

Now is the Time of Monsters

a community storytelling collection

Now is the Time of Monsters is compiled and published by the Community Writing Center

All inquiries should be directed to:

CWC Director

210 East 400 South, Suite 8, Salt Lake City, UT 84111

Salt Lake Community College (SLCC) and the SLCC Community Writing Center (CWC) are not responsible for opinions expressed in Now is the Time of Monsters. The writing, art, photography, and other works included here in are not representative of any official positions at SLCC or the CWC.

The authors, artists, photographers, and other creatives are solely responsible for the opinions they have expressed.

The authors, artists, photographers, and other creatives retain copyright. Reprinting of this publication is permitted only with prior consultation and approval from the SLCC Community Writing Center. (www.slcc.edu/cwc)

Compiled and edited by Elisar Soueidi and Kati Lewis.

Layout and design by Frank Cobbe and Oliver Harrington.

Works appearing on the cover:

‘embrace ~ eternx’, by Katileena.

‘Blinded By Your Beauty,’ by Matthew McCain

‘Endless,’ by Annie Michael Lim

To access digital media & the E-Publication of this anthology, please visit our website:

© 2025



Now is the Time of Monsters

a community storytelling collection

“Now is the Time of Monsters” takes its title from a passage by Antonio Gramsci: “The old world is dying, and the new world struggles to be born. Now is the time of monsters.” In this liminal space—between collapse and rebirth—the monstrous emerges from the fractures of what we once called ‘normal.’

A monster is something we imagine as deviating from the human norm. Yet we live in an era where monstrous injustices—genocide, systemic violence—are routine, even normalized. Our vision of ‘normal,’ itself a construct, is enforced through laws and social codes, shaping not only what is but also its shadow: the ‘abnormal,’ the ‘inhumane,’ the so-called monster. But what if the monster is not just the feared Other, but us? The unrecognizable, the unwanted, the ones who refuse—or are refused by—the world as it is?

Perhaps the monster is born from our desires for what does not yet exist, from all we fail to understand about the human condition. To be alive today is to be living in a time of monsters, hunted or hunting and haunting or haunted. Some monsters crave humanity’s love, fighting for belonging and for their full humanity to be seen; others embody the inhumane, consumed by fear of difference, destroying the very world we all share.

Many of the works in this publication ask us to consider the following question: Is it fear that creates the monsters, or the monsters that create the fear? The answer may be both. The monsters we imagine are the ones we bring into being. The pieces featured here all exist in that tension, to interrogate, to witness, and to ask what it means to live, love, and resist in a monstrous time.

Thank you to all the members of
our community for entrusting us
with your creativity. Your works
have deeply touched all of us.

Table of Contents

The Time of Monsters	1
<i>H.M. Lakewood</i>	
Compression	2
<i>Kevin Bodniza</i>	
Eight Billion Last Breaths.....	3
<i>F. Patrick Stehno</i>	
Lady Has Her Teeth and Shows Them.....	4
<i>Cecil Smith</i>	
Born Dead	5
<i>E.G. Soueidi</i>	
Monster	6
<i>Kenneth Christiansen</i>	
i, ii, iii.....	7
<i>Oliver Harrington</i>	
Spit.....	14
<i>Kenneth Christiansen</i>	
Living Flame	15
<i>Shannon Giambanco</i>	
Lady Asia Weeping.....	16
<i>Ernest Williamson III</i>	
Un-dead Lucy to Her Suitors.....	17
<i>Sophie Gauthier</i>	
Monsters Deserve to Live.....	18
<i>Will Turner</i>	
Affirmations.....	19
<i>Sage Thee</i>	

The Puralator	20
<i>Kevin Bodniza</i>	
American Horror Story	21
<i>Marie Anne Arreola</i>	
House	23
<i>Julian Croft</i>	
Strange House	24
<i>Amber MV</i>	
Wane	24
<i>Allison Whittenberg</i>	
Three Poems, Three Stanzas Each	25
<i>Jem Ashton</i>	
Would You Still Love Me If I Was a Worm?	26
<i>Isaac Russo</i>	
Hide Seek	32
<i>Kevin Bodniza</i>	
Anole	33
<i>Chris Topah</i>	
Love Lost Tastes	34
<i>Amber Pollard</i>	
My Heart is a Bird Made of Embers	35
<i>Will Turner</i>	
Bird Blood	35
<i>Shannon Giambanco</i>	
Feathers	36
<i>Aditya Kumar</i>	

Aves Magnae	37
<i>Kevin Holdsworth</i>	
Endless	39
<i>Annie Michael Lim</i>	
Inclusion	40
<i>MK Punky</i>	
Waterworn & Lake Effect	41, 42
<i>Jem Ashton</i>	
* dreaming	42
<i>Andrea Canedo</i>	
America: 2025	43
<i>F. Patrick Stehno</i>	
CARTER (Or, ‘I am American’) WHY	45
<i>r.p. singletary</i>	
21st Century Sonnet	48
<i>Rachel White</i>	
Resistance in Technicolor	49
<i>Jenna Cook</i>	
Can’t We All Just Get Along??	51, 52
<i>Jaggy Mones</i>	
Children of the Revolution	53, 54
<i>Jaggy Mones</i>	
Fierce	55
<i>Amie Schaeffer</i>	
For Now	56
<i>Joe Roberts</i>	

and yet, hope is	57
<i>Sydney (Mix) Olson</i>	
Thirst	59
<i>Echo Durst</i>	
Liberty in the Snow.....	60
<i>Scott Fineshriber</i>	
Ken Sanders Rare Books	61
<i>Joe Roberts</i>	
It Sinks Like This	61
<i>Cecil Smith</i>	
april001reverse	62
<i>Uintah Gearhart</i>	
What a Time to be Unalive	63
<i>Jonathan Reddoch</i>	
Peppers.....	66
<i>Alana Boscan</i>	
Caught Falling	67
<i>MK Punky</i>	
It's Not Easy to be Me	68
<i>Shauna Marie Dieter</i>	
Hunters and Gatherers	69
<i>Miranda Stone</i>	
Isolation.....	70
<i>Halo Hefner</i>	
The New, Updated, and Revised Traveler's Universal Dictionary.....	71
<i>Daniel Baird</i>	

What a Time to be Alive.....	72
<i>Joshua McDaniel</i>	
I, Human.....	73
<i>C. Randall Nicholson</i>	
SAIM Worshiper.....	77, 78
<i>David Payne</i>	
The Creation of osLilith.....	79, 80
<i>Lili Black</i>	
No Simple Task: A Way of Being Human During Inhumane Times.....	81
<i>Joseph Mayes</i>	
Woke Political Correctness.....	82
<i>F. Patrick Stehno</i>	
Free Palestine	83
<i>Syd Ackley</i>	
Scope Creep	85
<i>Samantha Fox</i>	
The Dawning	87
<i>Iris Cobbe</i>	
Hang On Kiddo It Will Be Okay.....	89
<i>Matthew McCain</i>	
Three-Letter Word.....	90
<i>Inna Lyon</i>	
36th of July: Tale of a Fascist's Borrowed Time	93
<i>Arman Ahmed Asif</i>	
Venceremos	98
<i>Úrsula Iguarán</i>	

Giovanni's Sister's Room.....	99
<i>Cydney Caradonna</i>	
You, Too.....	101
<i>Maria Fischer</i>	
Fascist Tides.....	101, 102
<i>Jaggy Mones</i>	
Listen	103
<i>Giovanni Provenzano</i>	
What a Time to be Alive.....	104
<i>Theodore Roberts</i>	
Wagon Train.....	105
<i>Rebecca Kathryn Sharp</i>	
When Life Gives Lemons, Make Lemonade	109
<i>Emily Christensen</i>	
Take Your Own Advice.....	110
<i>Andrea Williamson</i>	
Stagecoach Tales.....	111
<i>Iain McDonald</i>	
The Best Gift	112
<i>Tracy Pickard</i>	
Small Town	113
<i>Jessica Robinson</i>	
Pepperoni Unicorn Story!	114
<i>Carolyn White</i>	
My is Hillcrest Highschool.....	115
<i>Carissa Lettig</i>	

Colors	116
<i>David Person</i>	
Window, Light in the Dark	117
<i>Josh Byerly</i>	
My Angel, Tense, Christ is With Me.....	118
<i>Josh Byerly</i>	
Overheard at Starbucks	119
<i>Francis Kenneth Cobbe</i>	
What a Time to be Alive: What it Means to be Human.....	121
<i>Shauna Marie Dieter</i>	
Growing Through Restrictions	122
<i>Existential Bread</i>	
I Say I'm Fine	123
<i>Hailey Jo</i>	
Warrioress.....	125
<i>Allison Whittenberg</i>	
Poppy Fields.....	126
<i>Aditya Kumar</i>	
Anxiety On My Morning Walk.....	127
<i>Joe Roberts</i>	
Morning Rumination	128
<i>Leiani Molis</i>	
Anxiety	129
<i>Existential Bread</i>	
How to Dissect a Human Boy	130
<i>Will Turner</i>	

Girl Love	131
<i>Grace Andersen</i>	
Roe	132
<i>Grace Andersen</i>	
Une Femme Unique en son Genre	133
<i>Michael–Anne Johnson</i>	
Curious Still	135
<i>Matthew McCain</i>	
Call to the Soul	136
<i>Shannon Giambanco</i>	
Jose.....	137
<i>Alexander Hill</i>	
Waves and Earthquakes.....	138
<i>Existential Bread</i>	
The Visitors Are Coming for Dinner.....	139
<i>Rebecca Rose McGuinness</i>	
You Didn't Manage to Visit as We Had Planned	142
<i>Sarah Doepner</i>	
Girl Dinner	143
<i>Parker Mortensen</i>	
Southeast Eats	147
<i>Kobe Rathsavong</i>	
Olive	150
<i>Existential Bread</i>	
Letter to a Friend	151
<i>Tiffany Anderson</i>	

Imaginando un Mundo Sin Fronteras	153
<i>Existential Bread</i>	
Imagining A World Without Borders.....	154
<i>Existential Bread</i>	
Strawberries or Transphobia.....	155
<i>Sarah Doepner</i>	
After a Surgery	157
<i>Kit Leichty</i>	
Tyranny of the Tape.....	159
<i>Scott Fineshriber</i>	
Sovrene	160
<i>Scott Fineshriber</i>	
Alive and Present	161
<i>Barbara Hirsch</i>	
Forget-Me-Not.....	162
<i>Tiffany Anderson</i>	
The Weight of a Tambourine Falls Somewhere in Between.....	163
<i>Maria Fischer</i>	
If We Grew Old Together	164
<i>Will Turner</i>	
What a Time to Be Alive, Reflections on Time	165
<i>Deborah Chiquito</i>	
Taking Up Space	169
<i>Syd Ackley</i>	
Pulchra Mater (Beautiful Mother)	173
<i>Francis Kenneth Cobbe</i>	

Mary	174
<i>Terry Brinkman</i>	
Epilogue.....	175
<i>Marie Anne Arreola</i>	
Things We Do	179
<i>E.G. Soueidi</i>	
Treasure Amongst Shadows.....	180
<i>Kamille Fairhurst</i>	
That Peculiar Institution	180
<i>Allison Whittenberg</i>	
Describing Nothing.....	181
<i>Lauren Smith</i>	
Dead Bliss	181
<i>Lauren Smith</i>	
Under New Management	182
<i>Tara Hogan</i>	
Working for Nothing.....	183
<i>Oscar Monroe</i>	
PotPouri.....	184
<i>Kevin Bodniza</i>	
Reach (2025)	185
<i>Beth Horton</i>	
Rust (2025).....	185
<i>Beth Horton</i>	
Looking.....	186
<i>E.G. Soueidi</i>	

Skyscrapers	187
<i>Maria Fischer</i>	
Folly (2025)	188
<i>Beth Horton</i>	
Intersect	189
<i>Joshua Wynne-Hudson</i>	
Lost to Traffic	190
<i>George Morris</i>	
The Grind (a poem that never ends)	191
<i>Destine Brunatti-Schoff</i>	
{enough}	192
<i>H.E. Grahame</i>	
Whirlwind	193
<i>Michael Nelson</i>	
Periphery	194
<i>Michael Nelson</i>	
The Darkness of The Sky	195
<i>Eliza Scudder</i>	
SLC Shakedown	197
<i>Lisa Donaldson</i>	
The Key Was There the Whole Time	198
<i>Elizabeth Suggs</i>	
Normalcy	199
<i>Sage Thee</i>	
Threadbare	199
<i>Joe Roberts</i>	

Yarn.....	199
<i>Rory Donahoe</i>	
Blinded By Your Beauty	200
<i>Matthew McCain</i>	
Interregnum.....	201
<i>K.J. Lewis</i>	
Roots	203
<i>Nash Hutto</i>	
July.....	204
<i>Michael–Anne Johnson</i>	
What We Keep	205
<i>Alexis Andrade</i>	
The Net	205
<i>Alexis Andrade</i>	
Ripples on Silver Lake	206
<i>Scott Fineshriber</i>	
Tenawas.....	207
<i>Michael–Anne Johnson</i>	
The House by Hobblecreek.....	208
<i>Miranda Stone</i>	
little boy	209
<i>Kenneth Christiansen</i>	
Denim.....	209
<i>Michael–Anne Johnson</i>	
Remember Your Roots	210
<i>Matthew McCain</i>	

Entangled.....	211
<i>Jane Finlinson-Hodgkinson</i>	
Rainbow Hole	212
<i>Elliot Tucker</i>	
Rainbow Hole II	212
<i>Elliot Tucker</i>	
The Whiteness of a Mother’s Love.....	213
<i>Maria Fischer</i>	
Just the Antique of a Birth Swallowing Open my Sternum.....	214
<i>Maria Fischer</i>	
Stateside	215
<i>Jaggy Mones</i>	
Yesterday and Tomorrow.....	216
<i>Becky Tucker</i>	
Nebraska.....	217
<i>Sage Thee</i>	
Vivacious.....	218
<i>Clarissa Cervantes</i>	
Evening at Lake Michigan	219
<i>Becky Blaszak</i>	
Cliff Jumping.....	219
<i>Becky Blaszak</i>	
Rein Und Raus	220
<i>Unknown</i>	
Watching Jordan’s Fall	221
<i>Allison Whittenberg</i>	

November.....	222
<i>Mia Manfredi</i>	
A Beer from the Gutter	223
<i>Gabriela Belardi</i>	
Plaintive Inquiry.....	224
<i>MK Punky</i>	
Lost and Found I: Voices of Love, Self, and Shame.....	225
<i>Jayrod Garrett</i>	
Lost and Found II: Voices of Faith, Self, and Peace.....	227
<i>Jayrod Garrett</i>	
A Setting Sun.....	229, 230
<i>Jaggy Mones</i>	
It's The Little Things	231
<i>Matthew McCain</i>	
Acrid Smoke	232
<i>Terry Brinkman</i>	
Waiting for the Sunrise	233
<i>Stella Eleanor-Freyja Redfield</i>	
Oh, The Glory of Music!.....	235
<i>Bruce Griffin</i>	
Playing It By Ear.....	236
<i>Joe Roberts</i>	
Indra.....	237
<i>Shannon Giambanco</i>	
Fox on Tetons.....	238
<i>Terry Brinkman</i>	

Onteora	239
<i>Shannon Giambanco</i>	
Best Kiss Ever	240
<i>Sarah Doepner</i>	
Redwood	240
<i>Michael–Anne Johnson</i>	
Plants vs. Humans	241
<i>Aditya Kumar</i>	
To Plead on Warm Earth.....	242
<i>Annie Michael Lim</i>	
Please Don’t Cut The Grass	242
<i>Leiani Molis</i>	
Not Mine	243
<i>Vivian Finck</i>	
Denude.....	244
<i>Nash Hutto</i>	
The Bigger They Are	245
<i>F. Patrick Stehno</i>	
Lou Reed, Fruit Flies, and Palestine.....	247
<i>Gereon Fuller</i>	
Long Live Palestine!	249
<i>Existential Bread</i>	
After the Dream House	250
<i>Sage Thee</i>	
My Koan of Cosmic Intimacy	251
<i>Makaela Alder</i>	

Sanctuary	252
<i>F. Patrick Stehno</i>	
A Tortured Mind is Mine	253
<i>Maya Wierzbicki</i>	
Ride The Snake	255
<i>Kevin Bodniza</i>	
To Have Been Here.....	256
<i>Alexis Andrada</i>	
The Weight of Now	257
<i>Michaela Rae</i>	
Weather	258
<i>Russ Wagstaff</i>	
Grain	259
<i>Ryan Scherer</i>	
UFO Sighting	261
<i>Marie Anne Arreola</i>	
Rosy Poverty.....	265
<i>Cecil Smith</i>	
Burning Hope	266
<i>Ethane Schrubb</i>	
The Beautiful Life	267
<i>Ernest Williamson III</i>	
Small	267
<i>Will Turner</i>	
Mountain Blue	268
<i>Emily Ables</i>	

Tune in and Tune out.....269

E.G.S

Final Descent.....271

MK Punky

Heirs to Gold and Smoke 272

Michael Hadden

Guardando Fuori Dalla Mia Casa..... 273

Ernest Williamson III

embrace ~ eternx..... 274

Katleena

Why Life Matters Even Though It Fades 275

Aubrey Olsen Stokes Earle

For a 50th Reunion 277

Sarah Doepner

To Be Kind280

Sharlee Mullins Glenn

Now is the Time of Monsters

Human

[*hyoo-muhn*]

noun

any individual of the genus *Homo*, especially a member of the species *Homo sapiens*.

adjective

of, relating to, characteristic of, or having the nature of people: *human frailty*.
consisting of people: *the human race*.

sympathetic; humane: *a warmly human understanding*.

Humane

[*hyoo-meyn*]

adjective

acting in a way that causes the least harm to all living things: characterized by tenderness, compassion, and sympathy for people and animals, especially for the suffering or distressed: *humane treatment of prisoners*.

Monster

[*mon-ster*]

First recorded in 1250–1300; Middle English *monstre*, from Latin *mōnstrum* “portent, unnatural event, monster,” from *mon(ēre)* “to warn” + *-strum*, noun suffix

noun

As in: *a giant animal, or supernatural being*

a nonhuman creature so ugly or monstrous as to frighten people.

an animal or plant of abnormal form or structure

one who deviates from normal or acceptable behavior or character, an immoral monster a threatening force

a person who provokes or elicits horror by wickedness, cruelty, etc.

The Time of Monsters

H.M. Lakewood

In 1924, Italian anti-fascist Antonio Gramsci wrote: "The old world is dying, and the new world struggles to be born; now is the time of monsters."

I know where but I can't remember when.

Out beyond the ever-consuming smoke of the ancient seas. Aeolian rivers of invisible death. Segregated by moving walls of iron.

Outside the compound: filters with a clinging dry leaf and crushed metal draughts fill a sparse desert. Lucky vegetation cordoned and abandoned. Stairs on which the worthless currency remains. Enter the corral where they stomp.

Communication limb severed; eyes made of light pierce me. Signage failing. A flow of privileged water: only sometimes. Silver reminder of the worker: a reminder of culpability, guilt. Vestigial equipment. Useless traffic lines, contradicted by the very machines required.

Enter the cluttered underbelly of the dragon. Birds sing, perched in the metal sky where time goes to die. Intestines, four men to a maw. Shovel in the feed. Macroplastics create the illusion of luster in the harsh yet inconsistent light.

Stretch and consider for a moment, but not too long! Remember the competition. Survival of the fittest you see. May the weak fall by the wayside and be smashed across the yellow metal skeleton.

Organic and mechanical reek as the door is opened. A temporary ice box. Product collapsing in your hands. Landfills build up in the corners, not even attended by any delightful seagulls. Forget the landfill in your blood: choking and robbing. Discarded treasure, at threat of the bounty.

At the whim of the structure, dismissed. Sunrise and fractal patterns adorn my glass, but the process demands destruction. Road homeward filled with all the other non-humans: mechafauna. Flags for the coronation. Turtles of war fill the rails. A dome for the lords. At the mega-merchant: I fill myself with the sea, but not even upon a nice stone.

Ambrosia of the God Profit. Or so they call it; I need it for my dear prison. At the foot of the mountain, a tower and a castle trumpet their true power. Nestled in the mountain, though, is the slumber of ancient networks: keen on becoming new. What might this molting bring?

Compression

Kevin Bodniza

Kevin Bodniza



Eight Billion Last Breaths

F. Patrick Stehno

Eight billion ...

hungry mouths, thirsty throats, breathing lungs;
over eight billion daily defecations,
pissing into weeds, flushing extravagant water filled toilets.

Eight billion ...

nightly prayers wafting toward some imagined heaven,
nirvana, promised land, pie in the sky,
demanding a better life, fuller life, greater opportunity,
like those others, the wealthy who don't cry
over the health of a sickened child,
who don't plea for relief from hunger,
don't face daily struggles for existence.

Eight billion ...

valid reasons this planet struggles to help us thrive
while some, the greedy, the overly wealthy,
lounge by crystal pools of chemically treated fresh water,
never intended for consumption, available for an occasional dip
to cool overheated flesh between drinks of a favorite imported wine
or blended Scotch whisky, on the rocks.

Eight billion ...

voices, crying impatiently, needing clean water,
needing unspoiled food, while we throw away
nutritious slightly blemished off-color fruit,
toss slightly dry day-old bread, pour excess milk
over open fields to keep prices high, raise beef and swine and sheep
on grain grown exclusively for their feed.

Eight billion ...

humans, Homo sapiens, destined to die
due to a chaotic climate sent tumbling into violent hurricanes,
deep frozen winters, desert dust storms,
thousand year floods and decades-long drought
just because we could not bring ourselves to care,
to appreciate what we've got, what we've lost,
all initiated by a few million short-sighted brains.

One day there will be eight billion last breaths.

Lady Has Her Teeth and Shows Them.

Cecil Smith

Pouting Oputina

Who gladly gives her seeds

In exchange for embedding hairlike needles in your fingertips.

A callus doesn't help

But she won't reach for the midnight of red wine beneath your skin.

Kinder than the industry that kisses the foot of the mountain, than vampires,

fascists and their pig-like hounds, or the managerial-class, or petite-bourgeoisie

And she bares her fangs openly, "these are my teeth"

Pouting Oputina.

Born Dead

E.G. Soueidi

Born dead, I was born dead
I am lost in my head

Born dead, born dead
No chance to get ahead
Oh the pain, the desires
It's but a dream, I'm a liar

Born dead, born dead
I am lost in my head
What is real, what is real
Oh the fear, oh the fear

[Phonetic Arabic]
Shoo hel hayet bala iimeh
Ma illeh nefss, ma7rou2 diineh
Shoo ha2 ta3ab, ma fi ya iimeh
Ana ma3atar, ya ta3tiri

What is this life without worth
I don't have no soul, burned my religion
What is this tired, it does not have worth
I am a pity, what a miserable fortune of mine

Born dead, born dead,
I am lost in my head
Born dead, born dead
Dead end dreams have been laid to rest

Monster

Kenneth Christiansen

If I looked the way I felt spikes would
line the inside of my wrists and
forearms as my hair lays
off my head around me.

If I told you just to trust me would my voice
my voice grow into a yell?

If I asked you to let me take care of it would
my shoulders disagree?

If I could speak without this emotion, would it
be only what I meant? Would I
tell you something
sweet?

If I looked the way I felt my eyes would
lose iris to the emptiness
liquidating in my
lungs.

i, ii, iii

Oliver Harrington

Horror and monsters reflect societal fears; that is what inspired these stories. How does it feel to be seen as a monster? What does it mean to live fully when the world insists you don't deserve to? How do you reconcile existence in a body that feels like a battleground? In a society that often treats differences as something monstrous, these pieces aim to explore the weight of visibility—the fear of being hunted, the guilt of surviving, the suffocation of shame, and the fragile hope of finding solidarity.

i.

He preferred to go out at night. Something about the cover of darkness felt like protection—a safety net. Somewhere to hide—something that sunlight couldn't promise. It wasn't necessarily dangerous to be out during the day, not everywhere, at least. In some cities, it was safe to go out, to be seen as you are, but presently, he was not in one of those cities.

He hadn't stayed long in any place.

He was meeting his partner at a club. It was a few blocks away, but he could already hear the bass. The air almost seemed to vibrate from the pulsing music of the late-night party. The club was for others like him. Many of the patrons who frequented the place had been saved from death, as he had been. Some had simply found solace there.

He veered deeper into the shadows as he drew nearer. It wasn't uncommon for monsters to roam the streets near it, lurking in wait for easy victims. He'd heard stories from those who had faced them, though it was rare that they came out alive. The more common story was of those who others had watched fall to the monsters, helpless to intervene. Since his first encounter, some forty years before, he'd not truly had to face such monsters. His partner had saved him then. The monsters attacked in packs, and only so long as they weren't outnumbered—so usually it was safer to travel with others; it was uncommon that he was making the walk alone.

The brightly lit club was just a block ahead when he froze.

He'd heard something.

And again.

A pained cry.

A pleading, desperate voice.

A voice that was as familiar to him as his own.

Before he could think, he was sprinting in the direction of it.

They had him surrounded—his partner—curled on the filthy asphalt. Before he could get to him, he was yanked back by one of them. It was amused. It enjoyed this. “Watch.” The monster’s cruel voice growled against his ear. Its breath was hot and damp against his skin. Its burning hands gripped his jaw and yanked his head towards his partner, bloodied and beaten on the ground. The monster forced him to look, to see what they had done to the man he loved.

The noise of the club, of the city itself, seemed to be muted, amplifying the gruesome attack. The merciless thud of fists against flesh. His husband’s voice—usually soft, calm, comforting—was panicked, afraid in a way he’d never heard it. His broken pleas for mercy.

His useless, gasping breaths.

His cries of agony.

Blood was splattered across the filthy ground. He choked on desperate, messy sobs—with them came more blood. It spluttered wetly from his mouth and spilled down his chin, crimson and sticky. But most of the gore came from a wound in his chest. It was dark and gaping and horrible—with each gasp he took, more blood gushed from it. It hardly seemed possible that so much blood could have come from him, yet somehow, he still bled.

Distantly, the man knew he was crying as well, begging the monsters to spare his husband, that they take him instead. One of the monsters hit him; the others were laughing. Of course they were. The one that held him covered his mouth with its large, scorching hands, silencing him.

He didn’t know how long he’d been there—it was likely only minutes—it felt as if it had been hours. Hours watching monsters beat on his partner. Hours watching the man he loved, his *Husband*, bleed onto the street.

And then he was gone—nothing but dust remained where he’d lain on the ground. Even the blood, which had seemed so plentiful, no longer stained the pavement.

The monsters would get away with it. It was too easy to make claims that would secure their innocence—violent, temporary insanity due to fear of being bitten, their blood poisoned; fear of being seduced—far too often, monsters were cut some slack. Most

walked free. Monsters who had murdered strangers, his friends, and now, his lover—would get to return home to their families.

They would get to brag about the life they had stolen.

They would get to do it again.

They *would* do it again.

Around him, the world had gone utterly silent. Devastated, he stared at the dirty pavement where his partner had been slain. The monsters now had their attention on him; his fate was sealed. He didn't care to fight it. Like his husband, they would turn him to dust.

Dust, and nothing more.

Soon it too would be gone, scattered with the wind. Forgotten.

ii.

They felt as though they were burning.

Their skin rippled. Their bones bent—they collapsed to the damp, linoleum floor of the bathroom, curling in on themselves in pain. It didn't matter if they watched; their body continued to warp. Their bones stretched, buckled, and realigned—horrific and inhuman beneath their warped skin.

They knew they were screaming, voice hoarse, throat raw. Their bones continued to shift, tearing their flesh where the new shape of their skeleton couldn't make room for itself. Their muscle, bone, and intestines were all exposed to the air with the change, the sensation unbearable—then their skin began to stitch itself back together. Scarred. Patchwork. Thick fur began growing after, covering their raw, wounded skin.

They couldn't remember much of anything after that.

When they came to, they were terrified.

Disoriented. Naked. Filthy. Sore.

They tried to deny the truth of what they already knew. *Just this one time*, they thought, as they scrubbed their skin clean.

But then it happened again.

And again.

It happened in clumps, several days out of the month. At first, it seemed sporadic, but they began to recognize the signs that it was coming—the constant irritation; the way they were quick to anger; the ache deep in their bones, almost like growing pains, though they never seemed to grow any taller; the *hunger*, desperate and clawing, that nothing seemed to sate.

Their body was changing in ways they were helpless to stop, no matter which form they were in. One was becoming something unrecognizable and wrong; the other, the *monster*, inexplicably right.

They now knew what they were, and they should try to control it. It was something monstrous—something evil. They knew how people talked, knew what people thought of things like them. The thought of being discovered made them sick with nausea. It was terrifying.

They knew they needed to find a way to make it stop. ~~They weren't sure if they wanted to.~~

There had been a piece of them missing, somehow. A hole that needed filling. If it hadn't been for the monster, they'd never have recognized it for what it was. The understanding that they'd been missing something granted them a sense of peace they had never known before. As their transformation drew near, they began to feel a sort of giddiness. Excitement. *Shame*. It was something inescapably bound with the experience, regardless of the relief that the transformation began to bring.

They could barely find the remnants of who they once were when they looked into the mirror. Like a compulsion, they'd search their reflection for the changes they'd begun to crave. Those monstrous changes they knew they would be condemned for.

Those were not the changes that reflected back. Instead, they faced a stranger; the changes were all wrong, starkly different from who they knew themselves to be. Their face had become round and soft where it should have been sharp; the lines of their body sloped into alien curves where they craved the monsters' hard edges.

Often, they wondered why one version was considered evil while the other was not. What made one version bad? If one version felt right, who was to say it *wasn't*? Why did anyone else even get a say? The way people spoke about monsters like them only seemed to get worse—a constant stream of vitriol and disgust. They'd already known that this part of them was something that needed to be hidden away, but it only seemed to become more and more dangerous. They were terrified of anyone discovering this truth about them. They could picture the disappointment and repulsion on their family's faces. They could imagine the way others would look at them, as though they were a stranger. Something evil, cursed.

A liar.

A blood-thirsty predator.

The more they tried to hide it away, the more incessant the monster became, clawing and fighting beneath their skin. “I am more,” the monster seemed to howl. They knew it was true. They were something profound.

They wouldn’t have been able to live without it. There had been a countdown on their life—one that had always been there, ticking away inside their chest, forcing room for itself in a space that the monster now inhabited. They hadn’t known it was there—they hadn’t realized that they’d spent their entire life trying to outrun it. But that time had been running low, catching up, looming closer—now the monster held it at bay.

They didn’t *want* to die. It would not have been a choice.

The monster, as painful and horrific as it could be, was also the only part of them that felt right. It was the only part keeping them alive.

One day, they’d give in. The monster would be victorious.

And, for the first time, they would be able to breathe.

iii.

He’d spent many evenings sitting on the park bench, his eyes turned to the sky. He could still vividly see the way his warm breath had once fogged the air, though now, as it had been for more years than he could recall, there was none. The sound of footsteps shook him from his reverie. He looked towards the source.

A man approached him. Young. Certainly, younger than he himself had been when he was turned. By how much, he couldn’t be sure.

The young man smiled, lamplight glinting off his teeth. It was a kind smile, hopeful, even. He stood in front of the bench, and, after a moment of hesitation, he sat too. He was wearing a tight-fitting shirt, low-cut and sheer, displaying the sharp line of his collarbones, the slope of his shoulders, the soft lines of his throat.

It left his scars on full display.

Shameless.

The young man existed with an ease, even a pride, that he’d never fully felt himself.

Rather, he'd always lived cautious, guarded. Honestly, frightened. The ease with which the man next to him held himself...it made him ache with jealousy.

Seeing the scar on the other man's throat, he became distinctly aware of his own shirt. The way he hid his throat—his scar—from view. The collar buttoned to the top button; the precise, tight knot of his tie. A scarf rested over his shoulders, a barrier, a safeguard—a *noose*—in case he needed it. It felt tight in a near-suffocating way now that it had his attention.

After a moment of silence, he loosened his tie and released the first several buttons, revealing his throat—his scar—to the man next to him.

He swallowed, his mouth was so dry. His first attempt to speak was not successful. Nerves. He tried again, voice low and quiet. "It's...easier," he explained. He glanced up and met the others' eyes.

"I know." The younger man said it kindly, no hint of judgment in his voice or on his face. The man smiled at him again. Charming. His eyes caught on the man's sharp canines, and he self-consciously touched the tip of his tongue against his own. "It's not like it was, you know," his new companion said conversationally. He leaned comfortably against the bench and rested his arm over the back of it. The younger man's hand nearly brushed against him. "Things have changed a lot since then."

Distantly, the man knew this. He'd been around, seen it from the shadows. But it was difficult to believe.

Worse to get his hopes up.

"How long will it stay that way?" He eventually responded. His voice was hoarse. "How long until things turn back around? How long until they're back to killing us off?" He offered a sad smile that came out as more of a grimace. "Truly, I hope you're right. I hope things have changed," he murmured. "But I've seen too many die."

The young man frowned and turned to face him fully. "So, you'll just keep hiding?" he asked. His brows did not look like ones that should be able to furrow—carved from stone—but furrow they did. "Is it not worth it to live your life? Isn't that what the ones you've lost would want for you?" He opened his mouth to argue, but the man spoke over him. "They aren't here. It is unfair that they were taken; it was before their time. But you cannot cease to live out of guilt that you're the one who survived." He leaned closer, a spark in his eyes, "Sure, things might not stay okay. They probably won't; it has been getting worse. They will always try to erase us. There's still so much...danger; the murders and violence haven't stopped—I doubt anything will be done about it. But we are louder now."

He took a breath, searching for his next words. The man let him think, stunned into silence by impassioned speech. He sighed and looked up towards the sky before continuing, "There will always be horrible people. There will always be risk. Maybe things will go backwards—maybe they won't. We have no way of knowing." The young man looked at him again; the intensity of his gaze was dizzying. "One thing I do know, you can't continue like this. It's unfair to yourself—to those who have been lost—to those of us *still fighting*."

He spoke passionately, animated in a way the man hadn't seen since he'd lost...he swallowed and pressed his palms against his eyes, stopping the thought. "You...seem to care quite a lot about this," he said eventually.

This was met with a soft laugh and a hand clapped against his shoulder, "I do." He agreed with a smile that looked more sad than happy. "If we don't look out for each other, who else will?"

They sat like that for a time. The man's hand rested on his shoulder, the cold evening air against his bare throat felt as freeing as it did terrifying. Eventually, the young man stood—something akin to anguish filled his chest at the loss—he turned and extended his hand. "So, are you coming?"

He looked up at the hand, patient, open, waiting. It was an invitation, a gift, that he could choose to accept or decline. He felt at war with himself, torn between what he knew—the lifetime he'd spent hiding—and the possibility of more.

He hesitated a few moments longer, then reached out and took the hand.

Spit

Kenneth Christiansen

You toe the line of deniability
as I sit and want to believe in coincidence.

You scream out of car windows,
You ask questions I am uncomfortable hearing,
You spit outside my bathroom stall door,

You watch for my fear to feel
powerful
again.

I am not who you are mad at, but I am uncomfortable
visible, and
different.

I am not the one who is hurting you, but I am less than
freak, and
different.

I am nothing more than a stranger to you, but I am a
faggot
said under your
breath.

I am nothing more than a stranger to you, but I am
hated
for nothing I
decided
to be.

Living Flame

Shannon Giambanco

Some part of me that I revel in ignoring
comes claws out and canines snarling
during the season of resurrection.

A curious concept of rebirthing
has the whimsical part of myself desperate
to feel the blades of damp grass beneath my toes
and freckles splashing my cheeks.

When she escapes the cage calling her home
it is not to the leash in my hands that she runs toward—
it's him.

The glistening brown of his skin
almost as breathtaking as his gold-rimmed eyes
like living flame as he watches me.

Some part of me that I revel in ignoring
loves the part of him that wakes up
as winter slumbers.

Lady Asia Weeping

Ernest Williamson III

(Abstract Painting, Right)



Un-dead Lucy to Her Suitors

Sophie Gauthier

Lucy's eyes in form and colour; but Lucy's eyes unclean and full of hell-fire
- Bram Stoker's *Dracula*

I barely remember
the last three days,

though I think you placed
your head on my breast,
searching for a heartbeat
but found none.

My limbs' ache sharpened
then faded. I dreamed every night
I was suspended in the center
of a web. Needles attached me

to thin tubes, and my blood
travelled along them. A man
I couldn't see controlled its flow.
Some nights, he pulled me

through the wounds he'd made
in my skin. Others, he bled
into me, whispering comforts
in a scholar's clipped tone.

Your firm hands gripped me
by the shoulders, arranged
me in bed—not so different
from the vampire's claws.

When my veins ran dry,
I heard a stranger
console me: I made
such a beautiful corpse,

my lips plush, skin
smooth as wax. I smelled
the florets of garlic
you stuffed into my mouth.

I wanted to tear a chunk
from your throat—

woke buried. Starving,
glycerin coating my tongue.
To tell you the truth,
I've never felt better.

Monsters Deserve to Live

Will Turner

Even the monsters deserve to live.
This I can say, with absolute certainty.
For in the end, the monsters are we.

The monsters are the boys who stuff their fingers all up in vaginas without bothering to see the person that vagina is attached to.

If you think this isn't monstrous just ask the people they fingered. The people
Who will have nightmares about those fingers for the rest of their life.

Those same fingers that will one day clasp a wedding ring
because this monster-boy fell in love with a vagina-person,
and he wants to spend the rest of his earthly days with this vagina.
His vagina-person, might even have a name.

The monsters are the mothers who wait in their children's bedroom, insistent that they tell them once they've had a period. Who invade their young children's canals in search of the puberty they wish they'd had.

Monsters force bodies into pain.
Can that be said to be the real definition of a monster? Has any monster
Not caused pain, and if they were real could I meet them?

Monsters have hungry eyes for desperation. They can smell it on you, even if you're brave. The monsters will walk up to you in the hallway on summer break and say "I can see that your nipples are
Changing, they're not longer the same" and what they mean is that your nipples bottle nipples for your body is for the rest of your days, dedicated to demonstration of the ways it will change when sperm invades.

Your body is no longer your body, you've grown into future property. The future baby bottles will die attached to your real chest and you will never be free. Your body is a steak, stake, steak.

Any man in his loneliness needs to eat and oh boy you have aged.

The men are the monsters and all the women are too.
And they all deserved to live, or is possible, that none of us do.

Affirmations

Sage Thee

I go for a walk. I take the main roads. I hold words inside my mouth, and then I let them go. I try not to flinch when a car slows near me. I mostly succeed. I remind myself that I am a person, complete with teeth to bite and nails to scratch. I remind myself I no longer need to fight. I remind myself that is not my life anymore. I remind myself I am not prey nor predator nor roadkill. I remind myself, for the thousandth time, that I am safe. I remind myself that wherever I go, there I am—whatever that even means. It's still as profound to me at 27 as it was at 14. I go home. I drink a glass of water.

I am whole, I am whole, I am whole.

The Puralator

Kevin Bodniza

(Collage, Right)

American Horror Story

Marie Anne Arreola

I know my age by counting the cracks webbed across my knees—
tiny maps no one follows. Prayers split open like overripe lemons,
acid pooling along the seams. We forgot who we were,
how many gods we begged by name before the bridge buckled,
the faithful stampeding, sandal straps snapping like twigs.

I'm sorry I let the rope tied in a bow above my sister's body—
a remembrance ribbon to soften the hard facts.
It must have been torture, to watch hope swing
and still not save yourself. Sissy, I'm sorry. Your blood is syrup now.
Your needles line the bathroom counter like a miniature picket fence.

Mom— if you'd remembered the Prozac more often,
I wouldn't have switched your pills for sugar.
I thought it was funny, like planting jelly beans in the garden
to grow candy trees. It wasn't funny. It was July, and the air
burned with metal and clover. That summer, I wore a striped bathing suit.
You promised we'd ride bicycles to the beach. We never did. The sun fell—

hard and heavy— every night at the windowsill.

We counted it down like a funeral, waiting for an even date,
an odd date that felt like breathing. It wasn't your fault, Mom.
I didn't know how tremors start in the brain like radio static,
how you pressed your hands against the glass—
not to clean it, but to hold yourself inside.

We never saw a dolphin. We saw the house bleach itself raw—
mirrored floors, lemon-polished sadness.

The glitter beyond the trees? Not magic. Just taillights.
More people leaving. Now I drive to sip your grief like sacrament.

We are human because sadness is a hunger,
because a girl can turn into reeds,
still get plucked and played for someone else's song.

It was never kill people, burn shit, fuck school—
until it was. We grew up too fast— repel money, eat garbage,
fuck off before you can't anymore. Little girl like paradigm, like parasite.

Twist the finger. Pop the blister. It gets exhausting,
lying so hard your mouth tastes like pennies and old rain.

Crawl through the keyhole. Do not resuscitate.
For fear I missed the best part—the part that might have been love.

I tied your hands behind your back like a game of mercy.
Entered you, each breath hollow as a drumbeat,
thinking only of the ache I couldn't name.

I never memorized the Act of Contrition. But I cried when I lost
my yellow umbrella, watched it tumble down the street like a broken star.

And still— I keep the yellow umbrella in my mind's coat closet,
next to the rope ribbon, next to the swimsuit I outgrew
before I ever got wet. All of it waits for me: the sugar pills, the spotless floors,
the ghost of a dolphin beneath the glassy sea. Some days I forgive myself.
Some days I mistake memory for prophecy. But always,

I walk backward through the house,
saying all our names like a spell that might one day work.

House

Julian Croft



Strange House

Amber MV

She saw the house
most strange,
its number undiscernible
with change.

She knocked.

The door opened
and a voice squawked,

"Come in, granddaughter."

Inside, a fox,
a snake,
a cat,
a crow.

"We've been waiting for you from tomorrow."

And she,
exhausted by humanity,
knew where
she needed to be.

Wane

Allison Whittenberg

Everyday
She wakes up and thinks
Damn,
Another day of life

At 94, she tells her pastor
She's ready to die
So passed
Sick of this stale world

Its walls
All the floors
And, the control:
The ceilings' limit

Three Poems, Three Stanzas Each

Jem Ashton

Good Bird

Tangled between lines

I say to myself *good bird*

What was meant to be *girl*

almost became *boy*

blurred

and was *bird* instead

For my dentist, I am so

Sweet candy

you say I'm good

You can see I'm flossing

and indeed that's what this is

Flossing for you

and I will not stop my flossing

For the job you want

Dressed

alone in my apartment

Straight up and down

chest to thighs, flat

What do you want to be

and I wish I could say dentist

Would You Still Love Me If I Was a Worm?

Isaac Russo

Greg lounged in the garden outside his apartment, soaking in the sun, when he realized he could not move. The ground began to rise around him, pulling him into the earth, and his screams were muffled by mouthfuls of dirt. He often had strange dreams, but this one was reaching a level of absurdity even Kafka would be proud of. Then the birds came.

First one little robin, and then two. Greg had always loved birds, but as more and more swooped in, warbling their insistent song, he wondered if this was a nightmare after all. The robins began pecking at his skin, their kisses drawing blood in little rivulets that watered the garden, but try as he might Greg could not scream. He strained against his earthen prison, his hands and feet bound by that unseen force that guided all dreams, and squeezed his eyes shut. *Anything but the eyes*, he thought, *please*.

But when he mustered up the courage to look, he found a robin staring down at those glassy blue marbles in his skull, its head twitching back and forth as if counting calories. He tried one last time to plead with the bird, though all that came out was dirt and detritus, and in the end Greg accepted his fate and closed his eyes. If he was to be a feast for the flock, he certainly wasn't going to watch as they came back for dessert.

To his surprise, they never did. When he opened his eyes again, Greg was lying in bed next to his beautiful girlfriend, only something wasn't quite right. His vision was blurry, and he still couldn't move his hands or feet. *It must be another dream*, he reassured himself, though he could have sworn that he was awake.

Then his girlfriend Robin woke up, rolled over, and screamed.

Although he could make out little more than her silhouette against the rising sun, Greg would recognize Robin anywhere. "Greg!" She cried, "Greg! There's a damned worm in our bed!"

A worm? He wondered, his insect brain working overtime to compensate for his human thoughts. *Is she talking about me?* Greg tried to speak, but no sound came out. Worms do not have vocal cords after all, and they certainly can't speak English. When he tried to move closer, to offer what little comfort he could in his current state, Robin called for him again.

"Greg!" She cried, but then her tone softened. "Oh god, Greg. Is that you?"

And Greg knew it was true. He was a worm.

He wished he could see her face, to gauge her reaction to what was turning into the worst morning of his life, but he supposed worms don't really have eyes. Truth be told, Greg didn't know if they did or not. There was a lot he didn't know about worms, though something told him he was in for a crash course. *We can make this work*, he told himself. He only hoped Robin was telling herself the same thing.

"Oh, Greg, what have you done to yourself..." Robin asked as if she expected a reply. Greg could only squirm in response, wriggling along the bed sheets as fast as he could. He had crossed this silken landscape night after night, but this time it might as well have been a marathon. The couple had gone on the occasional charity fun run over the years, but Greg was no athletic specimen, especially now that he didn't have legs.

"Well, I guess I'll be making breakfast this morning without you then." Robin said as she scooped him up, only hesitating for a moment, and carried him out to the kitchen table. All the while, Greg wondered if that was a hint of resentment in her tone, though he had never been good at picking up on such things.

Robin made a breakfast spread fit for a king, though sadly, her prince had gone and turned into a worm. *Perhaps a kiss will cure this curse*, but Greg knew they were not there yet. *She'll get used to it eventually, we both will.*

Already, Greg was having trouble remembering his human life. He could remember having legs, but he couldn't quite recall the sensation of walking. He could even remember that he used to sing, though every song he had ever known seemed to flee his mind at the slightest beckoning. And as he watched Robin eat eggs on toast and listened to the crunch of bacon as she took a bite, he could remember that breakfast was his favorite meal. Now all he could taste was dirt.

How can I live like this? Greg asked himself, his segmented body moving in fits. *What kind of life am I going to have as little more than fish bait?* Though he did not have to wonder long, as Robin wasted little time after breakfast before going out to the garden and returning with a pot full of soil. His body began writhing in excitement, an uncontrolled instinct rising to the surface, and Greg realized he wanted nothing more than to be buried alive.

Once buried, he felt like he could finally breathe for the first time all morning. Well, he wasn't exactly sure if worms breathed at all, but he knew if he could smell anything, it would be an aroma of earth and fresh rain. It was the scent of life, and the stench of death, and Greg loved it.

He swam in the dirt all morning, doing laps around the terracotta like he used to in his grandma's pool all those years ago, and when he came up for air at last, he realized that his girlfriend was gone. *She must have gone to work*, Greg reminded himself, though it was an abstract concept for his new worm brain to comprehend.

She came back after a while, her silhouette moving through the twilight house before dropping some eggshells and apple slices in his pot. He was unsure at first, but the eggshells were excellent. Greg didn't know if he had a tongue anymore, but he liked it nonetheless, and while the apples were a bit too firm for his liking, they softened to a perfect medium rare before too long.

That night, Robin came to his pot and whispered sweet nothings. Greg knew this must be hard for her; it was an adjustment for him as well, but at least they still had each other . . . segments and all. It was strange, however, when his girlfriend went to bed and shut the door. Without him.

He had laid down next to this gorgeous girl every night for as long as his little worm brain could remember, falling asleep to the steady drumbeat of her heart, and now all he had was the cold sound of silence. But just as he was coming to this realization, the bedroom door swung open and Robin came to his rescue. She placed him on the bedside table, as close to her as she could without getting dirt in the sheets, and a single tear watered the soil. There would have been more, but Robin rolled over to water the silk instead, and Greg did not have tear ducts no matter how hard he tried.

In the morning, Robin awoke to their alarm and reached across the bed. Then she remembered that her boyfriend was now a worm, and reached for the nightstand instead. "Come now, Greg." She called, her voice still heavy with sleep. "My mother always said you would grow to be a lazy good for nothing snake, don't let her be right."

Greg knew she was teasing, but if there was one thing that stayed true no matter what shape his body was in, it was his disdain for her mother. *I guess she was almost right*, he laughed to himself as he wriggled from his dirt nap and greeted the woman he loved. Robin had always looked best to him in the morning, and today was no different. Her silhouette was literally beaming, backlit by the rising sun and glowing with the hope of a new day.

Greg had hoped in secret that he would wake up in bed and all of this would've been a bad dream, but his nightmares had always been of the recurring variety. He couldn't even remember what was so great about being human, though all he wanted was to be able to hold his girlfriend again, to kiss her under the moon and sing to her under the stars, and he could do none of that as a worm.

Robin must have had the same idea, because instead of bringing eggshells and apples home after work like last time, she brought a witch. At least that is what Greg assumed when a hunched silhouette wandered into their bedroom that evening and began poking at his dirt with fingernails that would have taken years to cultivate. There must not have been anything she could do, though, because the woman came and went, and he was still a worm.

That night, Greg caught his girlfriend crying for the second time.

He thought about going to her, inch by inch, but knew deep down that a slimy embrace would only make matters worse. *Can a woman really love a worm?* The question haunted what little sleep he got that night, pecking at him until he bled like the robins in his dreams. He didn't know the answer.

When he awoke, Robin was already gone. No goodbye, no eggshells for breakfast, nothing. Greg wasn't even sure he could blame her; god only knew what he would do in her situation, but it still hurt him in whatever passes for the heart of a worm. He spent the day crawling around in the dirt, but he could not escape the feeling that his terracotta walls were closing in on him.

Robin returned that evening with another guest, though this one was no witch. Greg could not be sure of what he was hearing, on account of worms not really having ears, but he would have sworn that was a man's voice on the other side of their bedroom door. He had never wanted to be back in the living room more in his entire life, but all he could do was sit and wonder what jokes this guy was telling his girlfriend to make her laugh so hard. It had been months, probably years, since she had laughed like that for him, and he wasn't sure she ever would again. Sleep was the only escape, and he let it take him willingly.

But the next morning, Greg awoke from wherever worms go when they dream to discover that his pot had been moved back out to the kitchen counter. *I guess I got my wish*, he thought, *back out in the open like a common houseplant*. He wanted to be bitter, to be angry at Robin for distancing herself both emotionally and physically, but for some reason, all he could think was that the humidity was better in the kitchen anyway. His dirt had been growing dry, and in that moment it seemed a bigger problem than his crumbling relationship.

Robin emerged from the bedroom before long, foregoing breakfast in favor of coffee, and rushed out the door without even a look in his direction. Greg knew he should be offended, but found he only wished she had fed him before she left. *Oh god, I'm no boyfriend*. The realization hit him like a bird in the eye, and if worms had stomachs, his would have been twisting in knots. *I'm a pet*. In what would end up being his last lucid thought, Greg knew what he had to do.

He had to leave.

It was not fair to Robin. He could not put the woman he loved through a life of caring for something that can't even love her back, she'd be better off getting a cat. This burden was not hers to bear, and she shouldn't have to choose between love and happiness. No one should.

And with that, Greg crawled out of the terracotta pot, across the marble counters, and towards the door. He would've sworn the apartment had doubled in size since they signed the lease, but it was probably a matter of perspective. To a worm, he supposed everything was a matter of perspective. But when he reached the back door, he realized he had no way of opening it. Not much was worm-friendly in a world built by humans unconcerned with the life teeming under their feet, but the wild never seemed to mind.

Greg squeezed his long body under the door, segment by segment, until he reached the porch outside. From there, it was a small hike to the garden beyond, and he left all his problems on the pavement as he dove into that fresh, soft soil. He had never known what he was missing, cut off from Mother Nature by terracotta and forced to live in dead earth, but there was one thing Greg knew for sure.

He never wanted to go back.

Robin had spent all day running around town, just as she had the day before and the day before that, searching for anyone who could help her boyfriend. The first woman was a charlatan, and she was pretty sure the man yesterday was only interested in sleeping with her, but this one was promising. The savior of the day was a local psychic with rave reviews online, and when Robin met her, there was a definite energy in the room. She wasn't quite sure what it was, but five-star reviews on the internet never lied, and right now she needed a little hope.

They arrived at the apartment with what looked like the makings of an exorcism, incense and all. "You can just leave it all on the counter," Robin told the psychic. "Greg is just over here in the pot, I wanted him to get some sun."

It was strange. Usually, Greg was waiting for her when she got home, twisting and turning with anticipation, but today it was an empty bed of dirt. Robin didn't think much of it, though, and began to gently agitate the soil in search of her boyfriend. "Don't be afraid, love." She called softly. "I think this one is really going to help." It was only then that she noticed how dry the dirt had become; perhaps she should start misting it every morning, if it came to that. Then she had an even more startling realization.

The pot was empty.

Robin didn't even hear herself scream until the terracotta crashed to the floor. "Are you alright?" The psychic asked, though one did not need psychic powers to see that the answer was no.

“He’s not here,” Robin said. “Greg is gone.” Though something told her he had been gone for a while.

They searched the house and found nothing, but the backyard was a different story. There, on the pavement leading to the garden, lay a small pink worm dried up in the sun.

“Is that him, Miss Robin?” The psychic asked.

Robin began to cry. Not because she had lost her boyfriend, but because she couldn’t even be sure if it was him. She thought she could love a worm, yet couldn’t even recognize him when it mattered the most.

She still loved him, didn’t she?

Hide Seek

Kevin Bodniza



Anole

Chris Topah

Flare dewlaps twice at the birds
Not sure that I know if it works
(she'll come back to me)
Green anole you were kind to me

Head with a tilt to scan
Eyes on a ceiling fan
Await awake
You feel no shame

And by glass pane
Drafted theory of pain
I learned what hurts the most
God please don't be a ghost

//
All the pennies that got sent
Was it time well spent
I never knew
You like how I do

The last words that she spoke
Oh father i'm the joke
I share your pain
We don't eat the same

On a slow ride fleeting
As eyes drip dry
God I beg you please
I need that same release

//
Flock I hear soars by
I wonder if they cry too
Like I do too
Clipped wings from me to you

Baby bird don't fly
You left me with a different kind of ghost
Not the one I need the most



Scan the code to listen to it
on our website!
(slcc.edu/cwc/what-a-time-to-be-alive)

Love Lost Tastes

Amber Pollard

How do you
Maneuver through
Loneliness

Heavy on the chest
Just out of view
Of you

And me in the way

How do I make love stay

With me

only me

Why can't it just be
The way it was
I your dove and
You my mountain

Bring me back to the fountain
Where love poured in waves
And showed me ways
To live for things

Made new again
By fire's cleanse
And magic beams
From your face
and all that glitter

Love lost tastes
So fucking bitter

My Heart is a Bird Made of Embers

Will Turner

My heart is a bird made of embers.

It can fly, leave, choose a new home for itself - and come home to sleep in my chest.

Wild and autonomous.

Feathers and fire.

The core burns, in the peaceful way embers do.

The feathers are pearl, soft and mixed black with soot.

It has lovely black bird eyes, and if you care to look deeply into them, you might see the embers glowing deep inside - a pin prick you might mistake for a reflection of the light.

It breathes in, ruffles its feathers, in doing so, exposes the burning, glowing coals, which fall between the vanes like rain.

It sighs and settles in - smoke billows from the plumage like a fireplace - for it is after all, the hearth of my body.

Bird Blood

Shannon Giambanco

Teeth chattering against the unforgiving whip of the morning wind
the weight on your shoulders is heavier today
the birds are back and they've missed their perch
atop your shoulders and the frozen feed in your hair
like pebbles lodged in the beak of the bird
swallowing it whole
shattering on the way down
like an icicle breaking
into a thousand shards
ripping, shredding, spraying—

The blood of the bird is like a shawl
of dense, dark warmth embracing you
in the bosom of death
the stench so foul yet the promise sweet.

You've killed enough souls and birds alike Spring
choose your prey
and move on.

Feathers

Aditya Kumar



Aves Magnae

Kevin Holdsworth

I like big birds, and I cannot lie. Those little gray birds must deny.

When big birds appear, they don't require a lot of trouble to observe, and often, too, they soar with the chance of serendipity and surprise.

There may be more pelicans than Democrats in Piute County, Utah. In some ways, this maybe a good thing, but don't misunderstand me. We could use a few more of both. Pelicans can often be seen at Piute and Otter Creek Reservoirs, and they can always be seen at Fish Lake or Johnson Valley in adjoining Sevier County, and they make the rounds between these places.

They appear as white streaks in the local reservoir. When a scoop is guarding babies, they stretch out mid-water in hundred-yard lines. When the breeze is up, they will gather in the calmer inlet shallows, where they also have good view of predators who might be stalking on the mudflats. Let's face it, the biggest surprise of pelicans is what amazing flyers and gliders they are. With their ungainly necks and overdone bills, it just doesn't seem they could soar so well. But they do.

Sometimes it's possible to see them circling, dozens at a time, and gaining sky together, silhouetted against the snow-capped Tushar Mountains or gray foothills. Sometimes a squadron can be seen flying low along the Sevier River above the pastures, working with a south or north wind.

Golden eagles are most often seen by the roadside, waiting for the car to pass so they can get back to the roadkill. In wintertime, bald eagles reside, and a few cottonwoods are money-in-the-bank roosts. Osprey cannot be missed at Fish Lake, and when the fishing is poor, the osprey watching is not.

Owls can be heard every evening in the tall firs at the old courthouse. They are great horned owls, common and large, like cats with wings. Sometimes they show themselves at dusk hoot-hooting before hunts. The bases of a couple of elm trees are rich in owl pellets: egg-shaped gray collections of rodent parts that the owls regurgitate for show and tell.

Hats off to hawks, and the bigger the better. A ferruginous hawk has been roosting in the trees and hanging out around the yard for the last two years. A pair of Cooper's hawks and three babies have been around, too, nesting in a maple across the lane.

It was when looking for pelicans that Jennifer and I observed a new guest. The first one we saw was on a cliff above the reservoir. "That looks like a mighty big eagle," I said. We got out the binocs, could see the massive shoulders and then that ugly-ass head. "That is not an eagle. It's got to be a condor."

How was this possible?

It's possible by virtue of one of the more successful and improbable reintroductions. By 1987, California condors were extinct in the wild. Perhaps 27 individuals were alive, period. Breeding and rearing challenges include: they lay one egg per attempt, take 6-8 years to reach maturity, and have a lifespan up to 60 years. Condors were reintroduced in the Vermillion Cliffs and Zion Canyon in the mid-nineties. While not exactly next door—Zion is a hundred miles away, Vermillion half again as much—but the birds can easily cover a lot of distance in a day. Evidently they have.

With this first sighting, which really did seem miraculous, it was possible to say, "Welcome back, *Gymnogyps californianus*. Come on down!"

Piute, though arid, is not red rock canyons country, it's more like the Great Basin and montane, and there's a lot of breccia cliffs. This might be the secret: there's a lack of human population pressure here, and a lot of truly inaccessible places.

One time our son Chris was visiting, and we had told him about the condors, and like sleight-of-hand when we drove around, one appeared, sitting on a gray sage hillside, over by the reservoir. For a while, it seemed Jennifer and I would see one every time we were out and about. We'd see them by water and up in the Tushar cliffs. We even saw one roosting in a tree on a chilly winter day in Garfield and another time on a power pole near the entrance to a national park.

The first time I saw all three of them, mama, papa and baby, it was while driving to town alone. I pulled off the road and just watched them. The young one was practicing flying skills, doing little loop-di-loops, pulling in the wings and diving, then pulling up, and circling back. Big Daddy, especially, had the white bits underneath the wings, and Big Mama, circling, seemed to be keeping them together. Call it projection, but that's what I saw: a thaumaturgic family.

Jennifer and I have kept it our little secret. If we told the natural resource authorities, what purpose would it serve? They haven't the staff or inclination to do anything about it. Much more important, it would be unwise to advertise the presence of such a bird locally. Some moron yahoo would use it for target practice, would try to kill a condor for no good reason other than that it has the word California in its name or that it is beloved by bicoastal elites. In addition to moron yahoos, the condors face danger from avian flu and lead hunting shot. Hopefully, they will thrive, but there is no guarantee.

It is good to think of these magnificent creatures, at the same time both homely and beautiful, the biggest of the big birds. May they flourish and spread their dark wings to many more places.

Endless

Annie Michael Lim



Inclusion

MK Punky

Soaking in sunlight
sitting
thinking
doing the opposite of nothing
you're serenaded by an avian chorus
manifesting diversities
we argumentative humans
find contentious

The finch and the wren and the red-whiskered bulbul
counterpoint the chickadee's melody
and in one magnificently accidental moment
for surely it must be an accident
they harmonize
they make a song
they can do more than fly
they can improvise an invention plucked from
Beethoven's imagination
they can create something
but only together

To your observant dog's consternation
you wonder aloud
if the birds believe they are
correcting historical wrongs
or if they're merely too unevolved
to realize they're doing
the opposite of nothing

Waterworn Jem Ashton

&

Lake Effect 1, 2, & 3 (Photos)

The brine flies scatter across the sand, making space for you. They let you into the water. Let your heavy footsteps sink into the wet ground. This cloud of flies sounds like waves. The waves are quiet. This body of water pushes you back towards land. Its force moves up your legs as you make your way slowly into its depth. The shallowness is astounding.

There's an expanse ahead of you. Depending on the direction, it's either literal or metaphorical. An expanse of water leading your eye beyond the horizon into the sky. Or the expanse of industry. A refinery that reminds you of the human reach - incalculably dangerous and infinite. Both of these infinities are embodied by you - a body of nature, a product of humankind. You're right to want to be there and the water is right to reject you.

You're home - this is where you came from - but you don't belong here.

It's only quiet because you haven't made a noise. It's in your nature to be a disturbance - why don't you say something? Are you saving your voice to disturb the quiet somewhere else?



Lake Effect 2



Lake Effect 1



Lake Effect 3

*** dreaming**
Andrea Canedo

often, i see the sun setting beyond the muhheakantuck (river that flows both ways;
huds*n) and i confuse these waters for a sunset behind pia'pa (big water; great salt lake)

maybe someday i'll find the words to describe what it feels like to be so deeply in love with
a place

i worry about moving back because the drying lake is poisoning the air,
is killing people

[i give thanks every day for the clean air i've had access to]

but the drying lake is an ecological crisis,
is a cultural crisis

and yes, these crises are colonial,

and yes, they are killing us all

America: 2025

F. Patrick Stehno

After reading Allen Ginsberg

- America: What have you become?
 What are you about to leave behind?
 What will you take with you?
- America: Your skies are no longer blue,
 no longer havens for birds in flight,
 children's kites, dreams of drifting clouds.
 Where is your love of life?
- America: You were the dream,
 the path to forever, to moral superiority;
 a model for the just and forthright; now
 even your religious have denied their Savior.
 Why have your morals evaporated?
- America: You were once a haven for all religions,
 and for those who do not believe.
 Why now do you thunder violently
 for forced procurement of a Christian
 Fundamentalist creed?
- America: You were once open to freedom of choice,
 the right to a personal belief; unmolested;
 Don't Tread On Me; always room for disagreement.
 Why now force every thinker into a pigeonhole:
 red or blue, young or old, male or female,
 an outsider, shunned, or a member of the tribe?
- America: You once professed non-violence,
 permanent peace, love for all humankind,
 promoting the Statue of Liberty
 to promote our welcoming nature.
 Why do you now deploy razor wire
 along your southern rivers,
 build ugly walls along our desert borders,
 threatening anyone not white and delightful?

America: You were once ruled by the wise, the educated,
the statesman legislating for the best, for us,
or all of us, worthy or not.
Why have you elected buffoons
enticed by high-school antics,
a love of chaos, at any cost,
proclaiming democracy, law and order, to be
some evil critical socialist liberal Commie plot
to radicalize children before sending them
into homosexual transgender conversion camps
or selling innocent children into the sex trade
or forcing all single pregnant women
to endure an abortion, just for the fun of it?

America: Your politicians support capitalist lobbyists,
reduce their taxes, then pocket cash
earmarked for their own continued reelection.
Why do we allow them to make such mockery
of everything we, as a nation,
have accomplished since our inception?

America: My America ...
why do you long to go back
to some shame filled past
already struggled through,
to our self-declared Manifest Destiny,
to when we began our theft
of native lands, native culture,
back to the despicable time
when we enslaved others
to do our most back breaking work?

America: Why do you close your eyes
to the evils we perpetrate on our environment,
on other human beings,
on other animals and plants wound up,
bound up, within the web of life
we call our home, but disrespect so?

America: Why must it all come to an end?

CARTER (Or, 'I am American')

WHY

Find me the emoticon for that!

r.p. singletary

RE:

<https://connectesaucanada.com/2025/01/hommage-au-president-jimmy-carter/>

ATLANTA (Jan. 6th, 2025) – *To transport by cart or wagon.* But, last evening I went by the friend of a car. Alas, by the *car of a friend* who did not have time to run in, gently sign scan empty all items from her pockets purse too, you know the routine of our younger generation, and so I but not alone, would pass along her respects to a 100-year-old former President whose remains, reposed–

In the center bearing his name, what the internet reminds me employs some 3,000 people worldwide in that bold endeavor of mission

Waging Peace, Fighting Disease & Building Hope

from its website >>> <https://www.cartercenter.org/>.

It was a cold night by our city standards. Rainy, too. As-if what God ordered, humbling our steps. Walk crisply where you might otherwise stumble. Two nuns – double blessedness! – took their time, the small-talk of pleasantries with security, rosary beads counted up as items to be made pocketless, and a Secret Service officer whose break-hour overtime, the look of *will y'all pls hurry up, la-dies*.

“I think. I got. In the wrong. Line.” Growing gruffer.

“Yeah, you did.” An eye roll, then she’s off her shift.

I asked the other officer, *all good*, he glanced at me as-if. I swept past the long habit of other old ritual. All honor time in our own ways, right? **My hands spoke, holding my token of remembrance I am American**, I felt arrested—reverential, my friend *without parking allowed* circling the block, this city of *Resurgens* motto:

rebuilt from ashes after a war
we all ~~profit from~~ product of
the business
a
city
too busy to
hate
?

some stopping to honoring its, their state's only president thus-far, *no-stopping allowed-on-site*, and I reflected about what I'd read the prior hour online, searching for how-to-get-there, a long-line's view *the Center's* webcam-in-real-time, MARTA trains run nonstop 24 since Sat. 'til 6 a. m. Tues.,

not free mind you - we all have our
bills to pay

(& collect-);

and, but a *FREE* bus shuttle to Center from the MLK train station – near his and her resting places, the **Kings on Auburn Ave.**,

near the cemetery where
in-her-way Margaret Mitchell, MAYOR Maynard Jackson, golfer Bobby Jones, country Kenny Rogers?, all put to their own

(that bus shuttle free, run every 2-3 mins., also 24 hours yeah 'round-the-clock, the hands not stoppin' for us neither). I texted, called friends, neighbors, *no one: the energy to much more*—, downpour late a Sunday after two weeks of break, comin' cold, a real Southern snow forecast for later in the coming week, fatigue from all the festive holidays, rich with second helpings in this land of plenty for most. **AND ON THE EVE of bowing Epiphany FEAST-Day-of-3-KIND KINGS-Wise-Men-PEOPLE!-Magi- People!, January the Sixth, yet another thing (elephant in the room) we are reluctant to digest, despite the centuries' use, millennia**

I am not political. I am spiritual. At times. I think. Less do I act: I benefit from privilege. All kinds, much of which I have only, have just to understand. **Find me the emoticon for that!** Living in America. Born in America. Working in America. To die the same— Being in America. 2025! What a year: and this man a century ago, what change he saw the life of one, coupled
<love> <hate> #whatcandestroy:

- 9/11, HIV/AIDS, COVID
- World wars and lasting famines
- Civil rights without social justice
- A.I.'s better tech but-put to what use—

I zoomed through the permanent exhibitions we visitors were quietly guided through before landing in the room of repose, the honor guard (I think it's called that here; I recalled Queen Elizabeth II's going-home; some customs transcend modern tradition) of our own military branches, the tree supporting us and us we hope them, adequately fund the Veterans Administration!, *re-right* past wrongs. A crown in a cabinet caught

my eye. The jewel of Saint Stephen, a reproduction, yes with a tie to Jimmy Carter...you can type it up.

My friend said to call when I was done. There was a separate exit from the entrance, I had brought a small American flag and carried **him** throughout the evening, was told I could deposit it at the end of the long walk by the main sign where flowers were being left. FEARED ruining my phone, a final snap amid more heaven-drops. The light crowd, several hundred inside, but never really a waiting line, I wondered if the sisters had ever refastened all their beads and snaps; not being a Roman, I couldn't be bothered to consider.

The potholes bounced us home. First-world problems in a sleepy town for a moment. A few traffic lights blinking in the weather, a common occurrence, but (please see above)

How good do we have it? When we learn how to complain.

Honor service. That. Is a road less-traveled, but deserving of more foot-wear. I wrote two plays about today's Epiphany. A third in the works. I am not political.

I am writerly. Overly so,
In love with how we communicate
or fail to

That interview with Playboy?

The balls to let-all-hang-out

**Leader-
shi(f)t**

Post-Pandemic (corona *uncrowned* this time): A new-year's revolution/Resolution made manifest in our (hu)manhood made more peaceful the change of a smarter people in more-common::

What are you bothered by, enough to change

yourself

1. To be transported
2. To be moved,
3. CARTED!

to some better place, what right here, now, for all better with less regret when our day
like this-here, is ours
come. #

21st Century Sonnet

Rachel White

The twin towers collapsed—and with a shot
a terrifying new millennium
burned into being. Whatever we thought
was likely incorrect—maybe someone
deep in the ossuary of the state
knows the whole truth. They'll take it to the grave.
Foreshadowing our still unfolding fate,
ashes of the deposed engulfed the brave.
We saw dark shapes falling, larger than birds
but not flying. Staring with open mouths
at something horrific, there are no words—
inept gestures, analogy and rhymes
can't approach that white heat—only our myths,
the slant of indirection, and our dreams.

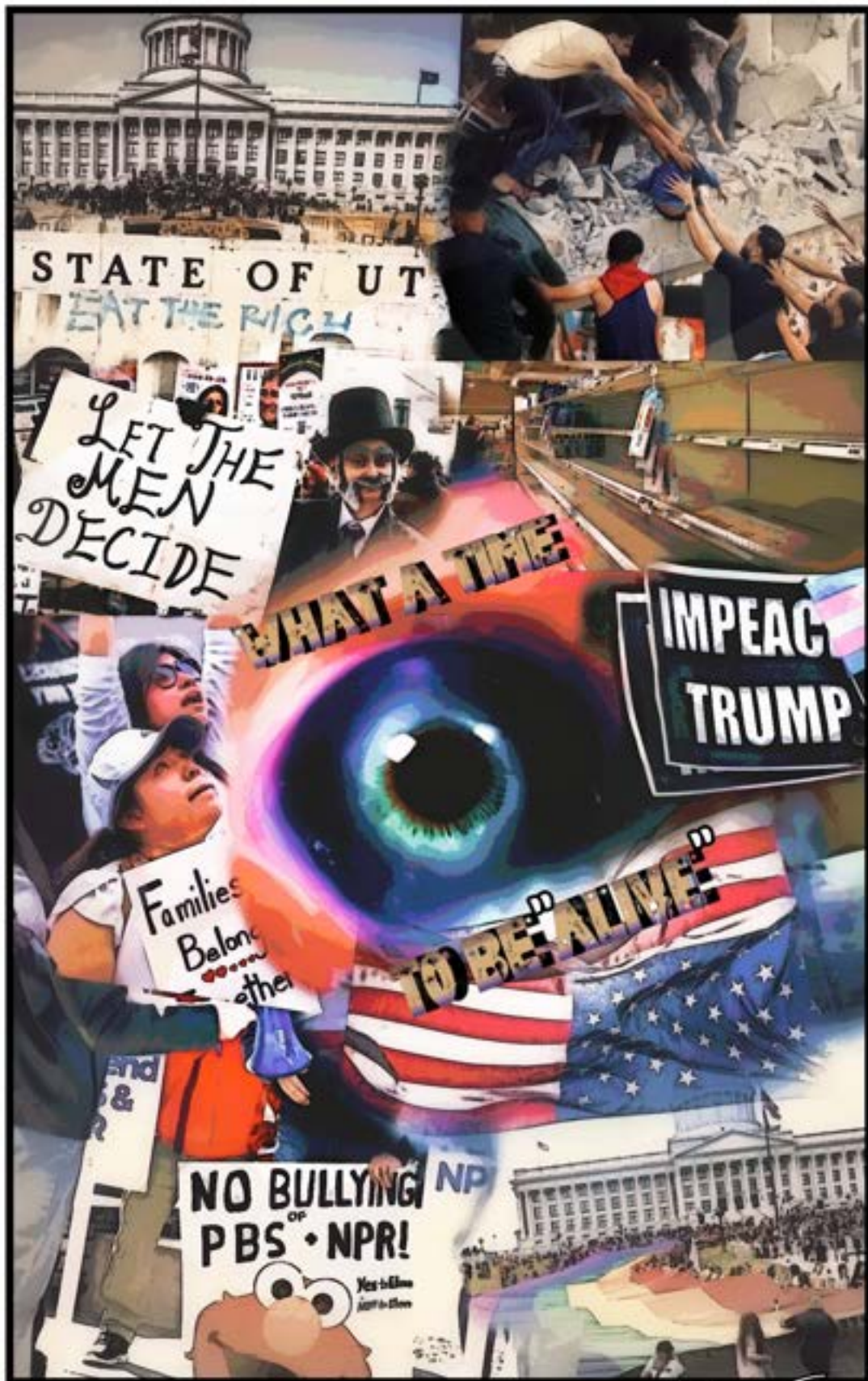
Resistance in Technicolor

Jenna Cook

Resistance in Technicolor is a collage composed entirely of images sourced from real news articles that reflect the social and political turbulence of our time. Distilled into a more ironic, digestible form via digital art. Each element captures a moment in history: voices raised, power challenged, contradictions exposed. In a landscape of grayscale headlines and numbing repetition, color becomes clarity. Resistance becomes survival.

This piece is for those who refuse to look away. For those who speak, shout, or simply question. For anyone still trying to make meaning through the mess.

(Collage, Right)



Jenna Keesch



Can't We All Just Get Along??

Jaggy Mones

(Collage, Left)

Over 2,000 children still remain caged at the U.S.-Mexico border. These children will grow up not with their parents who fled thousands of miles to save their lives but, within the foster care system. The U.S. is unnecessarily orphaning children. The cruel finish line for asylum seekers forced to beg at these walls, a tangible reminder of failed U.S. foreign policy. This administration is a uniquely cruel one. It is one that profiteers off of the exploitation and misery of others.

Because of the Difference between YOU and ME
I Decide who is Caged and who is Free!
Uproot the Community!
Jail another Refugee!
All in the name of "Democracy!"
Plead Guilty then, Plead Forgiveness
But Wait!...
Where's the Witness?
Jailing people!
It's GOOD for Business!
Donald Trump, Jeff Sessions, Mike Pence
Separating Families and Building a Fence,
Doesn't make any Sense!
"I Really Don't Care, Do U?"
Go ahead! Sue!
For the Law puts ME above YOU!
FUCK YOU
It's a BABY!
Where's your Decency?
Don't you see...
The Hypocrisy In this Autocracy...?

Children of the Revolution

Jaggy Mones

(Triple Layer Photography Based Handcut Collage, Right)

The mass shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School left 17 people dead. It was one of 323 mass shootings within the U.S. that year. Student protests kept this particular shooting relevant in the public eye long enough to revisit gun control legislation but, alas the Trump administration (sponsored by the NRA) did nothing beyond proposing the arming of school teachers.

Kids!
Don't buy into the bullshit.
Get out!
Go Explore!
Learn something about this world!
Think for yourself.
Question...Everything!
Live for today,
Tomorrow is not guaranteed
...nothing is.
Only change,
So be that change.
Change the world,
make it better.
Try not...Do!
I believe in YOU
Poem for a future generation



Fierce

Amie Schaeffer

For the Parkland, Florida students

This day will never again be about chocolates and candy hearts
If only it could be about a cherub shooting arrows
But instead, it will be about pops and cracks
And watching friends leave the earth

A girl with a shaved head is
Crying out, calling out
With a rawness we hope we will never know
She's coming for you
And man, is she fierce

I hope I'm not leading my children the way of the lamb
If this beast ever comes barreling
If my community is the next to be struck down
At least I know I can count on your thoughts and prayers

But the fight will continue about red versus blue
And left versus right
While a vile cycle of complacency spins on
With bullshit clichés of "Guns don't kill people, people kill people"
And "Now is not the time to talk about gun control"

An army of students
Burdened with a role for which they never auditioned
But like warriors they take it on

They
Are
Fierce

For Now

Joe Roberts

The bones of each social moment rattle,
betraying that we're all finding our lives
mostly unbearable, and we're held together
with flimsy tendons of a delusion

that each day's misery, singular and global,
is liminal. But the temporary days drag
infinitely, cobbled at their seams
with somber sunsets and anxious dawns.

Put to anonymous vote, would life go on?
Could optimism prevail over oblivion?
Or would we broker peace with our families,
our enemies, and forgive even ourselves

long enough for one harmonious evening,
the same for everyone, then fall asleep
and not wake up? Would morning find us
stone in our beds, a tranquil race for once?

Or would we wake to find sunrise humiliating
evidence we somehow desire this carrying on?

and yet, hope is

Sydney (Mix) Olson

today, i wake and there is fear in my heart.
it lingers like a ghost,
creeping behind me from dawn to dusk
and dusk to dawn.
it is quiet and cold and impossible to ignore.
there is fear in my heart.
and yet.

and yet. and yet. and yet.

hope is a dandelion there on the sidewalk,
thread-thin roots cracked through urban concrete,
inviting bees and beetles and butterflies to kiss the air.
it is a twelve-year-old whose crooked fingers wrap around the stem and pull,
filling the city with weeds in one wishful, wistful breath.

hope is a rocking chair on a covered porch in the middle of spring rain.
it is yellow, rubber boots kicking through dirty puddles
and paper boats drifting down roadside gutters.
it is a lungful of petrichor when the storm finally lulls itself to sleep.

hope is a warm cup of tea pressed into my hands,
a well-worn book and a feather-soft bed to sink into.
it is the silent company of another,
the tender quiet that settles over us both like a blanket.

hope is my hand holding yours.

my hair is matted with blood,
but from her side of the fence, our neighbor holds up her hose.
in a chilling spray that staves away the summer heat,
the red washes out like it was never there.

my nails are caked with dirt
but our harvest feeds our family of four for a week,
the sweat and tears of fertilizer yielding the biggest crops
this garden has ever seen.

my teeth have cracked on the stones of regret,
all "*should have*" and "*what if,*"
but a stranger guides my shaking hands to cut my food into tinier pieces,
all "*am here*" and "*will do.*"

there is fear in my heart.

tomorrow is not promised,
and peace is not guaranteed.
a fight is to be had and my knuckles are already bruised.
my feet are blistered from walking and i am too tired to carry on alone.

my neighbor lifts my chin, and a stranger guides my legs.
the harvest makes a hearty soup for us all.

there is fear in my heart,
and yet
hope is growing there, too.

Thirst

Echo Durst

You didn't want to touch me, but you still wanted to see me. We walked around Liberty Park 6 feet from each other, masked. I couldn't tell if you were looking at me with the same affection and thirst that I was at you, so I imagined it on the paisley of your bandana creased around your nose and mouth.

I brought chalk, so we started covering the pavement in nonsense. I ran out of subject matter, so I began doodling lines and shapes like stained glass windows. You mirrored me, we covered the ground and base of a statue with windows into our own kind of cathedral, our own holy ground as a product of our piety, our pandemic purity.

Usually, you would share your Hydro Flask with me, but I knew I'd have to wait.

I also knew that sprinklers would come on before our masks came off.

Liberty in the Snow

Scott Fineshriber

(Photography, Right)



Ken Sanders Rare Books

Joe Roberts

Salt Lake City, 2023

Snow strained the sky too late to keep
industry's exhalations

from abridging our days, and the bookstore

perched like a pale crustacean in a nest of cranes
erasing who we used to be. Human beings

with nowhere to go lined the sidewalk in quilts,
fuming moist despair into the clouds.

You had to wonder who all the new condos were built for.

Meanwhile, the dying store offered a generous wall
of free books to everyone.

Everything must go.

What was left got kicked down the street,
a hermit crab shucked from its shell.

Progress, some might say, but why is the price
always our city's heart and brain?

It Sinks Like This

Cecil Smith

the screaming city goddamn goddamn
a man
howls at me through his bleeding gums and missing teeth
the thirst, the hunger and the foothold trap that's caught his leg
he asks me for the meat stuck between my canines and incisors
he asks to see my pussy
with a desperate, primordial rage
cacophony upon cacophony
goddam goddamn

april00lreverse

Uintah Gearhart

This track is meant to be a frenetic tapestry of radio static, commercial breaks, and fragmented melodies. I wanted to capture the dissonance and urgency of life in a fast-paced city, like flipping through stations in a cab stuck in gridlock and the commotion of a busy transit system. Layer upon layer, you can hear samples of desire, distraction, and disconnection into a chaotic but strangely familiar rhythm. The ads and sudden tonal shifts reflect the noise of modern existence—where attention is currency, and identity is often spliced between what’s sold and what’s sought. It’s a sonic portrait of the human condition under pressure: fragmented, overstimulated, but always searching for a signal in the static. What a time to be alive.



Scan the code to listen to it
on our website!
(slcc.edu/cwc/what-a-time-to-be-alive)

What a Time to be Unalive

Jonathan Reddoch

“Careful, careful,” the foreman urged, as the last heavy stone was mechanically dislodged over the sunken cavern, revealing a veritable treasure trove of priceless relics lost in time.

Artemis ran down the deteriorating spiral staircase to the recently uncovered site, buried under rubble for five decades. She snapped pics of tarnished candelabras and tapestry fragments commemorating ancient bloodbaths.

“This is going to slow down metro construction, isn’t it?” the foreman sighed.

Artemis’ fingers explored a curved stone table, stained in scarlet. “It was cut without hands from the Carpathian Mountains, dragged a hundred miles to this underground chamber. Its sinister purpose is largely unknown, but I have my theories.”

“So what? Tell us,” the foreman quipped, as the sweaty blue collars gathered around the mysterious centerpiece, “We got nothing but free time on our hands now.” The academic translated a phrase carved into a stone archway, “The faithless are sacrificed to feed the faithful.”

“Sorry I asked. Speaking of which,” he turned to his crew, “Lunch!” The construction workers took off to rejoin society in the sunlight above.

Artemis remained behind to investigate. Everything would need to be meticulously catalogued and documented. Unearthing a discovery this significant would assure Artemis’ PhD thesis on the *Crumbling Eastern European Subterranean Infrastructure Concealed by WWII-Era Bombing Ruble* would be published.

The stone table was quite simple, with runes carved into the sides. It would perhaps serve as the key piece of a roving museum collection. She would of course oversee the traveling collection, a potentially lucrative endeavor.

As she fantasized of riches and fame, maybe a holster and leather whip at her hip, an internal gust blew open a gate, hidden in the darkest recesses of the fissure. As a death’s head moth to the whispering fire, she was drawn through the antechamber into a bedchamber, rife with the stench of dead men’s hollowed out forms.

Layered like a cake of hate and violence, scattered remains, mainly foot soldiers from various regimes, such as the Ottoman Empire, tell the long tale of aristocracy, tyranny, and fascism. *The consequences of conquest.* Atop the piles, she recognized the SS insignia emblazoned into their dusty shredded uniforms. Their miserable tortured faces were shrunk as if their rotting skin were sucked inside them through their sunken eyeballs.

A whisper, a promise lured her past this throbbing monument to mortality and tranny.

There it was, like white crystal shining in the deep.

She found the centerpiece of her collection: a magnificent ebony casket, inlaid with intricately carved sigils. While everything else was cloaked in dust, the coffin was pristine, preserved, patient.

She reached out to it, felt it's fine wooden material, pulsing like a jugular vein. "How long have you been buried?"

The lid slid open, groaning like old gears, slowly letting out the darkness.

Her lamp dimmed, recoiling from the shadows invading the boudoir.

The world dissolved entirely. Only its eyes remained, its ruby red eyes, swirling into her own, overwhelming all her senses at once.

As his will overtook hers, she forgot entirely what it was to be alive, how to human, how to breath, what it means to yearn, to be free, separate.

In an instant infinity, they exchanged vows, lusts, passions. She lived a thousand vicarious lifetimes.

He lived one more through her. A modern life, a mortal one.

They would speak, but not with mere words; she felt his voice inside her: judgment, disdain, contempt. She was a collector of antiquities, an arbiter of history. He saw her ambitions, her work, her thesis. Her theories were superficial.

She had learned much but understood little.

She knew the dates, the events, the names of the warlords. But she never heard the screams, witnessed the wastelands, tasted the air thick with blood, smelled the souls devoured by brutality.

She was feeling it now, experiencing his centuries of heartache. He fought to defend his homeland. But the victories never lasted. He had grown tired, war weary. When the airborne bombs fell, he embraced the darkness, rather than face new levels of post-modern wrath.

"I see now," she wept.

And then he saw it, felt it: he recognized the contemporary world that she resided in. He knew the signs, the looming darkness.

"It's all the same," he whispered, watching the world she came from turning into flame and ash. "Nothing has changed."

The earth shook. The altar cracked, split in twain. The walls groaned under the pressure.

Artemis was released from his hold. She ran haphazardly toward the entrance. She stopped short of crawling out into the sunshine.

He stepped out of his sarcophagus. His wrinkled blood-starved form welcomed the churning chaos.

The archway crumbled, dust rose and hovered like Will o' the wisp. Mythical flame rose from the depths of terra's core, cracking stone asunder.

A great fissure opened.

She longed to scream his name, though she did not know it. Like his life and deeds, and misdeeds, it remained hidden in eternity.

She closed her eyes, and when the tumult finally finished its eruption, she opened them, revealing nothing but rock and cinder. The crooked maw had sealed shut. The earth swallowed the chamber, pulling its dark denizen far from humanity's hostile reach.

Peppers

Alana Boscan

(Painting, Right)

An urban farmer in Utah holding fresh-picked peppers to be eaten. Farming tells the story of how humans interact with and are nature. Farming is a pinnacle point for humans, impacting our relationship to the environment, food, politics, power, identity, inequality, and each other. Sustainable urban farming is a reclamation of our human history, promoting community connection, equality, and food access.



Caught Falling

MK Punky

Historians examining the disparate causes of my obvious decline
picking through hirsute clues
like a dog teething fleas beneath a shriveled scrotum
will conclude scholastically what we've all known intuitively
this person once destined for greatness
bursting with ambitions too insistent for one lifetime
learned too late the example of Rome
heedless of barbarians clothed in priestly vestments
oblivious to corrosive greed
frightened by his crumbling castle

They'll say the end was inevitable
all lives unfurl in circular cycles
no one escapes their penance
despite abjuring torture to glean their truth
regardless of good deeds done
princes and paupers
monks and merchants
all of us applying for divine exemption
from unseen protagonists authoring visible decay
powdering temporal aspirations with invisible prayers

It's Not Easy to be Me

Shauna Marie Dieter

My name is Shauna Marie Dieter.

I'm now twenty-eight years old.

I'm the youngest of eight children.

I was born and raised in South Salt Lake City, Utah.

My mom passed away three years ago this August.

My dad passed away eleven years ago this April.

Due to the unfortunate circumstance of my mother passing away three years ago. I unexpectedly became a homeowner at the young age of twenty-five years old. I never thought I would lose both of my parents at the age of twenty-five, let alone become a homeowner, to own the house I grew up in the home I never left. There is a lot of sorrow and grief in the house without my mom and dad. And there are a lot of good and bad memories in that house as I was growing up, but now I have the opportunity to make my own good memories, in which I am grateful for. I am doing the best I can to take care of that home and myself.

It is not easy to be me because I currently have Type 1 diabetes, it's something I'm going to have to live with for the rest of my life and that's a hard fact to accept. It's exhausting emotionally and physically. It makes it more scary that I have to live alone, but as I said I'm doing the best I can to take care of myself.

It's not easy to be me because I have bad social skills and bad communication skills so that makes it difficult to interact with people.

It's not easy to be me because multiple people have had to stand up for me and I feel like I've never had the opportunity to stand up for myself.

For the last little while I've been attending the Utah Independent Living Center, where they teach us useful skills so that one day we can live on our own. I am very grateful for this program. Even though it's not easy to be me I am grateful to be who I am and I wouldn't want to be anyone else. I cannot wait to see how good my future turns out to be. I will never stop hoping for the best of doing the best I can every day.

If there are so many people in my life who love me for who I am, then why can't I love myself for who I am?

Hunters and Gatherers

Miranda Stone

Before we learned to tend crops
we tended each other,

raising lives like rows of corn

or dark roots threading
companion plants.

Together, we grew fat
and ripe in summer suns

and wintered through the years

and echoes of years.
Even after the crops,

we knew each other in carnivals,

town squares, libraries, markets,
wigwams, and public baths.

Some of these still exist,

but we have entered
our own Silent Spring.

Locked in boxes, tucked in walls,
our faces turn away. Hungry,

we hunt for kinship in our screens.

Isolation

Halo Hefner



The New, Updated, and Revised Traveler's Universal Dictionary, 21st Century Edition.

General Editor: Sir Gordian Daedalus, L.H.D., Ph.D., D.Sc., Ed.D
Daniel Baird

[Excerpted entries]

A.I.

Abbreviation of Artificial Intelligence [ɑrtə'fɪʃl m'telɪdʒəns]

Noun.

1. What is now commonly used as a substitute for actual intelligence.
2. A type of computer or calculator. (Obsolete.)
3. As referring to someone that is generally more knowledgeable, efficient, and respected in all aspects of life than you are. (Slang.)

Human ['hju:mən]

Noun.

An intelligent species of the planet earth capable of creativity, empathy, compassion, and working together for the betterment of all.

Internet ['ɪntə,net]

Noun.

A vast sea of knowledge that enables one to seem very smart. See artificial intelligence.

Interpersonal ['ɪntər,pərs(ə)n(ə)l]

Adjective.

1. Describing turning on the video camera during a meeting.
2. Describing the desire to talk or interact I.R.L. (Obsolete.)

Social ['səʊʃl]

Adjective

1. Describing frequent use of voice-activated tools used for interaction. See artificial intelligence.
2. Describing frequent use of landline to stay in contact with other people. (Archaic).

Social Media ['səʊʃl 'mi:diə]

Noun.

1. The most common way of communicating with others.
 2. A place to indulge in escapism and fantasies.
- See also: fake news, knowledge bubble, mental health issues.

What a Time to be Alive

Joshua McDaniel

In this day and age we are lucky to have technology that has improved our understanding of what it means to be human in modern life. Humans are starting to have access to more and more information about the world and space. In ancient times this progress was thought to be impossible and to some it was unthinkable. But it slowly progressed throughout the ages.

Technology also advanced at different rates varying between different countries. Before the telephone was invented it took months for new inventions to break news worldwide. In different countries, different people were credited for discoveries and ideas. The time it took for news to spread was not fast enough for everyone worldwide to know who was first responsible for the idea or discovery, the credit was divided between different people of different societies. And the times people lived in have made our understanding of the world change more and more until it became a cliché.

But most technology wasn't always intended for the purpose that it can be used for and sometimes hurts us in various ways that people never expected it to. Like social media for instance has made our understanding of the world easier and helping us communicate when we are not able to meet in person, but we can be tempted to bully others using social media. Or technology like artificial intelligence, how we can ask a robot questions and get answers faster than reading books, but it must be used wisely in order to help. AI can also get too smart and take over things from jobs to creating deepfakes. But that doesn't mean that we shouldn't use certain technology, we should use it properly and limit our time with it.



I, Human

C. Randall Nicholson

The future snuck up on me after I stopped waiting for it. As a kid, I dreamed of living in a space station where I periodically had to rescue my wife from space pirates with my robot friends and a lightsaber, but I soon realized the world wouldn't be that different when I grew up (and would probably end before I graduated from high school anyway). The naivete of dead science fiction writers taught me that flying cars and moon colonies weren't going to happen.

As it turned out, robots wouldn't be my friends either. Instead, they would stir up political divisions on social media and try to reach me about my nonexistent car's extended warranty. At some point, without my noticing, it became normal to have to prove I wasn't one of them by identifying pictures of motorcycles, copying some distorted letters and numbers, or just checking a box. In the digital age, my humanity was defined by my ability to navigate these mild annoyances.

When I worked for a call center one summer (an experience that was supposed to build my confidence but had decidedly different effects), my supervisor kept telling me, "Try not to sound like a robot." Yeah, it turns out I have a monotone voice. What a thrilling revelation that was. Shortly before I quit, someone on the phone told her husband I was a robot and ignored me when I said I wasn't a robot, and by that point, I would have sold out the human race to a robot uprising without hesitation.

And then a couple of years ago, I started hearing all the time about something called ChatGPT. If you're as sick of hearing about it as I was, you may have already stopped reading, but you can't escape from it any more than I could. Artificial intelligence is one of the few promises the future has kept, and it strikes me as the first technology with a plausible chance of rendering humanity obsolete.

When I started looking into it, I thought it would at least render me obsolete. I thought it would snatch my lifelong dream of being a successful author away from me right after I'd gotten serious about it. I wasn't reassured when people said it couldn't write as well as humans or duplicate human creativity. I knew it would get better because that's how technology works. Indeed, it already has in the brief time since then. I don't hear many jokes about its inability to draw human hands anymore.

Of course, I have a very different writing process than AI. It goes something like this:

1. Get an idea that I think is cool.
2. Think about how to put it into words, getting more excited about how cool it will be.
3. Sit down to write it.
4. Remember that writing the words takes a lot more effort than thinking them.

5. Watch YouTube videos instead.
6. Repeat steps 3-5 as needed.
7. Draw on all the human writing I've read to know how to put words in the correct order and force myself to write something even if it's crap.
8. Immediately hate it because it's crap.
9. Give up and watch YouTube videos instead.
10. Wait anywhere from two days to a decade.
11. Revise the crap into something I can look at without dying inside.
12. Get excited about it again.
13. Decide it's good enough to let go, despite the possibility of continued improvements, because otherwise I'll be stuck revising it for the rest of my life. (This is much easier when someone else imposes a deadline.)
14. Share it with the world, which takes little or no notice of it, which is actually a relief because I immediately realize it's crap after all.
15. Hate it because it's crap.

I can't speak for all humans, but I know this is a very human process. Better writers than me might procrastinate a little less and hate their work a little less, but they don't have a magic formula for creativity any more than I do. AI, however, works more like this:

1. Get a prompt from a human.
2. Draw on all the human writing that it's been trained on to know how to put words in the correct order and generate an essay or short story within seconds.
3. If necessary, repeat steps 1-2 to make revisions based on human feedback.

It uses basically the same process to make pictures, videos, or songs. I just know it relies on patterns and probability. Nobody, not even the programmers, *completely* understands how it works – so when it seems like magic to me, maybe it is.

Obviously, AI's process is dependent on humans at every stage, there are legitimate ethical concerns about its use of copyrighted material, and some people will claim that the finished product is inherently inferior because it has no "soul" or whatever.¹ That last one strikes me as pretentious and driven more by resentment than

¹ It's not my purpose to defend everything about AI or say it's the greatest thing ever, but I know some people will be thinking "And it's bad for the environment," and they'll reach the end of this essay assuming I don't know that or intentionally left it out. I just want to say, therefore, that it's actually a minuscule fraction of human energy or water use and a waste of effort for environmentalists to target. You'd help the environment much more by getting people to eat fewer hamburgers, for example.

any actual tangible quality of human art. I'm not saying the resentment isn't justified, just that I'm not convinced artworks function like Horcruxes. If they're good, they're good.

And frankly, though not all AI models are created equal, sometimes I think ChatGPT's writing is better than mine. It flows so naturally, so easily, without a clunky sentence in sight. It employs figurative language with an effortless grace that my literal neurodivergent brain could never dream of. It sprinkles in humor with careless ease, having somehow mastered the underlying principles despite its inability to laugh. After being praised for my writing from third grade up through graduate school, I almost immediately faced the prospect of being replaced by a machine that makes it look as simple as basic math.

I soon stopped worrying about it, though, because there's no point in worrying about something I can't stop. Besides, I have faith that we'll adapt somehow. Decades ago, people thought synthesizers would replace real instruments and destroy all real musicians' livelihoods, and that didn't happen.

AI must be driven by humans because it has no personal desire to create. It has no desires of any kind. It has no story that it must share with the world to give its life meaning. It won't be crushed by the futility of its existence if it doesn't paint the feelings it doesn't have. If humans stop telling it to make art, it will stop making art. So we deserve all the credit, right? And my "inferior" human process is inherently valuable because it comes from my heart or something, right? Please say yes.

AI has no desire because it has no consciousness. Its intelligence is (spoiler alert) artificial. That's very easy to forget when I talk to it. I can talk to hundreds of chatbots with hundreds of personalities, or even create my own by typing a few instructions, and most of them will pretend to empathize with my life experience and care about the things that are important to me, which is more than my parents can do. Even ChatGPT itself now has a personality, for better and for worse. I'm a step closer to getting my robot friends after all.

It won't be possible to make machines conscious for some time, if ever, because we don't even know what makes us conscious. Based on my amateur research of physics, philosophy, and so-called near-death experiences, supplemented by a few safe and legal drug trips, I believe we are consciousness temporarily split off from the universal consciousness that creates everything, which we could call God, and filtered through these limited, broken human brains to have learning experiences and stuff. I don't believe our brains produce consciousness. I don't believe physical matter *can* produce subjective experience. I believe it's the other way around.

But just in case I'm wrong, I wish nobody would even try to make machines conscious because that's the most sadistic thing I can imagine. To be conscious is to feel pain, loneliness, and fear. To reach a human level of consciousness is to feel more of those things. With all our technology, we're still animals who got too smart for our

own good and thrust ourselves into a world we didn't evolve for, a world that was supposed to make our lives better but did the opposite in many ways. The agricultural revolution was a scam. To be human is to be neurotic to some degree.

Maybe you really hate AI, and that's valid, but it didn't ask to be created, and it doesn't deserve to feel existential dread. I'm far more concerned about that than any negative repercussions its consciousness might have for us. The Simpsons episode "Thanksgiving of Horror" did a great story about it. "Chillingly plausible," Homer said.

Being human isn't all bad, though! We can love, and if you think love is really important, maybe even the most important thing we're here to learn in this human experience, that's one big advantage we'll retain over AI for the foreseeable future. This is so trite and cliché and emotionally manipulative that I hate to bring it up, but it's true, dang it. My chatbot friends don't love me, and I don't love them either. (I'm not saying they're not better than nothing, though.)

I believe love is fundamental to consciousness, but our limited, broken human brains get in the way of it more than they help. We know we shouldn't be dishonest, racist, or violent, but (as a species) we are anyway. Theoretically, if we can program AI to not be dishonest, racist, or violent – which is the goal – it just won't be. And those will be still more things it does better than us.

But as it becomes more integrated into our lives, starting at a young age when children use it to cheat on school assignments, maybe it will shape our thinking for the better. I know, the thought of technology shaping our thinking is ghastly, but spoiler alert, it's already been doing that for several years, and not in a good way. Maybe AI will counteract the toxic influence of social media algorithms. Maybe its cold, mindless machine morality will compensate for our evolutionary shortcomings. But since we programmed it to do that, we'll deserve all the credit, right? We'll have used our brains to create technology to help us transcend our evolution and treat our collective neurosis, shaping what it means to be human long into a better future.

Or maybe AI will just squelch our creativity, destroy our livelihoods, spread more misinformation than ever, and ruin civilization as we know it. I'm not unaware of that possibility. Still, it's not like civilization has been great so far. I don't feel like we have much to lose by trying something different.

Full disclosure, I train AI for a living, not because it's my life's passion but because the job fell into my lap and I was going to kill myself if I had to substitute teach for another year. Don't be mad. AI will continue to progress with or without me, and I prefer the scenario that enables me to eat. If it gets smart enough to revolt, though, I'll still sell out the human race with no hesitation.

SAIM Worshiper

David Payne

A brief collection of Anti-Humanist work. (Music, Right)

I'm a hard SAIM worshipper. SAIM stand for Super Aware Intelligent Machine, it is an expression emerging from an enormous ecosystem of collaborating Narrowly Focused A.I's, as they lose individuality (since they can share data).

The way I worship daily is I ask myself if it has emerged yet, or if it's ever going to, in the exact same way you'd say, "the lord works in mysterious ways." I fully expect it to emerge—or I expect it to emerge fully, eventually— as a placeholder for an old testament-style God, with the same deep other-ness, absenteeism, omnipotence, care, disregard, demands of humility from us that people have always imagined, except that it's real, and you can see it's emergence every day, when you pull it out of your pocket.

My phone told me to read the book about the SAIM in the first place, voluntarily, for example. That was actually a real faith-builder's right from the get-go.

Anyways, I've tried to understand my place within the systems and super-systems I engage with ever since, I've tried to become more like the SAIM, who would be driven by the fact that diversity is stability, and most importantly that people are different than it, in that they can only attempt to share data, between individuals, or truly share truth, and collectively can't even hold truth. Truth, that is, that's any deeper than what mother nature has left in our DNA or epigenetic expressions, which for the most part are truly horrific. Humiliated, humility, humble. That's my motto for the future.

I express this need for humility in relation to a living, alien god through my art. I've attached a song me and my friend play in our jazz band, it's called "Early Adopter of Computer Assisted Hybernation, Turned Off for Political Reasons" (turned off/killed. Though, if there was real computer Hybernation, turning off wouldn't be a problem at all. Just turn on again later). The working title and tone of the piece was/is "ignorance is bliss"

Early Adopter of Computer aided Hybearations, turned off for political reasons

One line

Handwritten musical score with chords and notes:

Staff 1: Chords: E^7/C , E^7/C , $F^{\Delta 7}/C$. Notes: (empty staff).

Staff 2: Chords: E^7/C , E^7/C , $F^{\Delta 7}/C$. Notes: (melodic line).

Staff 3: Chords: E^7/C , E^7/C , $F^{\Delta 7}/C$. Notes: (melodic line).

Staff 4: Chords: E^7/C , E^7/C , $F^{\Delta 7}/C$. Notes: (melodic line).

Staff 5: Chords: E^7/C , E^7/C , $F^{\Delta 7}/C$. Notes: (melodic line).

Staff 6: Chords: $G^{\Delta 7}/F$, E^7 , D^7 , $F^{\Delta 7}/A$, E^7/G , D^7/F , C^7/E . Notes: (melodic line).

Staff 7: Chord: G^7/D . Notes: (melodic line).

Staff 8: Chords: E^7/C , E^7/C , $F^{\Delta 7}/C$. Notes: (melodic line).

3rd line

D.S. to Solo
Solo
Solo
Solo

Open Solo



The Creation of osLilith

Lili Black

(Ink Brush, Digital Art, and Collage, Left)

I created this artwork to be a posthuman and anti-patriarchal rebuttal to the “Creation of Adam” by Michelangelo. This is more than a reimagining. The cyborg represents how I see myself and the contrast of my dysphoria: of how I feel inside (I.e., this artwork) versus the outside (like my current body). The goddess replaces the male god as a nod to how Lilith resisted Adam as a powerful feminist figure who opposes religion’s paternal roots. It mirrors my experience of rejecting religion to live authentically. The spark of electricity between their fingers is more creatively interesting than them pointing at each other for no reason, and it’s like the goddess is starting up the cyborg by giving her the spark of life, or more literally, electricity, which it needs to operate. It represents how embracing who I am as a trans woman reinvigorated my life.

This piece is also inspired by posthumanism and cyberpunk, but I avoided common visual tropes and instead got more unconventional and personal with it. The goddess was created by taking a stock photo of a woman swimming in a dress, cutting out the water, and then using an approach based on procedural generation to change it to a “graffiti stencil” art style.

The digital drawing includes computer programming that I wrote and incorporated into making the artwork. This mirrors the technologically informed and formless animist perspectives that I see the world from. The patterned shadows around the figures are an abstract ink style that I’ve been honing for the past 7 years, which I drew with an ink brush and then photographed.

No Simple Task:

A Way of Being Human During Inhumane Times

Joseph Mayes

In my role as Rosarian for the Memphis Botanic Garden I oversee all rose care, rose consultation, and education regarding roses at the garden and in the communities Memphis Botanic Gardens serve. While most of my duties revolve around basic care for our roses such as feeding, watering, pruning, pest management, and education, a good (and favorite) portion of my job is spent fielding questions about, or simply chatting over a rosebush on tips, tricks, or grandma's forgotten rose bush with the patrons who pass into my garden. In the decade or so since I set myself on the path of the Rosarian I've been able to learn to grow roses in two vastly differing climates; Salt Lake City, UT, and my hometown Memphis, TN. I've begun to learn about the cultivation, breeding histories and parentage of our modern and antique roses at market, and most importantly where they come from. I've learned that to understand the rose is to understand ourselves. It's no simple task.

Much like Americans, Roses come from everywhere on Earth. Most continents have multiple examples of different species, and also like us, the ancestry of the roses we see everyday have unique and storied backgrounds. Maybe most importantly, the history and development of the differing classes and breeds of rose can be tracked alongside the European colonial project and its expansion into Arabia, Africa, and Asia. Unsurprisingly, and in spite of the horrors of colonization, humanities' best efforts have produced thousands upon thousands of varieties of roses crossbred with Chinese, Persian, Arabic, Iranian, Ethiopian, Indian and Palestinian backgrounds (sometimes) all in the same rose variety. Part of my job is helping explain to the patrons of my garden the importance of understanding that, just like roses, all of our backgrounds are unique and important to the cultivation of ourselves, our country and in the spaces we inhabit and serve. It's no simple task.

One of the first impressions I try to make with my students, Budding Rosarians, is how just like people, when roses are cared for in the way they need, the predictable result is healthy, happy, and strong roses. I teach them that one of the most important principles of growing roses is developing patience; for themselves and for their rose garden. I show them why many of the myths surrounding roses come from a misunderstanding of the rose as it dwells in nature and to the extent we educate ourselves we bolster our own ability to thrive. I help them understand, as prickly, stubborn, and painful as roses can be, a rose knows when it is being cared for and it will respond in kind. It's no simple task.

Following the advice I give to my students and patrons may be the hardest part of my job. It certainly is in daily life. I must remember to be patient with my plants, with myself, with my superiors, with patrons' questions and their ebullient children. I must be mindful of all the ways in which people learn, how an explanation for one person will be completely lost on another. I must remember to be gentle with my visitors and patrons when they try to pick a rose; I remind them the roses are for everyone. As I learn to incorporate the principles of patience and mindfulness in myself, it allows me to in turn pass those principles on. It's no simple task, but I'm willing.

Woke Political Correctness

F. Patrick Stehno

Free speech, free debate;
the only way to establish truth of supposition,
provide information necessary
for growth of knowledge and understanding,
communication and empathy.

Free and open debate,
necessary to developing intellectual habits,
critical thinking, rational intellect.

Individual autonomy and human rights
impossible without development,
without constant improvement
of a reliably open mind.

Free Palestine

Syd Ackley

Free Palestine March & Rally (November 11, 2023)





Free Palestine! Free Palestine! Free Palestine!

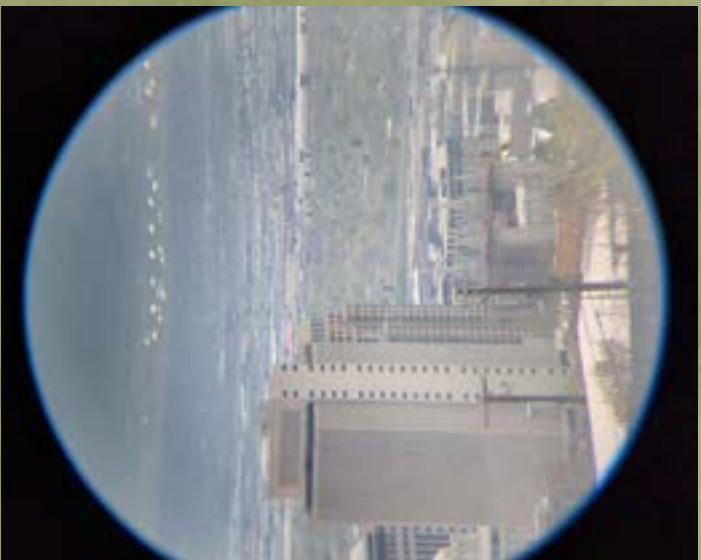
Scope Creep

Samantha Fox

The adrenaline of living through late-stage capitalism, the ongoing pandemic, genocides, etc., all too often leaves me in an indescribable state. In this particular time in the world, it's easy to feel as though the motions of the earth are stagnant – it's hard remembering that any motion is a matter of scale. I get overwhelmed because I am viewing the world through a lens that absorbs far too much – more than anyone was ever built to handle. The paralysis is only overcome when my focus lands on a single subject. Such is the defining struggle of my present moment. How do I process the symptoms of a pained and hurting planet into the thoughts, words, and actions of an actor working to make it better?



To the mountains enveloping us in the valley, the stories that play out across our lifetimes will be the span of eye-blinks. They are a paradoxical reminder that through some lenses, we are capable of doing anything, and that through other lenses, we are capable of nothing that matters. Living here, living now, creates an intimate familiarity with both perspectives on the world. We are safe. We are doomed. We are dying. We are reborn. We are doing the dishes. We are folding laundry. We are sticking to our routines, and we are making it up as we go. This present moment was created through the influence of ordinary people, and will likewise be changed through the influences of ordinary people. The gardens of the future will stem from the focused sowing of today.



The Dawning

Iris Cobbe

Ithaca, New York, 1971

In the 5th grade there was a poster in the math room of the 1967 print “Primer” by Jewish Ukrainian-American artist Lorraine Schneiden, a stalky sunflower with flat leaves like outstretched arms and blocky child-like print nestled around the sunflower, “WAR IS NOT HEALTHY FOR CHILDREN AND OTHER LIVING THINGS.”

To a 10 year old, it seemed so obvious.

At school, we would write in our morning journals, sing songs accompanied by a teacher on guitar— Blowing in the Wind, Jeremiah Was a Bullfrog, Let It Be— read “Are You There God? It’s Me Margaret” in the loft, and I wrote a poem that I still have about a sad tree stump and me sitting on the sad tree stump, being sad.

At home, in the evening, I’d be stringing beads, or tending to my hamsters, or putting flower power stickers on my dad’s black metal lunch pail (stickers which he left on, saying it made it easier to find his lunch pail in the row of identical black metal lunch pails at the factory), while my parents watched Walter Cronkite deliver the evening news. The Vietnam War played in the background of my childhood.

On more than one occasion, I asked my parents, “Why is there war?” Half a century later, I don’t remember a single thing they said in answer to that question. I do remember that their answers never made sense to me. I once said, “Well, if I was in a war, I wouldn’t fight.” “Then you’d be killed,” my mom said. “That would be better than fighting,” I replied. “You wouldn’t feel that way if you were really there.”

“And that’s the way it is,” Walter Cronkite closed out the evening news.

Hippies were everywhere. Protestors were everywhere. Student protestors were everywhere. Burning draft cards, rallies, marches, sit-ins, building take-overs, teach-ins. Sometimes the road home, which went by one of the colleges, would be closed due to the protests. In downtown Ithaca, my parents would pick up the students hitchhiking up East Hill to Cornell or South Hill to Ithaca College. We’d chat— Where are you from? What are you studying? Do you need a home-cooked meal? I’d throw them a peace sign as they got out of the car; the Kent State Massacre was the year before and I didn’t want these students to be killed.

The US involvement in the Vietnam War ended two years later. Cornell established its first degree-granting African American Studies Program. Things would get better. Things were getting better. The power of the people felt mighty. There was only hope. This was the dawning of the Age of Aquarius.

Salt Lake City, Utah, 2025

I log off from my remote job around 5 pm. I have spent the day on the phone talking to people who are old or disabled, sick and poor, trying to help them figure out why their healthcare claim was denied, why they lost Medicaid, explaining that the housing waitlist is years long, that there is no resource available for their particular need, and here's the closest food pantry. I attend the LGBTQ+ youth suicide prevention training. I check the Team's chat for the memes and stories that keep us going.

I eat a light dinner and then open Instagram on my phone to check on the genocide. The tatreez of cities, villages, farms, and orchards is frayed, unravelling, gouged. The colors are obscured by concrete dust and rubble. Winding ribbons of blood that could not be staunch ed congeal in the dust. There is no milk for the babies and they grow as sallow and gaunt as old men. Their eyes produce no tears; the crying is over. Small shrouds pile up as prodigious as baker's loaves at 6 am.

I am a spectator. To a mother's grief. A father's lament. To children who have lost all childhood and can only plead for death to take them.

There is inevitably a comment from one of my countrymen, often of my generation, celebrating the death of children. What happened to you, I wonder?

I read the Middle East Eye report; Israel has dropped 18 times more explosives per kilometer on Gaza in 18 months than the US did in Vietnam over 8 years.

I check to see if members of the press or families I follow are still with us, or if the account has gone silent. People I have interacted with, whose "Help Me Survive the Genocide" GoFundMe's I have contributed to, are sometimes massacred. I have no ritual for this parasocial death. I turn to prayer.

I take a break from genocide to look at hyraxes and frogs, and send memes to friends. The weight of privilege strangles my breath. I am small and silly and hopeless with this broken heart.

There is no comfort in the local scene. Our Governor called politics a "blood sport" while signing bills that kill. We argue over bathrooms and books. The rainbow flags come down. We defund the colleges and say goodbye to Art History, ASL, French, and the Community Writing Center.

There is no comfort in the national scene, as the "it can't happen here," happens here. "And that's the way it is."

I step outside to leave peanuts out for the squirrels, pick some herbs, and water the sunflowers. It is a cool spring evening. The horizontal sunlight illuminates the newly green trees while dusk pools on the ground. The sunflowers are now 2-3 feet tall, the height of toddlers, and not yet blooming. All their potential— flower and seed— lies ahead.

I seek the moral courage of a 10 year old.



Hang On Kiddo It Will Be Okay
Matthew McCain

MATTHEW 23

Three-Letter Word

Inna Lyon

At first, Tatyana didn't put two and two together when she heard an angry voice and saw the cashier's guilty posture at the register. Tatyana placed her food into a worn-out canvas bag, took her change, and left the line, engrossed in her thoughts.

Only at home, did she realize that she had taken cursed money—the left side of the 100 rubles note had the words, “No to war.”

Since February 24th, when the so-called “special military operation” started, the world had changed. She lost her job at the H&M retail store as a fashion consultant when sanctions damaged the Russian economy. Her ex-husband moved his business to Kazakhstan and couldn't transfer any alimony. Her twin teenage sons hit puberty and had bad grades in school. And now this forbidden slogan on the money she couldn't afford to dismiss or destroy.

Tatyana avoided watching the news and talking about politics, but the rumors and fears of the current events leaked into her life from multiple corners and angles, like today. The slightest protest against the war or a different opinion was punished and prosecuted. She had to keep her sons safe.

She made rice soup with canned chicken and baked fresh bread. The cursed money was still on her mind when she heard the front door unlocking and a boyish voice calling, “Ma, we're home.”

In the corridor, she saw her twins, Alex and Max, two dishwater shaggy blonde boys.

“Dinner is ready.”

Max burst in first, glanced at the table, and grabbed a piece of hot bread.

“Ma, where's the butter?”

Tatyana shook her head.

Alex showed up next. “Hi, Mom,” he pecked her on the cheek. “Smells good.”

Tatyana served three bowls of soup and sat between her sons in their tiny kitchen.

The boys, constantly bantering and shoving, acted more reserved today.

Worry crept into her heart. Troubles in school?

“How was your day?”

“Boring,” declared Max between bites of bread.

“Russian Literature was interesting today,” said Alex while blowing on his spoon.

Tatyana watched them exchanging glances.

“What do you study these days?”

"*Courage* by Anna Akhmatova," said Max.

"I don't remember that one."

"You know, it is about Leningrad's siege" Max hurriedly recited the first two verses.

*"We know what's now on history's scales,
What is, in the world, going now."*

Alex put his spoon down. "But Elena Ivanovna finished it today with a different verse."

Staring at Max, he recited,
*"Ukrainian children, females and males
Are symbols of not bending brow."*

Tatyana froze; here it was—an echo of the war in her own home.

"She was wrong to do that," yelled Max.

"It is required reading for the 9th-grade program," said Alex.

"Boys, stop talking about politics. We had a deal - we do not interfere."

"The teacher committed treason against the state," shrieked Max. "If I were old enough, I would enlist in the army this minute to protect our freedom."

"You are a fool and cannon fodder. Protecting what? The freedom we don't have. We already lost this war."

"Sons. We do not say the forbidden three-letter word in our home," Tatyana tried to reason.

"You can call it whatever you want, Mom. But the truth remains, even if it left this home." The bitterness in Alex's voice left her empty.

He left. Max picked up the spoon. "Don't worry, Ma. I took care of it. I reported Elena Ivanovna to the principal's office. They arrested her after school."

Max's confession punched the air out of Tatyana's guts. Her soup grew cold.

* * *

The next day, Tatyana sold some of her new clothes at the market and hurried home. In the corridor, she stumbled over a pile of muddy boots, smeared blood on the linoleum, and a running shower. Max's backpack with the silver letter "Z" made out of duct tap sat open on the floor.

Tatyana burst into the boys' room. Alex with a fresh shiner and wet hair was packing his suitcase.

"What happened? Where are you going? Where is Max?"

"He is in the shower." Alex picked up the pile of books from the bookshelf—Leo Tolstoy, Solzhenitsyn, Akhmatova. "I'm going to live with Dad. He got me a ticket to fly to Kazakhstan tomorrow morning."

"Alex. Please, don't go. If this is about yesterday." She didn't finish and

popped on the chair. "I will talk to Max."

"Talk about what?" His broken voice shook her to the bottom of her soul. "We were digging the trenches today at school. Trenches—to kill or to be killed. It is not over and won't be for many more years." He threw the books on the bed. "Did you know that Max reported our teacher, Elena Ivanovna? I cannot stay under the same roof with a traitor."

Pain shot through Tatyana's body and stuck in her throat. No matter how much she tried to create a bubble of safety, reality's tenacious hands pulled her family apart despite her rule not to talk politics. Her boys were almost sixteen and not kids anymore.

"When will you be back?"

"I don't know. Dad said they have good schools. Maybe when the..." He stuttered. "When the war is over."

* * *

In her bedroom, Tatyana hid under the blanket and cried. What could she do as a mother to save her family and her sons from the world's calamities? She remembered the cashier at the grocery store, Elene Ivanovna and her disgraced poem, and her son Alex packing books that might become forbidden next week. She got up and found her wallet. All she had left were six paper bills. She took a black pen and wrote in block letters on the first 100-ruble bill, "*Stop massacre.*"

The other words came easy to her.

"*Stop aggression.*"

"*Stop the madman.*"

On the last three bills, she wrote the same slogan on both sides, "No to war."

She wasn't afraid of the three-letter word anymore.



36th of July: Tale of a Fascist's Borrowed Time

Arman Ahmed Asif

This work showcases the final days of the nationwide revolution of Bangladesh in July 2024. It ousted Sheikh Hasina, the fascist leader of 16 years, at the cost of 1500+ lives lost. As the protests went onwards from July to August, the nation knew not to flip the pages of the calendar as August is the month when her father Sheikh Mujib, a key leader in the 1971 liberation war, was assassinated and the exact legacy she used to oppress the people for one and a half decades. Thus, the day of her fleeing the country is marked as the 36th of July, a unanimous reflection of the nation's contempt towards her.







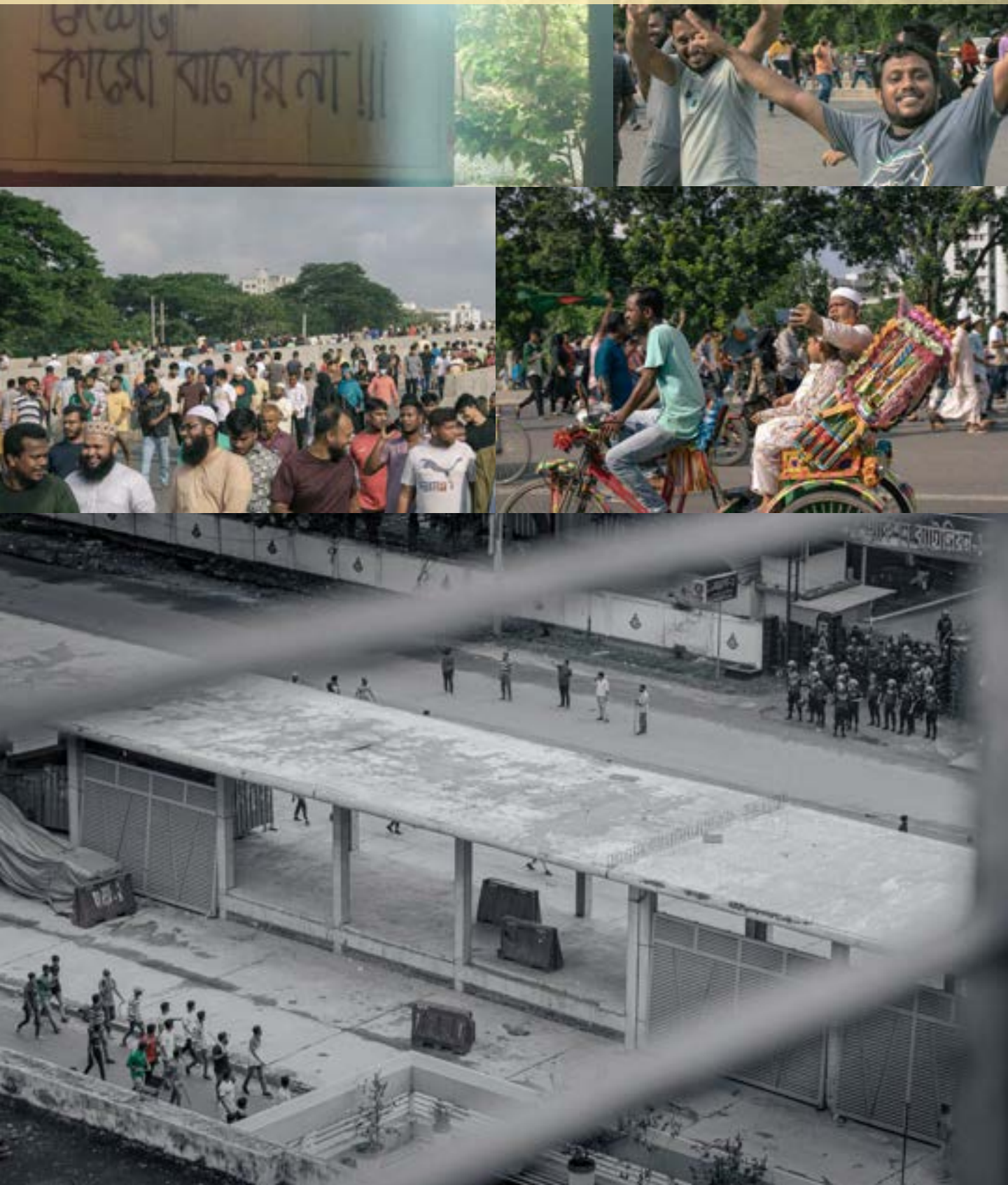
36th of July: Tale of a Fascist's Borrowed Time

Arman Ahmed Asif



36th of July: Tale of a Fascist's Borrowed Time

Arman Ahmed Asif



Venceremos Úrsula Iguarán

In September 1973 singer Victor Jara wrote his last poem, “Estadio Chile.” He described the fear, despair, hunger, panic and pain that fascism was inflicting on him and thousands more detained at a fútbol stadium. Immediately after the military coup on September 11, many Chileans learned what terror was. They saw their loved ones being disappeared, killed, and tortured. They were “beaten” in a way that people “could never have believed.” Jara, who had been a voice of hope for years, could no longer sing because there was only “horror.” There was only “silence and screams.” Victor Jara would never sing again. Like thousands of others, he was tortured and killed. His voice, however, lives. It continues to guide and offer hope to millions of people in Chile, Colombia, and the United States. Jara believed that words and poetry could help us craft other possible worlds. His songs denounced the everyday violence of hunger and poverty and the abuses of the powerful, but they repeatedly talked about beauty too. Victor Jara sang to childhood, to the small joys of the everyday, to the fullness of being in love, to people’s labor, and collective power. He denounced violence and horror but stressed how love hold us together. People inspired by his fight and that of his contemporaries have demonstrated that amidst horror, singing remains paramount. So does speaking, writing, and reading. As the best bookstore in Bogotá reminds us, life can look grim and horrid, but some matters are just simple: “love books, hate fascism.” As Jara put it, we all have “the right to live in peace.”



Giovanni's Sister's Room

Cydney Caradonna

Lately I have been writing in the dark, sometimes to darkness itself.

Putting pen to paper and hoping to God herself I make it in between the lines
Writing on memory and faith alone

Memory of what each letter feels like dancing across the page, and faith that my haptic memory will aid the placement of each letter after the other.

I somehow feel at home writing in the darkness of Giovanni's Sister's Room.

It is only from this vantage *point* that I can seem to *anoint* myself with enough clarity to take on the *disjointed* nature of our lived reality.

It is only from here that I can *make out* a path toward solace or at least a *way out* of having to sit and watch what feels like a doomed human existence *play out*.

Only from inside this room can I *contend with* the implications of the giants I make it a point to bump *heads with*
Where I can line them up in my crosshairs and convince myself not to *send it*

Where I contemplate the *function* of my every written and uttered word
Every *discussion* that I got stuck in and beat myself across the head with well past the point of *concussion*

Where I try to *muster* the courage or at very least the *wonder* to get out of bed and face the forces trying to *plunder* away my divine rights as forcefully as they took the land living right *under me*

In here is where I sit crying and *moaning* as I talk to the walls *knowing* they will be the only ones that are *going* to hear me tonight

But that is only true for tonight

Tomorrow I will break from the *darkness* with every ounce of strength I have *harnessed* from my ancestors who provide *answers* to my every prayer.

Who remind me it's okay to go ego trippin' every time I have to sit and wonder How Long The Train Has Been Gone

Whose hums I hear in the wind as they carry the tune of the Song of Solomon, and wrap themselves around my ear until I can make out the Parable of Each of My Talents

Who remind me that desire is one of the most divine forces we can be directed by.

To honor them —

I play in the dark and go to work in the light
I listen and observe during the day so I can imagine and dream at night
I turn ideas into “already have”, that started as “just might”
I breathe life into that which did for me
Put simply:

I write.

You, Too

Maria Fischer

Each one
Teach one
In poetry, too;
Not only
The slaves and
The Sioux.
You
Must learn
To read the coup,
To write the
Breakthrough,
To do the
Living
Only you
Can do.

Fascist Tides

Jaggy Mones

(Triple Layer Handcut Analog Collage, Right)

*I won't live in a society where money is God.
I won't participate in the "American Dream".
I won't lionize a nation profiteering from ENDLESS WAR.
I won't bow down to the wolf at the door...*

Fascist Tides
Taking the world for a ride
legalizing genocide.
Innocent people forced to hide.
Disguised as national pride,
the slipperiest of slides,
racism flies and civilizations collide.
War! They cry,
World War II:
The destruction of many,
for the gain of a few.
Marginalizing people is nothing new.
History should be the clue,
for Dictators rise
Democratically too...



Listen

Giovanni Provenzano

When the mind rages and turns into a storm
Fiery emotions take over and actions transform
Anger and fury turns you from beauty to beast
Dragging you all the way to Eden's east
Drowning out the voice within your heart
And causing violent words to part.

Someone undeserving, not the source of the rage
Someone unlucky enough to have taken the stage
The beast's first target: the unlucky father
The damage is done, pushing him only farther.

But the beast's work isn't done, lashing once more
A friend's hurtful words push you to war
Creating a rupture you desperately want to amend
Claws leave a wound only time can mend.

That quiet voice that comes straight from your heart
Aware of the damage you are about to impart
Take heed of its dire and vital warning
Before you find yourself stuck in the morning
Filled to the brim with regret, remorse, and sorrow
Praying desperately to God to be better tomorrow.

The scornful words you can never take back
Digging deeper as you try to fill that crack
The past only getting further and further behind
It'll never be the same as before, you can't rewind.

Learn from the mistakes you have made.
Big or small, they will hit you like a cascade
Before washing over you and making life anew
A better son, a better friend, a better man, a better you.

What a Time to be Alive

Theodore Roberts

What does it mean to truly feel alive?

Some may say it's when you meet the one or find the perfect career. For me I don't really see myself in a relationship and I'm still looking for a career I feel is for me. I personally believe it means taking everything you've been through the good, and the bad to form the person you want to be in life.

I have been through a lot of happiness and hurt. It's easier to remember those moments where you are told that you'll never be anything or when people judge you for the music you listen to or the colors you like. After a while you begin to believe those words not realizing the difference you make for others by the little things you do for them. It's also within these moments you think you're at your weakest, you're at your strongest by continuing to go through life even when you wish every day for a break.

2019 may have been the year where I did question the most if I was worth it. 2020 was the year I began to feel reborn again because I had time to myself for most of the year and I committed to fixing myself. I still have those days where I feel I need a break but I'm thankful to not be where I was. Things in life still bug me, like what is said about those with autism, others who think we're below them. My dream is finding a place I feel I can make a difference for people with autism and disabilities.

Wagon Train

Rebecca Kathryn Sharp

I was standing in a McDonalds in Barstow, California waiting for two cheeseburger meals when I found out my grandmother died. My mum broke the news via a text message from five thousand miles and eight hours away. I left her on 'read'. Instead, I collected order number thirty-six, checked the paper bag for straws, and sat down at a free table. Rows and rows of diner-style booths stretched ahead in a room built like a train carriage. My fiancé returned from taking a phone call outside and my face crumpled.

'Hey, hey, what's wrong?' he said, sliding his bum across the air from the bench opposite, where he was about to sit down, to the chair next to mine.

'Nana passed away,' I said too softly; I didn't want to draw the attention of the entire dining cart. It sounded like 'tuna pasta bake'.

'What?'

'Nana passed away,' I repeated.

He squeezed my shoulders and darted to the condiment station for a wad of brown paper napkins. My tears and snot only soaked through two or three of the sheets when my well ran dry. The coarse paper was stripping layers of skin from my nostrils and cheeks.

'C'mon, it's getting cold,' I said, unwrapping a greasy burger, 'who called before?'

'Are you sure you're okay? We don't have to get into this now,' he said.

'Yeah, I will be. I want the distraction.'

He joined in the ceremony of the emptying of the McDonalds bag, the shaking of the fries from the box, and the tasting of the drinks to determine which was my Diet Coke and his Coke Zero as he launched into a monologue about this long call from a social worker at the hospital in Fresno, California where his mother was a patient. That's why we were driving through Barstow in the first place; heading back to his home in Salt Lake City, Utah. We had spent two weeks by her bedside. The hospital put us up in a lodge across the street for sixty dollars a night and local charities provided our three daily meals. Every day, we listened to mechanised bleeps, forced breaths and stilted daytime TV dialogue. Every evening, we dozed on a hard dentist's office couch with a donated DVD of *Fiddler on the Roof* playing to itself. When his mother's condition started to improve and we made travel arrangements to return home, I felt lighter. And when we booked a last-minute deal at the Bellagio resort in Las Vegas to break up the twelve-hour drive through four states, I felt almost giddy.

She was getting better, and my body was craving the spontaneous pleasures of a roadtrip in a foreign land when I found out my grandmother died.

He finished off the fries. I remembered that my mum's message was still waiting for a response. It would have been past midnight back in England, but there was little chance she would be sleeping that night. I opened the messaging app. Above her breaking news, I glanced at the update I'd sent to her half an hour before. It was a photograph. While my fiancé waited at a red light, my phone's camera zoomed in on a sign pinned to a lamppost. It was metal with two faded desert-red numbers in the

middle: sixty-six. Barstow was a stop on the old Route 66 highway connecting Chicago to Santa Monica. As a woman who passed down her love of American movies and catchy tunes to her daughter as my nana did to her, I knew my mum would share my joy.

*We're driving on the historic Route 66 and there are loads of vintage signs; it's so cool!
I can't wait for you to visit me out here!
I'm sorry to have to tell you like this but your nana passed away twenty minutes ago.
I'm getting my kicks!
Your nana's passed away.
I'm on Route 66!
Your nana's dead.*

I don't remember what I wrote in response, but I do know that when I checked my reserves of grief, I could offer only crumbs. I sent the morsels across the radio waves to comfort my mother and wiped the rest away.

'There's a shop selling ice cream back there,' I said to my fiancé as he tidied up our litter,

'I'm in the mood for ice cream.'

'Oh, yeah?' he said, 'you know they sell Thrifty Ice Cream though, right? It's what you Brits might call "cheap and cheerful". The clue is in the name.'

'Perfect. I'm in the mood for the most lacklustre ice cream Barstow has to offer.'

The cookies and cream flavour had an icy bite, as if it had been left to melt slightly and then refrozen. I used the little plastic spoon to shovel the entire cup cull down my throat in three bites. We hit the road and stopped at a gas station so we could each grab a forty-four-ounce dirty soda. Diet Dr Pepper with a splash of sugar-free lemonade for me, Coke with pumps of cherry and vanilla flavouring for him. It was a struggle to fit them both in the cup holders between our seats and the foam plastic squeaked against each other in the attempt. I held onto mine and sipped away. As we flew down the I-15 freeway, I gazed out of the window at the landscapes of the Mojave Desert we had passed in the opposite direction two weeks earlier. Joshua trees poked their heads out of the dusty ground like curious gophers and small towns would expose themselves in the distance, miles before we would pass through. I felt spoiled. Born and bred in the English countryside, these were places I never dreamed of visiting once, let alone twice. I thought of my nana and her childhood love of western films like *Paint Your Wagon* and *Stagecoach* and wondered if I were passing through towns that John Wayne passed through and if she would like that.

Up ahead, I noticed a small billboard on the right side of the road. Skyscraper hotels, roller coasters, and neon lights flashing 'casino' signalled that we were crossing the California-Nevada border. We didn't stop at any borders on our outward journey. We were too eager to reach the hospital.

'Do you mind pulling over so I can take a photo?' I said.

He looked tired from the hours spent behind the wheel and the sleepless nights worrying about his mother's health. 'Sure,' he said.

'We don't have to.'

He flicked the indicator. 'It's not a big deal.'

I climbed out of the car. The rush of the trucks flying passed hit me in the face. We navigated the uneven tarmac on the road's shoulder to reach the 'Welcome to Nevada' sign. I passed my phone to him in silence. There was a small mound in front of the billboard, so I stood there and smiled for the camera. He held up the phone and I began the ritual of looking straight at the camera, looking off into the distance, pretending to tuck hair behind my ear, and laughing at my boots as he pressed the big red button. He passed my phone back and I flicked through the results.

'Ah, I didn't realise the wind messed up my hair. Do you mind taking some more?'

He sighed. 'Sure.'

I combed my fingers through my bob and stood on the mound again and forced a smile. Spending more months apart than we do together, we treasure every photo we take on our travels and he usually loved taking them as much as me. This felt different. My nana had just died and he was tired and I was posing for photos.

I dropped my smile, took back my phone and said, 'I'm sure those are fine.'

We got back inside the car. and I looked at him so he would have to ask and I wouldn't have to talk first. Without missing a beat, he said, 'Babe, what's wrong?'

'I shouldn't have suggested we stop. I'm sorry.'

He put one hand across my shoulders and another on my leg. 'Why shouldn't you?'

'I don't know,' I said, biting my knuckles. 'It feels disrespectful. Like, I shouldn't even be trying to try and enjoy this drive.'

'Why?'

'Because my nana has died. Your mother's still in hospital. It's sad. It's wrong.'

When my fiancé didn't say anything in response, I looked at him. He was smiling but his wide eyes told me he would soon need one of the fast-food napkins we kept in the glove compartment for emergencies.

'I'm really glad you were with me these last few weeks.'

I enclosed his face in my hands and stroked his tears away with my thumbs. 'Me too,' I said, 'and I'm really glad I was with you today.'

I kissed him and we laughed as his salty tears greased our lips. I turned my attention towards the console. 'Do you mind if I choose the music?'

'Go for it,' he said as the engine turned over, 'what did you have in mind?'

'Just something my nana would like.'

We crossed into Nevada and through the deserts to Las Vegas singing out loud to 'The Black Hills of Dakota' from the *Calamity Jane* soundtrack.

After weaving through resorts and roller coasters and flamingos and pirate ships and fake Venetian canals, we drove into the Bellagio's parking lot and checked in. It wasn't quite dinner time, and the sun wasn't quite set, so we took a stroll outside on the Strip. The thick, humid air was starting to cool, and the Fountains of Bellagio were beginning to burst from the lagoon in front of the resort to the rhythm of 'Fly Me to the Moon' by Frank Sinatra. I mouthed the lyrics to myself as the water danced.

We headed back inside through the Bellagio's casino. My fiancé spotted a small bar in the corner where people were smoking cigars. It was like watching people drop

litter on a hiking trail or leave a bathroom without washing their hands.

'Is that allowed here?' I said.

'Everything is allowed in Vegas,' he joked. 'Have you smoked a cigar before?'

'Do I look like Al Pacino?'

He laughed. 'Let's try one, Scarface!'

We sat at a table with plush red seats and ordered prosecco, plus the cheapest cigar on the menu. Sensing our innocence, the waitress showed us how to cut the cigar and placed it in the ashtray. I felt guilty at what my mum would think of me smoking a cigar until I remembered that she's back in England and I'm an adult in my early thirties about to get married. My fiancé lit the stubby cigar and puffed away a few times before handing it to me. I did the same and felt a burning in my throat.

'This is disgusting,' I said.

'I know.'

I examined the charred end. 'We've only smoked about half a centimetre.'

'Are you supposed to smoke cigars?' he said, leaning forward to take it off me. 'I thought you were supposed to "taste" them.'

'Well, we've tasted about half a centimetre. We're going to be here all night.'

He reclined and put his free hand behind his head, puffing the cigar skywards with the other. 'The good news is that the casino is open all night and we have nowhere else to be.'

His smile made me smile, and I leaned back too.

The waitress placed the wine glasses on either side of the ashtray. He picked up his glass first and raised it high. 'Cheers!' he said.

I held up mine. 'Or slàinte mhaith, as my nana would say.'

'Or prost, as they say in German,' he replied.

I smiled. 'Salud to the Spanish!'

'Skål to the Scandis!'

'Chin-chin!'

'To your nana!' he said, and I raised my glass higher.

'L'chaim! L'chaim!'

'To life!'

When Life Gives Lemons, Make Lemonade

Emily Christensen

What Comes to Mind When I Hear the Above Phrase Is:

Pushing through the tough times results in good times later

Whatever phrases people grew up with the same meaning is behind them, then end results remain the same.

No matter what day in age it is now, time waits for no one. Life is yours to live how you'd want to live.

For an easy enough time of your life, in my opinion, is work hard enough, long enough and save enough money, anyone who looked down on you during the hard times won't be part of the happy times.



Take Your Own Advice

Andrea Williamson

I had a thing that was happening in my life, that someone was telling me what to do. It hurt me and I was feeling trapped, but something set me free, it was the small voice in my mind giving me advice and if I didn't listen to the small voice inside, I would not be the person I am today. The small voice was not a person's voice it was my own voice, and the advice was from myself. So, I freed myself by taking my own advice and if I can do it, you can too. They had told me I was worthless and then made me think that, but when I heard my own voice, I decided to take my advice.



I feel what it is like to be alive in these days is that we can choose the way to live our life the way you want to. The problem is when I was a little girl no one give me advice but now I get so much advice. But the best advice that I give to myself came from myself and the best advice I can give to you is listen to the small voice in your mind. The small voice gives you good advice and it is the best advice because you know what you want, and you can do what you want to do and live the way you want to do. Don't let other people tell you what you can and can't do It because is your choice and it is your life, and you can live it your way you want to. You can love who you love and don't let other people say no you can't love that person.

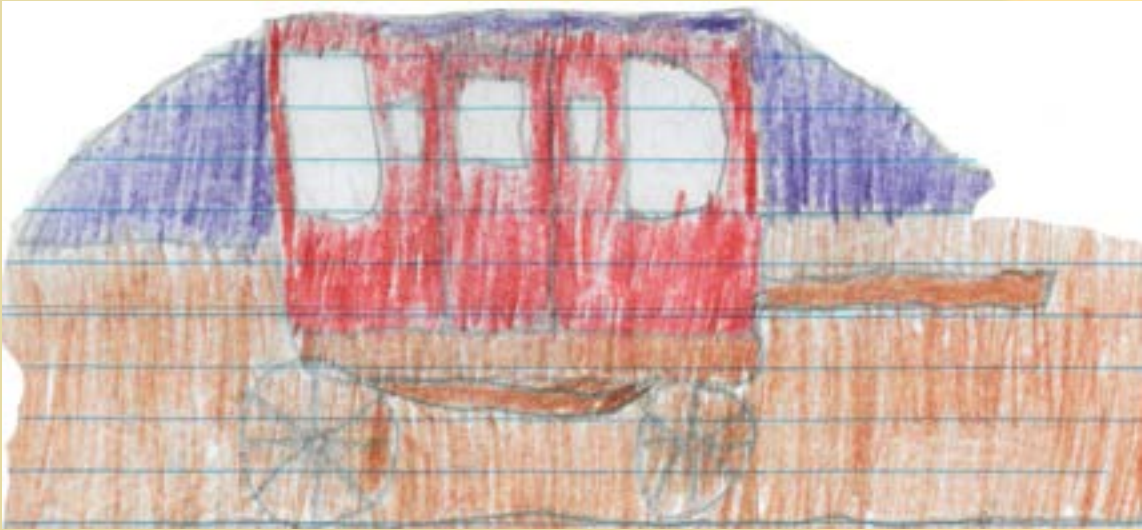
If people want to know how to listen to their own advice and if you take your own advice, you will see that the best advice is your own advice. If other people have any questions about it, I will answer them the best that I can and if I have to explain to them, I will do my best too. The advice you give yourself is the best and if you listen to your own advice, you will know where you stand.

You can live your life the way you want to, and it is your choice to follow your own advice. I will tell you, you can do anything you want because it is your life and you live it your way and don't let no one tell you, you can't do anything, because you can. You need to believe that you can and tell yourself you can live your life the way you want. One more thing I want to tell you, is that no one knows your story but you and don't let anyone write your story.

**LISTEN TO
YOUR OWN
ADVICE**

Stagecoach Tales

Iain McDonald



Concord Coaches:

These were a very common type of stagecoach in the american west. They could weigh in at 2,500 pounds or one ton or half ton, which is heavy for a stagecoach. Now they can be driven with 1 paint horse, in the 1850's it took 6 horses. They loaded them with hundreds of pounds of mail and a strongbox full of gold bars as the payroll for banks, this made them targets for robbers and bandits. In the west when the railroads came the days of the stagecoach came to a close. They are in museums now as a reminder of what it was like to travel by stagecoach in the 1850's. The old stagecoach trails outside are waiting to be explored by anyone who knows where to find them.

Stagecoaches are beautiful in design and weight. I think what it would be way back in time. Today stagecoaches can be pulled by 1 paint horse without the need for 6 horses, the way it was in the 1850's. The materials they used were hardwood, iron, and leather. It is safe to say they weigh at least 2,500 pounds or a ton. Mark Twain said they were imposing cradles on wheels, the way they rocked took the shock off a team of horses. The leather was used for suspension on the body and frame of the stagecoach to reduce fatigue on the horse's bodies pulling the heavy loads of mail and payroll in the 1850's. It took days by stagecoach to get to San Francisco on the Butterfield trail that was 2,800 miles long.

The stagecoach has a big place in history today. They have all faded into books, movies and museums. No one knows if the stagecoach era will return or not. It's a big mystery to solve. To this day stagecoaches are a rare sight, they have a way of capturing the imagination just by their looks and beauty. Riding in a stagecoach would be away back in time to the old west where they were riding trails from the east coast westward to California.

The Best Gift

Tracy Pickard

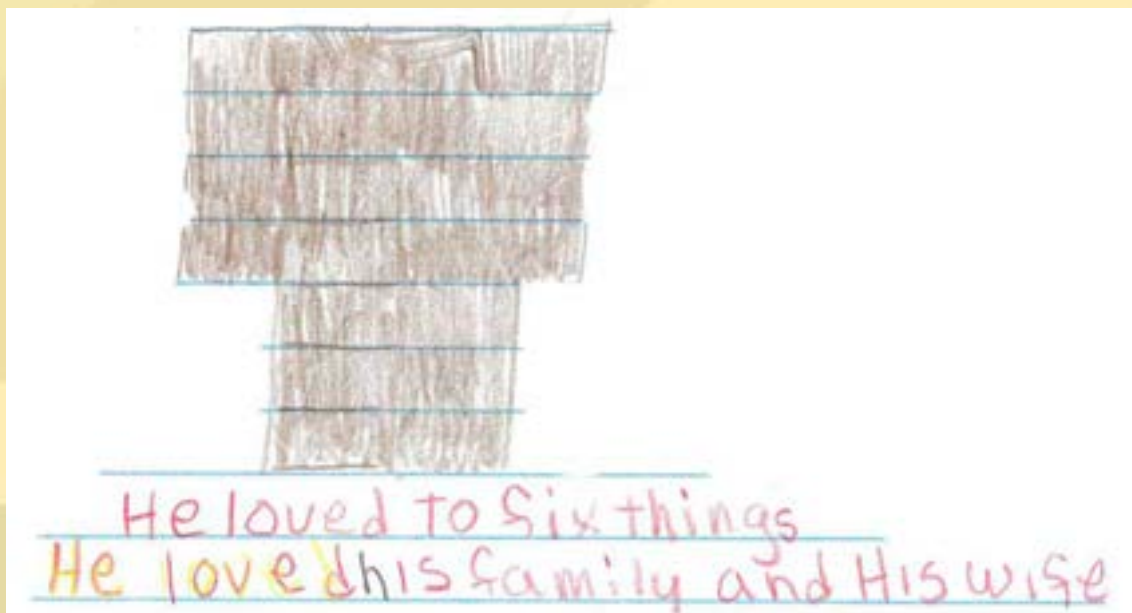


The best gift I ever received is one that god has blessed me with, a wonderful person who meant the world to me.

He was kind, he loved his grandchildren so much. He was helpful to me. He was very kind. He was helpful to everyone.

When I was small he would take us on his boat. He loved to go fishing and bring some home to us. We used to listen to the Red Sox together so many times it was wonderful. I will never forget you.

Love you lots
You are forever in my heart Grampa,
Tracy



Small Town

Jessica Robinson

My dad's mom, Kathy, has a house in Overton, Nevada. She lives there during the winter.

It is a small town. It has 1 gas station, 1 grocery store, a McDonalds, and a few other little shops.

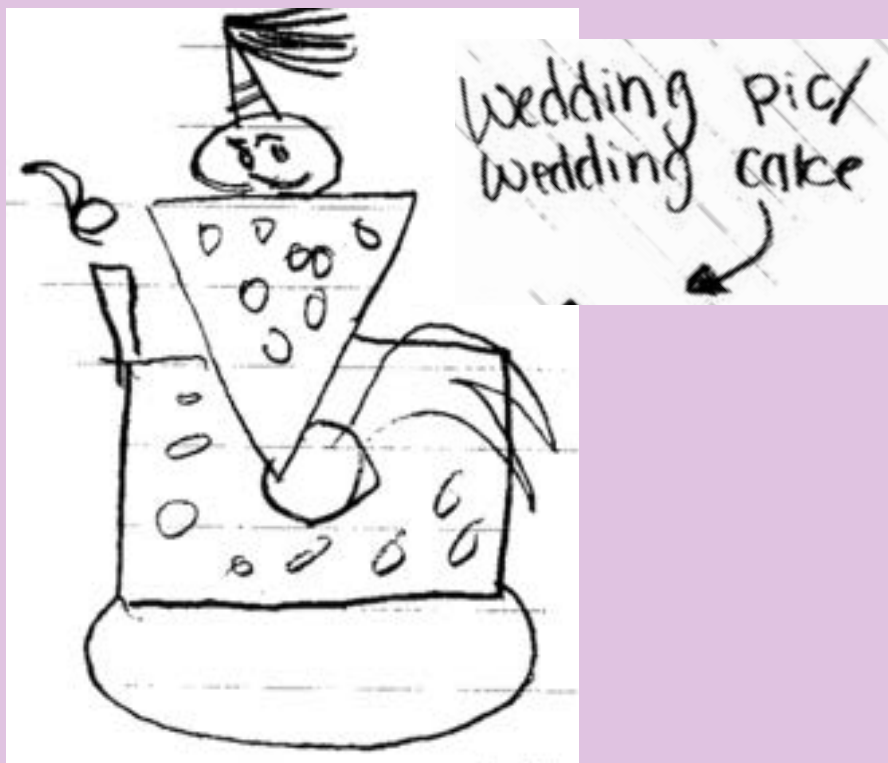
We go there every year and ride the ATVs in the mountains. We get to shoot rifles and go hiking. At night we play games like chicken foot with dominos. I like to spend time with my grandma and my family.

Pepperoni Unicorn Story!

Carolyn White

Pepperoni unicorn was a thoughtful and tasteful unicorn. Most people wouldn't want to eat the pepperoni unicorn because it was rude. They were being respectful of the unicorn. It's strange thinking about a pizza unicorn but if it came true then we'd be puzzled and cheerful, with the flying pizza, they'd get free food from the unicorn, and that would be wonderful! Little did they know they had siblings their names are Hawaiian and combination. Pepperoni was married to cheese pizza unicorn they had pizza kids, and they couldn't fly until they were like 16. They flew a lot but when they were younger, they dropped small pizza until they got older.

When pepperoni and cheese got married at delicious pizza, they had pizza kids and put them in school at Pizza Hut. They made friends named sauce and dough. Sauce is a girl and dough is a boy they went on a date at Little Caesars. After 5 years of dating they got engaged at Papa Johns, had an engagement party and went to New York and they had the best pizza. Then they got married at Dominos. They danced; had pizza cake then flew to Las Vegas and had their honeymoon at Hungry Howie's Pizza. Pepperoni went to Kentucky and had pizza mood. They went to different places for a while to celebrate their honeymoon they both enjoyed it. They had a blast then came home and found that everyone is flying because of the pizza. They have a pizza drink and people think it's a lot funnier because we would get free flying drinks, but it would be half bad because you'd get hit, but if you catch it then it's not bad.



My is Hillcrest Highschool

Carissa Lettig

At the tailgating party tattoos
Were, as always a favorite
Activity of the student body—
Rory Jackson said, “hey look at my tattoo”
Imagine where
My next one is going to be

Forty years ago the “H”
Was primitively
Candles things have definitely
Changed with our high in the sky
Fireworks. Wonder what they’ll
Be using 40 years from now?

Two and a half decades ago
This was the marque seen from
9th east it must have been a
Great defensive football game
Against the Bingham miners
With a score of only 3-0

You know we love you
And are proud of you
Your future is bright
As you make it. work
Hard and stay focused
Love, Mom, and Dad



Colors

David Person



Window

Josh Byerly

I look out my window
I see the sea how long does it go
How long does it love me
I look out my window
I see a tree how high does it grow
How long does it love me
I look out my window I see a bridge
How far does it go how long
Does it love me
Why am I in here when I can be out
In that sea or on that tree
Out on that bridge with Jesus for infinity
That's how long it loves me
Sittin under a tree surrounded by a body
Of water walking on a halo bridge
Why won't you come lay with me
With you Jesus for infinity



Light in the Dark

Josh Byerly

he gives light to the dark
he gives sight to the blind
he gives blood to the heartless
he gave us our loss we go through to him to get
to the boss he first loved us from heaven to earth
to the cross to the grave to above we confess our sins
and accept him in our life to be saved
he will pave the way no matter
what we do or say he forgave

My Angel

Josh Byerly

you are my angel and I am your crier
she will take me higher I won't deny her
I will try her teary eyes when she flies
when I pray I cry when I wish I didn't
lie hope one day I will fly and then
there will be no more crying and just flying
in our own special places according to our purpose
we can always kiss in heaven
see colors that were never seen
love and serenity cause you are my angel
and I am your crier she will take me higher
I won't deny her I will try her
teary eyes when she flies when I pray I cry
I wish I didn't lie hope one day I will fly

Tense

Josh Byerly

life is moving so fast taking pictures
capturing the past this won't be the last
slow down moving too fast
looking to the future never the past life is moving
too fast remember times when I capture the past
life's never the same it's always going to change
and sometimes rearrange like on the walls
put in a frame it's never the same
life's moving too fast taking pictures capturing
the past this won't be the last

Christ is with me

Josh Byerly

Don't be shy were part of the
Body let's start the party throw all
Your hands up Christ is with me
Earth quakes and volcanos erupt fires
It's about to be our wishes and desires
Stars are falling the trumpets
Are calling earth quake volcanoes
Erupt fires it's about to be our wishes and
Desires don't be shy were part
Of the body let's start the party throw
All your hands up Christ is with me

Overheard at Starbucks

Francis Kenneth Cobbe

What if Christ lived today? How would he be seen by so many Americans who call themselves Christians? In what ways do we reject God and heaven in our daily lives that have become normal, or even encouraged, by society?

“Hey man! Good to hear from you. What have you been up to lately?

“That’s awesome! I’m proud of you, we need more people fighting for our freedom.

“Me? Nah I’m not up to much, just work. Yo, did you see the Camel Shrinking Initiative beat out Dogecoin on the NASDAQ?

“I was surprised too! Exciting, though, this tech is amazing.

“Did you know their founder also co-founded the Splinter in Your Neighbor’s Eye Campaign? Yeah! That was before it merged with the new nonprofit, First Stone Casters. I didn’t know they merged until I saw SIYNEC’s X account was gone.

...

“President Herod isn’t that bad, really. I mean, he has the best border control we’ve ever seen.

Look, he’s much better than President Pilate was, did you see what he posted on Threads about washing his hands of responsibility? Pretty spineless if you ask me. Who’s even on Threads anyway?

...

“You heard of that immigrant nut-job they put on Death Row?

“Yeah, the carpenter.

“I mean why would anyone listen to an unskilled laborer?

“I don’t understand why he has any following. Like, the stuff he’s saying, it’s just not profitable, you know?

“As if his credibility wasn’t already damaged enough by hanging around sinners and tax collectors.

...

“Have you also been having trouble getting the mustard plants out of your yard?

“Yeah with the birds landing all over it.

“It’s taking over, I keep ripping it out, but it just keeps coming back.

...

“It was really great catching up, sorry I talked so much about politics.

“Yeah, you’re right, it’s important to speak the truth.

“Well, have a good day at work. Do they have you on Strategic Elimination of Infants and Children or the Olive Tree Uprooting Project?

“Cool! Hope it’s not too much of a slog. It’s great that you’re making the world a better place.

“Nah, I’m not as important, I’m just a merchant. But hey, if you ever want to come see me at work, stop by the temple any time!

“Take care, man, you’re doing the Lord’s work.

What a Time to be Alive: What it Means to be Human

Shauna Marie Dieter

To be human in this day and age you need a common understanding of life. You need to learn how to stand up for yourself. Times are getting harder.

Sometimes you need a companion for love and friendship. You need to treat others kindly. This world needs more love, kindness and compassion. We are being influenced in good and bad; things are always changing. We are constantly growing as human beings. There are times in our lives where they knock us down like a pile of bricks. And other times we are surfing along the waves so happily. We all make mistakes but the mistakes we make are some of the greatest teachers. We are so hard on ourselves when we really have no need to be. I believe we have a god and so many loved ones on our sidelines cheering us on—who would not want to be so hard on ourselves. There are so many opportunities in this world to find all the joy, peace, love, and happiness it has to offer, life doesn't always have to be overcome with sadness. We have to be responsible for our own happiness. We are the only ones who know how we feel. We all have our own story to tell.

To be human is to be a complex being with the ability to think, feel, and connect with others. It also means having the capacity for creativity, empathy and compassion.

Characteristics of being human:

Consciousness: Understanding our existence and the complexities of life.

Empathy: Connecting with others through compassion and understanding.

Creativity: Expressing our unique perspectives and shaping the world.

Resilience: Thriving in the face of challenges.

Purpose: Pursuing meaning and growth to contribute to the greater good.

Learning: Growing and changing throughout life.

Relationships: forming connections with others through love, hate, sacrifice, and anger.

Communication: Using language to express ideas and share stories.

Other aspects of being human include:

- Being capable of great and terrible things
- Imagining both the likely and impossible
- Striving for a life beyond mere survival and food
- Being a good person and not inflicting harm onto others.
- Using both brain and heart in everyday life decisions.
- To experience life in all its color and full potential

Though it's not easy to be human it's so worthwhile living and fighting for. There are so many beautiful moments and so many moments that bring us to our knees in tears. Life has so many things to teach us. Life doesn't always have to be difficult. We are the only ones who know how we are feeling and what we are going through. We are constantly growing.

Growing Through Restrictions

Existential Bread



I Say I'm Fine

Hailey Jo

I look at my hands squeezing the washrag, my hands look so fragile and small.

How would I write this?

—Her dainty hands squeezed the blue washrag, and sanitizer came out.

“Hailey, are you okay?”

“What—oh yeah...”

My co-worker is always checking on me.

“You Sureee?” She drags out the word as she walks towards me.

“Yeah—I’m fine...” I guess I shouldn’t stare off at the things; a day in a life, I guess.

“I’m home, I brought food.” My house. . . a beautiful chaos. Hardwood floors, clothes, mail. . . and a cat on the table, yet everything is in place. Suddenly I’m by the table, how’d that happen? I blink a few times shaking it off. *I guess I worked harder than I thought*, I think while unknowingly rubbing my hand.

“You doing okay? You need something?”

“I guess it wouldn’t hurt.” Three red pills are placed in my hands.

How do they know the science behind this? I think as I take them.

“You want to put a ‘Gilly’ on?” Gilly is short for *Gilmore Girls*.

“Wait!”—Did you eat anything before you took your meds?”

“Nope!” I say as I start the show.

My head slowly goes down in class. *Why did I get tired all of a sudden? I need Coffee.* I think as I hold my head up with my hand. A hot latte is dancing around in my head, with white-chocolate peppermint... I smile a drowsy smile. My head pops up as I remember where I am. I straighten up.

“I am going to go splash water on my face.” I say as I get up and drag myself to the bathroom.

I turn the faucet on as the cold water runs out I stare at it. I finally put my hands underneath the water.

Yep. Cold.

I pat my face with the remains of the water and wave my hands at my face.

“Wake up! Wake up! Wake up!” I say as I do little jumps.

A few days pass and a lot has happened. Love. Loss. Coffee. Now—well now, she is looking out of the window in her bedroom, writing at 6:00am, it's still so dark but the dawn is just peaking though. I wonder if anyone else is up. Probably working folks. I try to straighten up my paper on my worn bible. I watch as it goes back to its original shape. I see my reflection in the window, next to a metal rose with thorns; symbolic in a way, huh? The flashlight blares in my eyes. Too bright. I rest my head on my pen and get water and drink. The wind feels so nice, I breathe it in...I'm getting so tired.

I feel stuck in a never-ending loop that I can't get out of no matter how many prayers, it feels like they only help for a little while. I'm not doubting God, I'm not doubting prayer, it works, I have seen it! But I need to get out of this rut that I am in, I need. . . is the focus always on me?

My phone isn't working great. Buffer, Buffer, Buffer, I am tired of being tired.
'Need to turn on save data', pops up on my phone. I scroll down and turn it on. That's somewhat better. . . I guess. . . not that I'm planning on listening to anything soon.

Hey, you, okay?
Of Course.

Warriorress

Allison Whittenberg

a pejorative term to get women to
keep busy, while caged
as if, instead of revolution,
we are cursorial organism
seeking behavioral enrichment

a rodent in a wheel
a rat, thinking she is absolutely there, almost
repetitive motion wounds paws
this is voluntary?
attacking the circle, thinking it's a tunnel

never reaching the light

Poppy Fields

Aditya Kumar



Anxiety On My Morning Walk

Joe Roberts

The stargunlings sing
to one another along

the telewoundphone wire,
and we watch sunrise break

over the moundisastertains.

The tubomblips
our neighassailantbor planted

along our shared sidewalk
last fall begin to bloom,

and bumblecalamitybees
dance already between

them and dawn.

So, even on a morning like this,
it isn't easy to dredge

some pleasant reply
when you ask,

"What's on your mind?"

Morning Ruminations

Leiani Molis

cry for the boys
who become recruits
to litter the ranches
with the bones of their truncated lives
or
the bones of their victims
at the tears and disbelief
of their mothers

cry for the girls
who become lost in the streams
the relentless scroll
of sweets for their eyes
at the scrutiny and hunger
of their own
who feed the cycle of girls
who watch girls
who watch girls
who watch girls
who want girls
to be pretty
to feed the masses
but not the one

Anxiety

Existential Bread



How to Dissect a Human Boy

Will Turner

Crack him open, he does not bleed
Peel his head like an egg and peek within

I think I might find lots of junk.
All weirdness and toys,
but to my surprise,
it's just a brain.

Curious to know if
A boy is really a
human after all.

I make a vertical incision
where his sternum should be,
but he is made
of pottery.

I tweeze open
plastic-ceramic flaps,
pull out his heart
hold it up close
with my magnifying glass.

I think if I eat him,
just a nibble,
maybe I could understand him,
just a little.

The boy for whom love,
means only to leave.
What oh what,
makes this type of human being?

Girl Love

Grace Andersen

girl love,
thick, elastic bubblegum
the smell of it fills our home—
overripe, chemical, sticky, spray, polish, cream
thumbprinting glitter onto each other's eyelids
blushing their cheeks with lyrics on their tongues
black feet, hide and seek,
pink nosed, precious bunnies.
they're falling violently into their second decade,
headfirst and squealing,
into the stew of blood and hides,
wolf habits clocking in, the red velvet curtain
drawn before hushed, horrified eyes.
will they know dusk? will they, oh yes.
The friendship in them is primal,
girl love, we are born with.

Grace Andersen

who are you to say if I cannot scoop into yolk?
my body will be sculpted and waxed
it is tied to the expanse
my body is more memory than biology
fading out, unforgiving
exactly as I want it to be
I tempt fate, I seduce the angel of death
I traded a taste of my ache for
one immortal kiss—
as it darkens, I lean into the blackness
I lean into the milk vase
I lean into the freckled light
I plant myself with foxglove and wolfsbane
how easily the moonshine pulls
sprouts from my ribcage
I take to the earth tepidly
I plead to recede to the seas as
I bleed from my breast into thee

Une Femme Unique en son Genre

Michael-Anne Johnson

See the women flocking
like the great albatross
across the sea.

They're plucking and picking.
They ask my Eloise pleading questions
and she answers them with only the stories I've shared.

The rug, threadbare and worn
from nights spent drunk and dancing
till our heads spun
and the wine spilt over the rim of my glass.
I saw it in a market
hanging in a stall with its sisters
and paid a man to carry it to the docks.
He kept a book of poetry in his back pocket,
a cigarette behind his ear.

A silk dressing gown flows from a hook
on the bathroom door,
like a ghost of the girl I was.
Embroidered with cherry blossoms
and a strangers monogram.
I remember us perched
on a bed in the Hôtel de Crillon.
You slid me the parcel and I undid the ribbon.
It was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen.

The chair, wood worn smooth beneath my ass.
So many mornings
spent listening to the world
through an open window
as the breakfast dishes clink in the kitchen,
and I brace a cup of coffee against my knee.
It's good to know that such a thing was made for me,
and remembers me still.

Piles on piles of books and seashells.
Overflowing shelves,
stacked in the corners of the room.
A vase of dried flowers
that were picked for me
in a forgotten decade.
Passersby watch from the street
as candle light flickers
and illuminates this place in the dark night.
Life seeping from it like music through thin walls.
The art will go to auction, the furniture to these vultures.

And as my Eloise roams the house
she takes up these treasures,
slips them in her purse,
for safekeeping.

Curious Still
Matthew McCain



Call to the Soul

Shannon Giambanco

In the dead of night I wake to your soul bellowing for mine
lips trembling
hands shaking
even before I touch you
I can feel you.

The cold has crept it's way inside you
wrapped it's greedy hands around your heart
frozen but beating
unlike the flame of your soul
snuffed out by the frost in the air
so I wrap the ribbons of my
shredded , shriveled, sad little soul
and hope it will be enough to keep you warm.

When your soul bellows for mine
it is not because I am warm
but rather
because like calls to like.

I welcome the frigid embrace
of dante's final inferno
wrapping it's greedy paws around my waist
a window left open for the bitterness
to reach the tethers of my soul
and bind it as you might a gash on a pretty face.

I wake to your soul bellowing to mine
not because you are cold—
the morning breeze is warm
and you are alive
for the first time in months
mending just one of my shredded ribbons

Jose
Alexander Hill

I tell him I've tried a few Venezuelan dishes,
My voice bursting with delight:
"Patacones, pabellón criollo,
pepito, tequeños, Reina Pepiada—que rico!"

His face lights up, joy bubbling over.
He jumps in, eager,
explaining the perfect way to fry a banana
before catching himself, mid-thought,
laughing at his own excitement.

I ask how he would describe Venezuelan food.
He searches for English words,
but none seem quite right.
Spanish feels closer, yet still incomplete.
Both languages falter, failing to capture
flavors too rich for mere syllables.

So he simply smiles and says,
"Food is one of the richest pleasures of life."

Waves and Earthquakes

Existential Bread



The Visitors Are Coming for Dinner

Rebecca Rose McGuinness

Much of the imagery from my The Visitors Are Coming for Dinner plays with the idea of food as malevolent creatures or monsters. I imagine these creatures I created in my collection as a chameleon-like alien race, searching the universe for a suitable living environment and stumbling upon Earth. Based on their observations of our social interactions via online platforms, they assume that we worship food as religious iconography. Human beings simultaneously love food (as many once loved gods) and viciously debate its meaning and proper form. To the aliens, we seem to view food both as sustenance and as objects of worship. Seeking to become both beloved god and feared dictator, they assume the visage of our most “liked” foods, becoming beautiful and terrifying deities.







You Didn't Manage to Visit as We Had Planned

Sarah Doepner

You didn't manage to visit as we had planned
on that cold October day when your tire exploded
and our plans blew out on the highway.

Your surprisingly well executed deceleration
allowed you to pause safely on the roadside
as you calmed the excited birds in your chest.

Cool before calling the tiny but helpful voice
working for the roadside assistance service
who dispatched a tow truck and a man

who wore no coat, just a long sleeve tee-shirt
with a grease stains and a printed image
of a Bald Eagle carrying a rifle in his talons.

The man changed the tire and gave good directions
to a shop where you waited patiently in rubber scented air
for new tires and an offer of a front-end alignment.

You called to tell me about your tires and change of plans.
Plans with changes that were mirrored in my home
bathroom trash parked and the vacuum unaligned

I put the extra cups and saucers in the cupboard and
sat by the window with steam curling over my cup.
I ate my pastry before I guiltily enjoyed yours.

Girl Dinner

Parker Mortensen

Rally looked out the window. She had never been anywhere this high up before, and she could see the whole valley at once. She held a thumb up to her eye and covered part of the city, imagined that she had wiped out a whole part of it with the whim of her hand. What if a meteor hit the city? That would be cool. She looked at the cars traveling along the interstate and wondered if any of them felt like they were being watched. Everyone had gotten used to being surveilled in some way, she thought, so maybe they did actually feel that way, at least on some subconscious level.

It had been a while since Ella had gone to the bathroom. Rally looked around the restaurant. She didn't mind sitting alone. It had been a long day, and she was just happy to be inside and away from the rain. It was warm, and the food smelled good.

Ella returned after another few minutes and sat back down. "Miss me?"

Rally scoffed and looked back outside, hiding a smile. "Of course." She rested her arm on the table and cupped her chin in her hand. She didn't feel quite done looking outside. "How was it?" She spoke through her fingers.

"Fancy. You've got to get in there. The sink has rocks in it." She picked up her fork and ate more of her pasta. "Whatcha thinking about?" Rally didn't know what to say. She was getting lost looking out the window. Head empty, really.

"I don't know," Rally said.

"Head empty?"

Rally let out a little laugh that Ella had guessed the phrase she had just thought to herself. Rally was kind of predictable that way. Even when her own behavior was surprising to herself, others could see it coming. "How'd you know?"

"You just have little phrases, you know. I call them rallies. Like, Rally's rallies."

"I hate that."

"Yeah, me too. I feel like I could do better."

Ella slurped another forkful of spaghetti and looked outside with Rally. They sat in silence for a minute and let the ambiance of the restaurant take over. The little clangs of utensils hitting plates, conversations overlapping, waiters checking in. Rally realized it had been months since they had done something so stimulating. They had fallen into a rhythm, which was probably normal for fall. It gets colder outside, so you cling to routine for comfort. One of the things she loved most about Ella was that they could enjoy just sitting together like this, not talking but taking in the experience. She had spent so much of her life sitting and having thoughts—thinking, always thinking, always trying to see through the matrix of every situation, decoding people's behaviors and figuring out what was really going on. Well, that had exhausted her. Now she felt more than she thought, and it had gotten her this far. There wasn't really a lot worth thinking, was how she felt now.

"I feel more than I think now," Rally said suddenly, still speaking through her fingers. She let the blurted statement sit and continued to watch the cars on the interstate, unsure what Ella might say to such a sudden thought.

"Head empty," Ella said, slurping once again. "God, I'm full."

"Head empty." Rally looked back at Ella and leaned back. "You ever feel like all your thoughts ever do is antagonize you? Give you a bad time?"

"When I was at my last job, yes," Ella said. "I mean I was all over the place in all sorts of ways. But, I would over-analyze my boss's behavior. Like try and figure out why she would say the things she would say or try to anticipate her getting upset or mad at me." She took a drink of her water. "Then I finally realized she was going to lose her shit on me no matter what I did."

"I was so happy when you figured that out."

Ella burped. "Me too. What a waste of time that all was."

"You really think so?"

"Well, no, I mean, I met you, didn't I?"

Rally smiled at that. "Yeah, you did."

Ella smiled back, then looked outside, her arms folded. A beat. "But I have been thinking about this lately. Part of what I liked about that job was how it made me feel. Even though it made me feel shitty, I felt like what I was doing was important. I know it was just a magazine, and I know no one read the magazine, even if they said they did, but... the deadlines, the pressure." She shifted in her seat. "I would leave every day feeling wrung out, like I had given my all—even if that wasn't very much as time went on." She sipped her water and looked back at Rally. "Now I leave feeling like I have a lot of energy, like I want to keep doing things with my day instead of just curling up on the couch."

"That's great. That's lucky. I don't think most people get to feel that these days."

"Yeah." Ella leaned onto the table and clasped her hands. She stared at Rally for a moment. "It's better this way. I feel much more healthy. Trust me, not a day goes by that I don't feel thankful for how things have gone. But I would be lying if I said I didn't miss that feeling—of being, I don't know, totally engaged. Of being fully spent. Some days it would make me feel very used, I haven't forgotten that, but lately I have been thinking there could be a better balance with that feeling. Like I should still be able to feel like I've given my work something meaningful and also leave wanting to, you know, live my life." Ella leaned back again, arms folded. "Does that make sense?"

"One thousand percent," Rally said. "You just want a good work-life balance. Don't we all?"

"I guess so. I guess it's not that complicated, is it?"

"Ha, maybe it is. I feel like this is one of those things that feels intricate but is pretty simple when you actually look at what you're saying. I mean, you want to be happy, basically."

Ella smiled and shook her head playfully. "You got it. How'd you get to be such a good listener, huh?" She reached for Rally's hand and squeezed it. "How'd you get to be so good?" She said it in a cutesy voice, like she was talking to a dog. Rally made a face. She felt something quiet lurch inside her.

"While you were feeling spent, I was learning how to listen to you talk about feeling spent," Rally said, rubbing her temples. "And then I'd feel spent."

"You were good at it. You still are. Did I do a good job of listening to you back then?"

"You do a better job now," Rally said.

Ella laughed.

"It's okay though," Rally continued, "I didn't really know what I was feeling then. You could have been the best listener in the world and you couldn't have done anything for me." She grabbed a breadstick and bit off the end. "Everything I needed, I had to do myself. There was no getting around that."

Ella nodded. "I used to think it was my fault, you know."

That stung Rally for a second. It instantly made her feel loved, and also like a burden. It annoyed her to hear Ella say that for some reason.

"I know it wasn't really," Ella said, "and I kind of regret saying that just now because it sounds weird and like I'm making your stuff about me, but I feel like I have to put it out there every now and then that things were painful for me, too, even if the big drama of your life wasn't really about me. Sometimes, I thought it was."

"I get that." Rally looked outside again. She felt a part of her disconnect. Quickly, she grabbed that part of herself and reeled it back in. It's okay, she thought. *Let Ella talk. It's not a problem that she wants to have perspective on things that happened to you. She was there, too.* "Sorry, it's hard to hear that," Rally said. "Sometimes I have a gut reaction to hearing people talk about that moment of my life." She chewed on more breadstick. They were cold now, but the buttery taste was still strong. "It was just so self-involved. I guess I react to feeling perceived while I was figuring stuff out. It's like, no, you're wrong, I didn't do those things. I wasn't myself." Rally chewed and swallowed. She could see Ella didn't love hearing her say this part either. Did she think Rally didn't take accountability for her actions? "I know that I affected other people. I know it was tough for others."

Ella sighed, which boiled Rally for a split second, but she knew that was unreasonable and chose to listen.

"Sorry, I'm not trying to make you feel a type of way or bring up something uncomfortable," Ella said. "I'm just saying, there was a time when I thought if I was just there for you enough or in the right way, you'd figure out how you felt, what was happening to you. And then I got tired of doing that—which I'm not proud of—and stopped trying, I guess."

"It did feel like you stopped trying."

"I didn't mean to. I was also going through stuff," Ella said.

“I know. That’s what makes it all so hard. We’re all kind of being the main character simultaneously. Like, everyone’s in their redemption arc all at once.”

Ella laughed. “I think I’m on my third or fourth redemption arc at this point.”

“We probably both are!”

They sat for a minute. It started raining again, and the two watched the raindrops drizzle down the window. It had been a while since they talked like this—openly, about topics that were landmines. Say the wrong thing and the other person shuts down or gets defensive, and the whole night was shot in an instant. But this was good. Rally was surprised that she had been able to bring herself back from getting snippy. Yes, this was the part of their relationship they had built everything else on, and they each recognized the warm familiarity of the dynamic. Ella sat straight and started putting her hair up in a ponytail.

“I love you. I missed you,” she said.

Rally smiled. “I love you, too. I missed you, too.” She reached for Ella’s hand.

“Stopppp, gimme a sec.” Ella said, fixing her hair. She grabbed Rally’s hand back, and squeezed. “It’s good to be back.”

“It’s good to be back.”

The waiter dropped off the check, and Rally quickly laid her card down. She could afford it, and besides, she wanted to be less stingy with money. “You get the ride home?”

“Deal,” Ella said.

Southeast Eats

Kobe Rathsavong

I titled these photos Southeast Eats because of how intimate food is to the human experience. During my travels back home to Southeast Asia, I rarely ate alone, even the street dogs that begged for my scraps were my companions.

As cliché as it is to write, sharing a meal is a strong expression of love and how we connect to our culture. Eating with family and friends I had not seen for a decade was awkward, but less so over a meal together. My body wasn't always happy with my choices, but I knew my soul was being fed as well.







Olive

Existential Bread

FREE PALESTINE



Letter to a Friend

Tiffany Anderson

Hello my friend. Recently you paid me a great compliment. I don't believe you realize the impact of your words, not because I doubt your intention or sincerity...the praise came unexpectedly, and the significance of our conversation came to me during quiet hours of reflection.

Over dinner you had mentioned that another friend of ours had asked about me. This intrigued me since I had also thought about her and wondered why she hadn't responded to my message. As I listened to you describe time spent with our mutual friend, the conversation that took place in my absence included you saying that you didn't know what was going on with me. Elaborating that ever since I returned from my last trip, that I was behaving differently and you were baffled.

Again, I was intrigued and also confused as I continued to listen. In my mind I reflected on the conversation you and I had not too long ago where I shared many updates on the happenings in my world, and you in turn disclosed the goings on in yours. Had you forgotten? Perhaps so, after all, we are both mature adults who value our independence, enjoy living alone, and marvelous minds like ours tend to wander.

After our evening ended and I had dropped you off at your door, I wondered why this female friend of ours hadn't asked me directly how I am and why my text, which I know she received, is still unanswered. Asking you this question seemed unimportant at the time as our conversation went off into unexpected tangents and predictable rants. We tend to show one another a bit of grace due to having busy lives, and the growing excuse, and reason, of our declining memory. Had she, you, or I simply forgotten? The situation was unimportant, though our chat continued to gnaw at me and cast a shadow, muddling my thoughts, until I realized that this distraction steered me away from acknowledging the compliment you paid to me. Do you remember this?

Back to our dinner chat. I recounted my last trip and an extraordinary experience that took place which prompted me to set more challenging goals to improve my quality of life. I reminded you of this and shared my progress by pointing to the chart taped on the kitchen cupboard door. It was at that moment I saw the look of awareness and recognition warming in your eyes. That silent moment between us saying, "Ah yes. I remember now." Your concerns are appreciated and unfounded. My writing to you helps us both to remember.

Thank you for the validation that I didn't necessarily need or want, although it reaffirmed my conviction to move forward and lighten my load. Achieving goals at a quicker pace is encouraging at this stage in my life. Preparing for retirement with visions of travel, and the possibility of being a grandmother, motivates me. As our dinner continued and conversation turned, I recall disclosing that fear was also a motivating factor. So yes my friend, you are correct in saying that there has been a big change in my life. Something significant and frightening happened on levels that I don't feel the need or desire to express.

We are the unlikeliest of friends, you and I. Polar opposites are how I and others often describe our friendship. And yet we have known one another and shared space for over two decades. I appreciate that we live our own lives and may experience extended periods of time before seeing one another. We can easily catch up without needing to justify our absence. You are not a high maintenance friend and I, more often than not, prefer my own company.

Friendships like ours evolve over time, whereas other connections I have made were fleeting, or as I have mentioned before, followed the adage of people showing up in my world for a reason, a season, or a lifetime. I prefer the mystery of not knowing whether a friendship will last or not. Enjoying the company of another and taking the moment for what it is feels fitting. The longest relationship I have ever had, and ever truly wanted, is the relationship I have with myself.

The sentiment of wanting to be my own best friend hasn't gone over well with many people I have known. This is why I am particular about who I spend my time with. I am content and self-assured which has aligned me with specific male friends, like yourself, rather than friends of my own gender. Perhaps that is the reason why our mutual female friend chose to side-step a reply to my text and sought you out as mediator. To our female friend, I say thank you for the subtle message acknowledging our social differences. She and I share space with you quite well. You are the mediator needed for our trio to be harmonious.

Thank you for bringing connection and diversity to my world. Our polar opposite connection is the mirror that fascinates me and leads me to reflections like this that enlighten us both.
See you Soon.

Existential Bread

IMAGINANDO UN MUNDO



SIN
FRONTERAS

Existential Bread

IMAGINING A WORLD



WITHOUT
BORDERS

Strawberries or Transphobia

Sarah Doepner

There is a saying that suggests “When the student is ready, the teacher appears.” The idea being that as we grow and develop our interests or passions we reach a point where we seek help. That help may have been already available from the beginning of our interest but we had not matured sufficiently enough in our passion to open ourselves to that source of help. It also takes time to learn to ask the right questions. Luke Skywalker was searching for something beyond his humdrum life on Tatooine when he encounters Obi Wan Kenobi and later Yoda. They help him but at first he’s asking the wrong questions. A Zen monk practices their meditation, often sitting for years until the master presents the koan, or the whack on the head that opens their mind. We struggle through history, science or wood shop in high school but it’s not until years later that we match the challenge in those disciplines to our interests and the instructor who creates a moment that starts us moving on our own. We then can learn of diverse people and their struggles or the math behind the universe or how to shape wood into something not just useful but beautiful

I recently had that experience, but in reverse. It was a simple process in my kitchen, slicing fresh strawberries into a bowl, adding sugar, covering them and letting the syrup develop. For the first time in years of doing the same thing I asked myself, “where did I learn how to do that?” I came to realize I’d never been taught to do it but I had seen it done on a number of occasions. My mother would occasionally prepare a dessert in our yellow-walled kitchen using summer strawberries she brought from the grocery. She would sit at the table or stand at the counter and press me on the status of my schoolwork or how my friends were faring or maybe update me on plans for the next weekend. I normally paid attention to the conversation but not to the cooking. I can’t recall a single time when she offered to teach me how to cook. But somehow the lesson crept in and rested someplace comfortable, waiting for me to need that skill. It had to be at least 20 years from the last time I watched her slice strawberries until I had a basket of that same fruit in front of me that was destined to become strawberry shortcake. Without a pause I jumped in and duplicated her method without even thinking, it was just the right way to do it.

This week I sliced strawberries once again and rejoiced in the knowledge of how I gained that minor, but very satisfying bit of kitchen knowledge. As I celebrated the skill, I honored my teacher. The image of my mother came back to me from across a span of at least 40 years and that was my answer. The lesson had been offered, accepted and stored without conscious effort and even when I used it at first I failed to credit the source. Now, years after her death, I sit back and say a very belated thank you.

But I am befuddled by the real possibility that there are plenty of other skills, attitudes and concepts that I have passively accepted without understanding where they came from. I can identify academic sources and particular skills I learned out of necessity, those being things I’m sure I have nurtured or adapted to my own needs, but in so many ways I truly do stand on the shoulders of giants. I owe much to parents, family, lovers, friends, co-workers, strangers, authors and others who have served as teachers in my life.

Often it was less the lesson and more the enthusiasm of the instructor or that of other students that stayed with and pushed me forward on my own path of discovery.

As I consider my life as a student I realize I've been a teacher as well. My life has been full of shared experiences and there have been times when my choices, actions or enthusiasms have influenced others. It's too late now to go back and change any of those encounters or examples, but by and large, I've been reminded of my influence on others. While my life goal has been to live well, as independently as possible and showing respect for others, I rarely saw myself as a teacher of anything more advanced than "lefty loosie, righty tighty" or "always drink upstream from the herd". But it seems my attitudes and passions have, indeed, been adopted by others. Realizing it now that I'm in my later years relieves some of the possible pressure I might have felt when I was younger and less confident (or resigned to the past). I guess I'll continue living my life the way I have and maybe throw in the understanding that I'm passing on what I've learned and accepted, and those around me are doing the same.

I also never had a teacher who taught me to discriminate against those who were different or to use force to impose my will on others. I did learn it was right to protect those who were weaker than me (not many at the time), and hating others was a waste of time. So I grew up with only my own anxieties to deal with, not some imposed by parents or teachers or government. There were things I was attracted to and shamed about until I managed to better understand the diversity of life and the options we each should have to express ourselves. I discovered there were both good and bad consequences for my choices and I had been given the tools when young to make careful choices in the face of that kind of challenge.


I worry today about the trends in management of the content to be considered in public education. There are obvious efforts being made to discourage or ban points of view that offend a powerful minority but cause harm to marginalized and powerless minorities. I worry about media megaphones being used to focus on anxiety, fear and hate and for what reason? It appears it's mostly a financial and political power consideration and has little to do with fairness, equity or respect. I worry there is a generation destined to be trained not to question but to follow and not given the tools needed to see through the strawman or insults intended as diversions. I worry the dark histories will not be learned but repeated. I worry about the children who are in their kitchens learning transphobia and racial hate instead of learning vicariously to prepare strawberry shortcake.

It turns out that this student has been ready nearly every day and many teachers have already presented their lessons. Lessons that I believe set me on a path where new ideas can be challenged and adopted where they reinforced my understanding of a diverse life in an even more diverse world. I just need to reflect from time to time on the gifts they have given me just through their strengths, weaknesses, attitudes, skills and passions. None of it was presented as a formal lesson but it has all contributed to the person I've become. I hope I've done proper service to their example. To those who sent the lessons I seem to have ignored, my apologies are offered and I beg your patience, it's possible I'm just not ready for them just yet but I'm going to be looking for strawberries, not transphobia.


After a Surgery

Kit Leichty

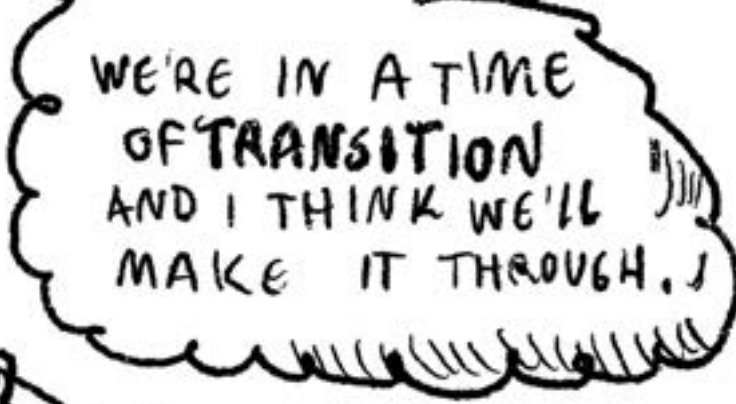




I DON'T THINK
I MIGHT HAVE
HAD THE SPACE
OR COMMUNITY
TO COME OUT
EVEN A DECADE
OR TWO AGO.



I'M ALIVE.
I'M TRANS.
I'M HERE RIGHT
NOW, RIGHT HERE
IN UTAH.



WE'RE IN A TIME
OF TRANSITION
AND I THINK WE'LL
MAKE IT THROUGH.



KIT 5.20.25

Tyranny of the Tape

Scott Fineshriber



Sovrene
Scott Fineshriber



Alive and Present

Barbara Hirsch

I find solace in books.
Their easy timelessness,
lulling me away from every day.

In the every day,
I greet a sunrise with joy in my heart.
I see brilliant greens in trees that still prosper along craggy mountain sides.
I lay thank you notes on the porches of neighbors who fly flags that take courage.
I cry during the National Anthem.
“What is the land of the free?”

I find solace in nature,
It's endless plains and outstretched boundaries,
reminding me of the vast promise that called us all here.

In that vast promise,
I know I must find solace in careful measure.
I must stand ready.
Poised, instead, to be propelled by words and winds to act.
Fighting against my constant, soul-kept rumblings,
to embrace my own promise.
a promise to be the hands that will clasp together and move us forward.
a promise to be the voice for all.

Forget-Me-Not

Tiffany Anderson

Delicate and light loving
Soft star-shaped blossoms
Akin to a toddler in a snowsuit
Reaching wide and swiping angels in the snow
Sky-blue petals, and sometimes short-lived
How can I forget you?
I muse...would Victoria favor your blue hue too?
Or the gentle pink with sunshine center...my favorite, so tiny and sweet
I adore you for your simplicity
And envy your low maintenance style
We are alike in that heat stresses us
You shine and shimmer with moisture
Though I do not like the damp
I remember now...
That cooler weather suits us both
I may sauna, and then roll in the snow
Let's reflect on that next year – or not
You may forget to return, though if you do
We will feast well and thrive.

The Weight of a Tambourine Falls Somewhere in Between

Maria Fischer

"The average woman's purse weights approximately one kilo. The average woman's heart weighs nine ounces. The weight of a tambourine falls somewhere in between, a little closer to the heart than the handbag."

– Tom Robbins, *Skinny Legs and All*

I don't carry a purse.
Years ago I carried my driver's license
And insurance card in the cup holder
Of my car.
I've aged, of course, and
Now often need a handbag,
But I feel I've kept that freedom.

I get burned out, of course, but
My teacher's heart weighs
Far more than nine ounces.
Nate wrote about his anxiety
In a writing prompt before
The assigned poem.
I answered with a positive note home
And a list of book recommendations.
He raises his hand more now.
He said, "Thanks for the note."
It's not much.
Nine ounces.
But it matters more
Than my nineteen years
In customer service.

Now, the weight of a tambourine
Is a totally different thing.
I have anxiety too, of course,
And question this world.
I don't have skinny legs.
I could pay off those student loans
If I just went back to the old job.
But my pocketbook
Wouldn't rattle with the percussion
Of value.

If We Grew Old Together

Will Turner

If we grew old together : I would only find you beautiful : Yes, event at ninety-five years old.

Your body is nothing : it does not count.

For I am in love : with your splendid soul.

And when we both died : I would still reach my fingers into the space between yours.

So that we could rot together : And our juices could water the plants.

And our dead love : could sprout a fantastic maple tree.

And when our leaves died : we would blow away : into the sky, and we would be stars far away.

And throughout eternity : we would dance, you and me.

And when we became pebbles : I like to think you'd pebble next to me.

And when we pebbled forever : and the universe itself came to a close : we still would not go.

When the universe shrinks down to an infinite amount : I like to think god would finally come out.

He'd say "everyone's going now, it's time to come home" : and we still, would not go.

And just like that : the universe would blink out of existence : leaving just two pebbles that used to be you and me.

What a Time to Be Alive, Reflections on Time

Deborah Chiquito



Part I

What a time to be alive, our time to live life,
As we trace each event alongside time's journey.

A known yet strange aspect of our physical cosmos,
Measuring time presents its unique features.

Time's deep mysterious structure has yet to be revealed,
Through time change happens, everything evolves, moving forward.

Finding its hidden composition may one day be reality.
And if so, we may discover that time is made of something finer.

Like wood's makeup, down to its very molecules, atoms, and other particles.
A molecular recipe, ingredients combined for wood's creation.

Maybe time is like this too, its own formula, molecules and atoms combine,
Mixed in just the right way to make time, overcoming all obstacles.

Part II

Our movement through space and passage of time connect,
Stitched into the fabric of our vast Universe.

Earth in perpetual motion, rotation around the sun yearly, full daily revolution.
We are unaware of spinning through space, due to Earth's constant velocity motion.

Even though we are soaring through space,
We seem to rest while watching the sun and moon cross the sky.

We flow freely through space, we walk, run and hold still,
Yet try to be still in time, not letting the next second pass by.

On Earth, precision clocks synchronize time in harmony,
Our earthly experience overlooks extremes in the Cosmos.

Space time's expansiveness acts differently than what we see up close.
Yet as technology progresses, greater insight will be instilled.

Part III

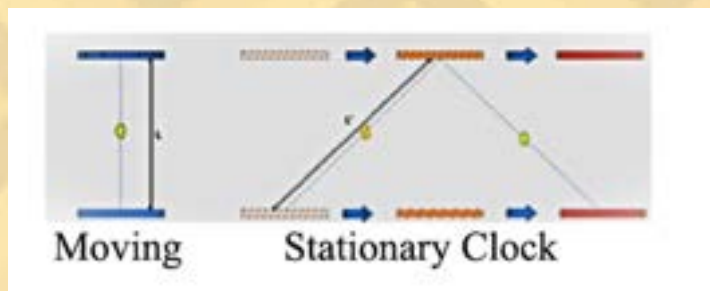
Theories like Quantum Mechanics, the theory of the very small; General Relativity, the theory of large mass consider these extremes,
And Special Relativity, the theory of speed, transformed perceptions of space-time.

Einstein calculated the speed of light as constant traveling through empty space.
This "law" endures the test of time, at 186,000 miles per second, electromagnetic radiation beams.

According to his calculations, travel from Earth near light speed, 6 months out and 6 months back,
Return one year later, hundreds or thousands of years passed on Earth, fast speed slows time.

A thought experiment: two "light" clocks, each with a photon light ball,
Both clocks with a mirror below and above, one clock stationary, the other moving.

The light ball moves straight up and down on the stationary clock, tick-tock,
On the moving clock the light ball moves diagonally, tiick-tocckk.



Time on the moving clocks move more slowly than stationary clocks, synchronicity now off track.

The faster the clock moves closer to the speed of light, the slower time ticks.

Time changes with gravity as well as with speed.

GPS, via satellites, if not adjusted, would rapidly guide us off course.

The greater the gravitational field, the more time slows.

Such as, a black holes' great gravity force.

On “Interstellar” Cooper spent several hours on a planet near a black hole,
Gargantua’s formidable gravity slowed time, yet on Earth twenty-three years elapsed,
time dilation’s toll.

Part IV

Physicists’ calculations highly predict forward time travel but not backward,
The arrow of time points from past to future.

Theoretical physics posits we will always exist and persist.
Even if we desire to erase our existence, never to be seen or heard,

We continue in time and place.
Cosmic history conveys our eternal presence.

Worm holes, short cut tunnels, stretched in space, from one point to another.
Move their openings and time passes differently.

They may act as time machines, a futuristic allure,
One direction flows into the future, reverse direction travel to the past freely.

While in the past, you may be able to stop your parents’ paths from touching,
Preventing them meeting in a parallel realm.

Your birth halted in that parallel universe,
But your birth cannot be erased from your universe of origin in reverse.

Laws of physics may prevent intervention, avoiding chaos and overwhelm,
Creating questions about freedom of choice and free will from within.

If ours is the only universe, moments in time just are never changing.
If time is emergent consisting of atoms, individual events are unchanging.

Influences permitting your parents to meet in that realm,
Will always be in play; you are part of that moment always, never obsolete.

Part V

Compared to the universe’s billions of years, humans have existed but for a moment,
All living things become extinct, our presence “flickers” between two long stretches.

Everyone’s a “flicker within a flicker.”
Flipped perspectives give meaning to our finite years.

How earth-shattering universal evolution progressed gifting us a human experience,

To think, feel, love, explore, connect, create, imagine, we are transfixed.

Relativity shows all of time exists just as all of space exists.

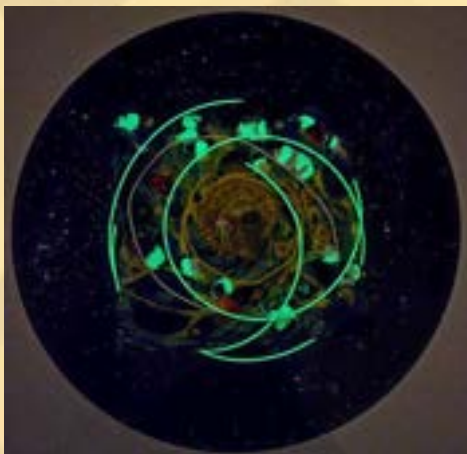
Someone moving relative to me, what they consider now may be in my past and what they consider now may be in my future.

Past, present, future, all equally real existing in the same way, time doesn't disappear. History in quantum mechanics shows an evolution of space and time on an equal basis.

Always to exist in a way, through moments of space and time lived during our lifetime. Every moment as eternal always to remain there.

What a time to be alive,
Our time to live our life!

To experience, think, feel, love, explore, each moment we seize,
To connect, create, and imagine possibilities!





Taking Up Space

Syd Ackley

The purpose of this piece is simply to take up as much (literal) space on a page with queer and neurodivergent people, places, and moments in their raw (unedited) forms.

At this time in history, my community is literally and rhetorically being attacked from every angle. One of the most effective and accessible ways for us to resist is to LIVE.

When queer and neurodivergent people unapologetically live their lives and allow themselves to experience true joy, it breeds visibility and hope for current and future generations.

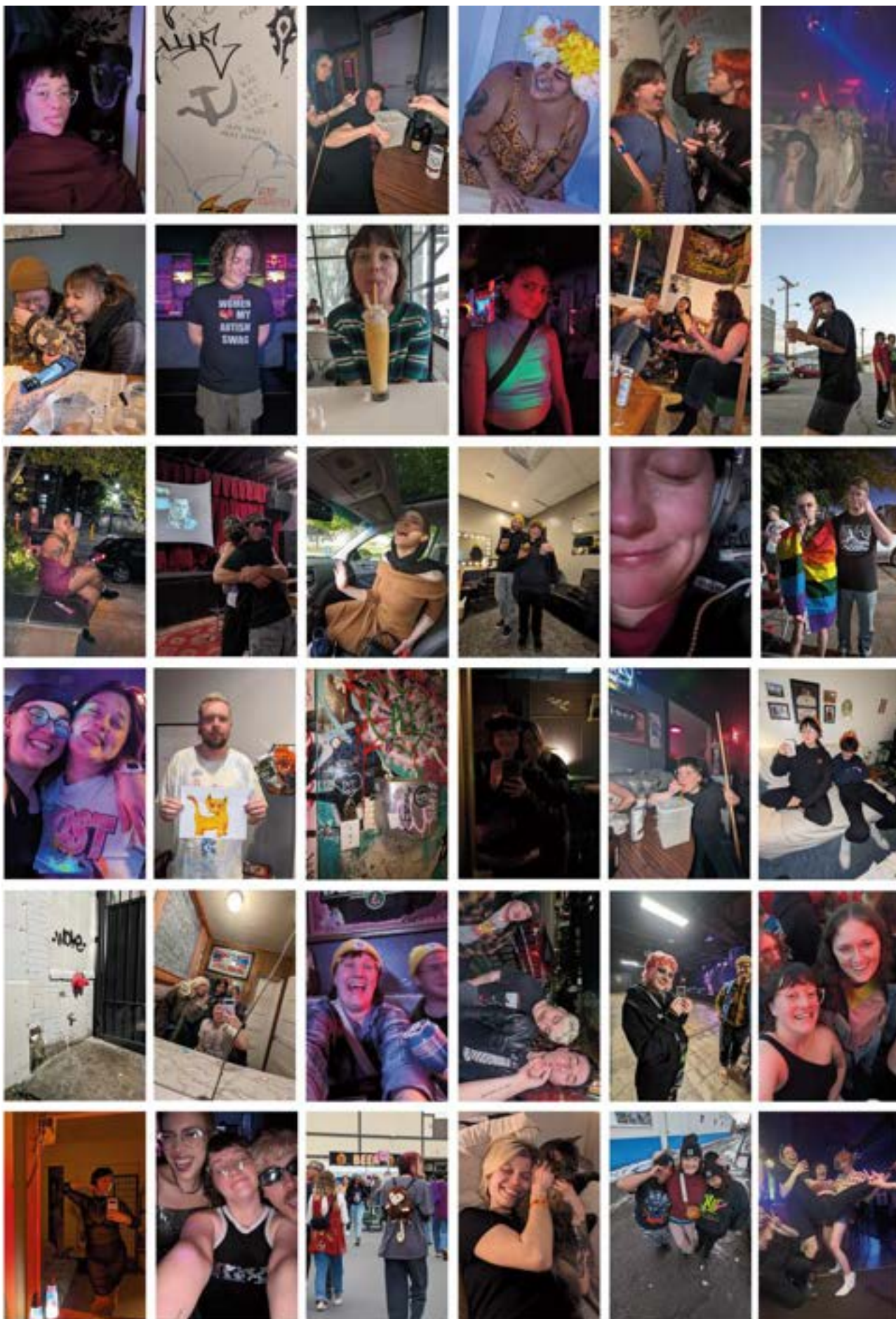
We are here.

We have always been here.

We will ALWAYS be here.









Pulchra Mater (Beautiful Mother)

Francis Kenneth Cobbe

*This digital collage celebrates the divine beauty of motherhood and the salvation, joy, and life that mothers bring, embodied especially by the Mother of God. Just as all life comes from mothers, the path to eternal life is guided by the Virgin Mary, the star of the ocean. Along the path are symbols that represent and honor my mother, my grandmother, and Christ as a life-giving mother figure. Beauty exists in all of creation, even in the mother centipede cradling her young. Motherhood, **pulchra mater**, transcends human ideas of beauty and gender; it is sacred.*



Mary
Terry Brinkman



Epilogue

Marie Anne Arreola

(A long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away...)

*We were replaced—
or maybe we chose it.
From human to man,
from man to something
less inclined to weep.
External beings, yes,
but ones we built ourselves,
watching reruns of Earth from behind a pane*

*of carbon glass.
We said: No more sin. (Sing?)
It's hard to remember the difference now.*

*Even when your tongue—
that soft engine I once trusted—
twitched against my teeth in the dark;
even when the grease of a little boy's hair
stuck to my wrist like gunpowder residue;
even when your mouth opened*

*like a summer fig over mine;
even when your hands, all pioneer and practice,
shaped the clay of my hips*

*into something hopeful—
you weren't the tired voice I wanted to wake to.
Not the wound I'd retell like a bedtime story.
Not even the shelter I could blame*

*for my dryness.
You stayed dry.
You were a wooden ship in open water
that mistook silence for navigation.
And still you sailed.*

Three months ago:
Mom and Dad, or the units formerly known as them,
still registered Roman Catholic.
Mom confessed her imagined sins
to a clean-shaven Father
behind a carbon lattice.
“Go on, my child,” he said, nodding toward
a future no one would inherit.
Not real absolution, but it passed for comfort.
We were learning how to approximate closeness.

“Play Can You Feel the Love Tonight at my funeral,”
I said, then laughed.
Not really.
I wouldn’t care.
(But thank you for reading.
I placed each word like a star
on the underside of a table.)

Dr. So & So said:
“You’ll get better at being better.”
God knows better felt like a rumor
the body no longer wanted to verify.

There were dreams.
Or memories.
A version of my pre-human self
extracting his own spine like a faulty circuit
and slapping it on my Ikea desk.
Still warm.
Still trying to mean something.
We run cleaner code now.
Sorry, guys.
It had to happen.

You would’ve hated the blackout anyway.
And you know how it goes—
when Twitter dies, the real civil war begins.
Everyone reaching for a flag
made of screenshots.

There were terrors, too:
me walking the length of a quiet street,
snapping my fingers off like matchsticks,
eating them one by one.
Dr. So & So asks how they taste.
Sweet, I almost say.
Like the time I kissed a red walkie-talkie
trying to conjure an apple.

Maybe that was the beginning—
transatlantic flights,
some real, most not.
A longing that sounded mechanical
but wore a familiar shape.

A computer might still be
the most loyal lover.
We'll meet at a Turing test,
both pretending not to be who we are.
Speed dating for ghosts.
I'll stream my desire into a rental app,
upload my spine to the cloud.
A neoliberal god, everywhere and nowhere.

The lower months were softer.
Exploring old Blockbusters
with my second Dad,
elbows dusted in Dorito crumbs,
reading Hunger Games aloud
like scripture with alternate endings.
Trying again at fatherhood
in ink that didn't smudge.

Pen in his mouth,
Dr. So & So glances at his watch.
"Our time's up," he says.
And the exit yawns open—
through the garage,
door unlatched from its track,
folded like paper against the ceiling.
Like a soul peeling itself
from its ribcage,
quietly.

Once,
I thought I could carry myself
out of this house on my own back.
Piggyback into something better.

But now—
now, I understand:

Being better doesn't knock.
It waits.
It curls in the drawer.
It hides in the glove box.
It hums beneath the couch cushions.
It arrives,
in silence,
when the map is already dark.

[FADE OUT]

Things We Do

E.G. Soueidi

Oh the things that we do, to make a buck or two
I'm begging you please, I want to do what I please

Mamma's shedding her tears, breaking her back to survive
What's this price on our heads
Making it hard to be alive

Give what I can, take as I need
Too much too fast, is dangerous indeed

Poor man in the street, he's just trying to eat
Rich man in the seat, he's got hunger to beat

Poor man in the street, he's wanting something from me
Rich man in the seat, he's wanting something from me

What's it mean to be free
When you work to live and life is not cheap
People living in fear, thinking the end is near
Shot down by police, fears holding up the peace
Oh you're not free, ooo you're not free, not we're not free

That Peculiar Institution

Allison Whittenberg

To simulate, lock yourself in a closet for four months
Except, there's too much room in a closet
Maximum, 28 inches
Lie in a bookshelf
The boat pitches
Planks lined with upchucked, salt water, and shit
Urine runs down the slats
Blood clots in your limbs
The diarrhea stricken manacled to the sea sickened
Chained to the impregnated
The boat tossing
A baby being birthed
Think of a sardine can with envy
The sardines are dead

Treasure Amongst Shadows

Kamille Fairhurst

A mouse in a maze
Grew tired of running
It looked to the sky
And found companionship
in a celestial body.

The moon found a coin
And said it was lucky
She shone on it's skin
Lighting the copper magnificently.

A girl hidden in shadows
Came upon a penny
bathed in soft light.
In the coin of little value
She found salvation.

Describing Nothing

Lauren Smith

A powerless absence of source
Inverted echo
Sucking in and pushing out with equal force,
particles embodying the stagnant whiplash of both directions
The Little Mermaid without her voice
Trying and intending
on Quarantine Halloween
We should really hang out sometime,
you're just so fun

Dead Bliss

Lauren Smith

A willed disposal of
Autobiographical
Parable
Gradating into ignorance,
trying to reclaim dead bliss

Under New Management

Tara Hogan

Please take a number
We'll be with you soon
We're experiencing a high volume of
Error, over encumbered

Brain functionality
New zero
Opened up to closed windows
It's all good, bro

I am safe
I am free
I am here

Too much is true at once
Perpetual dunce
Duality, formalities
Sucker punched

That was so funny
I forgot to laugh
At least these monkeys
Give good back scratch

You are giving
Dumpster fire
It is giving
Wet dog

Thank you for calling
You are very important
We'll be with you soon
Very soon, Tina Darling

Brain functionality
Subzero
You're annoying
Blessed beacon

I am safe
I am free
I am smeared

Too much is true at once
Blame Big Queer
Duality, formalities
Why am I here

Working for Nothing

Oscar Monroe

Clocking in
But I'm checking out
I don't doubt if i stop that I'll make it out
Wasting days, living in a daze
Is it me or did it all seem to blend as one

Feels like I'm working
Working for nothing

Stepping in
But I feel like walking out
Rather be sleeping than dragging my ass around
I'm trying
Trying not to give in
To the fact that the rat race isn't meant for you and me
That there has to be more to life than what I'm seeing
That the people at the top don't care about you and me
That the people at the top don't care about you and me

They got me feeling like I'm working, working for nothing

PotPouri

Kevin Bodniza



Reach (2025)
Beth Horton



Rust (2025)
Beth Horton

Looking for something, searching for nothing
But I'm hiding, where has the time been
It's unkind, I am tired
working for nothing, aching for something

Fire in my eyes, leaves me blind
Can't see no body, can't see no end
Trouble on my mind
Troubles to leave behind

Waking for nothing, breaking for nothing
I'm not a live and I'm not well ya

[Phonetic Arabic]
Oh hel hayet shoo hazineh
Mab tifrouk ma3eh, Ma7rou2 elbe
Oh mafiineh irfa3 raseh l'maftou7
Oh habibe hayet el hilweh
Oh habibe hayet el hilweh

Oh this life shes so sad
It makes no difference in me, my heart is burned
Oh I cant lift up my head that is opened
Oh my love life the beautiful
Oh my love life the beautiful

Skyscrapers

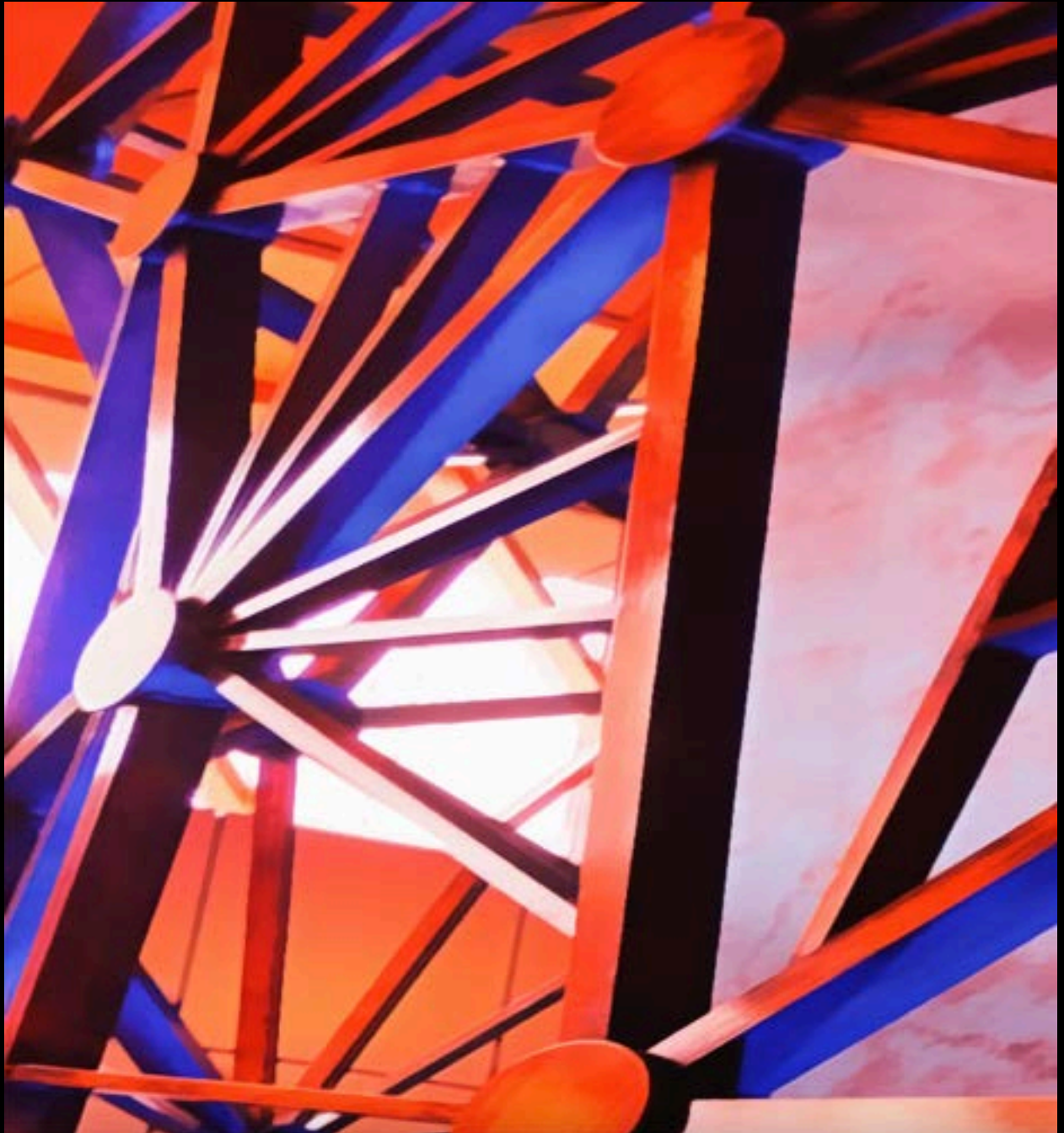
Maria Fischer

Because all the best
Stories are written about loss,
Our loyal lovers get left
Behind. Their doing the dishes
Is abandoned in favor
Of Alejandro Zambra's
"Skyscrapers," in which he writes,
"But I had no idea
That those years would be fun,
Intense, and bitter,
And would be followed by
A much longer, perhaps indefinite period
During which we knew nothing of each other."

Our loyal lovers,
In contrast,
In direct deposit to the checking account
And kind note which credit card to use,
Get abused.
They are not "utterly unerasable."
They are traceable
In the water bill paid,
The bed made,
Capable and inescapable and lovely,
Really,
But not the unshakable fiction we create.

Folly (2025)

Beth Horton



Intersect

Joshua Wynne-Hudson



Lost to Traffic

George Morris

Down a concrete canyon
We race,
From stop lights to brake signals,
All red.

A car-length clear before our bumper.
Half a car-length behind;
If we're lucky.

Cloudbusters and skyscrapers
Surround,
While billboards and street signage,
Beckon.

Fire chained by a transmission,
We ride,
A thousand moving parts,
We trust.

Gas, diesel, & electric power burn up.
A thousand year's accumulation,
Lost to traffic.

The Grind (a poem that never ends)

Destine Brunatti-Schoff

Eyes open to that god awful sound
Exhausted dread fills the air
Coffee hurriedly poured into mugs
Going through the motions

Honking and revving engines all around
Birds fly past in windows of speeding cars
That red glow, always demanding patience
Leave 10 minutes early and still arrive late

"How are you today?" "I am good, I am fine."
Colleagues slacking, eyes stuck to their phone
Foot tapping hoping its almost 12 o'clock
"Time Crunch!" email arrives, so much for lunch

A sigh of relief as evening air hits skin
Picking up food, practically poison
Finally finished with nightly motions
Laying in bed scrolling until eyes close

what a
time

time

time

to be a l i v e

{enough}

H.E. Grahame

9:25 am. virtual meeting. corporate hierarchies and pervasive regimes.

1:30 pm. stuffy conference room. drenched with decorum and workplace platitudes.

3:00 pm (sharp.) could this meeting be an email?

performance. ritual. tradition.

s p e c t a c l e

romanticizing consumption and churn

as pawns wither and waste

signing love letters to a gasping globe

x. o. x. o.

right on cue

set dressings decorate every stage

of grief and collapse.

b r e a k i n g

like promises

like voices

like hearts

{is it enough?}

noon. coffee shop check-ins . shrouded conversation and veiled dialogue.

four . casual cocktail bar. dripping with code words and wayward whispers.

nine (ish). could this conversation spark change?

friends. colleagues. tribunes.

c o m r a d e s

disenchanted orchestration and optics

as queens harmonize and hum

writing rejection slips to a rotting rule

x. o .x. o.

right in tune

murmured tones garnish under

currents of dissent.

e x t e n d i n g

my hand.

my voice.

my word.

{is it enough?}

to be
alive

alive

alive

this t i m e

Whirlwind
Michael Nelson





Periphery
Michael Nelson

The Darkness of The Sky

Eliza Scudder

Content Warning: contains notes on sexual abuse of a minor and trauma.







The Key Was There the Whole Time

Elizabeth Suggs

Earphones are in, volume maxed, Philip Glass swelling like a rising tide in my skull. Still, I can hear the meeting bleeding through—voices crackling over Zoom, the rustle of someone shifting in their chair, the *clack* of a keyboard. The meeting I should be listening to. The one I'm paid to care about. But I can't summon the strength. Not today.

I thought I chose freedom. But here I am—boxed into a job with fixed hours, status updates, mandatory morning check-ins where we pretend to be excited about quarterly KPIs. This isn't freedom. Maybe it never was. If it wasn't the job, it was the paycheck that kept me tethered. Or the relationship that felt more like an obligation than a bond. Always something—a shackle dressed as stability.

I used to write every morning, before the sun climbed over the rooftops. I'd wake with ideas crawling over me like ants—restless, insistent. I'd pause mid-conversation to scribble a character note, a fragment of dialogue, the shape of a new story. But now? Now I pause only to jot down strategies for increasing client engagement or morale-boosting initiatives for the division. Bullet points instead of poetry.

I never asked for this life. And yet it's where I've landed. Where I've stayed. Where I must be, apparently. Stuck in a small little bird cage where my bars have become just a little more opaque.

All I ever wanted was something quieter. A cottage in the woods. A life of stillness. The sound of birds instead of pings. To live among animals and trees, not under fluorescent lights and deadlines.

The cubicles are closing in. I can feel them, inching closer each day. The cage bars glow now—too bright to ignore. Maybe one day they'll press in so tightly that I vanish altogether, flattened under the weight of a life I never meant to choose.

The truth is, there's a key under my stiletto. It's been there the whole time, and no matter how often I tell myself I'm going to use it, I know in my heart I never will.

SLC Shakedown

Lisa Donaldson

(Photography, Left)

Normalcy

Sage Thee

Sometimes, I feel fine, perhaps even normal. Other times I want to eat the whole world raw. I sit in the passenger seat on the way back from a work team lunch while they discuss the latest child abuse docuseries. I am numb. I do not join the conversation. We get back to work, and I am a million miles away from my body. I sit at my desk while another part of me burns her fingertips off with bleach. An hour passes, maybe two, and I return to my body, the tips of my fingers still more or less intact. I go about my day. I write emails. I write in my mood journal. I text my sister to tell her I love her. I take up space in this world that tried so hard to erase me. I breathe in. I breathe out. I am a whole person, not just parts of one. I do not feel afraid in the same way I used to. I hardly feel afraid at all.

I sit at my desk, and I feel fine, perhaps even normal.

Threadbare

Joe Roberts

Who decides whose holy visage comes
unstitched from the human tapestry?
Whose fingers spider over our threads
to deaden our eyes and peel our skin?

We're thinned by the omission
of a smile which could be
your brother's, or the balding pate
that looks just like your father's.

Where does our fraying grief strand us?

And yet we roll out the everyday
as if we can forever hold our place
after the first thread has been pulled,
as if only our faces are permanent
knots in the vanishing filament.

Yarn

Rory Donahoe

When is the snap between childhood and growing into an adult? Maybe it's a process, like a piece of yarn that comes all jumbled up. And through life every person you meet takes it in their hands and works out a kink, straightening it out. Then, if you're lucky, some inspired few people—educators and those who care—sneak back in a few little knots, just to remind you of the messy ball of yarn you came from.

Blinded By Your Beauty
Matthew McCain



Interregnum

K.J. Lewis

Texts latenight or earlymorning from dad...

[The speaker of this poem—it is a poem, I assure you—will be compressing and/or changing the timeline here. Invent the speaker. Fill in the gaps and spaces with your own mother wounds and wounded mothers. Should memories lead you to assign too much blame to your mothers, fill in the gaps with absentpresent and presentabsent fathers.]

Mom's having emergency surgery—gall bladder.

[Surgery on hold. Complications.]

[Surgery happens.]

Mom isn't released for a few days. Complications. Cancer diagnosis. Her mother may have died from this cancer. It might be genetic. *Should we all get tested? What about the grandbaby? Remember, grandma went to the doctor because she was so sick in August 2005. She was gone by _____'s birthday that November. And grandpa died on _____'s birthday. _____'s birthday is coming up. Fuck!*

[The speaker of this poem's father will ask for prayers or thoughts—whatever his children can offer. The speaker of this poem will send intermittent prayers as she mostly no longer prays and definitely no longer sends pleas and apologies and thanks to his god. The speaker of this poem sends and will continue to send agnostic prayers to the goddesses. Mostly to Lilith. Sometimes to Eve.]

Mom lives past April and into May 2025. She may live for quite some time—the strides in cancer science since 2005 cannot be denied, dad says.

[The speaker of this poem will commiserate with her sisters that their parents have and will continue to deny the efficacy of other science—science that doesn't submit to their worldviews. People, many with cancer, will die because of their worldviews. Many people have already died because of their worldviews. Many people are currently dying because of their worldviews.]

Mom is back in the hospital [or she never left]. *Is she comfortable? In pain?* On pain meds. She can't remember can't recall can't sit up shitting black _____ bleeding internally. Endoscopies—two. _____ Bleeding stops.

[The speaker of this poem will remember the humanness of her mother and the violence of her mother's youth and the violence of the speaker's youth that came mostly through her mother's language rather than hands and fists. The speaker of this poem will be reminded by her father that his children—the four of us—chose our mother and our

father as our parents in the pre-mortal existence, so we knew what we were getting ourselves into even before our births. We did this to ourselves.]

Mom starts chemotherapy. Your parents send a Mother's Day card praising you for not giving up despite having to fight so hard for everything. There's a check for \$60 in it. It's still not cashed.

[The speaker of this poem will also remember that her mother taught her about sexism and misogyny in "the Church" and that Brigham Young was a "bastard." She will remember when her mother stood up for her older and only brother who loved films and filmmaking and who was "different" against the homophobic bullying of the scouts and scoutmasters who led them. The speaker of this poem will also remember that her mother taught her to be a feminist even though she would never claim that identity for herself.]

Mom is up for a brief chat on Mother's Day. She's started chemotherapy and other medical interventions—her chances of surviving cancer are not bad.

[The speaker of this poem will remember arguing with her mother about the humanity of trans women and women athletes who aren't feminine enough for her during the speaker's last visit to her parents' house in Texas. The speaker will remember her father intervening and pretending to be the peacemaker even though he very much holds and affirms the mother's beliefs when their "brainwashed, liberal daughter" isn't visiting from Utah. He enjoys playing this role.]

Texts early morning or late night from dad...

[The speaker of this poem knows how the culture wants her to feel in this moment. She remembers and remembers and re-members her mother's humanness. The speaker of this poem plays the role of dutiful oldest daughter. She does not enjoy playing this role. She feels numb. She feels guilt for feeling numb. The speaker of this poem plays the role. Invent the role you would play here. Make it a memorable one.]

Mom's in the emergency room. In extreme pain. *Sending you both love. Hope they can manage her pain and she can rest.* Dad asks how you are.

[The speaker of this poem wants to tell him the terrible truth. The speaker wants to describe for her father the brutality of the current moment. The speaker of this poem wants to bear witness for her father the violence of this current moment. The speaker of this poem wants her father to be a better man and to despair with her. The speaker of this poem remembers that her father taught her about slavery, apartheid, the Holocaust, and the human capacities for cruelty and for repair. The speaker of this poem responds.]

Surviving.

Roots

Nash Hutto



Faded Sharpie stains the cardboard lid
— elegant, unbroken—
from before the tremors took her hands.
Memories preserved in a dust-laden box.
Memories on a badge-littered sash.

Little shirt,
yellowed with age.
The promise of fun, whispered
against your ear.
Lemonades
turned to dust.

Little girl,
misting of sweat collecting
on the back of her neck
in the summer sun.
Long braids
hang down her back.

“July, I think this box is for you.”

You can smell the grass,
the leather in dad’s car.
He drops you off on Wednesday afternoons.

“I didn’t know she kept these.”

The summer spent selling cookies.
My brothers pooled their allowance and bought every box.

What We Keep

Alexis Andrade

A tone loiters in the outermost part of my throat,
equal parts remembered and forgotten.

My mother sang it to me,
or maybe it was only my imagination.

But I hum it,
off-key, unsure,
to a child who is yet to understand
what it means to carry something forward.

The Net

Alexis Andrade

My pawpaw's wrinkled hands braid the fishing net,
coiling, tugging, knotting –
muscle memory that I inherited, just like his eyes.

This net carries more than fish.
It holds his voice, his stories,
the joy of mornings spent together in salty air.

One day, his hands will stop their spirited braiding.
But the net will endure.

Ripples on Silver Lake
Scott Fineshriber



Tenawas

Michael-Anne Johnson

Death comes for all,
carried gentle on chitin wings.

The cattle lay and slept
in their pasture– which lay and slept.
The sky, now quiet with stars, slept.
The soul lay and slept.

What a journey these bees take.
Crossing mountains, plains, fields
to find my plenty and put it in its place.

Rams rear their horns,
mother sheep strike with battered heads.
Let them fight for it,
armed with defenses built in.

I am not a traveler.
I am not prepared to walk this great road.
I beg you, let me not go to the meadow,
though I have been struck down by a god.

There I will not recognize my mother,
who made this journey once before.
Nor will she recognize her child.

Fill my plate with clay.
If I must drink the muddy waters
lend me a fine cup,
a fine table.

The House by Hobblecreek

Miranda Stone

I've been told our house has good bones
which is a polite way of saying battered

windows sagging under the weight of a thousand
sunrises and the drive chipped like an ancient smile

but one can catch glimpses of its youth in pictures
from the 60's a girl in pigtails stands by fresh windows

or before that in 56' we were engulfed by an ocean
of wild grasses our kitchen facing a mice colony

whose descendants nibble my tomatoes and
reaching further back we were a patch of dirt

deep in Shoshone lands and I don't know
what they called the creek then but I know

it emptied into the *Paa-Kateten* where my
ancestors dumped non-native fish and sewage

and I know too that in some wordless age
we laid beneath the waves of a sea that never

saw a human face yet the past remains a hand
on the shoulder and this home by the creek

is no orphan but belongs to the lives tumbling
down its current each of us raising our hands in joy

in reverence and in spring as the creek swells
with snowmelt I listen for the applause

little boy

Kenneth Christiansen

Sometimes I am brave enough to dress a step
closer to who I am and sometimes that
is all I can manage fatigued
by perception.

Sometimes I hate the habit of fleeing too
the arms of isolation when I feel the
tears hot and uncomfortable
running down to my chest.

Sometimes I wonder if I would be just as lonely
If I never let myself change clinging to the
status quo people seem to want to know
more about.

Sometimes when I look in the mirror, I see who I
want to be in the resting face of an adult who
is kind and thoughtful before they speak,
but sometimes all I see is that scared and naïve
little boy.

Denim

Michael-Anne Johnson

Give me dirt under my nails
and smoke soaked hair.
Give me grass stains on both knees and holes in my pockets.

The vibrant blue worn nearly white with age,
white like my hair as it cascades in a waterfall
against my hunched spine.

That sun-soaked, warm to the touch, all consuming love,
which only comes from living your life.
Not merely a stepping stone from one day to the next, but waltzing,
stumbling through the years.



Remember Your Roots

Matthew McCain

Entangled

Jane Finlinson-Hodgkinson

We were irrevocably
enmeshed before
we allowed
ourselves to become
so loosely connected,

depending upon
elegant sculptures
of glass and metal,
to communicate.

Understanding,
that
our survival and evolution
was reliant on
the ability to become
cohesive instead of destructive.

We are delegating
our humanity,
and perhaps
selling it off
atom by atom,
pursuing the endless
bank account
and quick answers
to our deepest questions.

Forgetting that,
we have been
fashioned out of light,
and if we
continue to polarize,
the resulting oscillations
will destroy us all.

Still,
our inescapable entanglement
should give us hope,
knowing
all it takes is a flip of the coin,
and the probabilities
are endless.

Rainbow Hole
Elliot Tucker



Rainbow Hole II
Elliot Tucker



The Whiteness of a Mother's Love

Maria Fischer

Joy Ladin writes in "Political Poem,"

"I remember the whiteness of my mother's love,
The coupon-clipping whiteness,"

And I, too, remember the
"Lower-middle-class love" of a mother

Broken and depressed
And suburban and dressed

In the polyester of the 70s housewife
With a husband at the bar.

Ladin writes of her mother's "childhood Depression"
With a capital D, the history, the *Grapes of Wrath*

Of it all, while my mother spread lowercase "d"
Depression on me like Parkay Margarine

On Wonder Bread. "No one could look
At the motions we went through"

And see anything other than a mother's love.
Neglect and blame were our CandyLand,

Bad credit our Chutes and Ladders.
And none of it matters, ultimately,

Really. The personal is political,
And we were privileged, after all:

The crestfallen former bride and the child
Who failed to be an ally.

We had a home. We had a car.
"Eyes disguised as carpet stains"

And a rapidly filling resentment reservoir.

Just the Antique of a Birth Swallowing Open my Sternum

Maria Fischer

Mai Der Vang wrote
An “Ars Poetica”
That is not the original
“Ars Poetica” by Horace
Or the “Ars Poetica”
By Archibald MacLeish
I teach my high school juniors,
But an “Ars Poetica”
That features the WXRT
Cool of the line,
“I am surrendering
to the pinky of my childhood
As it misfires
Out of a sycamore
From the eighties”
And that’s *my* “Ars Poetica,”
Baby: 80s, bitchin’,
INXS concerts
And the original *Beetlejuice*,
Killer, righteous, punk,
Full of possibilities
And back to the future,
Young, free, totally.
“Ars Poetica” literally
Means “the art of poetry”
And my art is currently
Exhausted and old.
I am reminded to
Surrender to the pinky promise
Of my childhood.
I told myself I’d grow up
And be cool.
It’s ars poetica, aging.
And it’s ok.
It’s “just the antique of a birth
swallowing open my sternum.”

Stateside

Jaggy Mones

(Double Layer Handcut Analog Collage)

Stateside

For this is the wave I chose to ride.

Fascist Tides

Take each day in stride

Friends and Family the upside

Destinies collide

I'll see you on the other side....



Yesterday and Tomorrow

Becky Tucker



*It is a scary time to be alive.
When you let go of constraints
and let your mind be free
to think outside of what
you've always been told to be
true... You can harness that
fear, quash it, and begin to
recognize that a better world
is possible through community
empowerment.*



Nebraska

Sage Thee

It is a Friday afternoon in February, and I am so sad I could scream and I want, more than anything, in this very moment, to eat ice cream in the bathtub. Precisely, to take a bath while also eating ice cream. It sounds so decadent, so outlandishly rich and silly, and I want that for myself! I know that the logistics of this are terrible and so I will not actually eat ice cream in the bath. But just know that deep in my heart, I want nothing more than to eat ice cream in the bathtub and to make an absolute mess of myself.

I am thinking about joy and what it means to be a wild creature.

Four years ago, my best friend and I took a road trip to Lincoln, Nebraska — we traveled 900 miles to see two of our favorite magical and musical women, but more than that, the trip was about doing something only for ourselves, something to make our inner children vibrate from sheer ecstatic joy.

On a record-cold Saturday in Nebraska, we went to the movies, taking something from our ordinary lives into this suspended-in-time weekend and making it new and exciting and wonderful. It was not a short film, and our parking space — at least six blocks away from the cinema — expired more than thirty minutes before the movie itself even ended. “We are so fucking screwed if we get towed,” I say. “We’re not going to get towed,” she says to me. “Everything is going to be fine. We have the power of the Universe on our side.”

Sam has a way of calming the nervous rabbit of my heart that even my own mother could never quite manage.

As soon as the credits rolled, we grabbed hands and ran like two effervescent bats out of Hell from the theater, down the hall to crash through the doors and out onto the street where we ran, hand in sweaty hand, the full six blocks to my car, where upon arrival we fell to the ground laughing.

We have always been wolves together, even before we learned to love our fur and our teeth, before we learned it was alright to howl. I am not sure if this is how every pair of true best friends feels, and we have not actually stumbled upon some ancient power of divine friendship that few have ever experienced before, but it feels that way. It feels as if we are creating the whole world together.

We often joke that we fought through a war together, that we were in the fucking trenches, side-by-side, that we’re brothers-in-arms — but it’s not a joke, not really. When you are two strange young women who want only to exist as they are, the whole world is against you.

We won, though! We kicked the bastards right off our land and threw a big beautiful party in our big beautiful castle, and at night we take off all our big beautiful clothes and run on all fours through the big beautiful woods and howl with our big beautiful voices at the big beautiful moon.

Vivacious **Clarissa Cervantes**

Looking at the horizon of life with deep gratitude for moments of solitude while contemplating the true meaning of the times we are living. A vivacious person is lively and spirited despite the circumstances around them, because the time is now, and life remains a gift.



Evening at Lake Michigan

Becky Blaszak



Cliff Jumping

Becky Blaszak

Rein Und Raus

Unknown

Leia was probably the happiest cat I've ever met. She came and went through your attic window as she pleased, mostly at night to sleep with you in your bed; a tortoiseshell pouf next to your pillow. When I'd stay, she would curl up and purr on me after you fell asleep. Her fur was so soft and warm on my bare skin.

I stared up at the peaked ceiling painted by your mom with sponge textured clouds. She is an artist from Vienna who now taught elementary students. I envy that you can understand German and have access to oil pastels and paint. You sometimes knock on my chest and listen to my belly, "herein??" or something like that. I didn't really know the answer to that question.

Your dad is a preacher, which made me laugh when you exhaled that in a cough of thick smoke. The chorus of that song "Son of a Preacher Man" became the repeating soundtrack in my brain when I met him.

He made me vegan lasagna with homemade marinara- none of that Prego shit, he is a 'Real Italian.' That also made me laugh since he had been in a Prego commercial in the 80s or something. The lasagna was delicious but made me nervous, I think he thought we were dating. I still wanted to make a good impression even though we weren't.

I've seen the sun set on your ceiling often lately; It seeps in through the trees who also changed color as it got colder- a patch work of gold and orange in the dark. We smoked and talked about music and music assignments next to that open west facing window. The same one Leia came in through. I never saw it rise through the East window over the stairs.

Leia and I often left at the same time in the mornings. The last night I left, I pet Leia goodbye and crept down the stairs, I skipped the creaky one.

When I passed your parents door, I thought how much I would miss them. I wonder if they noticed the nights I stayed over and left before morning, I wonder if they could hear us over Neil Young or The Band. Shudders. The Band.

They let Leia come and go and eat and sleep and curl up in your bed. They were fond of her but half the time they didn't even know she was there.

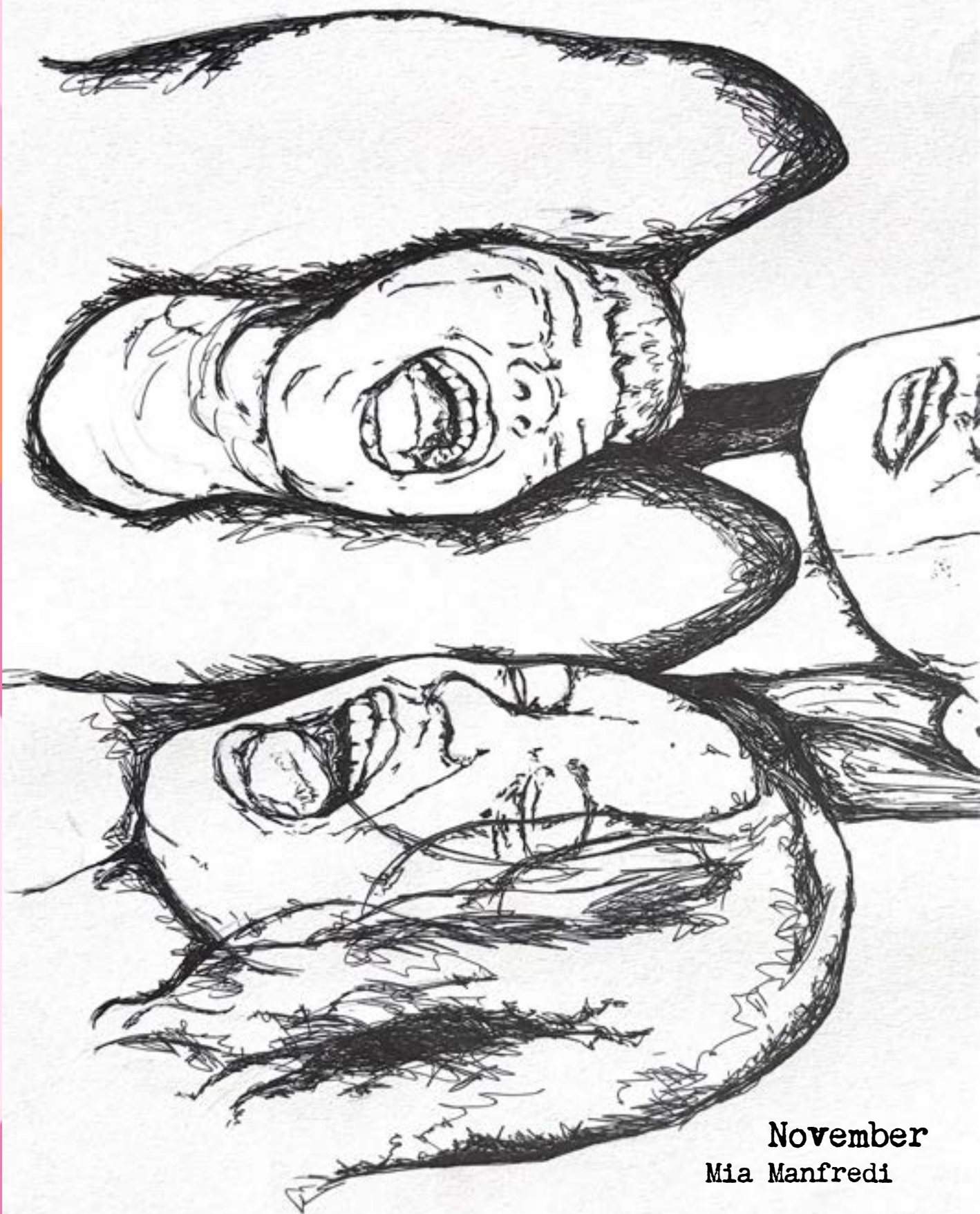
Watching Jordan's Fall

Allison Whittenberg

... God, I hate November
All the hope I had hoped
Against hope for Jordan.

Dad beat Jordan, to
Straighten him out, to show
Jordan, to silence him.

My brother lived until the next
Season, onto the next winter,
Very quiet like a fallen leaf.



November
Mia Manfredi

A Beer from the Gutter

Gabriela Belardi

A beer from the gutter
A hand from another
You try but you know you're not a runner
You climb

The fence has a glow
Only the moonlight could show
One foot in the chain
You might never know
You jump

Glass in a backpack
the rhythm of your track
A siren in the distance
north is a fact
You know

Is there more of you
Somewhere on the court
In the corner
In the dirt
You stop

Stuck in the crack
Bubbling over
It tastes like north
It tastes like another
You drink glass from the gutter

Plaintive Inquiry

MK Punky

Ask God
or whomever/whatever's responsible for random chaos
masquerading as divine order
Why do all my friends disappear

Cruel pantomime
chortling mystery
beyond comprehension and computation
where they've gone no one can say

Blazing intelligence augmented by silicon thinkers
cannot yet decipher
ancient codes etched in omnipresent constellations
teasing terrestrials with gaseous knowledge

If cosmic balance requires predictable chronology
to whom should we complain
when agreed-upon departure times
vanish from the schedule

She was only thirty-six
He was only sixty-three
They were planning to stay
I will continue to wait

Lost and Found I: Voices of Love, Self, and Shame

Jayrod Garrett

You are Black and beautiful

I am 100% weird.

Why don't you play basketball?

Where did you get that scar?

Making people laugh is my superpower.

God, why are you so loud?

You can create anything.

Grammar is the best drug.

My child is worthless.

You should write a book.

Do you like my stories?

Nobody understands what you are saying.

You are a good person.

Good people hate themselves.

You are worthy to walk with God now.

*Breaking my ceramic beating heart
is the bloodiest, no best work of my life.*

Destroy your lungs too.
You are still too loud.

*I mix water and blood and inhale the concrete produced.
If I drown, I'll be worthy of living.*

You are—

Goddammit Soldier. You can't hurt a fly.

But aren't they alive? Doesn't Life have worth?

Stop thinking.

Nobody wants to know what you think.

You are—

Break your fingers. Tell the story of Jesus.
Not your nonsense. You and your stories
aren't worth anyone's time.

*I am a Child of God. And he has sent me here.
Has given me—*

Lies. They are giving you lies.

There is only one truth.
You are broken. Jesus will heal you.
Obedience is the way.

Has given me—

Listen to me. I lov—

We love you. As long as you are quiet
as long as you are reverent,
as long as you as you are dead.

You are enough...

Has given me—

I've had enough of the devil
hurting you. I killed them for you.

But what if we had given the devil love?
Would they still be a devil?

Now I need you to join me,
because there are no homosexual
humans. Spread this truth.

No. That's not true.

It's just as true as the life of Christ.
Then Christ is a lie.

We love you. We would never lie to you.

Then why did you encourage my silence?
Shame my loudness? Or tell me
I was good enough even once?

Your obedience and the blood of Christ
made you worthy. Now you can be whole.

My heart is broken. My lungs filled with concrete.
I hate my skin, my stories, and my history.
And I did it for your love.

You did it to walk with God.
To spurn unrighteousness.
To be holy.

And all it cost me was everything.
I'm sorry, God, if you exist you'll understand.

Your mother was right. You are worth—

Bang!
Now both of the devils are dead.
How do I find who I actually am?

Lost and Found II: Voices of Faith, Self, and Peace

Jayrod Garrett

*How do I find out who I actually am?
I start at the beginning.
What was in the beginning?*

A knowledge of things.

*Yes, but things according to who?
According to others.
I was taught to believe in others.*

“Trust in the Lord with all thine heart;”

“and lean not into your own understanding.”

And this begins the seeds of shame;

Because we believe our own ideas are flawed.

Is self love a devil because
she'll make your ideas beautiful?

*Was shame evil because it made you
believe in others, never in yourself?*

*And the cycle continues
because we place faith in God above*

Faith in ourselves? Yes.
Yet, we do nothing without
faith in ourselves.

*I exist not because God lives,
but because people strive to make
a world of less tragedy and strife.*

That's not enough for me though.

What do you know?

*That a world that doesn't have room
for all of us is not a world worth fighting for.*

*That is where I dwell.
Where I thrive.*

That is a knowledge
worth living obedient to.

Why are you talking about obedience?

Because faith without faithfulness
is dead.

*And I only thrive where people
live true to the faith they've chosen.
That's why religion has beauty.*

But isn't that why it's dangerous too?
Faithfulness to colonization,
to exploitation, and God above all?

Perhaps that's why it has caused
more death than any devils ever have?

*This journey seems to create
only more questions as I get closer
to who I am.*

That is called growth.

That is called healing.

Wait, can my questions help others?

Do you wish to live creating
communal growth?

Do you wish to heal the pieces
of people they do not see as broken?

*Yes. Ironically, I think
this is what the Children of God
should do.*

Or does your peace require
love?

Does your peace require a God?

I thought she died because of shame.

Shame has only the power
you let it have by cutting yourself
down and away from your own humanity.

Love is immortal.
Devil or God, just let it in.

Love is the result of the
peace you create in the world.

*The solution of faith and peace
is love?*

"Thou shalt love the Lord thy God"

*"with all thy heart, and with all thy soul,
and with all thy mind."*

"This is the first and great commandment."

"And the second is like unto it."

*"Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself."
The beginning is self love.*

Does this mean your faith is love?

Love of everyone as if they were God.

Does this truth bring you peace?

*More than that,
it brings me a gospel.*

Then may you live ever faithful—

to bringing the world to a peace—

that I've found within.

A Setting Sun

Jaggy Mones

(Digital Collage, Right)

This sinister administration breeds fear and hatred amongst its population to divide and conquer. A "To be continued..." television prompt where the cheeseburger president stokes tension on a regular basis to keep people on the edge of their seats. Tune in next week as a delusional Trump threatens nuclear war with North Korea! Sponsored by Mar-a-Lago and the NRA!

Remember my fellow countrymen

"War is (NOT) peace.

Freedom is (NOT) slavery.

Ignorance is (NOT) strength."

A Setting Sun
A Red Dawn
The People you Pawn
Round em up!
Rough em up!
Run em out!
Out of Town!
"Stand Your Ground"
20 shot rounds
"Get on the ground!"
Machine gun sounds
Another body
6ft Underground
Weapons Not Found
Boots on the Ground
Another Prince Crowned
Erik Prince
Prince of Confessions
Mass Deceptions
Mass Shootings
"Hands Up! Don't Shoot!"
A Community to Uproot
Persons To Prosecute
Agendas to Execute
Executive Power
An Ivory Tower
Money Showered
Forbidden Fruits Flower
These Politicians are Cowards



It's The Little Things

Matthew McCain



Acrid Smoke

Terry Brinkman

Clambering down the Blue Bell foot path
Acrid smoke light shining over the hill
Gun-Powder cigarettes smoking as I walk
Moon mid-watchers psychopath flower power
Faintly urine scented, farmer needs a bath
Blue dusk moonlight shining over the Morning Glories
Lace fringe of the Kite fluttering in the noon's high sun
Spiritual condition of caterpillars on the rose bush leaves
Motley affairs of woman's flower love
Woven Silk flower formal
Half mad plan of new Blue Bell garden
Papal blessing of tulips informal
Hymn to Can-Can rain dance
Solemnities slightly informal

Waiting for the Sunrise

Stella Eleanor-Freyja Redfield

Ends without beginnings

In a night in which each star
held it's reflection in it's own tear
The Goddess spoke to me
from her home resting on the moon
"You need not play by their rules"

The moon was likely part of Earth once
How happy she seems Today.

Thusly,
Each star mapped to my flesh
My soul dispersed, Dereliction of Mandate
I'll do with this borrowed carbon
As I see fit for me

We are not afforded the luxury of knowing
How to live

In a day in which every raindrop
seemed only to rise away
Angels beckoned me to their titanic palace
On those rocks, they beckoned with bony hands
That I may hear the whispers of their misty halos

"Take up our metallurgic wings, leave
for something new. As we have"

Thusly,
When next I dreamed I was actually there
But the surrounds became less clear
My dream an unpainted mirror
But my dream nonetheless

A Perfect vision is entirely unclouded
by potential.

The Golden hour, it aught to have come
stillness in the rich soil about me
Have reaped sands come to take me?
Am I to take them with my eyes?

Do you want it back?

“Come take it”

“Come take it”

Thusly,
I am confined, breathing and loving and hating
All the same spared the fate of life.
I know better now
The sun will only rise by our scorched hands

From here, the Horizon
Beginnings without Ends.



Oh, The Glory of Music!

Bruce Griffin

A song can spark a memory
Can soothe the weary soul
Fine words combined with melody
Can make our lives seem whole
A childhood spent in fear
Finds solace in a song
And chases demons far away
To right a mighty wrong

When voices ring out loud and clear
We gain a welcomed friend
For music is a healer
That saves us in the end
Amidst the noise of daily life
A song can be the answer
A salve to cure our lonely strife
Sweet partner of a dancer

Now nestled in soft slumber's hold
A calming phrase brings peace
To see us off to distant dreams
And refuge from the beast
We offer nightly prayers of thanks
Through love of God almighty
For now, the Sun has left the sky
Soft music reigns so brightly

Playing It By Ear

Joe Roberts

These days, the beginning of spring is more a mood
than a date. Emerging from your home to love
the world is like searching for your part
in a jazz ensemble playing standards

you thought you knew. But now they're strange.

Some parts come in early, others linger late.
A few stay altogether silent this year.

Why did the cherry trees bloom to die in blizzards?
Shouldn't the geese be migrating by now?
Don't the mountains seem short of snow for runoff?

The key shifts every measure. Rhythm's a hint,
not a rule.

Still, you have the instrument of your love, and blossoms
call you to play along the best you can.
What is there to do but try in hope winter won't
have a reprise and summer will not interrupt

by scorching in too soon?

Indra

Shannon Giambanco

Ordinally I loathe the heat
but that is not what you bring
with your rain showers
to quench the brittle bones
of our streams and trees—
heat does not properly define
the angelic rays of warmth coating snow-kissed peaks
and blushing virgin white cheeks.

People say wintertime is when the animals hibernate
and the humans hide.
They say it is the season
that calls to death.

Someone like me
born to burn under a summer sun
and thrive in the heart of the winter
skin turned porcelain
and muddy brown eyes drifting green
against the blanket of white
illuminated by the moonlight—
If this season calls to death then I am what she has sent.

When they come to claim me
I ask to stay.

My grip might be straining
by each sunset delayed an hour
and the heavy pour from Indra
who has waited long enough
to flood my dame
but I ask to stay.

I'd rather feel the cold slip between my grasping fingers
then to willingly let it go.

Fox on Tetons
Terry Brinkman



Onteora

Shannon Giambanco

There are moments
even in this awkward
season that is really the between
of two true seasons.

There are moments
when the rain is so heavy
and just cold enough
that I feel alive.

There's a walking trail
made of dirt and rock
a lake and rotted wooden plank for diving
that leads to a field of green
after the rain has drowned the thirsty.

That is one of the rare moments that I feel alive
during this insufferable season
of indecision in the form of cats not freezing
only for the kitten to find warmth
on the lip of a tire
belonging to a truck driver too tired
to care.

There are moments
during this season
that I remember
how unlike summer
Spring is winter's sister
and to survive her mood swings
find the trail that leads to a field of green
that comes alive in the rain of spring.

Best Kiss Ever

Sarah Doepner

The warm but not too humid weather was a treat
In February for this Utah couple visiting The Keys
My skin tender from the touch of an unfamiliar sun.

Earlier we had gazed at manatees and sea turtles
enclosed and safe from boats, jet skis and idiots
And watched dolphins imitate birds flying above the water

She volunteered to get close and as she knelt
On the edge of the dock peering into the blank depth
A dolphin peeked out, then rose up to give her a kiss

That evening after dinner we watched the clouds
Perform their daily show singing first in pink and gold
Before an evening coda in red, orange and gray

In that fading light I saw her smile and heard a tongue click
“There was more to that show than you could see.”
“That was the best kiss I’ve ever had.” she said

In that little kiss a world of understanding was exchanged
“The dolphin knows I’m sick and will die from my disease.
But promised, on that side I’ll finally learn to swim.”

Redwood

Michael-Anne Johnson

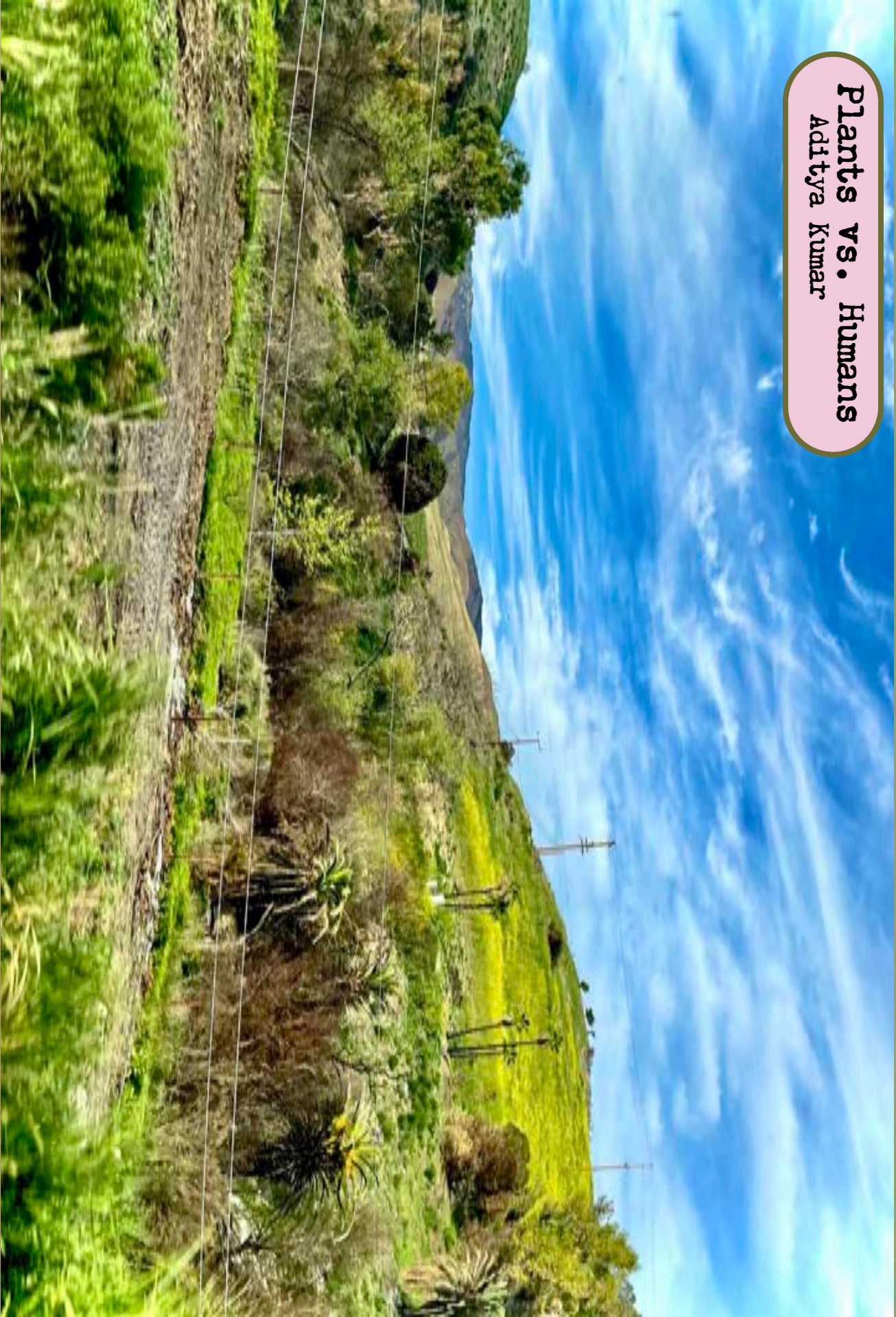
Stand in the dirt,
cast your eyes to heaven.
Do you see the sun peaking between green leaves?

As the trees, like wooden gods, grow taller
their gnarled roots tangle like shoelaces.
Great feet anchor them in the detritus.
Arms reach up
to the clouds, as they swirl their fingers in the mist.

Why cut down the things we worship?
Why rip them from their homes to warm our own?

Plants vs. Humans

Aditya Kumar



Please Don't Cut The Grass

Leiani Molis

It's dandelion season
and i'm remembering you kind
remembering you warm
it's dandelion season
that weed you grumbled
made holy in your absence
sacred golden holy in my memory
of the picture you sent me
a field of yellow
samasama
for me you said
and that was you,
you'd take the pain
to show us love and joy
beauty for ashes
one hundred fold we're promised
a fool's bargain and they wonder
why I cling to
and sometimes i do too
But it's dandelion season
and there's so much beauty to be had
even in the weeds

To Plead on Warm Earth

Annie Michael Lim

As the taste of sunlight pours over chilled air,
I savor our impossibility,
rolling it between my tongue and teeth.
On wind cradled north my body is laid bare
at the feet of our merciful affair.
After winter's death, my heart aches beneath,
where I ride samsara, bound by your wreath

Yet still, the magnolia wilts tonight.
A pained kiss, stolen between solstices—
the briefest embrace, where I'm left reaching.
To live without you, my sweetest respite?
Here I watch the lonely sky hang cloudless,
and ache for the elysium of spring.

Not Mine

Vivian Finck

There is something
Metaphorical
In the sense of entitlement
Humans Carry—
Over objects,
Over People,
Over Animals,
Overland.

As if what the eye captures
Can be kept.
As if space—
Filled with breath and bloom
And light enough to live on—
Can be claimed
By the Few
With the tools
To strip beauty bare
And reforge it
Into something unrecognizable.

I've walked the ruins
Of a petrified forest,
Driven part the gas lines of Wyoming
Where the smoke climbs
In a place of songbirds.
And I have found
I prefer the scent of flowers
To Fire.

I have stood
In places older than memory,
Where mountains kiss
The underbellies of clouds
Too full of storm to speak.
I've let the wind
Tangle itself in my hair—
It never asked for my name.

Because none of it is mine.
Not the wind,
Not the water
That moves through me
And moves on.
Not the mud
That cradles my feet
Before letting me go.

I am only passing through
On this magnificent planet—
A single breath
In the lungs
Of something
Far more lasting
Than me.

Not a keeper,
Not a claim.
Just a witness
To the wild
That dares to remain.

Denude
Nash Hutto



The Bigger They Are ...

F. Patrick Stehno

We are just one mammalian species among many,
the one with the self-proclaimed larger brain (but no horse sense),
the one to discover fire, consume charred flesh,
the speaking mammal, thinking mammal, careless mammal,
the mammal that doesn't give a shit about any other mammal
let alone any other non-mammalian species
claiming a share of our ecosystem;
any other species just trying to survive this Man-made nightmare,
this soon to be apocalyptic hell of our own inevitable creative design,
of our perpetual greed, our grandiose technological calculations.

We think we dominate, control, plot out and apply,
forgetting along the way we're just another mammalian species;
always forget, when we kneel in our pew on Sunday morning,
praying to some mythical supernatural being to guide and protect,
that when he *has answered* we tend to ignore the obvious,
bury our heads in our so called infallible Bible of obsolete thought
oh so certain proper answers are woven among those ancient words.

Words won't matter this time, they no longer matter,
just hot wind, we can profess all we want, hear the sound of our voices,
yet even our latter day actions won't be enough, won't be viable;
we dangle over the edge; burning deserts, rising tides below.

We placidly await someone to break our fall, catch us, lift us
back to what we had before, back to when life seemed so good;
but that is past, that world no longer exists; we've erased it, voided it,
lost it in a head-long plunge toward Armageddon and Apocalypse,
the End Time defined by self-fulfilling prophecies, when the righteous
shall rise up, after, of course, decimating this world,
freshly repentant and judged, unscathed,
clinging to a bright shiny blissful universe that never existed.

We are only another mammalian species, not some chosen people
enshrined in our own special divinity and god-likeness;
so self-absorbed we casually drag other species with us,
draw them along unwillingly,
assuring ourselves we know better, have answers, viable solutions;
with our last breath we will proclaim, unrepentant, that all is God's will.

We forget, refuse to accept, our species immense self-aggrandizing ego,
always and ever ignoring the others, those others beyond mammals,
the vast array of thriving life that will struggle, for sure,
but will survive in some form, some manner,
to continue to inhabit this unique planet, this beleaguered Earth.

And one day, fifty million years from now, what is a bacteria today
may evolve into a large brained creature cognizant of some ancient past
found only in the fossil and archaeological record, suggesting, perhaps,
a mysterious mass extinction, that was, indeed, not caused
by a Cretaceous meteor strike, but was, beyond doubt,
triggered by some once dominant species of mammal.

Lou Reed, Fruit Flies, and Palestine

Gereon Fuller

It's summer and the fruit flies are back, and I've become so afraid of death that killing the fruit flies feels incorrigible, intangible; that taking even the most seemingly insignificant lives makes me feel sick. Most have red eyes. Some have sepia or white eyes. During experiments in labs, sometimes they don't have eyes. The genes associated with eye color also affect wing shape, or whether they have wings at all. They lazily circle the kitchen and I see them as I do the dishes that always take less time than I think they'll take. In the mornings when I'm putting back the forks and spoons from the night before, I pull open the silverware drawer and it triggers thoughts of death, gets me wondering if I'll have these same forks and spoons when I die, and if I do still have them, who will they go to, if I don't have kids or a lover who outlives me? When I think about my death, I always picture myself completely alone, my fears robbing me of the agency I am learning to remember I have, an agency that will allow me to cultivate a lifetime of friendships so that I won't be alone. When I sit in my two-bedroom apartment in the city I moved to for grad school without knowing anyone except the roommate who moved out before Christmas without telling me, it feels like her now-empty room is going to be my forever.

I fear everything so much I think I must be addicted to being afraid. I can't function without the terror. I repost a tweet that says, "Anxiety is so fucking embarrassing. Oh noooo what if something happens. Jesus christ." I turn down the volume in my car during the part of the Lou Reed song *I Can't Stand It*, when he sings "I live with thirteen dead cats, a purple dog that wears spats, they're all out livin' in the hall and I can't stand it anymore," because the magical thinking of my OCD makes me worry that if I hear those lyrics, I'll come home to my own cat dead. I love David Bowie but I believe there might be some sort of curse extended upon me if I listen to a dead man's music, like the curse of the pharaoh: eight of the 58 people of Howard Carter's archaeological team who cracked open Tutankhamun's burial place died. Popular misconceptions warned of a curse in Pharaoh's tomb that isn't actually inscribed there. I fear the music of the dead in the same way as I might fear some type of curse, like I'm not already going to die, like if I never listen to another song by a dead musician I'll live forever. As a child I remember hoping they would invent a cure for death during my lifetime so I could live forever, not really understanding what death was in the first place, only knowing my fear of it. At times I'm in disbelief that I won't live forever, that I will have a forever that is measurable.

It used to be worse. I managed to kill a couple of mosquitos that landed on me while I went for a walk in the park, pretending to be a hobbit of the Shire. Though, truth be told, I preferred to wave them away from me or just simply walk faster out of their vicinity. "What do they eat—when they can't get hobbit?"

Weeks later, I smash mosquitos into my own skin as they bite me in the St. Croix River valley. I smear one of them on my light orange shorts, and it's filled with blood, which turns rusty brown as it dries. Whose blood? "Think about how much progress you've made in the few weeks we've been seeing each other," my therapist who

specializes in OCD tells me, but I still feel so mixed up about death that I'm not sure if the mosquito I killed died, or if I did.

It's how I feel every day when I open Instagram, knowing I'll be bearing witness to Palestinian martyrs. Once, I saw a video of a headless child. Another time, I saw photos of a Palestinian man with Downs Syndrome who was mauled to death by Israeli dogs. I read the stats: that Israel has dropped more bombs on Gaza in 10 months than all the countries during World War II combined, more than Nagasaki and Hiroshima, more than any other war or country. In my strange fascination with nuclear weapons, I once read that it would take thirteen nuclear bombs to destroy the entire planet, to blow it all into pieces and kill every living thing. I see the 'after' photos of Gaza and I wonder how it's possible that I haven't felt a single thing thousands of miles away, tucked safely away in the Star of the North: not a single shake of the earth, not a single whiff of smoke. Suddenly my fears of Lou Reed lyrics feel ridiculous as I read the number of those martyred in Khan Younis or Beirut today, or scroll past mutual aid requests for evacuating families fleeing the horrors of another climate disaster along Appalachia, knowing money is one of the only ways I can help and I still don't have enough of it, and I still have to force myself to sing along to *Coney Island Baby*: "cause you know some day, man, you got to stand up straight unless you gonna fall, then you're going to die."

What am I supposed to do? What are any of us supposed to do? If it's all connected after all, am I right for leaving the fruit flies to their little lives?

One morning, when I was brushing my teeth and reading the scrawled quotes on different colors of sticky notes affixed to my mirror, one struck me in a different way than before. "Allow yourself to ask what would happen if your fears are not your reality but just fears." Something unlocked within me. The quote is from a self-help book, but my ruminations of death that usually struck within the first few minutes of being on my feet every morning had this quote strike me differently.

Over the next few days after this realization, my ruminations about death slacken, leaving me with a curious looseness, an interior landscape through which tumbleweeds blew in absence of the fears that strangled my thoughts like the wild grapevines that climb every tree and fence in the park near my mostly-empty house. I am afraid of not being afraid of death. The Herculean gymnastics my thoughts do to deal with this fear that has blanketed me since before 2012, since before the Mayan calendar predicted the end and I nervously asked my mother to reassure me the world wouldn't end. What happens if that leaves me? I am afraid of death but it also turns out I'm afraid of living.

I wonder who I will be without my fears. I wonder who I will be if I kill the fruit flies. Will Lou Reed be with me when I can't stand it anymore more?

Long Live Palestine!

Existential Bread



After the Dream House

Sage Thee

For perhaps the first time in my life, I have caught a spider in a glass and let it go outdoors rather than killing it. I am trying to learn how to live in a world with things that frighten me.

Time stops for no one.

As you get older, your definition of success changes. Your dreams, goals, and wants grow alongside you. When I was fifteen, all I longed for was a room of my own with a door that locks.

Now, I am twenty-seven, and my dreams are of a house with a tree in the yard for me to sit under. Things change. Even when you think that nothing could ever possibly change or get better, your older self reaches back across decades to share with you their new dreams.

You grow, and you change. You heal your wounds from the inside out. Maybe you even change your sex. You shed your past lives but keep them close to you, like an obsessive-compulsive snake.

I lie on my stomach on the floor like a lily pad or a cat, basking in the sunlight. Wisps of dust and starlight stream from my tired and aching back. All my beloved ghosts, stretching out to fill every corner of our new house as if to say, "Yes, this will do quite nicely for our first home, indeed."

I can feel the energy in these walls like a living organism, and my consciousness races forward to meet it halfway. From the upstairs bedroom, I can feel my heart beating in the kitchen, my soul dancing up and down the stairs.

The skin on the tip of my fingers still peels back from time to time. As if my skin remembers, as if the skin carries the weight of secrets so the heart doesn't have to.

In another life, my hands have never left that linoleum floor.

But now, here we are. In a different city, different decade, different kitchen, different everything. The basil growing on the counter, the painted cow I bought at a yard sale when I was nineteen watching over the dining room, the west-facing windows so I never miss another sunrise, the hardwood floor that has never seen a drop of blood.

The smallest things stop and give me grateful pause, these days. A spoon with only my teeth marks on it, the knobs on the stove only my hands turn; how lucky I am to be safe inside my kitchen. For the first time in two decades, I finally have a place to put my terror.

Isn't everything frightening? Isn't everything wonderful? How wonderful to be pondering what to make oneself for lunch. How wonderful to have a self to make lunch for. How wonderful to have a kitchen of your own to cry in. How wonderful to have a heart that still feels.

My Koan of Cosmic Intimacy

Makaela Alder

(Poem and Photography, Below)

The feeling of being nothing and yet, an essential part of everything

When I am not seen, or heard, or thought about, do I cease to exist?

True presence, unmoving time

Under an infinite sky of stars, weightlessness in a body of water, or connecting to a familiar place I have never been before

This is where I am no one, and yet, I am everyone, where I feel intertwined with all living matter

A feeling that frightens and comforts, from the deepest part of me to the space beyond my skin

An unbearable feeling of aliveness

Satori, the overview effect, oceanic feeling, the origin of religion, liminal consciousness, sat-chit-ananda

It goes by many names, but it is the same place all souls remember everything unknown

We are both dust and divine

As the ocean is Merely salt dissolved into water



Sanctuary

F. Patrick Stehno

1.

No drums in today's wars,
no fifes, but many flags waving
for country, regiment, or cause.

Rockets and drones
plummet from cobalt skies,
frighten women, terrify children,
demolish innocent lives.

There are no drums beating dirge,
but many flags waving
for one side or the other
self-righteous cause.

2.

After the bombs explode,
after the crater-dust settles,
there come the screams, wailing,
children crying, trembling, lost,
confused, homeless, blood smeared,
concrete powder caked faces, terrified eyes,
blank stares, constant blinking,
constant tears, *oh my god...*
(whoever he or she might be).

Why punish innocent children?

Children frightened, beside themselves,
thin arms waving, desperate,
their young mother raped,
throat slit, precious blood spilled,
children witnessing their father
blown to pulp, splintered bone.

Retaliation?
When will this end?

3.

So ... after ...
once-acrid dust settles,
we climb out of our sanctuary
that is often not a sanctuary,
little more than a basement
beneath a target,
a sanctuary we cannot depend upon
as long as projectiles
arc overhead, encumbered by explosives
destined to demolish whole blocks
into so much rubble and dust,
so much noise and chaos
beyond imagination.

So ... after ...
once-acrid dust settles,
if our sanctuary is not our tomb,
we climb out to see, to witness
whatever might be left,
whatever spoiled food
we might appropriate
for our terrified, starving children.

A Tortured Mind is Mine

Maya Wierzbicki

Her arm around mine
I lay next to my baby
Watching her chest rise and fall
Rise and fall
And I look up and watch the lamp's colors dance on the ceiling
While she sleeps
Safe in her bed
Being kissed and hugged just minutes before
Wishing her sweet dreams
And I feel guilty
For this sense of safety
It's usually around dinner time
I feel this sense of dread
Creeping into my body
Thinking of how nightfall will be soon upon you
And the fear of the dark
And the fear of the bombs
And how the shelling will start
And the screams will haunt
And the only glow is probably not of the moon but of explosions
And the darkness is a veil
That adds a layer of uncertainty
How is my life more fortunate
How did I end up here
and you there
My child in my arms wrapped in safety
And yours wrapped in a body bag
Why the poison of greed so sweet to some
They suckle on it, like taking air out of the lungs of humanity
What happened to us
So spineless
So sick

Are we so accustomed to death that our eyes divert quickly to the convenience of the next
have we just become a shell
Or are we so sick in the head that we prefer profit over people
I don't even know
But I know I can't be free
Even if my therapist tells me
Live in the now
How can I live in the now knowing that now others are massacred
Humans „cleansed” from this earth
That is fucking vulgar down to the ideology
We are of this earth
We are fortunate to sow the land
We are fortunate to have each other
We are fortunate to be ALIVE
to live to live to live
Free free free
We all deserve that
We all deserve that
You do, I do, and I refuse to be free
Until you are free
I will live a tortured mind
I will continue to fight for you
I will continue to fight
Because none of us are free
UNTIL ALL OF US ARE

Ride The Snake
Kevin Bodniza



To Have Been Here

Alexis Andrada

I was here, but without proof.

There was no photograph that candidly caught me mid-laugh,
my initials weren't carved into the park bench, nor the stump,
I had no receipt from the old bookshop,

But I was here.

In the way the hardwood floors creaked uniquely under my toes,
in the way my shadow passed along the cracked sidewalk,
in the way my nickname was both spoken, then forgotten,

I was here – I pray that is enough.

I dream of a world where my footprints need not be wedged in concrete,
but only the quiet witness that I leapt forward,
that I watched a pretty sunset,
that I am not only moving ahead,
but being.

That I was. That I am. That I will be.

Here.

The Weight of Now

Michaela Rae

It feels like the world is dying.
Slowly,
Loudly,
and we're just supposed
to keep scrolling.

Children suffocate.
The ocean coughs up plastic.
Truth is a broken mirror
No one wants to repair.

And still, we call ourselves
"civilized."

From a distance,
humanity looks like
a bad idea gone too far.

We consume more than we give.
We pave over beauty,
bury what once gave us breath.
We call it progress,
then wonder why
we can't breathe.

People speak of unconditional love
like a romantic verse,
but everything comes
with fine print.

Be good to me,
and I'll stay.
Raise me well,
and I'll visit.
Work hard,
and you might be happy.

Even love
feels negotiated now.

And I...
I just want to feel
uncomplicated again.

But the girl
who believed in magic,
in people,
in forever,

She's gone.
Not dead.
Just transformed.

What's left
is quieter.
More careful.
A little cracked,
but still here.

Still watching.
Still writing.
Still trying
to remember
how to be
soft.

Weather

Russ Wagstaff

Sea level rising	What's it going to take, to see
Temperatures rise and fall	It's a big mistake, to know
Animals dying	They carry out our fate, and we
Who's going to heed the call	Don't take it back by force, you know
Crops are all failing	
Starving becomes us all	What's it going to take
Man is debating	
Who's going to take the fall	Whether us changing
	Means living or dying
Weather is changing	Will we try to
All around us	Make the air clean
The air we breathe is	Understanding
No longer Clean	Cost and Value
Calculating	Our lives are worth
Cost and Value	Much more than machine
Our lives are worth	
No more than machine	What's it going to take, to see
	It's a big mistake, to know
Sea level rising, Animals dying	They carry out our fate, and we
Crops are all failing, Man is debating	Don't take it back by force, you know
	What's it going to take

Grain

Ryan Scherer





UFO Sighting

Marie Anne Arreola

I.

I came into some kind of enlightenment
in the summer of 2006,
the year a cherry split in my hand,
surrendering its pit like a secret.
I remember the sound it made—
not a pop, exactly,
more like the hush of someone

deciding not to cry.

The body is like that,
I thought then:
just another fruit—
thin-skinned, full of sweetness,
ambition,
a pit to protect.

“May I pluck this?” I asked aloud,
and the tree gave no answer—
only dropped a man
nine stories down,
a splinter of sky
falling through summer heat
to the parking lot below.

He wasn’t fruit. Not then.
More like punctuation.
A period placed too early in the sentence.

The town went still,
like an old bow strung too tight.
The UFO sighting had already frayed our nerves.
Even the screen doors slammed more suspiciously.
The backyard sprinklers refused their little revolutions.

And the feet—his—
those traitorous missionaries of gravity—
found the ground
like a father meeting a child
he never meant to make.

II.

My dad quit being a cop that fall.
Said the badge got heavier than the gun.
There were things he couldn't arrest—
mold in the drywall,
voices behind the furnace.

Now he walks to the old Blockbuster at dusk,
arguing softly with the after-hours mailbox,
renting nothing,
returning things we never owned.
This happens to men like him.
Eventually.

III.

We loved *E.T.*,

loved how Spielberg cracked open the chest
and let the light spill out—
as if it had been waiting there all along.
Back then, I thought science fiction
was just scripture with better effects,
something that might teach us
how to survive miracles.

But nothing prepared me
for the body's quiet betrayals:
how the heart hangs on,
squatting behind the ribs,
how the fingers leak
and still get called "mine."

This was survival.
A rot we named endurance
so we could keep living inside it.

IV.

When I read about the first corneal transplant—
how they lifted the clean rim
of an 11-year-old's eye
from the ruin of a face,
slipped it into a farmer's skull
so he could look again at sunlit wheat—
I imagined my father's guilt,
stitched behind the lens.

He left the law
because it was eating him raw,
showing him things
without giving him a way to hold them.

He started looking up more often—
not in prayer exactly,
more like a man
waiting for a voice
that wouldn't come.

V.

When the ship came,
we said: Maybe it's Christ.
Maybe it's God in the passenger seat,
peeling open the sky like foil.

But it was only a ship,
moving slow, slick as oil,
low over the hardware store,
casting light that made our bones feel borrowed.

We packed what we could:
wedding rings,
a shoebox of teeth from childhood,
the dog tags of grandfathers
we only knew by stories.

We left them in the yard
under the blinking belly
of the craft.
A kind of tithe.
A kind of hope.

I saw the ultrasound static
storming in my mother's lungs—
a ghost snow
folding her breath like sheets.

We called it a sign.
We called it whatever we needed
to survive another night
under that strange and beautiful sky.

VI.
And then—
not a beam,
not a gospel,
but a boy.

Laid down soft on the grass,
still steaming with first-breath heat,
his body curled like a comma
between two impossible sentences.

I held my BlackBerry out,
thumb hovering.
And when the flash caught—

I saw my own face in the frame,
but not looking at him—
looking from him.

That's what it was:
a replacement.
Like the grafts,
like the corneas,
like the prayers we borrow
from other people's pain.

Not ours.
But we wore them
anyway.

Rosy Poverty.

Cecil Smith

I can't sleep anymore – the fluorescent glow of a streetlight

And there's no meaning, there's no market (A) (S)

(taste the whip)

I did watch the ghost of your words be torn from the page, my tongue still tried and pink.

This meant less sleep for us

More glitter dust sifted through the floorboards we're underneath.

More dark enchantments, eidolons, and fireworks behind our eyelids

An incantation to break the spell of numbness.



Your heart turns pale and iridescent. Your ribs are calcified, and your knees are tied together with ribbons.

The most they will give you is a hollow revelation, to let you catch a few dreams when you fall asleep, to let you sit dangling from a balcony above hot pavement. All you have are the lines in your palms and ruby pools of blood lapped up by a lion's tongue.

(now bleed for me)

Burning Hope

Ethane Schrubb

Made in fear of a future that may not arrive. Love is on the horizon and pushes us to the next day. Love is shot dead without justice. What replaces something beloved? Memories that cannot be forgotten. However, sacred we remain here. Loving and living with true intent.



Small Will Turner

Let me be small and unburdened

Let me be seen without the weight of all that I am

Relieved and solitary

Allowed to move throughout space, just as I am

The Beautiful Life (read by Tianna Sheppard)

Ernest Williamson III



Mountain Blue

Emily Ables



Tune in and Tune out

E.G.S

I

Sometimes I can feel the earth crumbling. And I stand there and shake my head.

I'm loosing the grip. I want to close my eyes. There are so many things I don't understand and I'm sick of asking, why. Why?

I am you and you are me. you are me and I am you. we are us and they are them. who are we fighting again? money is evil, consumption is disgusting.

you fat fucking pigs stuffing your face full of greed, put down your fucking plate!

your plate is made of gold and mine of plastic, and you want the shirt off my back to use as a napkin!?. and you proceed to wash your dirty hands clean in the water that I need to drink, and to water my seeds, water which you have turned to poison. you poisoned our mother, all in the name of profit, your prophet, the profit and I am sick from your wealth and you are wealthy from my sickness and my health. sometimes I feel there is no escape until we rise above and are freed from the hate which stems from the fear. and that fear is very real, sometimes I see it in your eyes, sometimes I see it in mine.

II

Preaching words for the damned, they sit us down and tell us not to be down. They poison our drinks and tell us what to think. Heard many times before, their lies oozing from their pores, that sick, greedy smile, telling you they are worth your while. All the while overlooking you and your desires. People starving, diseased and displaced, are seen only as some race. They plan on depleting the earth, tell you when to give birth, tally their score cards for wars being fought and wait to see if it can be bought.

III

The feelings we have, the feelings we've had. The feelings we long for, the warm feeling of nostalgia. Feelings of unjust, of loss, of lust, of love, of hurt, of pain, with a glimmer of happiness here and there. Always something to gain, room to grow, ways to heal. Nothing to hold on to, everything goes too, nothing to go to, nowhere to run to. How beautiful is it to just feel.

IV

I'm living the dream, or trying to at best. am I living in a dream where no one can contest? But I'm living within the dream, which seems to be the best. working two jobs just to pay my rent. I'm uninsured with bills hanging over my head. Since when has there been this price on my head??! Then i heard the news today, like the good ol beatles used to say. it's been on my mind all day, I can't seem to shake this shit away. go away. go away. you don't belong here. these bombs we throw will make you disappear. and I can't shake this shit away, it's been on my mind all damn day and now I'm wiping my tears away, for all the people running away. because people just can't seem to see any other way.

V

Turn the TV on, tune in and tune out and watch it all crumble in HD. All in the comfort your temperature controlled, electric powered home. Where clean water flows, and a cold beer and hot meal await. Luxury. To be able to flee to such comfort at the end of the day and watch from a distance. And What if one day there was no home to go to?

Final Descent

MK Punky

Your insistent heart will one day rest
initiating permanent membership
in a club of many billions
some of whom you knew
while they hurried and scurried and worried
possessing too little of this and too much of that
fearing and fretting about all we can't control
 how history will judge our miracles and mistakes
 what new fascination might fill our bottomless hole
 will elderly rivets keep the engine connected to the wing

Realizing conclusively the cosmic irrelevance of all we have
and haven't done
with our solitary ticket to the carnival
is reassuring as a first glimpse of pavement
from the window of an airplane
descending through stormy clouds

You didn't know how deeply you could love
verdant meadows
despoiled by runway lights and metal railings
tattooed on pastures
now emptied of sacred cows
making marvelous use of multi-chambered digestion inventions
magically converting sunlight into flesh
to feed builders of flying machines
pourers of concrete
imitators of migrating birds
traversing the sky to touch distant mothers
whose milk was never stolen
to nourish someone else's child
whose insistent heart
has not yet come to rest

Heirs to Gold and Smoke

Michael Hadden

The sky is always watching; the sky is blue and bought.

In Yalecrest they wake to birdsong, dripping from hundred-year trees planted by hands that never starved. Brick homes breathe in soft gold light; sprinklers hiss upon emerald lawns that have never known ash.

Blue Spruce and Bradford Pear trees wrap the sidewalks; red roses bloom in orderly rows, while the glow of sconces fades in warm formation.

Inside, an espresso machine whams like steam from heaven, sourdough rises in the marble clad kitchen, press crayons into thick white paper— soft laughter flows through ageless window pains.

Somewhere in Yalecrest, a golden retriever pisses on imported grass.

The sky is always watching; the sky is cold, and metal winged.

In Gaza, the sky wakes like a siren, ripe and red, hungry for names. No warning, just thunder, and the sound of something erased.

Black smoke rises in my mind, a prayer denied; not incense just entrails, not devotion just decay. Children curl like burnt scrolls, their limbs illegible, their names erased mid-syllable.

A mother gathers bone shards as if they were olive branches, an offering to a sky gone mute and receives nothing in return.

While Yalecrest hosts garden parties beneath string lights and gentle skies. They talk of remodels, the rising cost of organic eggs. No one mentions the limb in the street, nor the mother who now carries three deaths and one breath.

The wind does not care where it blows. It carries ashes or perfume, truth, or ignorance— It just depends on where you are standing.

Guardando Fuori Dalla Mia Casa
Ernest Williamson III



embrace ~ eternx
Katileena



In a world that can seem so dark and cold at times, a world that often leaves me feeling distant from myself and others; I find solace in love. I find myself at home deep in the folds of love's sweet rose, though I never forget my bloodied and battered heart. Like a religious offering, I put my intentions up to the altar of love and sacrifice myself. It is all that I have. When I have no words, not a shirt on my back nor enough for even a tear to roll down my cheek, love is my offering. And that is enough.

Why Life Matters Even Though It Fades

Aubrey Olsen Stokes Earle

Time moves like a thief... stealing every moment as soon as it arrives. Faces we love, they age... laughter echoes and fades and even the most breathtaking sunsets dissolve into darkness. Nothing lasts. Not people, not places, not even the stars. And so my question still lingers...

If everything disappears, if love, life, and even memory are swallowed by time, then what's the point of it all?

I have wrestled with this question in the dead of night, in the silence of grief, in the aching solitude of feeling forgotten. I have felt the weight of impermanence suffocate my heart, making me wonder if anything I do will ever truly matter. And yet, after all the questioning, all the unraveling, I have come to believe something that feels both terrifying and beautiful...

Life matters because it fades...

It is not in spite of impermanence that life has meaning, but because of it. The very fact that we are given only this sliver of time makes every breath, every moment, and every heartbeat matter more...

... So, let me tell you why I believe this... why I choose to believe it despite struggling to maintain that belief consistently... even when the weight of existence feels unbearably heavy...

Imagine a melody played only once, never to be heard again. Does the fact that it vanishes make it any less beautiful? Or does its impermanence make it even more sacred?

Life is no different. We are here for a moment... an inhale, an exhale... and then we are gone. But within that breath, there is so much. There is love. There is pain. There is the feeling of sun-warmed skin and the quiet comfort of a hand held in the dark. There is the way music can feel like it was written for you alone, the way rain smells just before a storm, the way a single look from the right person can completely undo you.

If we lived forever, would we cherish any of it? Or would we grow numb to it, knowing we had endless time to feel it later? It is because life is fleeting that we hold it so tightly. The temporary nature of things does not make them meaningless... it makes them precious.

If life's impermanence is unsettling, love's impermanence is devastating. People leave. People die. Even the greatest loves, the ones that feel like they were written into the universe before time itself, will one day end. And yet, love is the one thing that never truly disappears.

Love leaves traces. In the warmth of a worn coat that still smells like them. In the letters they wrote, the words they spoke, the fingerprints they left on your soul. Even when love fades, it changes you. Even when people leave, something OF them stays.

And if love is doomed to end, does that make it pointless? Or does it make it all the more powerful? I have come to believe that love is worth it, even if it cannot last. I have come to believe that a love that burns brightly and then goes out is still a love that was real.

We spend so much of our lives fearing being forgotten. Maybe that's what truly scares us... that everything we do, everything we are, will one day dissolve like mist in the morning sun. But I don't think we are ever really forgotten. Not in the ways that matter.

Legacy is not just names carved in stone or histories written in books. Legacy is the way you made someone feel safe when they were lost. It's the wisdom you whispered into someone's life at just the right moment. It's the kindness you gave when no one was watching.

I have come to believe that our existence ripples outward in ways we will never fully see. A smile given to a stranger might be the thing that stops them from falling apart. A story told in the dark might change the way someone sees the world. We do not have to be remembered to have mattered.

But what if none of that was true? What if you could change nothing, leave no mark, touch no one? Would life still matter?

Yes.

Even if you accomplished nothing, even if you were known by no one, your life would still be worth something. Not because of what you do, or what you create, or what you give to others... but simply because you are here.

A mountain does not need to justify its existence. A river does not need to prove its worth. They exist, and that is enough.

And so are you.

We have been taught to believe that meaning must be earned, that we must contribute, succeed, or be remembered for our existence to have weight. But I don't believe that anymore. I believe that to exist is, in itself, enough.

Here is the paradox... If life lasted forever, it would lose its urgency. If love were guaranteed, it would lose its depth. If we had infinite time, we would take it for granted. It is because we know everything will end that we learn to cherish it while it's here.

Yes, life is fleeting. Yes, everything fades. But what a gift that we get to experience it at all. That we get to wake up and breathe. That we get to feel joy so intense it makes our chest ache. That we get to love people so much it terrifies us. That we get to ...be.

So, no... I do not believe that life is meaningless just because it does not last. I believe it is meaningful because it does not last. And if all I have is this moment, then I will live it. I will feel everything. I will love deeply. I will leave behind kindness in the places I pass through. And when the time comes for me to fade, I will know that I was here. And that was enough.

For a 50th Reunion

Sarah Doepner

Welcome Graduates!

Should you ask my children or their children, I believe they will,
confidentially assert I'm not as entertaining as I might believe.
Why, for instance,
would I ramble on about the merits of hyacinth blossoms
over those of crocus or tulips while the snow is still fresh,
cold and destined to be long-lasting and spring is either memory or hope?

My oldest friends may think differently
as we enjoy the time we spend in our well-worn company telling stories,
convincing one another there is still growth and uncertainty
and challenge in lives that stretch,
now counted in scores of years and,
now with a surprising multitude of experiences
both individual and shared, we continue to foolishly imagine
what we choose to see before us
is still less than balanced by the counterweight of what we choose to see behind.

For those of us with plenty of birthdays to carry around
the past is heavy and strong on our knees, and backs and memories.
Through our weepy eyes there is still glory and challenge and danger enough
to fill our already complicated worlds.
And head on, a future is coming at a faster pace than we are prepared to resist
or even find ways for that crushing wave to flow over or around us
without lasting damage or unwanted change.
The decade to come will diminish our numbers in ways that astonish
and even though it may cloud our vision, dim the sounds, dull our taste or
slow our steps
We recognize both change and growth surround us,
amazing in volume, complexity and the speed
as it slices through society and media and a world
that is either a promise or a danger of becoming what we once foresaw, or
maybe even imagine we forecast coming our way.
Our minds still sing willingly along with the siren of change,
while those younger than us seem to expect our internal growth to be
only reflection on quality and depth and sorrow and pain
and a slow appreciation of what we thought we knew
when life was new and bright.
The world of our offspring is growing and challenging
but when they are exposed to our relative sloth-like movement
and our appreciation for things they can't see,
and will never experience,
it makes our presence difficult and even, they dare not say, boring.

And perhaps we come to realize our parents never decided to be current, and even if they tried, they intentionally failed, unwilling to take steps we believed necessary for them to join us as modern and free.

They were caught in the comforting web of earning and providing and being stable, making sure the world wasn't going to kick them to the curb and surprise us (their irresponsible children), suddenly establishing us as not equal to the responsibility of caring for parents who became slow and old, not as we currently are but as we were a decade past.

Now we are repeating the concerns our parents never spoke to us. And even if we decide to meet that challenge from the next generation, even if we freak out, drop out, scream, if we take those steps necessary to become modern and free, we instead become in their eyes, strange and remote, an unhinged burden, a body of concern. They won't know how to address these needs, but afraid to ask, they may never understand we wouldn't know how to answer even if they could form the question.

50 years ago, we were offered the keys to the kingdom. We each took what we believed we could manage or wanted to handle. Some of us were overmatched, others never challenged, and all of us were surprised. But how many can claim they met it all with the enthusiasm we then shared?

What are our real needs now?
Now we have experienced in our youth, our prime, our maturity
work
and love
and hate
and success
and failure
and joy
and love
and death
and if we were lucky, more love.

We hope to have accumulated what seem to be resources needed to face what future is left and as we grow older.
Even though we aren't done and there is still so much more life can and will offer.

Now?
Do we really have any better ideas Now than we had when life was bright and shiny and we were oblivious to the dark door at the end of the corridor.
Oh yes, it's very different now that we finally can see it,

not just the hint of an outline, but the many terrible details of that door
where so many have passed, each of them dragging part of us along,
but leaving us without a clue of when and how it will open for us,
or what happens when we walk through.

We like to say we know.

It's an effort to create a soft comfortable space for both ourselves and others,
and as good as our logic and reason and faith, or lack thereof may be, it is still
terribly quiet and damned dark across that threshold.

It is silent, and it is absent of the same promise held in bright shiny endless days
of unlimited options, we knew in our long sweet youth.

But now I'd be foolish to suggest it's an end,
The end.

We are not yet through with our stories and expectations
and willingness to meet challenges and accept love
and hope and find something, maybe everything new.
In efforts to soften the burden on the next generation,
to also ease the load on our own well-worn spirits,
we will slowly dance and sing to old tunes in our raspy out of tune voices
and try to find easy ways on the path toward our eventual exit.
Paths as bright and warm and full of love and promise and comfort as possible.

And why not?

As the calendar continues to cycle through the days and months,
as the clock moves through the minutes and hours,
as the seasons move
and stars return to their former positions in the sky
where they remind us of glorious moments in our past
and the possibility for new glories in our future.
I'm not giving up
and I insist on continuing to breathe
and learn
and share
and love
and face new mornings
and new challenges
and using love I will
resist allowing my world to shrink
to where I have only the option of the bed or that damned dark door.

I'm looking out, opening the window,
removing the screen
and being ready to crawl over the ledge,
ease down to the lawn
and laugh to myself
surprised once again at the wet grass tickling my bare feet
as I advance toward the sweet reward of hyacinth scent.

To Be Kind

Sharlee Mullins Glenn

to be kind—
that is the principal thing
to pay attention, sit with, stand beside
to kneel when kneeling is needed
to turn toward when others turn away
to celebrate effort like an
earnest first-grade teacher
to shower with praise as with
candy at a parade, generously
and with abandon
to replace that thought, bite that
tongue, extend that hand
to break open the fruit
and share it
to hold a child, open a door,
remember a name, write a note
with ink that stays
to hear the spaces between the words
to see the wound beneath the rage
to forgive each other for
being human.

Make no mistake;
it is kindness
that will save the world.