my sin. I had heard about other catholics who did that. I know better now. Maybe it was better this way. I wouldn't have to live with my Dad's disappointment looming over me. Who knows, maybe he is in heaven and judging me from up there, or maybe he learned better and looks down with admiration. Perdona nuestras ofensas como perdonamos a los que nos ofenden; no nos dejes caer en tentacion y libranos del mal.

Despite all my resistance to religion, I can't say that I have entirely stopped believing in God. I mean, there has to be something. I've always been drawn to the women of the Bible. Mary, mother of God, to be specific. There are theories that maybe Mary lied about the conception of Jesus. Who knows what the truth is? None of us were there. Even if it isn't true, she still gave birth to Jesus, who had a massive influence on three major religions around the world. Her position is nothing to belittle. I used to think her virginity was a miracle—something to strive for. I was 17 when I strayed away from Mary's path. The anxiety and turmoil that day caused in me were immensely difficult to deal with as a rebellious catholic. I wasn't ready then. I was a late bloomer. I seemed to mature slower than the girls around me. I felt like I had something to prove to myself, to my parents, and to my peers, but I wasn't ready. I know that now. Dios te salve Maria, llena eres de gracia, el Señor es contigo...

The Mary and Jesus I've come to know are much different than the ones I've been taught. Mary feels like a warm hug when you desperately need one. A motherly presence, filled with light and love, who will advocate for you, not just some symbol of virginity or purity or chastity. She had a life and a purpose beyond being someone's mother. Jesus would never look at me and see just sin. He would welcome me as I am. He would allow me to question the world and authority. He wouldn't want women to be subservient to men. His best friend and best disciple was a woman. Whose I

reputation has been dragged through the mud by a random pope hundreds of years after her death and whose teachings and understanding of Jesus have been burned and forgotten. All because she was a woman. Bendita tu eres entre todas las mujeres y bendito es el fruto de tu vientre, Jesüs...

There is a Catholic tradition I hoped I'd never have to do. After a person has died, the rosary must be prayed for nine days or nights. My mom and I did this at a friend's house with community members who wanted to join after my Dad passed. One of these nights, a woman stopped reciting the rosary and stared at me and my mom for a while. She fell to her knees across the room, closed her eyes, and let her curly, reddish brown hair fall over her face with her arms stretched out in praise. After the rosary was done, she came up to us and said that during the rosary, she saw Mary behind us, embracing us in her mantle. I knew Mary was feeling our pain, and I knew she was watching over us in our time of grief. I think she's the reason we didn't crumble. I was too mad at God for taking my father, but when I heard it was Mary watching over us, it felt like the things I didn't and couldn't understand were falling into place. As horrible as it sounds. Santa Marìa, madre de Dios, ruega por nostros, ahora y en la hora de nuestra muerte...

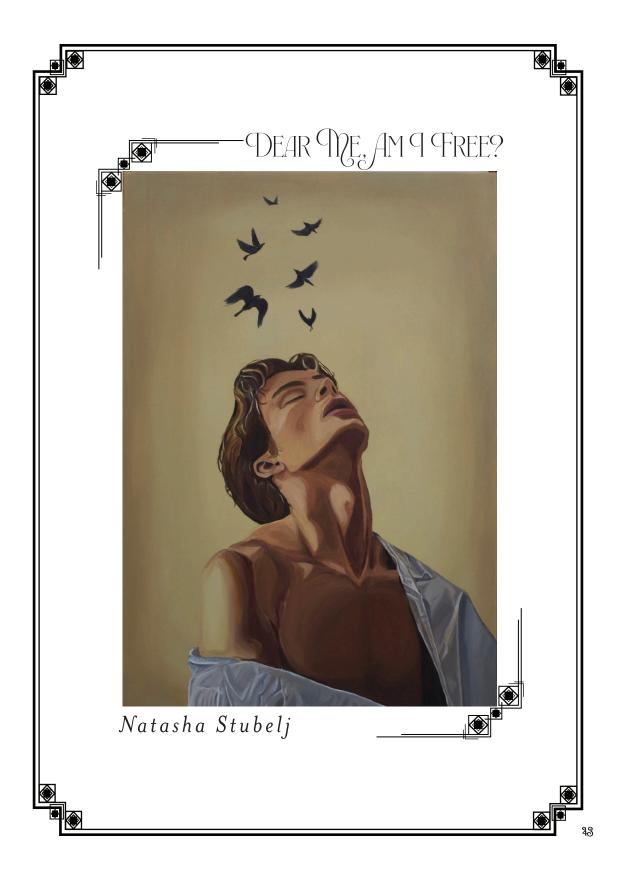
I still get panic attacks every once in a while. I still question God's existence. I don't know if heaven is real. Truly, the most likely thing that happens after death is nothing. Physics says that we are just energy. Energy can neither be created nor destroyed; it can only be transferred. So when we die, our energy goes back to the earth for nutrients, and that's probably it. I get panic attacks over this. I got panic attacks over the version of Death religion offers. I don't think I'll ever come to terms with death. No matter what version it is.

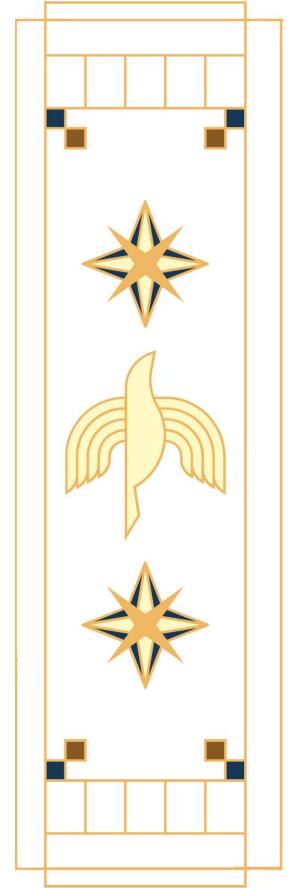
My Dad's death was a horrifying experience, but it was also healing in a way. I read a book once that helped me cope with this. A hospice nurse described several

experiences where her patients would see family members who had already passed as they neared their end. This didn't occur just once; it happened again and again in many of her cases. I'd like to believe I'll see my Dad as I near my time. I think I'll see Mary there too. Maybe my aunt, who died from a disease she couldn't control, or my grandparents, who died when I was too little to remember. I'd like to think we would be left alone to live our afterlife in peace, even at the end of the world. I think we've done enough by simply living. The torment of being the only animals to truly understand our mortality is enough. I don't think I'm a sinner. So, I don't think hell is in the cards for me, even if I still believed in it. Who knows what'll happen when I die? I just hope it is something peaceful instead of the violent images I've held in my head for years.

Amén.







PART TWO



I am a child born from my own heart Sculpted and molded to fit my every desire

A spirit forged in the fires of adversity
A soul once confined in the armor of pretense
Bound by a name that does not hold me
Has now shed the skin of falsity

Each step I take is a liberation
A journey towards my truth
Carving my path through the wilderness of expectation
Claiming my rightful place in the tapestry of existence

I am a song of authenticity
A melody composed of tenacity
Each note a crafted piece of me
Lyrics written with my blood
The bridge built with my bones

Let me play this song for them Let me boast it from the rooftops Till my lungs shrivel And my body goes cold

Let them hear my old story no more Let them gaze upon this new image Take attentive notes And study the fine details

For I am both artist and artwork A masterpiece forever in the making



ATTACHMENT



Daniela Ventura

i have my parents to thank for my issues.

thank you for my anxious attachment, where i constantly panic they'll leave at the slightest hint of uninterest or lack of enthusiasm whilst speaking to me.

thank you for my abandonment issues,
how i feel everyone will disappear
no matter how hard i love them
or the amount of effort
is never enough
to keep them around
as long as humanly possible.

thank you for my trust issues
that i will never move on from;
i don't trust,
his infidelity towards her,
her brushing it off
as if it means nothing
for her children to witness this.

thank you for the belief that love is not real,
no one will ever truly love me
for the person i am
for the person i will become
i'm too much for them.

i don't think anyone will ever be able to handle me.

overbearing,
overthinking,
issues,
never resolved,
please leave me alone,
don't leave me,
don't go,
go,
stay,
please,
no one can ever do so
maybe you can
or maybe you're like the rest.

just like the rest..





Bennington College - Bennington, VT

We ascend from our shelters like we haven't seen a clear day

in centuries, fetal positions drained from our memory like rainwater off a parka.

We take our origami cranes and 8 hours of Netflix TV show dialogue

memorized down to the breath, and we float them along the motes gathering at the gutters flooding our streets. We make mud angels in the grass

and call ourselves queer when the rainbow, resting its chin on the highest cloud, begins to rub off like lipstick on an unassuming cheek at the after party.

We make hailmen, gathering pieces like we're building a sandcastle, and we name it

Sergio because it sounds like someone who'd survive in the gray. We try

to make meaning out of everything the lightning destroyed, but give up after deciding not all beautifully volatile things have to be a metaphor. There are

stories even the strongest don't tell. All of our candles are burned down to their wicks' end, molds of wax fanning out in dripped asymmetry until

even a corner in our home looks unfamiliar in the serenity. We keep pockets of the light

we lived by in the folds of our cerebrum, anticipated next-times being the

pocket knives we never leave home without keeping. After dressing our shadows with

dirt from the eroded banks beside our house, we watch in wonder as the swirling colors—once moss, slate, and onyx—tarnish the edges of the sky, as if the

storm is, well you know how it's supposed to end, but it doesn't make any promises.



TON SONO INTERO.

Amelia

I am not whole.

I am pieces without control.

Il mio nome non è il mio,

(my name is not my own)

perché non so chi sono.

(because I do not know who I am)

I was not taught,

I tried to learn,

but they ask me "why?"

"Siamo qui per non parlarne."

(we are not here to speak it)

Faccio del mio meglio,

(I do my best)

Perché voglio essere completo.

(because I want to be complete)

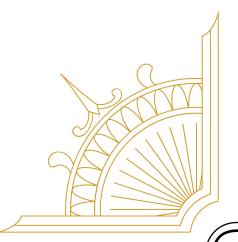
I learn, I write, eppure

(and yet)

Non ti lascio sentire

(I won't let you hear)





HUMANITY

Ava McDonald

I sat on a brick wall today.
I picked at the globs of mortar,
still gooey from when they were laid,
and I stared at the birds.

I imagined they were vultures. I thought about humanity, the birds, me, and my family.

Perhaps we all only accept what we deserve — pick each other apart piece by piece — all starving, all ugly.

I imagined the birds were chasing me, and I begged the sky to stop them, so the clouds came down and I drowned.

I cursed God for flooding the streets where my wall of bricks was, and the mortar in between them.

I cursed him for abandoning me. I am humanity.



ST. THOMAS BECKET DIES

Lane Armentrout

There once was a boy (a lamb) who

found his untimely end on that church's marble floor. I see it now:

The way he bled gold enough that, like pottery,

the cracks in the chapel walls were sealed up with the last remnants of corruption;

His halo shattered on the pews and each greedy man (or wolf)

dove for the jangling innocence

which slipped between each claw-like finger and clattered

down the front steps of Bethlehem

and into the hands of the people to covet,

the mear scraps of sanctity meeting a grasping public.

His porcelain flesh sopped up their wrongs, their rights,

each endless night and day of terror,

and with the world's last consolation, he cried.

I saw a boy, not a man, shed tears of shame as he wept for a future he creates yet is not needed for. the never-ending machine he bore into

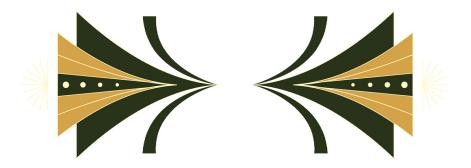
which drinks his diluted blood and binds his hands for the debtor's market.

Something in me (wolf and lamb and boy and man) mourns; yet

I lean down and lap the blood from the lamb's cooling cheek

and, with that taste of divinity,

devour the lamb inside me, too.



LEARNING LULL

Michael Ewing

As students become scholars, life's pauses are few-

One week to blossom, two months to bake, a handful of leaves

Crunch down day's festivities- always on cue.

A quarter per year you're free from institutes' semester fees.

Break from our routine that forces your bow implies saving solitude- Come now!

Without worry to work, no fret of due dates, frolic freely- Post haste!

Train or let lax, study or sleep; a graduates' keep is their plot to plow.

Variations can be made early, but any major change? A whole field replaced.

Colluding over 13 years that 4-6 more will ensure* profitable* future.

Keep on this belt you know too well, avoid halting academia's assembly line.

Enroll while still in high school. Trust us, mid-twenties are life's suture.

Knowledge has no price, but we made one for you! (Relay this design:

Teach enough to exit caves, but not the ones we structure unfairly)

**Chosen college/university, career, and generational wealth may vary.







BAWATORO MA

I stormed out the store, out of thunder and lighting, left with the clear skies.

TOKORO

Through talks, faults, one halts. Think before they speak some more, in case they take all.

BA

Between time itself, the filling of none that's there, constant plane that shifts.

MA

Sentiments cement, concrete, discreet, holds beneath, defeats, completes us.

WA



JIM BEAN RESPONSIBILITIES



Star Elizabeth



The lingering of whiskey reminds me of my duties. A timepiece clicks loudly in the corner

of the room my mother is dying in. I hold her frail hand and the cold is comforting. A notification

beeps. It's the team checking in on me. My bosses making sure I'm still arriving at 8am.

Responsibility is a funny thing. It doesn't make me laugh, unless hysterically.

Mother coughs and it catches me off guard.
She hasn't made a pleasant sound in a while.

I dream sometimes of drowning her in the cool liquor. Ridding us both of the misery,

of the waiting.
I'll curl up in bed tonight
and sob
against my sheets imagining that

they are mother's hands, still warm, still fighting, clinging to a life she never even wanted. I never wanted to be cared for until I couldn't be.

Nothing feels fair. I longed for adulthood, begged

because clearly she loathed it. I'd rather take care of myself. Bullshit. Nonsense. The idea of my desk makes me nauseous. Reports and filing and nervous breakdowns disguised

as allergies await me in a few hours. Earning a paycheck that will inevitably be spent

on the corpse that I came out of. I'm having trouble keeping fluids down unless it's something strong.

You're a strong one. You've got this, is what she always used to say.

I never believed it then.

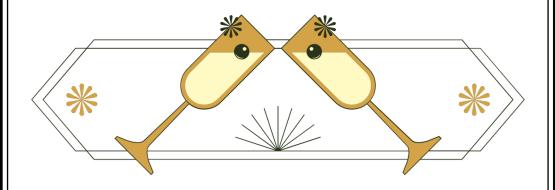
Still don't, even as I juggle putting food on the table and managing her medication better than

she ever did. I get it now though. I wish I could tell her. I understand the frustration. she ever did. I get it now though. I wish I could tell her. I understand the frustration.

The crutches. The bottles. Booze or vicodin and the anger she had when I didn't put out the chicken.

Being responsible for another being is maddening, but I'm doing it. The clock hits a number after IO.

Visiting hours are over.
I'll see you tomorrow afternoon,
I whisper
and leave with a drink in hand.



THE HUNTRESS Duncan Sullivan

This never gets more pleasant," the tawny skinned woman sighed, leaning back from her knees to rest on her heels. She rubbed at her forehead with the sleeve of her tunic, wiping away sweat and tucking the most offensive strands of hair under her wide brimmed pointed hat. In front of her, lying between two hollowed out half logs, was the bloated and decomposing corpse of a man, more mushroom and moss than flesh. The witch leaned back over the body, having taken her breath of air not muddled with decay, and continued to harvest the mushrooms with a carving knife to toss into a wicker basket at her side.

"Excuse me?" A small melodic voice from a source unseen startled her.

She whipped her head at the offender with a steel tongue ready to strike, surprised to see a petite and pale blonde girl wrapped in a white cloak with a spear taller than her strapped to her back. The girl couldn't have been more than a year or two into adulthood, a fact that softened the witch before she hurled reckless hexes. "It's rude to sneak up on people outside their homes."

The girl shrugged her arms under the cloak that was notably muddied at the bottom from the damp forest trail. "I need to talk to you."

"You should introduce yourself before demanding answers to questions I'm not even aware of," The witch stood, brushing off the knees of her leathers.

"I am the Hunter-…ress"

"The Hunter-ress?" The Witch mocked, cocking her hip.

"The Huntress," she said with confidence.

"There you go. Come inside Huntress, we'll talk there," the witch waved the hand with the knife towards her cottage just out of sight down the trail.

"No. We can talk here," the Huntress narrowed her eyes, her tone tensing.

"No?" She scoffed.

"I'll ask, you'll answer," the girl took a swaggering step forward, as if to intimidate the witch with height when she was a head shorter, "Dragon hearts, what do they do?"

"....What?"

"Dragon- Hearts- What do they do?" The Huntress took another step closer, the bulge of a gripped hilt clear under the cloak.

"They're given as offerings to the Light Council," the witch droned, quickly tiring of the interaction.

"Don't think I'm oblivious to your heresy, Witch. What do they do when ingested?" The click of a sword unseating from its scabbard whispered from under her cloak, a clear threat to the woman armed only with a carving knife.

"....Who do you think you ar-"

"Answer the question," she snapped.

"If inquisitors run out from behind any of these trees, I'll gut you before I go down," It was the Witch's turn to lift her blade and threaten the girl back. ".... They grant you the power of their blood, to have what you most desire for yourself."

"Like what?" She took another step, the cloak dragging along the dirt from being too large.

"Like magic, speed, strength, beauty-"
The witch looked over the girl with widening eyes and a quickly growing toothy smile. "You know someone who ate one."

The blonde girl flinched, her brow tightening and eye twitching.

The witch gasped. "I performed the ingestion ritual for a handsome blonde knight not a month ago- Are you his sister?"

The Huntress froze in place, blood rushing to her cheeks.

"...no. No, it's far more amusing than that," the witch fought to suppress a giggle.

"You shut your mouth, Heretic!" The Huntress hissed the words.

"You... are him, aren't you? What a delightful desire," she purred.

"I-I didn't want this!" The huntress stammered. "You need to reverse it!" She finally drew her hidden sword from under her cloak, holding out a plain short sword towards the Witch.

The witch clicked her tongue as she slowly shook her head. "If that's what you actually wanted to happen, you wouldn't be a beautiful girl shaking a sword at me." She stepped up slowly, letting the knife drop from her raised hands. The Huntress grimaced and took a step back, not attacking as the witch slowly pushed her blade to the side with the tip of one finger. The witch only smiled, gently cupping the trembling cheek of the girl that now had tears at the corners of her panicked eyes. "Was it hard? I'm sure it was a frightening journey."

"I- I didn't-"

"I know, it's ok. You're safe here," the witch took another step forward, bringing the shorter girl into a hug.

The sword dropped from the Huntress' softening grasp, her eyes wide and confused. "I wanted to be strong," she whispered after a long moment of silence.

"You are strong," the witch replied softly, moving to gently stroke the long blonde hair that flowed like silk.

"I- I- I-"

Her voice dropped to a laced whisper. "You're allowed to not hate it."

The blonde girl stuttered, sniffed, trembled her chin, and began to cry into the neck of the woman holding her.



Esme Aranda

It's been three months since Andrés was dragged by the sea. The memory of him lurks in Mateo's conscience since Andrés was his other half, his love of three years and a half. Guilt nestles along the crevices of his ribs, but he can't strip it off. It swallows him even though it's something that was out of his control, yet the smallest voice within his mind tells him he could've done something. Mateo rubs his hand down along his face. He tugs a coil of his dark hair and curls it around his finger.

"Mateo?" At his name, Mateo moves the hair that fell along his eyes to the side. Out of instinct, Andrés' name ghosts along his lips, but he pauses. It isn't Andrés calling out to him, despite how much he yearns to hear his voice again.

Mateo notices Julian's figure come into view. His best friend's shape blocks the moonlight as he enters the room, concealing the gentle, ethereal glow from Mateo's sight.

"I see you're awake." Julian crosses his arms. His hands curve along his biceps, resting his weight on his leg as he meets eyes with Mateo.

"You're awake too," Mateo observes. His palms press flat on the tiger-patterned blanket.

"Well you know me," Julian admits. He sits beside Mateo, and the mattress sinks down since a twin-xl sized bed isn't enough for two men in their early twenties. His hands clasp together, resting on his lap.

"Oh," Mateo scratches the back of his head. He strains his lips into an awkward smile, eyeing Julian's side.

"You alright?" Julian asks.

"Just- just trying to tell my brain to go

quiet, you know."

Julian sighs deeply, and he swallows thickly in consideration. "Mateo, I've been thinking..." he hesitates. "What if... you went to Zihuatanejo for closure? After all, that's where... it happened."

Mateo closes his eyes briefly. He had also considered the need to return. He hadn't gone back since then.

"¡Señor, regrese en este instante!" The lady hollered after Mateo when he dove into the water, hearing Andrés' frightened yelp followed by a splash. The boat tangoed with the waves that awakened from the tumultuous winds.

Mateo watched as she cranked the engine into neutral once he pushed himself up above the water. "Help me find him!" He heaved out, trying to stay in place so the waves wouldn't carry him astray.

"Per regulations, you're to come back on board."

"Not without him!" He protested but caved in, getting pulled up as the waves were rougher.

The lady exhaled sharply, pulled her walkie-talkie from her belt, and she called for back-up, alerting others how a man had fallen into the sea.

Mateo brings his hands together, opening his eyes as he exhales rashly, "I think I'll go."

"Should I come with you?" Julian asks.

Mateo sees the moonlight gracing along Julian's irises, and his breath cuts short. "I want to go alone, for a week," he murmurs to his friend, noticing the nod from the corner of his eye. "I'll probably stay a second week, but if I stay any longer... Come get me, please."

"Alright." Julian gets up from Mateo's bed, patting Mateo's curls down gently, and he yawns. "Es hora de dormir."

"Buenas noches, Julian."

"Buenas noches."

In the morning, Mateo walks to his job to ask for some time off. The sun is barely out, but the rays were no joke. He hauls himself along the steep hill, avoiding countless bikes and unstable drivers that dominate the roads. He misses how walkable it used to be, but then again, this is to be expected since he lives right off Interstate I34, at the edge of Vallecitos de Zaragoza.

Mateo did consider quitting his job as a result of his grief, but he couldn't bring himself to quit. He works at Doña Marta's Abarrotes as the shop assistant, and the older woman was like his own mother. As he arrives, he grabs onto the steps and pants like a dog.

"I didn't know you were opening with me today," Doña Marta's voice falters from behind him, her voice tuned out by the music that drivers blast in the morning.

"I wasn't." Mateo looks at her.

"Ay Mateo," Doña Marta shakes her head, pressing her hand against her forehead. Beneath her eyes, her skin is beginning to sag. Mateo wonders how Andrés would feel if he saw his mother aging.

Mateo grins, but it doesn't last long as he notices the graying hair on her head, wondering if the stress from Andrés' funeral had anything to do with it.

"Entonces, what's the matter?" Doña Marta asks.

"Oh! Quería saber si es posible que me des dos semanas de descanso." Mateo says.

"Of course!" Doña Marta agrees. "Take your break. Mijo wouldn't want you hurting yourself like this." She lets out a huff. "Disfruta de tus vacaciones, but you better come back home to me, I can't lose you too." She meets his eyes.

No words crawl from Mateo's mouth, and his vision blurs. He croaks out a soft "okay," giving her a firm nod. He turns away as she opens the shop, and he returns downhill. As he walks, he constantly pauses to glance back, recalling his first encounter with Andrés seven years ago, the summer when they were sixteen.

Mateo walked towards the shop with his empty water bottle in hand. He huffed and waved his bottle to the dude who swept the front of Doña Marta's shop. "Hey!"

The guy turned around, face damp with sweat from the summer heat. It looked like he had poured water over his head since his brown hair was plastered onto his head, drops glistening with the sun rays. He held his broom in hand, his pale skin getting burnt by the sun.

"Güerito, I need water!" Mateo sat on the steps.

"Veinte pesos, wey." The guy placed the broom against the wall.

Mateo groaned, scavenging in his pocket. He had twenty pesos somewhere mixed in with all his other junk — pens, pieces of paper, unused tissue, his keys.

"Any day now?" The guy held the bottle near Mateo's face. "Just give it to me after you stop dying on my front porch."

Mateo sat up abruptly, raising an eyebrow. "What do you mean your front porch? Doña Marta owns this-"

"She's my mom."

"I've never-"

"Because my dad took me to Guerrero from a young age."

"Oh."

"Me llamo Andrés." Andrés extended his hand out. Mateo met his hand, "Soy Mateo."

Mateo opened his liter water bottle, taking a gulp, but before he took another, Andrés snatched the bottle from him. "Los veinte pesos."

"Ay güerito, güerito," Mateo's eyes beamed, a smirk tugging on his lips as he shook his head. He handed the payment, taking the water bottle back.

"By the way, is your mom hiring?"

Andrés raised an eyebrow. "You wanna work here?"

"Why not?"

Mateo blinks rapidly as he looks up at the sky, and he inhales sharply, turning to storm down the hill. He makes a stop at the bus company, purchasing a ticket for Zihuatanejo for tomorrow's departure. The sooner he goes, the quicker he can return, but he's not sure if that will apply to his need for closure. Once he purchases his ticket, he pockets it and makes sure to remember it's in the same pocket as his wallet. He's so caught up in his inner world that he doesn't greet Julian when he's home, instantly dashing to his room and packing everything he may need for two weeks. He glances around his room, and his eyes land on a picture frame of him and Andrés.

"Y esto también." Mateo grabs the picture frame, placing it gently along the middle of his clothes, and he zips up his suitcase. "Okay, so far so good." He pulls his arms up, but he pauses in place when he stretches. He takes a whiff. "A shower," he scrunches his nose, "I need a shower."

8:00 A.M.

Mateo's suitcase is placed into the bus's storage unit, fixed along other travelers' belongings. Hardly any buses run directly from Vallecitos de Zaragoza to Zihuatanejo, so Mateo considers himself to be in luck.

"You sure about this?" Julian rolls his sleeves, checking the time. "You'll get there around 9:30 or IO:00 right?"

"Yeah," Mateo responds as he pulls out a piece of paper from his pocket. In doing so, coins fall out, and he frantically picks up after them, catching a few before they hit the ground. He places the paper against Julian's palm. "I'm staying there, just so you know."

"Okay." Julian pockets the paper. "I'll keep this safe." He checks his watch again.

"Don't you have work at 8:30?" Mateo quirks an eyebrow, and he notices Julian fidget with his sleeves.

"Tal vez," Julian smiles.

"Go to work," Mateo groans, letting out a laugh.

"Pero-"

"No buts! You rarely get time off!"

"Okay, okay!" Julian chuckles. "See you when you come back, but just know, if you call me or if it goes past two weeks, I'm coming down there." He gives Mateo a tight hug, ruffling his hair, and he steps back, waving goodbye.

Mateo sighs once Julian is out of sight,

and he steps inside the bus. He spots his seat at the very back near the restroom, and he rests his head against the windowpane. Bitterness anchors in the pit of his stomach, hoisting itself with a weak rope as he watches an assortment of couples traveling in pairs. He glances at the empty seat beside him, and he turns away. "It's okay," he reminds himself.

Within an hour and twenty minutes, Mateo arrives at Bahía de Zihuatanejo, the place he'd never return to. He gives the sand a little kick just like Andrés once did, and he makes his way to the familiar motel. He checks in at the front and walks to his room on the bottom floor all the way to the left. Three months ago, he had this room with Andrés.

"¡Mi amor, tenemos una vista orgullosa!" Andrés laughed, dropping his suitcase at the door to run towards the ocean. He tossed his arms into the air, the breeze dancing with his hair which had grown down to his shoulders, and Mateo noticed him close his eyes as he had leant back for the sun to kiss his skin.

"Andrés! Let's finish settling in, please." Mateo groaned. He fumbled with the lock, jabbing it left and right. "Did we get the wrong key?"

"Lemme see," Andrés' chanclas slapped along the stone flooring as he returned to Mateo's side. His fingers brushed against Mateo's as he took the keys, and he opened the door in one go, giving his boyfriend a grin. "I think someone's just impatient," he whispered near his ear as he handed the key back.

Mateo huffed. "It's just a faulty key." "Uh huh."

Mateo opens the door in one go, and he flicks the light on. He looks around the clean room, dragging his suitcase in, and he closes the door behind him with the tip of his shoe. He waltzes briefly with his suitcase and slumps onto the mattress, sinking into the comfort of the cushioning.

"Do we have to sleep here?" Andrés twisted and turned, groaning at how the springs poked at his back. "It feels like your old mattress."

"The one you said that feels like rocks?"

"Pues, what other one would I be talking about!"

"Pues, no se güerito." Mateo breathed in deeply, and he tucked his head into the crook of Andrés's neck.

Mateo smiles, gazing at the ceiling, and he enjoys this cozier bed for the both of them. He clutches the fabric of his shirt that hugs his chest, pressing his fingers along his heart. "This one doesn't feel like rocks, amor." He closes his eyes just for a little while.

9:06 P.M.

Mateo sits along the familiar shoreline, knees close to his chest. The moonlit water sways gently along his skin as it reaches and pulls for the sand's smallest pebbles into the water, never to be seen again. His eyes follow the sea, and he waits for the moment the waves extend their arms towards the moon in complete, shameless devotion to embrace it. However, it doesn't seem like it'll happen soon.

Mateo's legs fall flat along the sand's mush, and his palms press against the ground. He eyes the moon's enormity and stars surrounding it. He hums gently to himself. "I miss you, Andrés." The glow from above blurs. "There's not a day when... when I don't think of you." He muffles a laugh with a hand against his face. He doesn't care if small grains of gravel mingle with his eyelashes. Right now, it's him, the moon, and the sea. The serenity eases the tense grief that wallows in his heart. He still had so much love he wanted to give to Andrés, but he can't do that anymore.

"Fuck," Mateo's voice trembles. He pulls the ends of his t-shirt and wipes the overflowing stream while his heart swells with memories of his former lover. He reminisces Andrés' laughter, the sound that once filled Mateo with joy. Within the span of three months, the voice of his lover was growing fainter in his mind.

Mateo gets up on his feet since it doesn't seem like any waves will form, so he walks back to his motel room. It's best he went to sleep, to protect his mind from the sadness that wishes to reign his heart. The most he can do is not let this grief take over his life. The walk wasn't very long, for he found himself entering and locking his room, tossing himself onto his bed. He pulls his phone up to his ear, finger hovering over Julian's contact. He taps his friend's number.

"Mm, hello? Mateo?" Julian's sleepfilled voice fills Mateo's ears.

Mateo remains silent, his grip tightening on his cellphone.

"I think you buttdialed me... I'm just gonna hang up." The line went flat.

Mateo sighs. What was he thinking?

4:00 A.M.

Mateo's eyes open with ease as if he hadn't slept at all. He turns on one side, then to the other, and he huffs, feeling stiff against the softness of the bed. He swings his legs over the edge and reaches for his keys on the bedside dresser, but he knocks the rest of his stuff down onto the floor. He pinches the bridge of his nose and sighs. As he grabs his phone and turns on the flashlight, he gets down on his knees, scouting out his keys. He looks through the clutter, soon pulling them from beneath his wallet. He can always clean later.

Mateo leaves the bedroom while the rest of the world sleeps.

Every step Mateo takes draws him closer to the sea, the swish of the waves lulling him as no other soul wanders by. Andrés always told him not to walk outside in places he hardly knows, and Mateo had promised him he never would. But tonight, Mateo looks at the moon and apologizes for breaking his promise. He reaches the shoreline where the water rests along his ankles.

Mateo feels his phone buzz within his pocket, distracting him, "Hello?"

"Mateo?" It's Julian.

Mateo sits in his thoughts, feeling tension crawl along his body. While he holds his phone to his ear, he focuses on the sound of Julian's breathing, aware of Julian's night owl tendencies that resemble his own. Here they are though, separated by a screen, wide awake at 4:15 A.M., with their breaths in synchrony.

"This is gonna be random, pero... ¿estás en la orilla del mar?" Julian asks.

"Huh?" Mateo raises an eyebrow, and his train of thought fades as he focuses on his friend's question. "Wait, how do you know where I am?"

"Well, you see," Julian chuckles. "I think you buttdialed me earlier, and well... you know how worried I get so..."

"Julian," Mateo breathes out. "Don't tell me..." He looks around, spotting Julian on the hill. "Ay, no entiendo por qué eres así." He watches his friend come closer, hanging up once they were face to face. "You have work tomorrow. How're you going to explain this to your boss? Also, how the hell did you even-"

"Mateo, that doesn't matter right now," Julian says, "I couldn't sit still at home while you're all alone. You know I get anxious!"

Mateo's hands press along his face to muffle a groan. He drags them down enough to unveil his eyes. "But I'm okay! It was just an accidental dial." He insists, trying to play it off, but the thought of his friend going through all this trouble for him causes guilt to grow between his ribs.

"Mateo... wait- are you... crying?"

"No," Mateo sniffs. He faces the water and crouches down to it, vaguely seeing his reflection. He notices his disheveled, knotfilled darkened curls, his sun-kissed skin, his brown eyes. Andrés always told him that his eyes were golden pools of honey.

"Mateo, it's okay." Julian crouched beside him. "You're my best friend, andand I want to be here for you."

Mateo's shoulders tremble as he bites down on his fist to wheeze out a sob. Julian sighs and wraps his arm around his shoulders, bringing him into his side. He gives Mateo a comforting squeeze, pressing his head against Mateo's as Mateo breathes in and out to calm his racing heart.

"Sabes, you looked like a jerk when we first met," Andrés patted the sand off his beach towel, the rays of the sunset caressing his cheek. "I thought you'd be one of those pendejos who doesn't care about anything."

Mateo's breath hitched as he looked towards his boyfriend.

"But," Andrés looked at him, "you're really soft." He smiled at Mateo. "I've seen when you cried after clashing with Julian since you guys are so similar, pero just know it's okay to cry. You don't have to be some tough guy, you know?"

"Pero..."

"Ay," Andrés scooted over to Mateo's towel, taking a seat in his lap, and he held one side of his face gently within his palm. His thumb caressed the skin as he stared into his eyes. "Pero nada. Tu güerito dice que chilles todo lo que necesites chillar."

Mateo snorted, bursting into laughter. "Okay, okay. I'll cry all I want then."

"Good," Andrés smiled.

"I got you," Julian reassures. His hand rubs against Mateo's back. "You're safe."

"Siempre estaré aquí." Andrés put the tip of his index finger against Mateo's heart. "Mi cielito lindo." Mateo felt Andrés' forehead against his. "Cada vez que miro el cielo, pienso en ti. ¿Sabías eso?"

Mateo opens his eyes and tastes a tear upon his lips. He lets go of Julian after clinging onto him. "Lo se."

"Hm?" Julian looks at him..

Mateo meets Julian's gaze, and he shakes his head. "I think... it's time to sleep."

"But are you okay now?" Julian's eyebrow quirks up.

Mateo stifles a smile. "I will be," he glances briefly at the moon and back at Julian. "It'll all be okay."

"Ta bueno," Julian says. "Off to sleep... you don't mind if I crash in your room?"

Mateo shakes his head as the two of them stand back up, and he digs into his pocket, pulling out one of the various items that nestle within. The item was the cap from the water bottle Andrés gave him the first time they met seven years ago. He had written the date they met on it. "Oh, that is old." He hears Julian.

"Oh, shut up." Mateo gently shoves him away, rolling his eyes.

"I don't understand why you collect random things." Julian says.

"Well! I'm not the only one." Mateo eyes him with big eyes. "You literally collect-"

"Blah blah blah," Julian tunes him out.
"This isn't about me!"

Mateo shakes his head, and he turns back to the ocean, whose waves begin to stretch to hold hands with the moon.

"What are you-"

Mateo holds it firmly against his palm, and he pulls his arm back over his head. He takes a step forward.

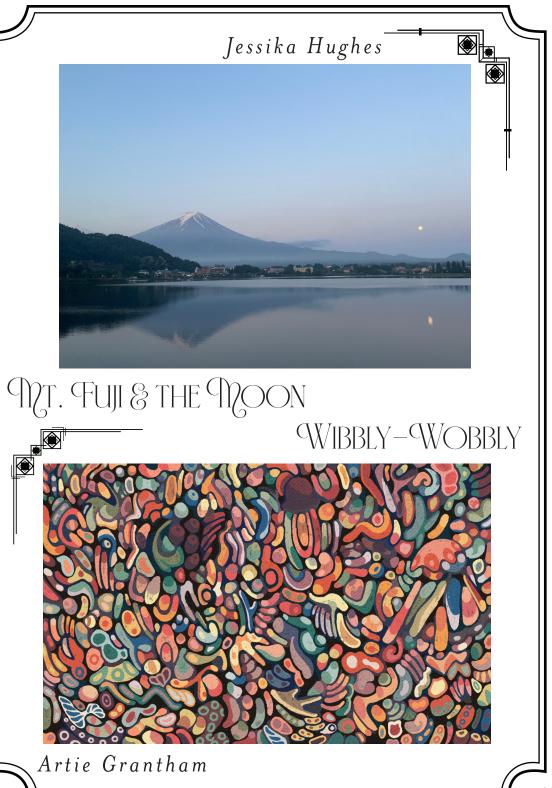
"Mateo?"

Mateo brings down his arm and lunges it forward, sending the bottle cap flying, and he watches as it gets caught into the wave that held hands with the moon, shimmering bright as ever. He turns away and buries his hands into his pockets. His eyes sting briefly, but his heart feels lighter.

"You sure you did the right thing?" Julian follows behind him.

"Yes," Mateo croaks out, the tip of his nose reddening from the cold breeze. "Because now, I can let him go," he stops in place and looks Julian in the eyes, "but I'll still have him here." His hand rests against his heart, gaze transfixed onto Julian's, and he takes a deep breath.

Mateo's lips curl into a smile.



BY THE LAKE

Amirah Khan

My dear, you were so gray the day the lake sulked in algae clogged bath. While you let small fish nibble your toes, the waves bent backwards to mirror your frown.

Each pebble on the gravelly beach creates craters into your hands, delving deep.

Don't you think they were compensating for the holes pocketed in each corner of your heart?

If flowers you pluck from the lake's crown were to be planted in your ownif you, my dear, eat your breadcrumbs, instead of throwing them all to the ducks, you'll see.

You'll see the notes a soul can sing. Your morning hum finds higher keys, salty tears lose face to dainty sweet crystals freckled on your cheeks.

If we all danced in the rain to the rippling waves of our heartbeat, tiptoe through rays of moonlight, our lakes would waltz to our smiles.





Starwalker, I sway in the void.

Torn between gravities of the Earth and Moon

Like a mistake waiting to happen, a path chosen too soon.

Which way should I walk?

Starwalker, I have existed here forever.

A precision in my indecision. I yearn to thrive,
But not knowing the future, it is difficult to decide.
Do I ignore the ticking clock? Is it only in my mind?

Starwalker, time is running thin.

A vacation in space does not excuse me from life,
Neglecting the decision will cause yet more strife:
Earth or Moon, mundanity or dream-chase?

Starwalker, the choice is yours,
To dive for the cosmos in optimistic glory,
Or relegate myself to Earth's far tamer story.
Could I even bring myself to leave?

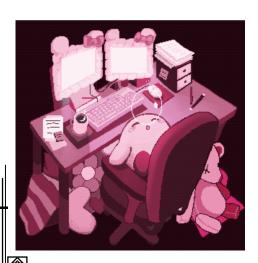
Starwalker, I am reminded of my weakness;
Every time before I was unable to decide,
A paralyzed judge over every case he presides.
To risk nothing is to gain nothing, to risk everything is to live.

Starwalker, I am going insane. Should I Sprint for the stars and abandon my reticence, Or stay on Earth for a life I may grow to resent? How many steps until regret's bitter embrace?

Starwalker, how I tire of this place. Yet another soul-splitting dilemma, no one here to ask. Conversation, I've found, is a much easier task, So to my reflection: Starwalker, which path do I take?



COZY CORNER





scan here for Samaria's GIF on northtexasreview.com

Samaria Torres



This song follows "Astro!" as the second piece in this single. Just like "Astro!," this song is inspired by traditional 8-bit Nintendo music, found in famous franchises such as Super Mario Bros, The Legend of Zelda, and Kirby.



Mya Johnson



WHERE DID ALL THE FIREFLIES GO?

Gianna Ortner-Findlay

Moonlight kisses the stones on the walkway, warmth barely left from the wake of Him, cicada vibrato echoing through the woods. Fireflies glow, popping like embers in the darkness, whispers of their presence through the grassalighthouse-last attempt for love late in the season.

Fireflies

don't wonder when the last time they've been kissed is.

Fireflies

know that their love is waitingwaiting for that flash bulb moment before they perish together.

Fireflies

don't ache to be held or touched kindly- or at all.

Fireflies

know what it is to be loved without strings tied taught around crimson pulsating lobes, pulled every which way by reckless fingers, pinned artfully in frozen decay forgotten and sealed shut for display.

She waves goodbye to the stones on the walkway, Moonlight listening to soprano sparrows whistling through the trees



as their partners follow in tune. The fireflies are gone, their glow fading as tendrils of yellow, red, and orange crawl across the deep blue expanse to the other end of the horizon.

In the full glare of morning, there is no more loveno more flirtatious flashes or the soft legato of wings.

Sunlight looks towards the edge of Her, longing in his rays-outstretched towards His love that He cannot kiss, He cannot touch, as blinking lights, like fireflies fade from Moonlight's deep blue.





GETWEEN Felicity "Torrin" Nguyen



Frigid wanderings scape devoid, but the few foraging flocks flew away upon my wake.
From above, with their beady eyes see a black dot that lurches across a blank sheet.
Snow bed depressed from where divine beings once laid, gathered flakes crying out whispers to the universe when met with sole.

Washing away the sweat and rain of depleting summers gone, drowning the drain, far past sunset at IO pm. That black dot careening across an empty street, where distant neons smeared against an untinted sky and jagged white streaks divide inked night in an instant against the backdrop of a movie theater left too brightly lit left unanswered left in a hurry. No reason to linger, some would say 134 minutes was too long to begin with.

Socks on dirt, the party, pleasantries, proceed inside. Playing cards on carpet, Deluge on sand and sea, water showers on skin — oil slick, disparate — the party, pleasantries, proceed inside. a game for one, while they chase hermit crabs in dunes. even when surrounded by others.

Is it a fool's errand

Hand extended

to expect the same

fingers splayed, in all intents and purposes—

year after year

trying to hold onto what will only

even if for just one second

run þast you.

to reach out to the sky and grasp it.

peel what clings, away from it all.

LITTLE CARDBOARD BOX











BUCKET LIST FOR HORSE GIRLS Felicity "Torrin" Nguyen

Horse Eden of nothing aside from extinction and dressage — paid in allowance. A modern-day horse girl surely dreams of electric mares,

the debts of your oversized hearts gone unfulfilled.

Pings of pain can go unfelt, for your troubles can be herd. Focus can be put in someone's pocket instead

☐ Frolick over daisies while grazing on balut and butterflies

- - rootin' in appaloosa country jamborees
- ☐ Limited offer BFFs acquainted over favored breed or television, and once offline, lost time and again
- ☐ Replay day in a life of highschool clique rich debutantes or stallion and wife with millions and billions adopted as kin
- ☐ Misspellings and dwelling on going-ons and little things, repelling the oncoming future of imminency
- ☐ Fill out dailies as fillies with joy and with sin, with hedonist plains of map pins, questlines, and whim
- ☐ Bask in momentary glee of the sinking, monetized maiden voyage
 - nosedive to the bottom and bring home the helm

— The XOXO-marked treasure at the end of the line is in-game currency and the friends we made along the way

Show ponies! Show ponies! Soar high, you vulnerable beasts

One-trick gift horses perform for pennies on the faux dollar

Run away!

With your blinder view of life going forward!

Beat the dead in their lost race;

sunk-costs until the last drop has wrung!

Gait with grace! Soon there will only be empty pastures

Of texture asset grass, flattened trees, and flipped icebergs,

with blinking chat rooms, and beached whales,

with broken legs stuck in tombs

Wide, glazed, constellated eyes—

shuttering to a close



Rae Flores

THERE IS A CERTAIN FEEL

M. Corbin Crain

To the way pen drags across paper; Ink flows in gyrating motions leaving letters, words, sentiments. In the pen's wake is an intimate poem sprawled out, Emotions once shielded, now exposed.

The poet is elated in their work,
Feeling clarity and exhaustion, and hope
The reader too feels the weight of their words—
Satisfaction on both ends.

But then there is the intellectual.

Although he writes poetry just the same,
The vulnerability feels superficial, and he
Lacks the gratification of poet and reader alike.

It doesn't matter what he feels, however, Because the readers will never know. Not like they care how he feels anyway. They only wish to satisfy themselves.

Nonetheless, when they read his imitations And feel pleasure still, he questions himself: Are these emotions real to me as I wrote them, Or are they mere performance for another's sake?



94HAANE 94A WAQT (DINNERTIME)

Mahvish Shah

When did skipping meals, turn into a pastime, turn into something I do? When did feeling empty come with feeling full?

Since when was my hunger ignorable?

I was never ill, I just forgot to eat sometimes. When did any of that become a problem?

Sometimes I think I like the feeling that comes with hunger, And *crave* the numbness that comes with fatigue.

And my mother asks me

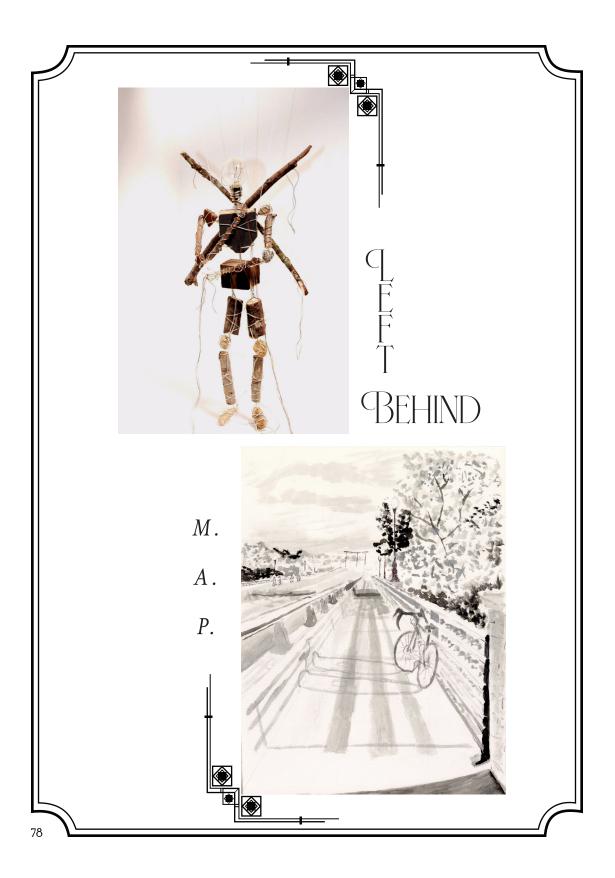
What kind of relationship I have with food,

And I wonder if it's the same one I have with her.

I like food, mostly,
But I don't like eating sometimes.
I like her too, mostly,
But sometimes she is too much.

Sometimes I'm full, And sometimes I'm just not hungry. I wish she would understand.









I cleaned out my earsdragging a kerchief through the center of my head.

I had it

dipped in holy waterasked that God release me from the voices of my demons.

I only wanted to hear from him. And so, I listened

with my eyes closed and my hands nailed to the bible.

And I heard what felt like angel's voices as they called on me

to lay at his feet.

For the first time in far too long. I rested.

The parade of loved one's voices and their concerns about my choices no longer

beckoned me. I was free to worship with

cotton sticking out of ears like a mouse's or a fox's.

I twitched on the ground like an animal caught

in a snare-

but I love it here.

 $\begin{tabular}{ll} The thing about senses \\ is that they come with the sense \\ that I am \end{tabular}$

somehow right or wrongin my actions, in my decisions

in my own head.

Now my decisions are made by him

and thus, I can ignore the screaming voices of conviction begging me to change

I may stay wild in my judgments and my rage.

For my decisions

are intuitive, instinctive, or better yet divine intervention.

And I will enter the kingdom of heaven with not a single moral question

-unanswered-

no blood on my hands. The nails that still inhabit them will close

over my coffin and the bible will be read over the cage

I've buried myself in.

It is unfortunate that I won't be able to hear them.

The cotton pages tend to muddle the sound

of other's prayers.

But not to worry God will tell me what the preacherswhat the demons said

when I leave them all behind for heaven.



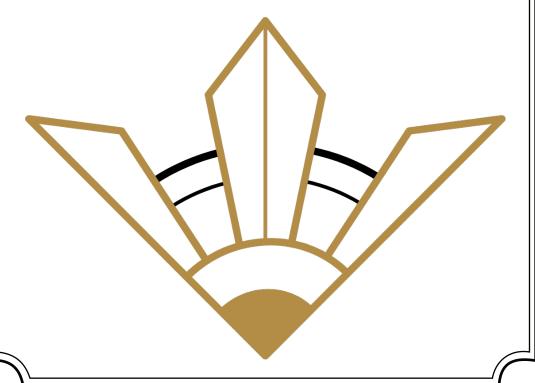
WYSTERIA

Gabi Baca

I was a home, oiling frays in your stories, Unmoored from the glisten, I sit and listen. "One weak leaf will destroy the whole harvest;" I'll save the thistles and thorns.

I spruce the gables with gallows wisteria,
Launder the shallows and river bed on my knees,
Corral the mud and disgrace and my name,
And toss them with the teeth from this jackal.

I sow the hothouse flowers, just as I was trained— Taut like a liar, scathing as schism, Gentle as a house on fire— Tying knots in your linen.



MOTHER (THE TITLE, NO LONGER THE ROLE)



M.W. Graham



I remember being small, Mother.
My leg was as long as your arm.
I fit safely in those arms and they held me through nightmares and through laughter and just because.

I remember you, Mother.
Your smile and your laugh,
the dream in your eyes of who I'd become,
your words soft like my toys —
the ones you'd give voices to when it was too late
at night, and I needed to go to sleep.

I remember seeing you happy, Mother —
you and Father both.
There were days where I even thought you loved each other,
but I always knew you loved me
because you were my mother
and I was your child.

I ponder nowadays, Mother,

about what you would think of who I am today, about if who I am today is who you'd want me to be, about if you'd still want to be my mother had you met me today. Do you want to be my mother today?

I know you ponder nowadays too, Mother, about if I still care for you and if I'm okay about Brother and his hidden cards about Father and his rusted joints and your own mother. Did you ever have to think if your mother still wanted you?

Do you know, Mother, that you can still hold me?
Though I'm not as precious as that which you held long ago, I'm still here and real.
I'm taller than you now, but I can curl in on myself forever.

I don't know if I want you, Mother, with your mamba tongue, your glares out of the glass, your splattered expressions, your anger, endlessly boiling, and your cooling heart.

But aren't I still your child, Mother — or are my faults all you can see? I know my faults, they're yours.



OUR SOULS TOUCH FOR THE FIRST TIME

Marina Lukens

Oh, I am a ghost Observing from the eaves of my life. A whisper, I am Small, I am Safe.

And then there are
Someone's eyes —
Almost the same as mine —
Watching, seeing.
I tell them with
Only the hard lines I place at
The corners of my mouth,
My chin protruding:
Good luck on pinning me down.

And then there are two bookmarks Wedged between
Different pages of the same book.
I slip from my perch, split
Myself open.
A newborn baby, I am
A small bird, I am
Fumbling blindly.

OF DESPAIR

Ashley Barcenas

Texas Woman's University - Denton, TX

How is it so quick and easy for them to fall? To be fragile, yet strong as they jump freely. Born of grief and burden, They fall so beautifully and gracefully, All while made of clarity.

How can it be?

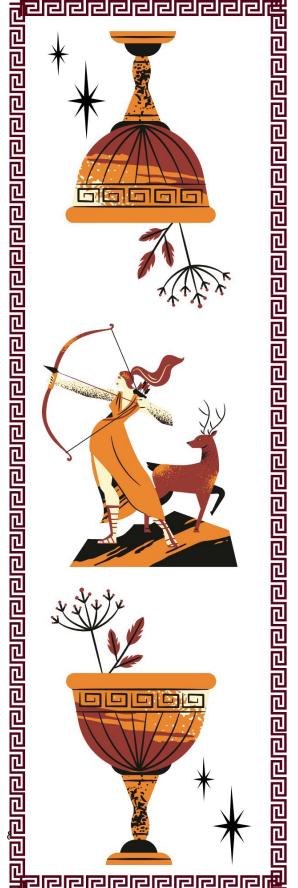
How is it they disappear so magically? With a heavy birth they somehow grow, Into such strong and confident beings. Raised with lamentations and sorrow, They still come to bring comfort and relief.

How can it be?

Such pure and innocent things,
Soaking their chill and comfort into every cheek.
Giving relief while receiving short life and gloom,
And blurring vision in order to hide the ugly,
Just until light can make its way back.

How can it be?

Protective and allowing one to recollect,
Their tender intentions and actions hold,
Until one is ready to face the world once more.
Even though they're crystal clear,
They carry the burden and hardship all on their own,
To make sure this despair disappears.



PART THREE

WAR'S WOMB

Amelia

[19:14] Civilian, wounded

Wire mother, Blood brother. Cloth mother, Dead brother.

As you lay, Sticky and sweet, Does the wool Feel like Mother did?

Sway to And fro, To, And fro.

Mucking and Bucking to And fro, To, And fro.

Mother, why? Burrows of Hate and Bullets of Love.

Wire mother, Cold as lead. Cloth mother, A woolen red.

[20:23] Civilian, dead



WHAT HAS BECOME OF US?

Gianna Ortner-Findlay

Pockmarked and sulfur stung, the city weeps beneath the weight of dull needles piercing soil (a macabre needlepoint), sound cushioned only by the heart-drumming blood into blown eardrums.

I hope they (the true cost of war — who are buried underneath the rubble and bleeding onto the streets) can still hear the birds as they sing, arching gracefully beneath skies scarred by smoke ducking solemnly in their beds that are littered with ash, bits of nests tucked carefully with blood-tinged blankets, woven in between twigs to protect new life.

The children are dying, and spring mirrors their decay.

Smoke hazed and bleeding, the soldiers whisper amongst themselves, chuckling as the whistle of bullets and bombs whiz past their tanks and in to soft, moldable flesh.

I hope they (the soldiers in uniform — the men who cannot sleep, haunted by the faces of the nameless and the voices of the living who knew their names) can hear the weeping, it sounds like God crying, as He watches His children tear themselves apart.

The men are fleeing and summer simmers, baking dried blood and soil into pound cakes.

In the stage beyond hunger (no more supplies are coming), where ribs crest the top layer of skin and hopelessness carves itself into a new home, redecorating the hollow cave that once was stomach and muscle, unable to stop to remember what has been lost.

Screamed at and belittled,
grabbed and pried from dying babes,
blood drips slowly off fingertips
that just learned to play piano.
The last hands to hold her child were not hers.
I hope they (the men in white—
perched atop an ivory tower built of bleached bones) can hear the wailing,
underneath the sirens scream, the rage
and sadness coiled into one song.
The women are mourning,
and August, tumbles into fall.

Crumbled and war-torn, the city is the quietest it's been in months. There are talks of peace, pitiful agreements between men who believe that land is taken instead of given. I hope they can hear the dying breaths of those they have shoved through death's door, smiling, and saying that death becomes you. The city diesbuildings concaving slowly into themselves and dear winter comes to harden yet again, crystalizing their bodies in perfect symmetry.





CATARACT (>>>)



Lillian Pruett

I cannot see pictures in my head, and images form no growth inside my mind. There is no conjuring of warm riversnor constructions of any sapphire seas.

But if you asked the names of ten children, I could tell you the life they could have had. I could tell you the exact scent and taste of crushed dates squished in sticky fingers.

I could tell you of prayers and of mothers, gain sympathy for a life you can imagine. But my mind cannot conjure up stars and my fingers cannot open unseeing eyes.

But hear me.

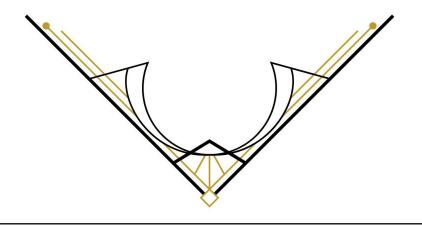
Tonight, your children are Palestinian and you will let the Arabic spill from your lips. Look at your sister, her smile and chopped hair and let your voice whisper into the wind.



EVERYTHING MEANS NOTHING

Aaron Kessler

children use napalm soldiers play with their toys unjust war is just world peace is boring it seems like the Devil keeps laughing at your every misfortune at your every mistake picking and stabbing and fucking your skin you notice signs the twisted face of the nightclock surreal paintings and absurd dreams you stare in the mirror searching for an answer you've been beaten your scalp bleeds like an uncooked fig onto the teeth of an unwashed pig you seek escape you lay missing an old picture on a vandalized streetlight a forgotten Post-it note mouth-cutting ice cream cones a fraud memories fade quicker than time a non-believer as you set aside the empty gin the unlit pipe the bloody knife as you pat dry your tired eyes with gasolinesoaked toilet paper with a blue BIC lighter just when you think it's only just begun the crickets chirp you've won the cows chide the lilac and lilies are disappointed like your father learn to swim he says the raging rapids await you they will drown you hope you write a good poem or two the Almighty likes you appease him





EPITAPH

(FOR

THE

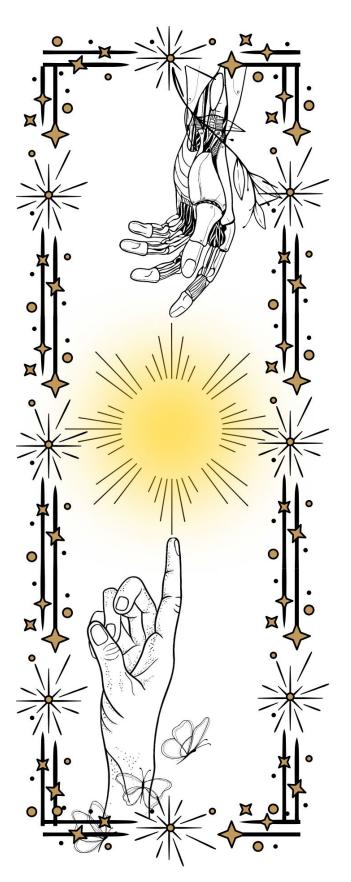
INFANT

WING)

Austin Moxie James







PART FOUR



he fires roared from the city forge as Hyacinthus approached. He was headed towards the city gates, but, as he came upon the roaring forge, a voice called up from the ground.

"A coin for a poor veteran, sir?" The man wore nothing but tattered leather pants. He held out a metal cup that contained maybe half a dozen bronze coins with his left hand. On his right side protruded a stub where an arm should be, and a shallow, pink scar ran down the man's cheek down to his clavicle.

Hyacinthus averted his eyes from the grotesque figure but rummaged through his coin purse and dropped a few silvers into the cup with a series of sharp clinks. "You really should get away from this heat. No reason to endure the forge-fires in summer," he said.

"This is the only place I've got left, sir. Reminds me of my glory days." A wry smile slowly grew upon the man's face. Hyacinthus walked on.

How glorious could they have been, he thought, if they left the man in such a sorrowful state? His stomach turned to lead as he realized that this man was one of the lucky ones. He survived. But instead of being revered for his sacrifices as the dead were, he was left out to dry. A chill ran down Hyacinthus' spine. He was in search of space to think, to calm the racing thoughts in his mind, to forget the dreaded knowledge that Sparta would be dragged into the conflict eventually. And then what will become of me? A vision of the veteran returned.

The heat from the forges billowed out into the street, ushering his feet forward in search of cooler air. Soon, he came upon the outer gates and walked over the threshold into the wild country. The gentle afternoon sun welcomed him and beckoned him along the familiar path toward a hidden glade, his frequent escape. When he finally reached the quiet meadow, he lay down and could not help but smile softly.

Then he waited; his olive skin basked in the June sun while he twisted a blade of grass between his fingertips. Some of the taller grasses swayed in the breeze, enveloping his lean body in a green, evershifting sea. Untamed nature felt more like home to him than anywhere else—no house compared, despite how much his father wished otherwise. It was here in the glade that he met the man who made him feel more comfortable and treasured than anyone had before. Every encounter made the world seem ever brighter. He closed his eyes and began to hum.

After some time, a shadow passed over Hyacinthus' eyelids, followed by a soft thud a few yards behind him. He sat up and the gentle wind tousled his dark, curly hair. There was no need to turn to face the figure. The mere smell of beech trees and lavender brought his features to mind. Golden hair, muscles chiseled like marble, and the most endearing green eyes of anyone who ever walked the Earth. Although, to Hyacinthus, his radiant smile was even more alluring.

"Hyacinth." The man now stood

behind him. "May I accompany you?"

"Dear Apollo, you know I could never refuse you," said Hyacinthus. He grasped the god's hand and pulled him down eagerly, so eagerly that Apollo lost his balance and fell on top of him. Stuck below his weight, Hyacinthus felt divine eyes trace the details of his face and neck. A burning sensation crept onto his cheeks. "My apologies, I didn't realize I could fell the God of the Mighty Sun so easily," he teased to cover his embarrassment.

"Yes, well, I've never needed to keep my guard up around you," said Apollo. Perhaps it was only his imagination, but Hyacinthus could've sworn he saw a slight pink in Apollo's cheeks. After a moment, Apollo rolled onto his back to lie down beside his beloved, grabbed his hand, and gave it a comforting squeeze. Hyacinthus sighed, and the tension left his shoulders.

Apollo had alleviated the anxieties in his mind since their first meeting like a mist that rolls in the morning after a battle. The ugly remnants may still reside beneath the mist, but, while it persisted, the carnage could be forgotten. The mere graze of Apollo's skin over his own made Hyacinthus melt. It made him feel vulnerable in the best way. There was no need to pretend with him. He could simply be himself without the baggage society placed upon him. No council, no responsibilities, and no looming war. Together, they gazed at the clouds as the wind picked up around them. Early evening rays of sunlight danced across the

"Apollo?" Hyacinthus asked.

"Yes, my love?"

Hyacinthus hesitated for a moment, perhaps it was a silly question. But then, he felt inclined to ask anyway. "When we lay here together, I notice the sunlight shifting in the most entrancing way... Do you make it so for me?"

A caw-like laugh escaped Apollo's throat before he smiled and turned to look at Hyacinthus. "My powers are not quite

so direct. If the light seems 'entrancing' when we are together, it is because of how I feel when I am beside you. How my heart flutters when we clasp hands."

Hyacinthus smiled at the thought, and then there fell a comfortable silence between them. Yet something weighed on his mind in the silence, something Apollo deserved to know. Instead, he focused on the texture of his lover's coarse fingers, the loamy and woody aroma drifting into his nostrils, and the sunlight warming his skin. He tried to quiet his mind, tried to recapture the serenity of that first day when he'd discovered a god peacefully asleep in this glade. But it did not come.

When at last the noise in his mind became too much, he spoke. "Apollo. There is something I must tell you. But I fear I may give in to despair once I admit it, so I need you to keep me strong."

"Anything, Hyacinth," Apollo said as a wary crease formed between his thick brows. Hyacinthus sat up, which prompted Apollo to do the same, but then he found himself unable to focus on anything but a tall tree that stood some distance away. Recognizing his discomfort, Apollo took both his lover's hands in his own.

The words finally escaped his mouth. "I have been drafted," Hyacinthus said. "In a fortnight I will be sent away to aid in the fight against Athens."

Apollo, mighty god that he was, was for a moment struck dumb. After a pause, he rose quickly from the ground and began to pace.

"You cannot go," he said. "I forbid it."
"You forbid it? My love, you hold no
power over the council. I have been drafted
along with all the young men of Sparta. I
have no more choice in the matter than

"You think your council would deny a god?"

you.

"I think it would be unwise for you to try." Hyacinthus hardly needed to explain why. Ares was Sparta's patron god, and Apollo's intervention would certainly only make things worse.

"Well then, why don't you leave instead?"

The question hung in the air. It was obviously a flippant suggestion, but after a moment, Apollo seemed to grow fond of the idea. He rushed back to Hyacinthus and knelt in front of him before taking his hands.

"Yes," he said. "Come with me instead. We could explore Demeter's domain forever, and you would never have to risk your life for my family's nonsense war!"

Hyacinthus hesitated for an instant, only an instant, but in that instant, he gazed upon his lover's face and was reminded of a raven. A face so used to grief it had a perpetual expression of mourning etched into it like stone. He looked desperate, like he had lost too many loves before and could not stand to lose another.

Despite a nagging voice in the back of his head, Hyacinthus agreed. Apollo embraced him tightly for a long while. Hyacinthus held him close to his heart as he memorized every detail of how Apollo's body felt pressed against his. Then, it was only them. Apollo, cupping his hands around Hyacinthus' cheeks, drawing him in again for a kiss. Hyacinthus, intoxicated with the smell of beech trees, the wind howling deeply in their ears.

The Taygetos Mountains bordering the western sky of Sparta were the current home of Zephyr, the western wind and one of the Anemoi. She had come to this range to watch Apollo one day as he slept in a meadow—no doubt dreaming of her. At least she liked to think so, but then again, she sat watching him fall for yet another mortal. She grew ever more frustrated with his games. Every touch between the two lovers made her wind more volatile. The boy was beautiful, sure, but he was no goddess. No mortal could compare to her beauty. The Anemoi may not be Olympians, but she knew where Apollo's heart truly lay. Afterall, at the end of every day, the sun set in the west. Her sisters always insisted that she move on from this little

crush, but they could never understand. Still, this petulant game of his had gotten rather irritating.

She watched them now, embracing each other in that meadow. Apollo held his arms around the mortal's bare waist, no matter how fast her wind blew. She tried to imagine his hands gracing her smooth hips instead, running through her brunette hair, but it only made her more aware that, while she was up here fantasizing, that boy had Apollo in the flesh. She was so wrapped up in his little show that she almost failed to notice she had company.

"Zephyr." A voice behind her boomed.

She turned, and the hair on the nape of her neck stood on end as she came face to face with the neighboring patron god. He stood tall with an imposing posture and dark hair.

"Ares, to what do I owe the pleasure?" She bowed in respect and hoped her voice did not betray her nerves.

"I'm here because I've noticed a certain sun god lurking around my city," he said, his deep voice like a growl. "As I'm sure you've heard by now, the final days of Athens approach, and I don't need my meddling little brother to sabotage the Spartan campaign."

"Of course not," she replied, careful not to interrupt him. He simply looked at her, seemingly expecting her to say more. She studied him and tried to decipher why he would come to her of all gods. When she had finally steeled her nerves, she said, "Pardon me, Ares, but what exactly do you want from me?"

His eyebrow twitched, and he pinched the bridge of his nose. "Come now, Zephyr. Everyone knows you're obsessed with Apollo. All I need to know is why he constantly visits my city."

Zephyr took notice of the dark, unnatural shadows behind Ares and the twitching muscles in his face. She knew of Ares' hot-headedness and that most who crossed him either ended up dead or wishing they were. If he was this angry about

Apollo's presence, she would be wise to try and protect him from Ares' wrath. Apollo would do the same for me, she thought.

"There's nothing to know," she lied. "He simply likes the area, I suppose." Her mouth felt dry, so she tried to swallow the lump in her throat. "Maybe he simply lingers because he is finding the courage to embrace his affection for me."

Ares growled like a boar and a great shadow expanded to fill the valley. The darkness swallowed the goddess, and, in the low light, Ares' eyes shone crimson. "How dare you lie to me!" he shouted, tearing her from the ground by her throat. Zephyr tried to pry his hand from her neck, but his grip was too strong, her fingers too weak. The wind kicked up around them, howling desperately to release her.

"Can't... breathe..." She gasped.

The shadows retreated quickly as Ares released her. Her body crumpled to the floor with the sputtering wind. His composure returned. "My apologies, Zephyr. You really shouldn't make me lose my temper like that." A hollow chuckle left his lips.

She propped herself up by her arm and massaged her throat slowly as she shuffled away from him across the floor. "Fine," she said. "Fine, I'll tell you. There's a mortal."

Ares scoffed, "Of course there is."

"He's a Spartan, the son of a council member." Her voice was coarse, but her limbs trembled violently. She would not lie to Ares again, not even for her beloved. She cursed herself for her weakness. She was an Anemoi, a goddess of the wind. She was no fighter.

"Oh, I see then. He's using this boy to gather intel for Athena. Well, we can't have that now, can we?" He bent over Zephyr, and she was engulfed in shadow once again. "Tell me. How desperate are you to finally get your hands on my brother? Or would you rather his hands on you?"

"You make me sound pathetic," she said, rebellious fury rising in her voice like a falcon's cry. "We are in love! The sun rests on my horizon every night! But you, despicable

as you are, would never know what it means to cradle a lover in your arms!" She choked back her vitriol, and her throat suddenly felt tight again, only this time gripped by fear.

Ares let out an amused grunt. "Yes, well, don't you think it's time he finally acknowledged your existence? I'll tell you what. Take out that little traitor for me, and Apollo will be all yours. It wouldn't take much, you know. Mortals are quite fragile. And so is Apollo. With his lover dead, you two would be free to be together. Two birds, one stone."

Zephyr felt her heart jolt with excitement at the thought. They could finally be together. No more mortals to steal his affections with the Spartan gone and so many others off at war. And yet, she had never killed before. She glanced up at Ares. A conniving glint shone in his eyes.

"That is what you want, is it not, Zephyr?" He grabbed her hand and helped her to her feet. Her nerves still swirled in her stomach as she watched cautiously for any sign of aggression. She considered for a moment how it would feel to be the one out in the field with Apollo right now, locked in his embrace instead of watching from afar.

"Alright," she said. "Alright, Ares. I will help you. What exactly do you want me to do?"

"Oh, it's simple really. Next time the two are together, kill the Spartan boy. It's time Apollo learned not to mess with the God of War."

With that, Ares melted into the shadows of the valley, leaving Zephyr alone again. She was used to solitude, but now her mind raced as the gravity of her task settled onto her shoulders.

"Damn it!" She cried and wrung out her hands. She never liked how easily those manipulative Olympians could read her.

Apollo arrived in the glade early the next morning and waited with bouncing knee for Hyacinthus. Apollo's mind raced with scenarios in which their plan could go awry, the bottle of ambrosia feeling heavy

in his bag. Hyacinthus would drink and become immortal. Then, the two of them would travel the world together and see every natural beauty it had to offer. Apollo knew how much his lover adored the wilds. He smiled softly.

There could be no room for error. To deify a mortal without the permission of Zeus was strictly forbidden. Apollo knew he must do it regardless—Hyacinthus must live.

But where was he? Why was he late? Apollo had already been there for hours. Watching the rays of sun turn soft orange and blush pink. Forming a crop circle with his well-paced path through the glade. His nerves steadily grew, and so too did the wind, as if it too waited for his beloved to appear. Then, just as his heart swelled so tight he feared he could not breathe; Hyacinthus broke through the tree line.

"My love, I was beginning to worry," said Apollo as Hyacinthus approached.

"I'm sorry, dear Apollo. My father tried to make me stay," he said. "He couldn't bear the disgrace of his own son becoming a deserter, but I cannot bear to live without you."

The lovers embraced each other, stealing their resolve. The wind swirled violently around them. Leaves cut through the glade like razors, snapped from branches, and tore from shrubbery on the western tree bank.

They separated, and Apollo noticed Hyacinthus fidgeting with his bag.

"Here," he offered, grabbing the bag from Hyacinthus' shoulder and tossing it over his own. "We have a long journey ahead, no need to tire you out before we even leave."

"Oh, thanks," he stuttered.

Apollo cupped Hyacinthus' face, planted a lingering kiss on his lover's lips, and pulled back to admire his beauty. "No need to be nervous, my love. The world is wide, but I will be right here with you the whole time. You will never be alone."

Apollo caressed his lover's cheek before turning to the eastern horizon, his hand in

Hyacinthus' hands to guide him to their new future.

"I can't wait to show you the world, my love."

A crack echoed harshly through the glade, heard even above the howling winds. Apollo flinched. Hyacinthus' hand slipped from his own. Apollo turning. Ears ringing. He found his lover crumpled on the ground. The pink twilight silhouetted his body. Beside him lay a smooth stone painted deep scarlet with blood.

Apollo's stomach churned, and he sank to his knees. A wail escaped Apollo's throat like a wounded bird, and his hands trembled as he reached for the boy's bludgeoned form. He cradled Hyacinthus in his arms, staring down at the large gash across his head and the strange angle at which his neck protruded. A rusty odor filled the air as his lover's skin paled.

Trembling sobs shook the god's shoulders.

Apollo tried to think of something, anything. He was adept at medicine. He could save him. His eyes scoured the hill around him for herbs to make a poultice with, but the wind—this wind— was whipping too fast to make out any of the plants. He couldn't recognize any flower or root. It was all just grass! He rocked his lover's body in his lap as tears ran down his face onto the boy's skin.

Suddenly, Apollo remembered the ambrosia in his bag. He fumbled around frantically for the cool, glass neck of the bottle and tore it from the bag. He popped the cork off and brought it to Hyacinthus' lips. He gently opened his lover's jaw, attempted to ignore the way it slacked off to the side, and tipped the bottle until the golden sap poured into his mouth. Apollo felt for a pulse, but Hyacinthus' crooked neck was perfectly still.

"Please!" Apollo pleaded, "Hyacinth, you can't leave me!" His voice drowned in the violent torrent that surrounded him.

"Don't leave me alone again."

Apollo sat in the meadow, cradling his

lover's body. Sobbing until the moon rose high. He held the body day in and day out, motionless for a fortnight until a day when the sun hung too long in the sky. On that day, the day of the solstice, Apollo finally ran out of tears. He let Hyacinthus' body fall from his lap. He looked just as he had the night he died, as if his spirit refused to leave his body until Apollo did as well. Apollo could still smell the sweet nectar of ambrosia on his lips. He stood for a long while, hovering over the body with his hands outstretched. A pale yellow glow emanated from the palms that once graced his lover's hips, and Hyacinth's body melted into the soil until all that remained was the smell of blood and ambrosia.

From the blood-stained ground, flowers began to sprout. They spread outwards, mingling with the grasses until they covered the entire glade. The blossoms felt the light of the sun and began to open, revealing vibrant purple hues that swayed in the gentle wind.

"You are beautiful, my love." He was alone again.

AT WHAT COST?







Lauren Grega -

EVERGREEN

Kade Miller



I think forever comes after eighteen
The innocent kiss under glow of a vending machine
The rise of the rates of dreaded gasoline
Why do songwriters love
The rust and the wear of dying machines
The tart taste of orange and sweet tangerines
An easy addiction to dreams on morphine
No wonder songwriters love the ease of
The Evergreen







THE COACHMAN

Wesley Junker



e awoke to a new world. Curled up next to the pumpkin, his long, Lplump body stretched alive in the sun. In truth, everything was much the same as it had been the day before. The afternoon heat radiated down on him, the cool breeze rustled his fur and whiskers, and the loamy smell of the garden soil filled his nose. For a moment, his groggy mind lost itself in the familiar as he shook himself to consciousness. But then, that consciousness pressed down on his fragile mind. He became aware that he enjoyed the sun and breeze and the smells, a feeling previously foreign to him. More than that, he remembered.

He would have thought last night a dream except that before last night he hadn't known what dreaming was, much less ever dreamed himself. The memories came charging back like the horses he remembered steering through the Provencal countryside. They came to him in flashes, his rodent brain screaming under the torrent of thought.

A winged woman flying down from the sky. A wand in her hand. The casting of a spell. A stretching ache in his bones. Clothes covering soft skin. He suddenly had memories, experience as a coachman, and an unplaceable drive to perform his job. A whip in his hands urging the horses down the roads. A world wider than he had ever been able to fathom rushing past faster than he had ever traveled in his life. A castle. Thousands of lights. Hundreds of people. Then, a flight from the ball. Panicked thundering of hooves back home. The moon overhead. The town clock striking twelve, hard chimes. Darkness.

He looked down in a panic. With relief, he found his paws sitting there in the soil, attached to familiar arms and a familiar body. Back in his right body but still out of his mind. He glanced around

the potager, taking in the scale of his world for the first time in his life. The pumpkin patch, the rows of cabbages, lentils, the aging wooden fence. The mice, who had been his horses mere hours ago, pranced around the edges of the garden in formation, wrestling with their new identities the only way he supposed they could. How small it all seemed compared to the grandeur of the prince's ball. He turned his attention back to the house where all his problems stemmed from, where the people lived. So quaint, he thought, compared to the castle of a king and yet still palatial compared the scale of his little world.

His world. His home. His eyes flicked down to the base of the estate, and finally, he was able to grasp at the memories that danced in the darkness of his mind. Remembrances of before. He scampered for the wall of weeds where the garden backed up to the house. His gait felt suddenly inelegant and unnatural. No longer was he the rat he had been nor yet quite a coachman. He was something in between. Equally uncomfortable on four legs as on two.

He lumped his way into the acrid forest of wilting weeds where the bottom stones of the house settled unevenly. It left a crack in the foundation that created a small passage into the belly of the earth. Down that passage lay his destination, a small den, held safe within the soil where another rat nursed her small litter of pups. He could picture her, and he could picture his pups—his children—but these rodential memories were dim compared to the vivid images of his human wits that threatened to consume him. He tried to ground himself in the present again,

but the earthy scent of the underground den blended with the thick perfumes that lingered in his mind from the night before.

The sweet smell of spring roses wafted from the newly transformed maid. She was draped in an intricately jeweled gown that flowed down her form like diamond encrusted water. Her smile outshone the precious stones, and she seemed to be taking her transformation much better than he was taking his. She approached the carriage, and he instinctively opened the door for her. He held his uncomfortably long-fingered hand out to help her into the carriage. She smiled that same beaming smile as she took his hand.

"Thank you," she said, and his world fell apart.

She didn't spare him a second glance. These were the first words anyone had taken the time to speak to him in his entire life, and she couldn't do him the justice of meeting his gaze. She wasn't being unkind. She simply thanked him and went back up into her own world. It was the same kind of treatment she had given him as a rat, leaving scraps at the back door for him and the other vermin to feast on. She showed him kindness and empathy, but it was devoid of respect. After all, why should she respect him? She was a guest of the prince living her fantasy while he was at her whim living his quiet nightmare. He was still a rat in this world; it was just a bigger garden. This was humanity, he thought as he closed the door behind her. This was what it meant to be aware that you have a place in the world. He despised it.

The hungry cries of his children brought him back to the life he was now forced to reckon with. He stood for a moment listening to the small struggle playing out just around the corner. He heard his partner's squeaking over the din of the little ones' protests, urging them to calm down. He knew in the back of his primitive mind that he had never cared for her or his children before. He had known several partners in his short duration on this earth and their features blurred in his mind. His new, cruel human sense of morality was appalled at his polygamous past self. He felt he did not deserve the happiness of the family that curled itself up on the soft nest of grass just around the corner from where he stood, but as he listened to her comforting the pups and heard her gentle breathing, a warmth

welled up inside him. A kind of love. Although he, with his precious few hours of humanity, knew nothing of this feeling and could put no name to it.

He crept around the corner on four, uneasy paws. There he saw, truly saw, his family for the first time. His little ones had finally grown fur over their delicate, pink skin and they swarmed over their mother, fighting with each other to get closer. If she were hammered with the same level of thought he now experienced, his partner might be exasperated from the clambering of her dozen children, but he knew the contentedness she felt. The same feeling he used to share when they huddled together in the dim dusk of this den that he hadn't yet known to call home.

Standing here with his family before him, he felt suddenly so alone. He knew that the sum total of his life, all evidence of his existence, sat buried beneath a house, behind a garden, under the ground: an unobserved life. He knew that to the owners of the large footsteps traipsing overhead he had no value. He knew that his partner and his horde of children would never be able to understand him. His heart broke at the obscurity and isolation of his new awareness.

His partner came up beside him and nuzzled her nose into his paw. Her touch saved him from his spiral of thought and tugged at his rodential heart. Does she know, he asked himself, could she have understood my distress and come to help me?

For a brief moment, he allowed himself the luxury of hope. The warmth once again grew inside him and he knew that feeling, that unnamable connection he felt between them, could make this existence survivable, even enjoyable. He experienced the fleeting joy of a world that was not his to bear alone. But then she kept sniffing, and he realized she was only smelling the pumpkin on him. The weight of his isolation crashed back down on him, and he drank in the noise of his hungry children all around him.

Their pleas rose above his own needs,

and he knew that regardless of what he was now, he still had a family to call his own. They would always come first. This was his choice, not some false memory magically planted in his mind nor some instinctual response sewn into him from birth. Human or rat, it did not matter. He could decide, and this was something he could do. He could feed them.

Thus he spent the first memorable afternoon of his life lost in the simple purpose of providing for his family. He got to be a rat again. He wasted the daylight digging into the soft, fleshy insides of what used to be his carriage and ferrying the seeds back and forth across the garden into the waiting arms of his pups.

He noticed for the first time the way the guts of the pumpkin stuck between his paws, the sliminess of the seeds, the sound of his own scratching. Even though he was still unsure of his place in this new life of his, he could lose himself in the labor. Thoughts of whether to walk on two legs or four faded to the back of his mind.

The lizards, his footmen, watched curiously from a distance, hiding under the leaves of the vegetable rows. The mice continued their march around the perimeter, but he ignored them all. Gradually, the pile of seeds and sinew grew in the corner of his underground home until the blooming spectrum of purples and oranges in the sky reminded him that night was approaching. Another night, another ball, another job to be done.

He crawled back into the ground for the last time, a final pumpkin seed held loosely in his mouth. Laying the seed at his partner's feet, he stopped for a moment and took in the small life unfolding before him. His children were quiet now, either asleep or munching on seeds, and his other half nudged them into a heap of fur and tails.

He knew it was time to leave, but there was a moment, watching her tend to the pups, that he hesitated. Facing down the prospect of another human night, he craved the company of another. If he brought her

with him, she could understand him. The magic could transform her just as it had him. They could face this strange half-existence together, and he would not have to be so afraid. And yet, he also remembered the pumpkin, the simple contentedness of survival. It was the same need to survive that drove her, the same need she would, in turn, pass onto their children. He was not a member of mankind. He saw no purpose in lifting another up onto the ladder of society just to let them hang from the bottom rung. Still, he couldn't quite suppress that selfish doubt lurking in the corners of his consciousness.

His partner noticed his hesitation, and she approached cautiously with a pumpkin seed between her forepaws. He tried his best to smile and reassure her, but his face was not built for the subtlety of human emotion. All he did was bare his fangs in an ungainly and indecipherable expression. She cocked her head, not seeming to understand and offered him the pumpkin seed.

Instead of taking the seed, he set his paw on hers. He could feel her heart pulsing through her fur, and with each soft beat he heard the word that he had searched for all afternoon. Love. It filled him with renewed energy and purpose. All doubt he still held onto drifted away on the waves of her beating heart.

Be safe, my love, he said, even though he could not talk, even though the words never reached his mouth. My love. The words felt right as he swirled them around in his head. I will return to you in the morning.

He turned to face his new world and walked out into the sundown on two steady feet.





any years later, as I gazed at what was once that statue that was him, I would sit and remember one of the last times I would ever make my dad proud.

"Armistice Day?" he asked, looking away from the calendar on his phone. "What the hell is that?"

I giddily jumped up and told him the tidbit of information that I'd remembered learning about World War One in history class. At II A.M., on November IIth, the peace treaty that ended the Great War would go into effect - the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month. It was the fact that I knew random things about random topics that my dad would always smile proudly at me and comment on how I was probably one of the smartest people he'd ever met. I remember sitting back down with my smile full of smug self-satisfaction. The moment was as mundane as a day could be.

All those fun facts I had collected for the sake of earning my dad's pride and admiration did nothing to warn me of the fact that he would never make it past Armistice Day.

"Cardiac arrest," they told us. One second, he was in perfect health. The next, he looked back at us with nothing behind his eyes.

My brother and my mom cried over his casket; I stood back. There wasn't an emotion that I could feel; I had never been in this situation before, nor had I ever observed the behavior of someone else in the same spot. I don't know how I was supposed to feel anything if I didn't even know how to properly act in the moment. Sure, I had my family in front of me demonstrating to me how I should be acting, but the very last thing I wanted to do at that moment was look at them. I looked down, and all I could do was begin to contemplate what my next action would be. I looked up and saw my mom in mourning out of the corner of my eye. I saw my younger brother next to her. I looked in, and suddenly, I saw the beginning of an inkling of an idea.

My mom was an artist in her previous life, as were several of my closest friends and enemies. I approached as many of them as I could find and asked them all if they had ever worked with metal. If they said yes, I would jump up with a sparkle in my eyes every time.

"Where can I buy gold?!"

I asked about different shops to buy gold from, both online and in-person. I asked about the properties of different gold alloys and how they affected the final product. I asked about which kinds of metals were the easiest to work with in order to know if I should use a different metal instead, and how much different kinds of metals cost. I was so excited that I probably asked the same questions multiple times. Regardless, my dad had left me a large portion of money, and I had finally realized the only thing I could do with the money that wouldn't leave me with a lingering sense of regret. Once my mother found out that my intentions weren't to buy gold for financial purposes, she immediately changed and tried to dissuade me, but the one thing I dreaded more than anything else would be sleepless nights caused by the regret I knew I would feel by doing literally anything else.

It wasn't constructed in a day; several months passed, several seasons came and went. Butterflies with black and white and brown wings flew past me one day, and then seemingly the next, the birds overhead would migrate south. Every beautiful feeling that nature filled me with daily every cool gust of wind on a hot summer day - every pink and orange sunset - these feelings would fuel my sculpture, and I could tell solely from how beautiful I felt that my sculpture would surely match that emotion.

I didn't spend every single hour of every single day working on the structure; I knew that exhaustion would inevitably lead to ruining my magnum opus before it even had a chance of seeing the world around it. I went out; I took the effort to go to places and parties that I wouldn't normally go to; I reached out to friends who I hadn't spoken to in months or years. I put on new clothes and decorated myself in new ways. I did all this with the goal of giving myself new emotions and experiences that I thought would add to the artwork, but as I look back now, I realize with a sense of irony that, in the pursuit of new experiences to fuel my work, I was accidentally in the middle of changing. I was unconsciously separating myself from the Self that I had spent my entire life creating, and one day soon, I would reminisce about this era of my life as "the good ol' days".

My constantly shifting state of being reflected in each consequent step of working on the statue; the handiwork became steadier and less messy - I took greater and greater pride in my own work and the fruits of my labor. The facial features became more distinct, the pose became more similar to a stance he would stand in rather than something a classical Greek statue would look like, and in the end, I managed to dot the eyes and bring him to life.

I was wrong about the statue's beauty in the end; I had undersold myself. Both

my mom and I cried tears of joy when we saw it. My brother left the room after seeing it - he was never very good at expressing his emotions, but he surely must've loved it. The statue became the centerpiece of the living room; he was the first thing that anyone saw after walking through the foyer. My brother never once looked at him - not once - while my mom and I both pretended we didn't notice each other fawning over him and whispering our secrets whenever our backs were turned to each other.

One of my favorite aspects of the statue - the part that was my greatest subject of pride - was either the attention to detail about the face, or the intense artificial shine that I'd managed to give the statue. I didn't even mind when the light from the window hit the statue and blinded everyone in the room; sure, it hurt my eyes, but he was my dad, after all, and he deserved to shine after all the hard work he'd committed to building the wonderful life I had around me. He would apologize, saying he couldn't control it, and we'd laugh it off and move on with our day.

Then, one day, I heard a knock at the door. My mom was cooking dinner, and my brother was at school. I walked to the door and opened it. Standing in front of me was my father. He smiled as if expecting me to hug him. I don't know why I would, since I didn't miss him in the slightest; he'd been there in the living room for months now. He said to me in a comforting and reassuring tone that he got bored, and wanted to come back and stay for a while. A good, long while. My mom heard the conversation and left the kitchen to see who was at the door. She saw him and looked at him with a soft, sentimental look in her eyes. She walked over, past me, and gave him a great, big hug. He returned it. She invited him in, telling him that dinner would be ready soon. My father thanked her and walked past me, but not before giving me the biggest bear hug I could ever remember receiving.

I didn't like physical touch, especially

when it was without warning, and even more so when I was feeling overwhelmed. This was something I'd only discovered while I was at those parties in an effort to forcefully undergo my metamorphosis; touching through clothes was fine, but I didn't like being touched on my skin. Previously, I had never even begun to consider that this was something I was allowed to contemplate, because if my father had ever heard me tell him that, he would say that I was being too sensitive; he was sensitive in the same way, but he simply learned to be fine with people touching him. This sensory disability we shared wasn't enough to stop him, and the world wasn't going to stop turning while either of us took the time to figure out how to cope, so it's better to just grin and bear the discomfort. I would've stupidly looked away and thought to myself how silly it was of me to not think that I could ask people to never touch me.

I sat down at the table for dinner. I looked over at my father. He saw me looking at him, and he smiled widely. In the gleam of the sun's rays sneaking in through the window, I could just slightly see a hint of golden shimmers buried along the crevices of a couple of his smile lines.

Time went on. My brother stopped isolating himself in his room. He started acting like he didn't love the statue; he only ever spent his time hugging and kissing our father. I gazed at them hugging with the intensity of a hawk observing a mouse, and whenever they pulled away from each other, my brother would always have a few little yellow sparkles left behind on his clothes, speckled around his dark clothes like the constellations in the sky. I looked over at the only dad I could see myself ever acknowledging - not the fraud associating with my family - and I would remember the pit in my stomach that formed when I saw my beloved statue - my dad - cowering away from my father like a sunflower would cower from the dark.

Sadly enough, time would continue

to go on. I would be sitting on the couch watching reality TV shows with both of my parents. My father would get a little bit too much alcohol in him and say rude things about someone on screen who was arguing in favor of someone he didn't like - harmless at the end of the day, I suppose. Sometimes, he said these insults and slurs based off of characteristics which I share with the person on screen. "Oh," I would think to myself. "I'd forgotten that this is something to be ashamed of. I'll do my best to hide this away. Obviously what he's saying must be right, because if it weren't, then my mom would say something." Even now, years down the line, when the statue as I recognized it at the time was no more, I don't know if I was thinking this thought with a tone of gratitude or resentment towards my father for teaching me this lesson, but I think that in matters dealing with fathers, there isn't really a correct answer. After having the revelation that I should be hiding away, I looked up at the statue for either approval or disapproval (God knows my father was too absorbed in enjoying the show); based on the time of day, the light reflecting off of him should've been blinding us all, but he was dull, and his shine didn't blind me at all when I looked at him. There was only the slightest of sparkles.

We were in a drive thru at a restaurant one day. It was just my father and I, talking and bonding over music taste. The person at the window got our attention to give us our food. As he handed the food over to me so he could pay and drive away, he noticed in the bag that there weren't any straws provided with the drinks we ordered. He asked about it, and the employee apologized and turned around to grab some. He turned around and whispered to me that the employee must be disabled to have made such a simple mistake. Oh?, I wondered. But I have a disability. Does that mean you look down on my intelligence? And what about the fact that you share this disability? What lesson am I supposed to obtain from this? While thinking this over and analyzing this new bit of information, I realized that the sunlight reflected off of my father's skin in a way that hurt my eyes to look at. I would later notice that no other members of my family shielded their eyes from the shine, even though the way they rubbed their eyes afterwards showed me that they clearly felt it. The questions raced through my mind: Why did they never cover their eyes from the glare? Why was I the only one noticing a problem?

My father couldn't help but do anything other than shine so brightly that nothing could prosper in his presence - similar to a houseplant trying to grow mere meters away from the Sun - and so I attempted to find solace in the memories of my dad. We were coming back from vacation, and I was crying. I had no way of giving voice to these complaints I had - even though I know better now, the vocabulary seemed nonexistent at the time. My dad was angry with me. He told me that his father - my grandfather, who had left my dad behind in this world at the same age that he had left me - would have despised me. I cried harder, and he had the audacity to not understand why. I had no idea that, as my mother would explain it many years from then, my grandfather absolutely was larger than life in context to the legacy he left behind, but even though he was fundamentally a good person, he was not nice or kind or considerate or open-minded; he would've hated me for not being connected to my culture enough, or not being masculine enough. If I was hypothetically acting feminine in any sort of way, he would have hated me for not being feminine enough. At the time, all I could understand was that this family member who I had never met would absolutely hate me, and naturally, I cried. I ran into my house and buried my face in my pillow. I didn't notice it at the time, but looking back, I wonder... was my dad glittering even back then? Was I just used to the glow and didn't notice it?

I opened my eyes from the delusion

of my grandfather hating me without ever realizing I had closed them, and noticed the statue was drooping away, seeming sad with its own dull state. Even though it was gold - I know it was, because I made it - anyone else who saw the statue now would have likely mistaken it for copper or oxidized iron. The thought appeared in my head to put it out of its misery, but I decided to keep it. I convinced myself it was out of something other than selfishness.

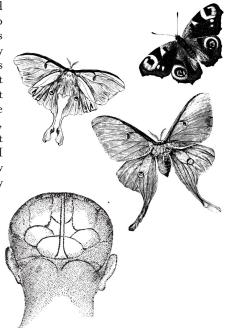
It was dark. It was the middle of the day, with the windows larger and more illuminating than I remembered them being, and I was standing in the center of it. Still, I was in the dark. My family was bustling around like they normally would on a sunny day like this. Still, I was isolated.

The only one with me was my dad: cold, metallic, and impotent; unable to defend his family against the fraud who was stealing him away from me. The fact that the fraud wasn't even actually a fraud shouldn't have mattered. He had spent his whole life beating himself up for much smaller things. I deserved the right to feel resentment over his failure to protect me, even though there was nothing he could do against a threat if his own self was the threat. I had only ever given myself to creating and helping others, and I wanted to give myself the privilege to be selfish and unfair for the very first time in my life.

As I groveled in the dark space I found myself in - entirely mute, because I had no more tears left to cry - I saw a pair of shoes step out in front of me. They looked awful. Not 'awful' in the sense that they were worn down or bad quality. They simply were ugly shoes. I looked up and saw with horror that my father had even stolen my dad's horrible fashion sense. He wanted to do his job as a father - he saw his child miserable on the ground, and he reacted by coming over to see if he could help. My father would never normally do that. He would've told me to stop making noise because I was distracting him from Judge Judy. My dad, though? The one whose form was once a man, followed by a statue? All the forces of the world around him couldn't have stopped him from helping his own child.

I saw him, and he was a gritty, sparkly, dirty-golden homunculus of a man. I had constructed the statue ages ago - it must've been several years since then. I had only wanted to take the thoughts relating to my father and remove them from my mind. I wanted peace. I wanted solace. What I got was a horrible fusion of metal and flesh presented before me, who had taken the eternal memory of my beloved dad and ruined it. He was no longer a perfect man. I saw him, and I felt a tear going down my face. I don't think I had ever felt it before, but the only word that could've possibly described the lack of feeling I had at that moment would've been 'despair'.

The homunculus was reaching out to comfort me. Surely he only did this because he knew how much distress I felt when looking at it? I knew I was responsible for what I was looking at - didn't it invalidate any sort of misery I felt if I was the one who created the pit of quicksand I now find myself shoulder-deep in? I couldn't help but look at it or its gesture of its willingness to help me. I averted my eyes down at my hands - I don't know exactly what thoughts were racing through my mind at that moment, but I think I just wanted to shoot daggers of hatred at the agents I knew were culpable for my sorrow. When I looked, I darted my eyes away out of fear; the last thing I wanted to do was confirm what I thought I saw, but I could've sworn I saw a few specks of gold sprinkled across my palms.



<u>Unmarked</u>

GRAVES





Calf in Pasture





Matthew Willingham

see the world in green. It is the shade of the living forest, a monstrous beast consuming this world, capable of killing all life. The living forest stretches across countries, through rivers and lakes and oceans. Someday, it will cover all of humanity, suffocating all of them in a green casket. It took my home, my friends, my family. Everything I ever loved, gone because of its havoc. And yet, I remained.

First, its trees sprouted from the ground. They uprooted the homes of my village from their supports, reducing all to rubble. The initial feeling was confusion. My wife and I could barely even imagine what we were seeing, let alone understand it. Once we had begun to fathom the reality of it all, we consoled ourselves as we avoided the destruction raining upon us. The tree trunks reached heights towering over everything. Their emerald leaves conjoined, forming a ceiling above us as the chaos of its attack began to unfold.

Second, evergreen vines formed a border around the living forest so that all under its walls should suffer with no escape in sight. My wife and I joined our friends at the edges of the forest, a collective army of panic clawing through the gaps in the vines, hoping for a chance at escape. There was none for no one, not even myself. And yet, I remained.

Lastly, moss would grow over every tree trunk, every root, every home that now lay in ruins, every friend who had already fallen to the destruction caused. The moss emitted a green gas, noxious in nature, so that any survivors remaining simply died off. By that point, we all started clawing

at the vines in desperation, holding out for any hope of freedom. I could hear coughing coming from all around me, the lungs of my brethren begging to escape from the gas. My hands became bloody as I continued to fail at my escape. I watched my best friend clawing with me, his meager grasps becoming softer and softer, as he slowly sunk into the ground, dead. I turned to my wife, knowing there was no hope left. I held her as she cried, just feeling her for as long as I could.

It's going to be okay...It's going to be okay...

We joined my friend on the ground. Her cries became quiet, turning into whimpers. Then, there was nothing.

And yet, I remained.

I awoke surrounded by death. Bodyshaped clumps of moss surrounded me. One stood right by me, holding my hand. I pulled my hand away and it crumbled like dust. Their bodies, they were all gone. Only the ashes and myself remained. Why did I remain? I thought I should cry, to let all my emotions out in one burst. I couldn't. All I did was stare at the pile that was once everything I had loved. I could barely fathom the loneliness that followed, the emptiness I had felt immediately upon recognizing the shapes of people the moss formed. I knew who each one was, what their lives had been like, who they loved and what they would pray for. With all of those thoughts swirling in my head, I had only one thing to say.

It should have been me.

П

I heard quiet whispers from afar deeper into the woods. I walked closer in

the hopes of finding survivors, leaning my ear to them so I could hear them better. Eventually, I picked up their words. The Whisperers spoke of their own past. They were not from my village. Rather, they were like me. Sole survivors of their villages, The Whisperers all found themselves alone in the belly of the beast. Each learned the secret of the living forest, that those killed are spared long enough to serve an unknown purpose.

After being told this, I finally reached the desired destination. The Whisperers were not other people, but from a katana stabbing into the ground. Its bright malachite blade contrasted with the dark kombu handle. The Whisperers continued.

This is Kimaru. It will lead you to what you seek. You need not be alone.

I thought of my wife, of everyone I held dear. I couldn't imagine the suffering they might have been going through. All I knew was that I couldn't be alone. I needed to save them, whatever way necessary. I held on to Kimaru, pulling the blade out of the ground. Small thorns the shade of a mantis emerged from the handle as I pulled, embedding itself around my hand. The thorns twisted themselves into skin and muscle and bone, wrapping all around me. Moss grew from the thorns, turning my skin as green as the forest itself. The excruciating pain doubled into fear as my body became more and more molded with the forest itself. I felt the moss and the thorns reach my face. My vision was painted on a green canvas as I began to hear a heart beating. It was fast and unrelenting until it slowly calmed itself, matching the beat of my own. The living forest had become a part of me, clinging its power unto me.

III

The heartbeat had echoed my own during the journey to its location. I walked forward for eons, stretching all conceptions of time, our heartbeats like a clock ticking down to midnight. I stepped over old roots and vines, trees that grew taller and taller the further I progressed, even the remains

of civilizations lost long before mine were even conceived. There lay a residuum of thousands murdered by the creature. Mothers and fathers, sons and daughters, whole families and perhaps even whole family trees all lost to the living forest.

Finally, I reached its heart. A jade-green tree stood taller than all others, surrounded by more moss graves than any I had seen on my journey. A hole was drilled straight through the tree's trunk, wide enough for someone's head to push through. In the center of the hole hung a heart of myrtle color, dangling from a fleshy thread connected to the rest of the tree.

This is it.

I was ready to end my journey, excited to finally free my family and friends from the forest. I rushed forward, stepping over the moss bodies until a sudden force grabbed my leg and pulled me down. My hands landed before my head onto the ground. Whatever tripped me held me still, so I clutched Kimaru with a hard grip and turned myself towards it. The moss had moved, holding onto me with great strength. Recovering from my initial shock, I struck the creature and cut off its hand, standing up as quick as I could. The severed limb limply let go of me, falling onto the ground in an unrecognizable pile.

The other moss soldiers had begun to move as well, slowly rising up from their positions. They all turned, readying themselves to face me. I held Kimaru with both hands, preparing for my biggest challenge. They charged, and I swung back.

IV

Each soldier of the living forest came at me with full force. They used no weapons and tried no direct attacks. The only thing they attempted was to dodge my sword, grab me, and pull me into the oblivion of the creature atop us. Any time they succeeded at a grab, the soldiers would begin to topple over me, as if trying to suffocate me. I would kick and push anyone daring to get too close, cutting them all down with force strong.

enough to chop the trees surrounding us in half. They would crumble like dust into my strike and subsequently collapse into the ground as a pile of moss. The stench of their deaths was as pungent as the noxious gas that killed everyone I had loved, that had taken everything from me. My thoughts naturally drifted to my home in the heat of the battle, the smiles and laughter I had shared with those that had now perished, the peace I had felt holding the love of my life, reminding me of all that I had lost because of this creature. All potential of happiness in my life I once had were all reduced to piles of dust in my memories. Smiles and laughter all felt impossible for me. The only hope my life had left was this one chance, to bring everything back.

I needed this to work.

The last soldier fell with a strike from Kimaru, from the top of its head to below its feet. The moss rained onto the back of my head, falling to the ground like snow. I ran up to the living forest's heart. I was ready to end all of this, hoping for one last chance. My grip on Kimaru was stronger than anything I ever held. I wrapped my hands around it, pulling my arms back behind me while turning my body in preparation for one last lunge of my blade.

The wind is blowing all the dead moss away. Our hearts keep beating, drowning out its sounds. The leaves are rustling louder and louder from the wind. I've never felt so alone. All I want is the love I once had returned. I thrust Kimaru towards the heart. I don't want to be alone anymore.

The sound of the leaves dominates over our beating hearts. They begin to whisper to me, in the voice of my love.

Stop this.

V

I blink, and my world changes. I still see the dead moss of the fallen soldiers, but I'm no longer standing. There are tears in my eyes, falling down from my face to the ground. Kimaru points not to the heart of the living forest, but to my own.

I was about to kill myself.

The ticking of the heart, I must have confused its beat with my own. The living forest had infected me like a virus, pushing me closer and closer to itself. I can't help but think about why it would lead me to its heart only to take me to my own doom. I heard my love speak once more.

I was dead as soon as I left your arms, my love. It fuels itself not on those it kills, but on the suffering of the survivor. Once it has had enough, it kills them too. I beg of you, my love, do not let it take you.

This is its mouth, not its heart. I've been doing what it's wanted this whole time, facilitating my own death just to feed itself. But it also means that all this death, the loss of all I've loved, has been to get to me, to crush me to the lowest point I will ever reach for as long as my mortal life persists. The worst thing, what truly made all of this journey so miserable, is that it worked.

I hold Kimaru in my hand. My tears drip onto the blade and cause it to sing with the wind. My breathing becomes out of control, almost suffocating me. Quiet sobs boil out of the surface. It feels so good to hear her speak again.

Why shouldn't I? I have nothing left for me here, only dead loved ones and the wind. Why should I leave you if I can just join you?

She goes quiet. I fear I have lost her again.

Because your life isn't over. Because the remainder of a life yet to live is full of potential. But most of all, because we shall be immortal for as long as your memories remain.

My emotions become uncontrollable. I collapse onto the ground and feel. Every memory of what I have lost returns to the surface and surrounds me, cradling my broken soul. I lay there for an eternity. There are attempts to get up many times, only to sink back down. After what feels like forever, I finally work up the strength to stand. I watch the leaves swing to the whistles of the wind. Finally, my strength returns, and I walk away.

\mathbf{VI}

I retrace my steps to the beginning. The moss piles of my loved ones stay there, resting for eternity. Above them is a wall, of vines, decorated with scratch marks and memories of horror. Kimaru feels heavy in my hand when I raise it above myself, slicing down the walls that held me here. The vines fall, and I kneel down to where my wife once stood.

It's going to be okay.

One last thing remains. I grab the thorns that tied me to Kimaru. The pain becomes nearly unbearable while I continue to pull and pull the moss and thorns off of me. Red blood pours out from every mark until finally, I remove all that held me to it from my body. I see my reflection on Kimaru's blade. I am covered in scars. They all sting, feeling like needles sticking through all corners of my body in a way that is nearly impossible to bear.

And yet, I remain.

The living forest still survives, but I know now that I can't kill it. Just like me, it will persist. It will go on killing and killing, thriving off the suffering of those like me. Someday, it will cover all of the world, wrapping everything in vines and moss. There will come a time where I will no longer be able to escape it. It will take me just as it did my love. But maybe, when that time comes, I will be ready. I step forward, away from the vines, and walk out into the unknown fields ahead of me.



WINGS OF WONDER



Marisa DuBose



PART FIVE



I look for your pulse
in the bodies of other men.
I search for your voice
in their throats,
hoping to hear the words you willingly professed.
I am your rib,





Lovers leave plum-colored marks on my skin; Bites of love while they navigate the valley between hip and stomach. Taste every part to memorize a foreign pleasure.

Lick up the neck, down hollow collarbone. Nip inner thighs, soft tissue over a heavy heart. Travel to sweaty cheeks, strong jawlines.

Feel the pull of skin, a reminder of this fleeting bedroom endeavor, Let them dent the body in hopes it will penetrate through the soul.

A reward for having been held, however rough.

A memory to say: I was here, I was here, I was here.





A D E L I N



Mia Gorus

"Though she might not say it, Madeline has a lot on her mind! She doesn't want to be a bother, so she doesn't say when she's worried, or scared, or has an uncharitable thought. She's been bottling everything up for years and it's been building and building and building. One day she's just gonna explode!"



FAIR WINDS AND FOLLOWING SEAS

Lane Armentrout

On birth, my body- capsized, bedridden, illness thrust in to; Still, still.

Just a fever, just a drop or two of yearnful years.

A man or boy, with palms wide open,
says: "I have to leave now".

Like a sickness, leaving
digs into the marrow, sometimes;
sometimes, it decides to linger,
builds its home in shallow lakes and

For few, the rot never clears; The water lays sun-baked kisses on the gunwale;

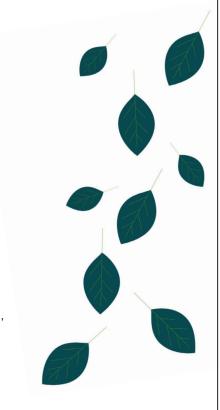
sets the boat out to salt-sick sea.

church bells sing a lullaby for hallowed ground.
This pallid skin; the gale consumes fairer cells and there we lay, written in stirring dust.
Some terror forgiven of greater sin; just an illness, born again to leave and keep leaving until the end of time. We entered and left and the sun still rose the next day.

Still, still.

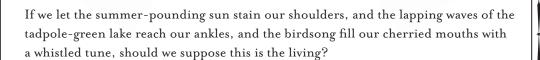
A boy walked into the year and a man waved goodbye.

An illness entered my body and, unlike any year before, never left.









The herding dog weaves in and out between my legs and drives me forth; my unblemished hands wrap firmly around the fencepost, separating me and you and the sheep, of course, cowed yet soothed by your hand; your fingers glide across their wool and I, the lonely saint-shaped boy, feel it: down my woolen sweater, tucked tight into the base of my spine. It coaxes out those baser emotions, foreign yet entrancing all at once: pleasure, at seeing you work. Embarrassment, at my inexperience. Warmth, from the sun, jumping from your eyes to mine.

My mother once told me that good things only come if you work for them. Is the toil in the chase? It's been years since my plow hit dirt yet here you are, my good thing. Employ me; let me work in your fields, find some living in your industry. There's an aching in my bones to be useful, but an even stronger one to be used by you.

So maybe we spend hours at the lake and I watch you fish, hands clutched skillfully around the pole, sweaty face grinning down at me as you praise your catch. Maybe we're at the stables, the coarse brush stroking the hair of your prized pet, the most reliable to ride. Or maybe we only sleep beneath the shade of the apple tree, obscured from the wider world, one bite away from lovelier sins.

You're clear and sweet and mine. And it's in looking at the slopes of your shoulders, the way they hitch up as your bring shovel to ground, their heft from years of swimming and digging and holding up the earth, their shifting lines as you lift your arms to press the flask to your lips, then mine, that I realize the living isn't in the moments. The living is you.



COVE CETTERS TO ANDESCRIBABLE

Maria Zaki

Arizona State University — Tempe, AZ

No one knows for certain

but the latest estimate for the number of brain cells in one mind is 86 billion cells

What is even more remarkable

is that they say even a piece of brain tissue the size of a grain of sand contains IOO,OOO neurons and I billion synapses all communicating with each other

This is why

I always thought being speechless in the face of beauty was just an excuse

but now

I wonder how one could pin a cloud of emotion down with words

How one could boil down an auburn sunset over a grave into an elegy or transcribe the heartache and relief in between beats of a requiem

What I know for certain

is that I am as naive as I've ever been and will ever be

So these

are love letters to three of countless wonders I cannot put into words

To soft concrete flowers

I admire your beauty

between rubber soles and asphalt, you've never lost your lilac hue Your periwinkle and touches of white gleam against the hot sidewalk Sometimes I crouch down to take you in

See what blessed perspective a dog might take as you draw them in

To the not-so-strange strangers AKA everyone I've ever or will ever encounter I'm not a tennis player but I have this ball I call Sonder whose fuzz and stripes I toss back and forth every time I walk past you

and with every toss, I ask

If you have the same concrete flowers

If you also drink in the smell before it rains

If you shed the same tears under a dynamic moon

I wonder if I remind you of a friend
If you might pick up the phone to check on them after all these years or maybe I remind you of an ex-lover to which I apologize if that aches but maybe I can draw you a different version of them Slowly revising nightmares into a less haunting face

To you

I leave a space here for all the words that need to be created solely to describe you I cannot fathom what has brought you into my life what gust of wind or baby's laugh brought about a fantastical love like yours

I find my thumb circling your cheek as I am wrapped in deep brown eyes drafting my vows every stroke every letter

Just you

and yet no words leave my mouth

I used to think being speechless in the face of beauty was a sad excuse for being unfamiliar with words

Now I find not only my heart in a knot but my tongue too

flowing with no rhyme or reason in mind-



SHOOTING STARS

Trey Thornton

I didn't even notice what had happened until I came up for air Feeling the needle wedged in my ear missing its partner The silver star now shot through the water falling gracefully Into the inky sea that was your pool

We searched until our lungs gave out The stony shore Riddled with drains That could've easily swallowed all of that starlight up When I was tired You insisted we keep looking For a silver star smaller than your thumbnail

124

It reminded me of the parts of my heart Wedged in the cracks of your concrete driveway The night we left each other speechless for all the wrong reasons my heart finally content and mended from so many years ago

Eventually, we stopped
I concluded it was lost
Down the drain and to the filter
Yet again the world itself
had taken a part of me
and stuck it to you
Like the piece of my heart
In the cracked concrete
A silver star pierced your reflection
In the dark wavering water

By falling star
Or a wedge of flesh
There'd always be
a piece of me
That yearns for
your heart to fill mine
and for you to wish for me
when you see a shooting star
in the inky black sea of night

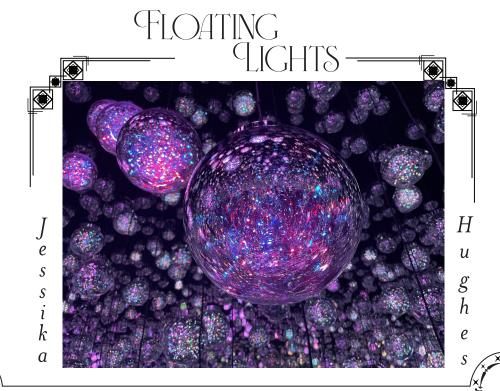


ARE YOU SURE? Rae Flores

I know it's impolite to ask you to repeat yourself but my ears and my mouth are the thief of our joy. Tell me, my love, will you sit on the filthy bench with me as we compare our tender moments, reselling them for double, triple the price plus tax. It's not a scam, it's just inflation and I need to eat. Will you take me out for dinner and drinks?

The bartender used the gin you hate.

The one you say tastes like dirty shoelaces dipped in vodka. You were going to finish it anyway, until you saw that face I make when I'm worried. You know the one. I think I left the oven on. Let's go home, you say. Maybe there we can speak a little quieter and the drinks won't cost as much. Maybe there I can fall asleep on your lap as we talk about our dream home and I dream of you and I on a camelback sofa as the oven I left on burns down everything we've built.



PRON AND LAVENDER

Rae Flores

The slippery, soapy string sways just enough to make it impossible to grab. I miss the fan's pull chain. Before it fell off, I never wondered if I would be cold forever, frozen in my parents' home rattling around inside the dryer for warmth.

I thaw myself out on your saccharine smile. I feel full as you stuff me with hay and sew my pretty mouth shut. It was worth it, since your mother never caught us.

I give my bloody lips to you in an iron and lavender infused kiss. You love tea and I prefer water. I can smell mildew as it seeps out from our freshly washed jeans. You can taste the color of May, sweet like red velvet cake and disemboweled pomegranates.

Neither of us like the beach very much. But still, you give me seashells. Walk with me, towards sand and sunsets and crow's feet.



OBSERVATIONS ON OBEDIENCE

Kyle Tomchesson

Close your mouth / lips busted by a stranger who bit too hard While the dogs waited outside

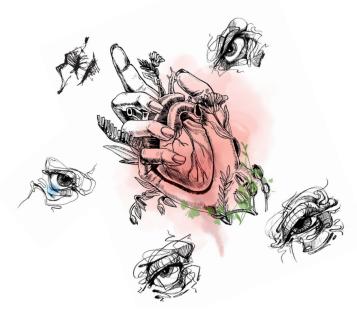
There is no room / for love between my lips Gag or swallow and I will / spit, always

Bruises as evidence / that I have been Touched at least once

What is it about men who Want to hurt / but not kill

An animal is the only / thing I know how to be Raising a child does not mean nurturing it

Holding onto something doesn't mean you haven't / already abandoned it



PAGER CODE 143 (THE MATH WORKS OUT AND THE CLOCK WILL SAY ⁹ LOVE YOU)

Paige Young

You wake up with my seven o'clock alarm. You hate that you do because you don't have to be up until eight thirty-one.

I fall asleep to your midnight concerts in the shower. I hate that I do because i'm supposed to be asleep by eleven forty-six.

We're both wide awake and staring at each other. We hate that we are but we decide to do something at four fifty-eight.

We make it to the docks by your old work.

It's where we first met.

The walls are still covered in shorthand writing and a cacophony of numbers.

We have nothing better to do then crack a code that never existed.

It's a morning full of laughs. It shows me that we still know each other despite our grievances. It shows that our friendship is still the seal.

When the numbers are added up, and the words are clear, all I can read is I love you.









Mia Gorus



"Missy has a wild imagination, though it comes back around to bit her sometimes and she frets about every little interaction she could have. So, she acts out everything that could possibly happen and every reaction she could have beforehand, just so nothing can catch her off guard. Maybe it's not the best solution, but it's a start!"

A MOTE ON ETERNITY Kyle Tomchesson

I want to know you when you would crawl up trees, knees bloodied and Left the mud under your fingernails as you

Opened a jar of peanut butter, ate it without a spoon, open mouthed

Victorious in your hunger. I want to know you when

Evening has slipped in through the windows and

And you go on a jog. I will fill up

Every glass in the house with water for when you return.

Your open mouth. Your open mouth

How can I tell you this?

130

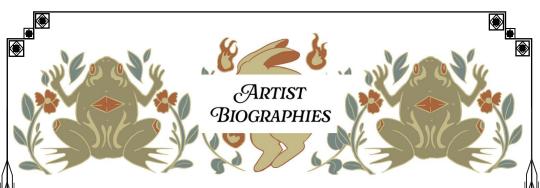
I want to know you when eternity is too long of a time to wait and the closest thing to a prayer is our breath.

The sheets haven't been washed in a month but

It doesn't matter. Let the sink overflow. The electricity bill going up is proof That we lived if nothing else. Lock the door before you come

In, even if for just one more time.





Alice

Writing is a way to show all of her feelings.

N. A. Ambler

N.A. Ambler studies computer science and creative writing in New York. She's a self described flaneur, and you'll often find her with her head in the clouds.

Amelia

Amelia is a second-year student at UNT and can often be found reading a volume of Wilfred Owen or Virginia Woolf.

Esme Aranda

Esme (he/they) is a senior at the University of North Texas pursuing an English major with a concentration in Creative Writing. He mostly writes queer fiction and poetry and has recently begun to dabble in the world of creative nonfiction.

Lane Armentrout

Lane is a senior at UNT double majoring in History and English Literature. He likes to explore themes of gender, sexuality, historical interpretation, and mental health through poetry and has previously been published in The North Texas Review.

Gabi Baca

Gabi is a multidisciplinary creative from Texas, with a focus on art, design, and writing. She has a passion for activism and authenticity and values narratives that spark empathy and curiosity.

Numair Baig

Numair, 22, is a mechanical and energy engineering student. They knew they would have been full of regret if they hadn't submitted this work, which they had been working on intermittently for about a year.

Ashley Barcenas

Ashley is an English Major at Texas Woman's University and an aspiring writer who loves all things fiction and fantasy. She is fascinated by written worlds and hopes to give that same fascination to others with her pieces.

Lizbeth Bernaola

Lizbeth is an inquiring artist dedicated to initiating conversations through 2D media. Inspired by daily life and personal experiences, her work explores connections between individual perspectives and prevalent themes such as femininity, violence, and nostalgia.

Calf in Pasture

Founded by lovers, Calf in Pasture is an experimental folk duo from Denton, TX. More importantly, it is a bond best illustrated through the beauty of sound.



Sofie is an English major with a focus in Creative Writing at the University of North Texas. They love to write anything their heart desires, whether it is difficult or fun to write.

Alexander Christensen

Alexander grew up in an ordinary town, always seeking something extraordinary. The U.S. Marine Corps provided that challenge, and after nearly 5 years on active duty, his hunger for the extraordinary has only deepened.

M. Corbin Crain

M. Corbin Crain is currently an undergraduate student at UNT majoring in Creative Writing and International Studies. His fiction frequently explores the tragic nature of love, while his poetry features themes such as sexuality, beauty, and the curse of a neurodivergent brain.

Abby Dickhaut

Abby is a physics major at UNT. A huge nerd about math and science, she also has a not-so-secret passion for writing.

Marisa Dubose

Marisa Dubose is from Tyler, TX, and has been interested in art since she was a little girl.

Star Elizabeth

Star is a post-baccalaureate English major at UNT. She has spent most of her college career completing projects and poems that revolve around disability, family, religion, and mental illness.

Michael Ewing

Michael is a recent Creative Writing graduate from UNT, hoping to publish poetry collections and works of fiction in the future.

Gianna Ortner-Findlay

Gianna is a writer and junior at UNT, pursuing a degree in Journalism with a minor in Creative Writing. She has over 50 stories published with The North Texas Daily and hopes to use her writing to uplift voices and tell stories.

Rae Flores

Rae is a painter and writer whose work explores and subverts themes of femininity, nostalgia, and surrealism. She contrasts whimsical and dreamlike imagery against taboo themes such as women's health, bodily autonomy, religious deconversion, and growing up.

Alexandria Furlow

Alexandria is a senior at UNT, graduating with a BA in Fashion Design and a minor in Creative Writing. Writing serves as an escape for her—a safe place where she can allow her emotions to breathe.

Mia Gorus

Mia is a self-taught sculptor and sewist, interested in the intersections between human and artificial bodies.

M.W. Graham

M.W. is an aspiring poet seeking to discover more about himself. He does so by reflecting on the past to strengthen his present.





Artie is a digital artist interested in exploring color and shape. Art serves as a form of self-expression and an escape from reality.

Lauren Grega

Lauren is a third-year photography student at the University of North Texas. She has an eye for light and perspective and a great sense of curiosity that drives her work.

Valentina Valecillos Guerrero

Valentina is a Pre-Communication Design major at the University of North Texas, focusing on Graphic Design. She is deeply passionate about art history and visual storytelling.

Jessika Hughes

Jessika is a student with a passion for art, specifically photography, dance, and theatre. Her recent work is inspired by natural beauty, striking cityscapes, and her travels, especially her Summer 2024 study tour in Japan.

Austin Moxie James

Austin is a singer, songwriter, and sound artist from Denton, TX. His music blends elements of folk, psychedelia, and ambient atop the soft hiss of a cassette tape.

Mya Johnson

Mya is a first-year student majoring in Music Education with a vocal concentration at the University of North Texas. They sing in chorus, compose pieces, produce music, play 13 instruments, and draw inspiration from jazz and video game music.

Wesley Junker

Wesley is an undergraduate English student at UNT concentrating in Creative Writing. An avid reader of all genres, he focuses his writing on short stories and poetry.

KNND

KNND is a multimedia artist engaged in film, animation, music, drawing, and writing across all genres and mediums. Art fuels the passion to master them all.

Aaron Kessler

Aaron is a second-year student at the University of North Texas, majoring in Ecology. He enjoys dreaming, reading and writing poetry, listening to artists such as Townes Van Zandt and Elliott Smith, and going on latenight walks.

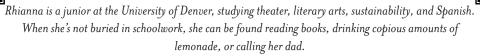
Amirah Khan

Amirah is a pre-med student who enjoys writing as a break from chemistry problems. She cannot live without peanut butter or buffalo sauce.

Lindsey Marie Leggett

Lindsey is currently studying at Bennington College where she's exploring her undergraduate work in Creative Writing, Restorative Justice, and Psychology. When she's not writing poetry or sourcing epigraphs for her senior thesis, you can find her cuddling with her service cat, Guido, and reading a satiating poetry book. Her work has appeared in City Limits Publishing "A True Love Lasts" 2021 Anthology, as well as Eber and Wein's "Best Poets of 2022" Anthology.

Rhianna Lewis



E Lou

E Lou is a first-year student at UNT majoring in Interdisciplinary Art and Design. This piece holds great significance to them, and they are glad to share it.

M. A. P.

M. A. P. is a UNT student interested in both Medicine and the Arts. They choose to hold onto both science and creativity, looking forward to where they lead.

Marina Lukens

Marina is a Michigan-native English major at UNT. She lives with her two sphynx cats, Deborah and Agnes, and enjoys drawing and writing in her free time.

Ian Báez Matos

Ian is a freshman at the University of North Texas, studying Music Education and Vocal Performance. He also enjoys creating music of all kinds, from composing to modern production.

Ava McDonald

Ava is a 21-year-old media student passionate about feeling and writing. She is currently writing a book of poetry, using her art to navigate the loss of her mother in 2024 and explore the journey and joys of healing.

Alexis Melendez

Alexis is a writer who enjoys working on his car, exploring the occult, and embracing a bit of silliness.

Kade Miller

Kade is an independent folk songwriter primarily focused on conveying themes of time, interpersonal relationships, and grief. Rather than telling a story, his work emphasizes the natural aspects of music by relating the lyrics to human nature and incorporating sounds of the world within the instrumentals.

Tyler Moore

Tyler is an author born and raised in Texas. They also write under the name Susan Moore, with work published in Tonitruale, The North Texas Daily, Darling Zine, and This Modern Struggle.

Felicity "Torrin" Nguyen

Felicity is a graphic designer and illustrator by day, poet by... every few months. They hope readers take something meaningful from their work, whatever that may be.

Lillian Pruett

Lillian is a sophomore at the University of North Texas. A creator at heart, she prioritizes love and the wellbeing of all people. She is queer, has a cat named Kiyoko, is obsessed with hero comics, and is passionate about all things creative.

Lerymar Rivera

Lerymar is an undergraduate student studying English Literature and is set to graduate in December 2024.

She is also the author of The Ring, a short nonfiction story published in NTR's 2024 issue.

Mahvish Shah

Mahvish is a 19-year-old visual artist and poet with a love for cats, oranges, and all things purple. She is passionate about cultural representation and capturing vibrant moments through various artistic forms.





Ram lives with his family in the Dallas–Fort Worth area, where he grew up. After self–publishing his debut novel, The Forest and the City, he returned to the University of North Texas to complete his studies in English Literature.

Natasha Stubelj

Natasha is a Communication Design pre-major who dreams of becoming an Art Director. In the meantime, she uses paint as a means of self-expression in the world of art.

Duncan Sullivan

Duncan is a STEM student at UNT, returning to school after several years. Becoming a published author remains the dream.

Rylee Thomas

Rylee is a creative writer with a deep interest in fiber arts and history.

Trey Thornton

Trey is a poet who seeks to catalog the reality and inspiration of simply living life.

Kyle Tomchesson

Kyle is a writer based in Texas.

Samaria Torres

Samaria is a UNT transfer student originally from College Station, Texas. She has always had a passion for art and plans to use it to inspire young artists as an art teacher after graduating.

Daniela Ventura

Daniela never truly enjoyed poetry until she went through difficult times and used it as a way to heal.

Evelyn Vi

Evelyn is a third-year English major studying creative writing. She is fascinated by expression in gender identity, queerness, bi- and multiracial identities, and the representation of diasporic Asian identities.

Writing allows her to explore and share her emotions.

Rona Williams

Rona is a sophomore music student at the University of North Texas. Since the age of thirteen, she has taken a DIY approach to writing and producing original music, releasing multiple albums independently from the comfort of her home.

Matthew Willingham

Matthew is studying Media Arts at UNT with a minor in English. They hope to become a filmmaker, writer, and director, while also pursuing writing across other artistic mediums, including books, comics, and television.

Paige Young

Paige is a poet and short story writer who explores themes of creation in their work.

Maria Zaki

A poet and freshman at Arizona State University Online in the DFW and Boston area, Maria speaks volumes through her writing and brings the craft to a larger youth audience. She recently competed in the Brave New Voices Festival with MassPoetry and featured her work on WBUR.

"The brilliance within this edition of the North Texas Review flies from the pages like sparks from a Catherine wheel. These are the kind of voices that not only make me feel glad to be alive, but lucky to exist within the same time-space continuum as these writers, poets, painters, and thinkers... The best art, or maybe my favorite art, is dynamic in this way. It converses with the reader. It asks about you the way a good neighbor might. This is how you know these works are the real deal. They're explorations in what it means to be human. Phenomenal curation here. Absolutely phenomenal."

Daniel Peña, Associate Professor of English & author of Bang

"The range of work in the North Texas Review represents the ingenuity, artistry, and skill that make UNT the place to explore new ways of understanding our world. In a lovingly edition collection of illustrations, photography, poetry, fiction and non-fiction, the latest volume presents a great diversity of young writers. Their collective work represents the power of creative labor and is a privilege to witness."

Adriane Bezusko, Senior Lecturer & & Undergraduate Advisor

"The latest issue of the North Texas Review is a wonderful showcase of the emerging talent and budding artistry at UNT Here, you will find writers and artists collapsing simplistic notions of dichotomy. The past is alive and manifest in the present... With nuanced storytelling, haunting yet beautiful artwork, and poetry that is at once formally innovative but grounded in human emotion, this issue is a singular odyssey, featuring numerous moments of individual brilliance that speak to one another in ways that are both profoundly moving and deeply thoughtprovoking."

Ross Wilcox, Lecturer &

author of Golden Gate Jumper

Survivors Society