



# JABBERWOCKY

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Spring 2023

# **Cover Artist's Statement, "Empathic Energy," by Shannon McKenna**

My name is Shannon McKenna, I'm a Junior at UMass Amherst, & I created my own major called "Sustainable Living". For forever, I've been an artist of the ocean, where passionate waves of creativity flow through me. Living is such a vivid, potent, & colorful experience. I aim to reflect that richness I observe in my art. For me, this painting expresses how I feel about how beautifully different every being is, especially the light they share with others. Acrylic on Canvas finished in February 2020.

## **About Jabberwocky**

*Jabberwocky* is the official undergraduate literary journal of the English Department, published by students of the University of Massachusetts Amherst. Named after the whimsically terrifying creature from Lewis Carroll's poem "Jabberwocky" and famous fantasy novel *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, our journal features the best of the undergraduate student body's art and literature.

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All opinions expressed in the journal are the authors' and do not necessarily represent the interest of the journal itself. Additionally, the pieces are included as originally written by UMass students, and may contain content that is difficult or unsuitable for some audiences. Please read at your own discretion.

## **Acknowledgements**

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# “Camp Leo”

Grace Young

The lake at Camp Leo was eternally strange, and it haunted my thoughts year after year. Summers passed by dutifully in their sticky, New England manner: humid and swelteringly hot with buckets and buckets of rain, just as I liked. Admittedly, I wasn't much at home; I spent most of those summers staring at that strange, strange lake.

The oddest thing was this: the lake didn't *look* out of place. It consisted of four sandy shores, two of which were owned and operated by Camp Leo itself, with near-endless waters stretching out in every direction. When the sun shone—and it shone often, those days, wrapped in the cotton comforts of childhood memory—the blue surface of the lake couldn't help but entice me.

But I didn't swim. I *couldn't* swim, in fact; I'd failed the swim test, many summers before, in a most glorious fashion. Choking and coughing and spluttering had been enough to deter any more attempts at gaining me my blue swimmers' wristband from the camp staff. I was much happier on land, anyway, with my boots and my knife and my muddy tee shirts.

Cameron liked to swim, though. She'd show up bright and early, nine o'clock sharp every morning, for the open waterfront: a towel thrown lazily over one shoulder, loose curls tucked into two French braids, and her arms crossed over a green swim-shirt. Sometimes, I sat on the beach—behind the guard line, because everyone knew that the waterfront staff would yell at you if you so much as breathed in their direction—and watched her glide through the water with a fluid grace. She swam laps, most mornings, there and back there and back across the lake, and then she'd emerge from the depths just in time for lunch.

That odd feeling lingered in my stomach. I didn't trust the lake to hold her in its grasp. I didn't trust it to wrap an arm around her waist and hold her close. I didn't trust it to run its sky-blue fingers through her hair and promise, softly, never to leave her.

*Best friends forever*, we'd sworn the summer before, with pinecones in our hair and gimp around our wrists and stars in our eyes. We'd been fourteen, then, and the whispered promise seemed like a lifetime ago.

Cameron had informed me, matter-of-fact, that this new level of friendship entailed several commitments. We'd moved our seats next to each other in the mess hall last year; somehow, they'd stayed there like phantoms until we arrived for the following summer.

This time, when I flopped gracelessly into my seat, I asked Cameron to pass the salt and pepper by way of greeting. The lake had plastered her blonde hair against her neck; water droplets shone every time she twisted in place, like a soggy golden retriever avoiding a towel's magic touch.

She grinned and offered me the two shakers, which I nearly dropped. "I didn't see you at the beach."

This was the thing I liked the most about Cameron—she didn't ask stupid, needless questions like *where were you?* or *how was freshman year?* She simply spoke her mind and waited until I stumbled along after her. And somehow, I always stumbled along after her.

"I was unpacking," I said. It was only a half untruth—after filling the old chest of drawers with my haphazardly-folded clothes, I'd gone exploring through the woods. As far away from the lake as I could get, really. Time had slipped away from me there, surrounded only by trees and moss and birdsong, and I had almost arrived late for lunch.

Cameron leveled me with that same piercing gaze. "For two hours."

"Yes," I said. I did not drop eye contact. "Lots of shirts and socks. You know how it is."

The silence stretched between us for a moment longer; she broke it with a stray bark of laughter that seemed to send tremors through the June air. "No bathing suit, though," she said.

I flushed a little. "No," I said. Thank God that my voice did not waver. I leaned forward, across Cameron, to snag a grilled cheese sandwich from the platter and hide my face from her scrutiny in the process. Her breath fanned across my neck as I did so, drawing a reckless shiver across my skin. "No bathing suit."

She sighed, a drawn-out thing, and I didn't quite have the courage to glance back at her.

This was the thing I disliked the most about Cameron: her insistence that I should learn to swim. Or, rather, her insistence that I should take the swim test again and *pass*, this time. Whenever she brought up the topic, I felt rather like the flint to her steel. Any friction between us usually ended in an explosive series of sparks.

And if that was true, then this, perhaps, was the truth about me and Cameron: I loved her, fiercely, with everything I had, and I was never quite sure if she knew.

Her tells were a constant mystery to me. Maybe she loved me too, somehow, in her own strange way. *That* was the thought I lingered on, especially on the nights I had trouble falling asleep. My head brushed soft pillows and my eyelashes touched my cheekbones and I thought only of Cameron. Maybe the two of us were more alike than we'd thought.

Still, I refused to enter that lake, and I told her as much as I ate my sandwich. I didn't mince words, opting for bluntness rather than tact. "It's terrifying," I said. "I don't know how you do it."

Cameron turned those bright eyes on me, and *oh*, what a fool I was. In that moment, I might've done anything for her. "I love the water," she said with a pout. She reached out and poked me in the side, insistent; I shied away with a small noise of protest in the back of my throat. "I love swimming. It makes me feel alive."

Unspoken between us in midair hung: *you should try it.*

I'd known this was coming. Cameron tended to get her way when she wanted it. "I like terra firma," I said, and Cameron laughed even though I hadn't intended for the words to be funny. "Ground under my feet. I feel plenty alive already."

"You don't get it," she said with a huff. I imagined her crossing her arms over her chest and sitting back with a scowl dripping from her lips. "We're *supposed* to be best friends, aren't we?"

That gave me pause. I considered the issue for a long moment, head cocked to the side. "We are best friends," I said finally.

"A real, true best friend would take the swim test," Cameron said. I did not point out her concurrent use of *real* and *true*; a small voice in my chest told me that it wouldn't be tactful. She leaned close, all at once, and my breath left my lungs in a sudden exhale. "For me." Then, as if an afterthought, she added: "*Please?*"

In that moment, with the full force of Cameron's gaze leveled in my direction, I couldn't have said no if I'd tried. Admittedly, I did not try very hard; I simply held eye contact as her smile drew an invisible ripple of blue water between us. "Okay," I said quietly, and the deal was thus sealed.

It was worth it, if only for the look of delight that spread across Cameron's face. I



loathe even now to describe it in too much detail; part of me wanted to bottle up that joy and sell it for a profit. Surely man would never need anything else—not shelter, nor food, nor water. I could have lived off of Cameron’s glee for a lifetime.

“Tomorrow morning, then?” Cameron said. She phrased it as a question, but she’d clearly already come to a firm decision. Though, when she reached over and squeezed my hand, I decided that was more than fine with me and offered her a nod in return.

Tomorrow morning dawned bright and blue-skied and blessedly early. Chickadees chirruped in the trees; I listened for them as Cameron led to the lake, our arms entwined at the elbows. Best friends simply *had* to hold hands while walking together, she told me with a straight face. No excuses.

I outright refused to hold her hand—I’d always considered the action an awful, girlish thing that was far beneath me—but I let her thread an arm through the crook of my elbow instead. A compromise, of sorts. The pressure of her grip against my sun-warmed skin felt nice, but she used it to practically drag me down to the waterfront; I stumbled over my heavy boots with only a few protests.

The waterfront staff knew Cameron, and she knew them right back. Camp Leo had been her home during the summer months for years now, and she’d spent most of that time in the water. They knew me, too, of course, and therefore liked me even less: I was the small, churlish thing who sat out of every activity that even remotely involved lake water.

I’d been dreading my inevitable confrontation with the waterfront staff, but Cameron spoke for me. She informed the waterfront director—a rather burly woman with thin graying hair and a horrible frown—that I needed to take the swim test. Time was of the essence. And no, ma’am, the test couldn’t possibly wait until open swim; I needed it *now*, before breakfast, or there’d be hell to pay.

What kind of hell, I had no idea. It was most likely Cameron’s own invention—she had a way with words that I envied. The waterfront director hummed along to her words, brows creasing, as if she were a rat caught fast by the Pied Piper. She, like the rest of us, had been bewitched by Cameron’s spell.

In the blink of an eye, the waterfront director agreed and I went to change into my swimming costume. My mother had insisted I bring it this year. No more of this nonsense, she’d said, her tone final. You’ll swim this summer, or I’ll toss you into that lake myself.

I shivered at the memory now that the lake lay ahead of me. The rocks on the beach cut into my feet with sharp, glistening edges; I stepped onto the dock, arms wrapped tightly around my middle, to escape the discomfort.

Cameron had waited there for me, but she was turned away—conversing with a lifeguard on the dock. “Cameron?” I called, uncertain. She glanced over her shoulder at me; her expression softened as soon as she laid eyes on my shivering form.

“You made it!” she crowed. When she stepped forwards to take my hands in hers, my heart skipped a beat. “I like your bathing suit.”

“What, this old thing?” I said, even though my mother had only purchased it days before. Truth be told, I hated the costume: something with orange and red stripes, shot through with blue. At first, I’d thought it made me look rather childish, but Cameron’s eyes had lit up at the sight of it. I was not built like Cameron was—long and lithe and graceful, her shoulders packed with muscle. Bathing suits did not usually suit me in the slightest. “Found it in the bottom of my trunk.”

“You’re awful,” Cameron said, but she was smiling as she shook her head. I figured there was no heat in the words. Her attention turned back to the lifeguard, and she gave a little toss of her hair.

Right. We weren’t alone. I let go of her wrists and listened to the guard’s instructions instead: jump in, swim two laps, float on my back. It sounded easy enough, though I’d never heard of elementary backstroke before and I was too afraid to ask.

“Good luck,” Cameron said with a small smile. I debated smoothing that smile out with my thumbs, pressing our foreheads together, and pulling her into the lake with me—but the waterfront staff certainly wouldn’t like that. It might get me kicked out of camp, but it would be worth it.

So I jumped into the lake before the thought could take hold. The water was deathly cold upon impact—it left me gasping at the surface for air. I couldn’t see anything with my eyes squeezed shut; it felt like the lake had wrapped around me and *tugged* me, downwards, in a never-ending spiral.

Front stroke. Two laps. I pushed myself forwards and broke the surface, finally, my lungs working double-time to collect that precious air. It felt like my brain had short-circuited. The sight of Cameron standing on the dock, worrying her upper lip between her teeth, had delivered the most electric of shocks.

I managed a bastardized version of the front crawl. Slowly but surely, I finished the

first lap—then I treaded water as my bearings returned to me. There was the shore, over there—and the other beach—and the dock bobbing on top of tiny waves. There was Cameron, her arms crossed over her chest. The lifeguard was nowhere to be seen.

The thought did not inspire as much panic as it should have. Rather, I pushed myself forwards—towards Cameron, towards the dock, towards land—and called out, “Cameron!” with a mouth full of lake water.

She grinned. It was a wicked thing, sharp at the edges and smooth just about everywhere else. I could see it from the water. “Keep swimming!”

Come here, I thought, fueled by the wonderful desperation of the lake. Come swim. I must’ve unintentionally said the words aloud, because Cameron uncrossed her arms and reached down to pull off her shorts.

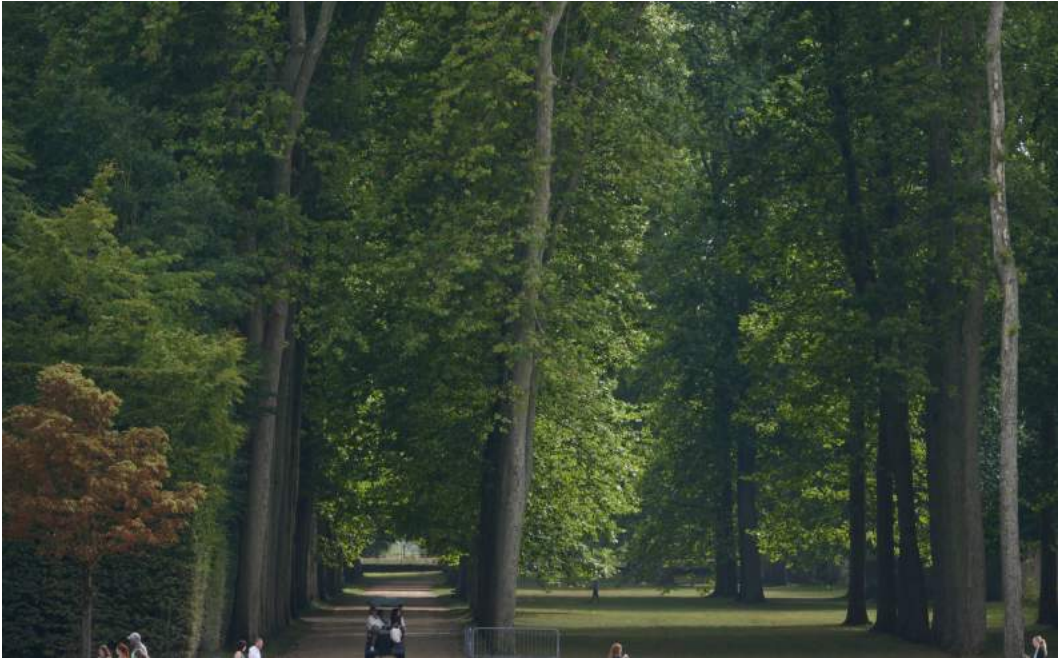
When she threw herself into the lake, the resulting splash soaked my hair through. I spluttered and coughed up lake water as she laughed, bobbing to the surface with an easy grace. When she swam towards me—her rippling muscles working in tandem and her unbraided hair trailing after her like the wind—I was struck by just how natural it all seemed.

Cameron caught me the next time I went under, wrapping strong hands around my forearms. Grinning, she said, “Got you,” as if I wasn’t about to drag her down with me.

Then again, I thought, maybe that’s what she wanted. There was a part of me more than willing to drown for Cameron, and it drove me to open my eyes underwater when she let us both sink deeper.

From this angle, with Cameron’s arms now around my waist, the bottom of the lake glimmered beneath us. And I could truly see it, through my oxygen-deprived vision, for the first time: bones and skulls and rocks and tangled weeds. *Far* too many skulls; the skeletal structure seemed almost sentient.

But they did not unsettle me. By all means, they should have—as I was staring, vision blurred, one of the skulls winked at me. I tried not to think about how familiar the sharp edge of that jaw looked. All I could do was return the gesture with a languid watery blink, locked tight and drowning in Cameron’s grip, and think how *right* the strangeness had been all along.



*Versailles Trees*  
Damien Crockett  
Digital Photography

## **Georgia**

Danielle Marrocco

The old train tracks have bats  
I throw rocks up to taunt as they dive for bugs  
Hunger tears into stomachs.  
No noise in wastelands and  
There are holes in my shoes.

Cold skin droops against the glass  
A palm on my window meets mine  
Husks stumble outside the house  
Pop out their eyes and lose legs.  
Spray-painted warnings on signs  
Rusted-over cars bumper to bumper and  
Teddy bears propped up in seats.

It's humid out, and rot has an odor.

Have to get out, stumble away, have to  
See what's outside, have to touch  
Everything three times and question  
Who the person was before prayers to God  
And hold the knife, have to crawl into  
Stores, have to eat, spilled boxes,  
There is food in me, can't give in  
To what they want, have to leave my house,  
Have to gather boards and turn away from  
Voices outside, even from garbled speech,  
Have to get out of this house,  
Door knobs turning, back and forth,

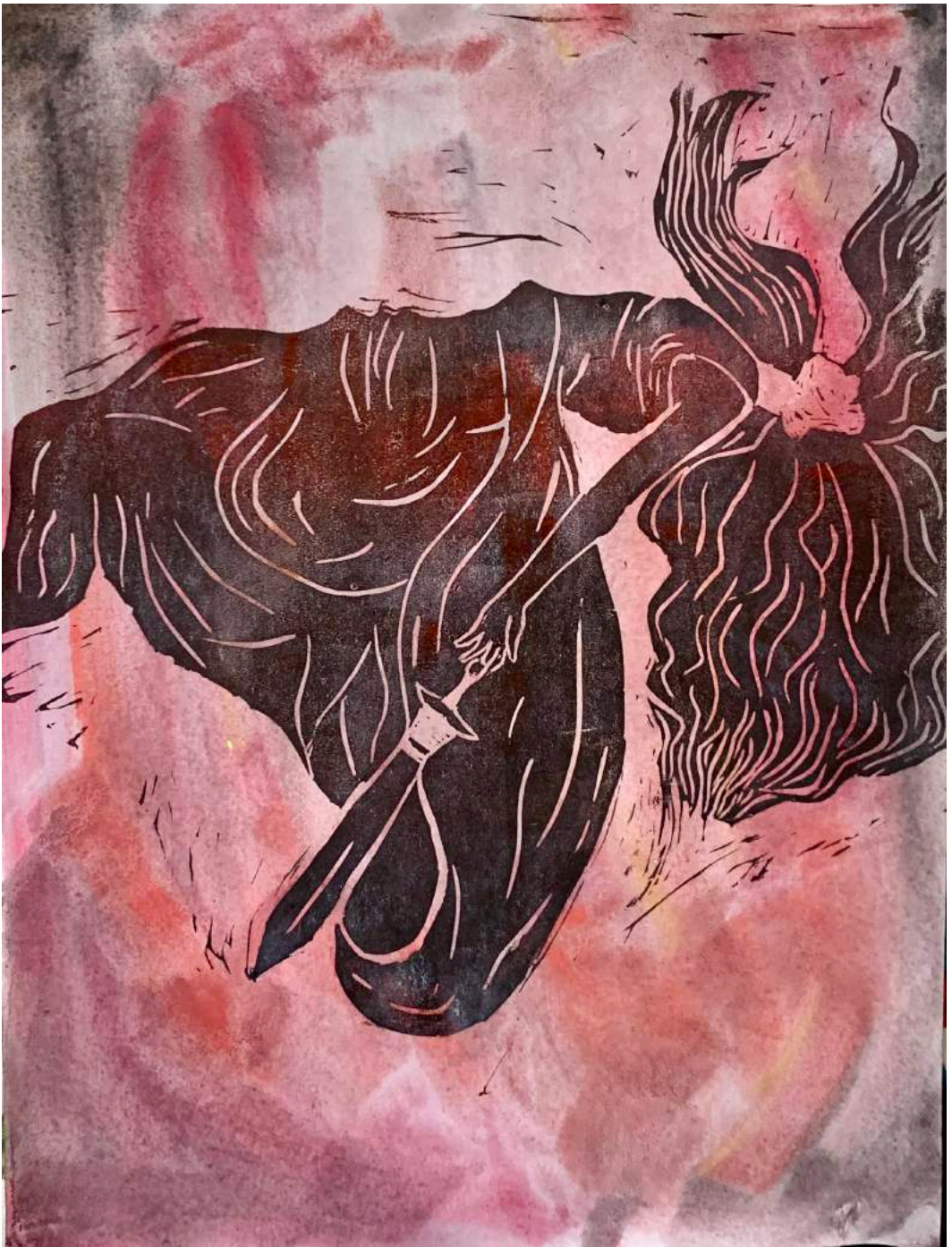
I got out of the house.

Have to move, can't keep staring, but  
What else is there to see besides bones lined along the roads,  
A hand by my cans, and should find a mirror, to see,  
Can't let adrenaline rush in veins, can't let them have a taste,  
It'll be too sweet, have to run up to cars, and tug  
On the mirror, have to look, please let me  
Plummet into illusions of past days, flourish and  
I have to reset

## **give us hunger, give us god**

Nick Lang

and on the skin she slices down the throat / we all bend down to drink  
/ blood of christ, body of christ / religion scaffolds from anywhere with  
someone to listen / we listen / all her scolding, kissing, crafting / our  
Grandmother who holds a knife to the throat / does not cut us free from  
the years in holy row / pews, altars, chalice to challenge witches and magic  
/ build us anew, outcast fear as habit / on the duck, coconut, holy spirit /  
our knees gashed from years of prayer / and gulping down what she has  
provided / love, loss, religious prowess / give us hunger, give us god.



*More Than Love*  
Shriya Agrawal  
Linocut, watercolor, monotype,  
and frontage on paper

# **Cowboy, take me three towns over**

Molly Hamilton

Thieves in the night, balancing act at the threshold  
we never took our eyes off the borderline.

When the job's done we move on —  
you taught me that.

And you were right  
about the boys with their gold stars and degrees,  
I should've taken my cues from you and headed north.

Happiness eludes the liars and traitors,  
both necessary to the aims of the reckless.  
You took up the first, so I settled for the second.

I wanted to hold you sometimes,  
when the dim light cut through the smoke  
and reminded me of an old movie scene.

Go put on your black hat and  
I'll draw lines up the backs of my calves.

If you were bad, I was worse.  
Backed out before the gunfire could hit me,  
left you with the blame and blood money.

Someone always has to get the better deal —  
you taught me that.

Keep your eyes on those white lines, the night's  
half over and the dawn's not promised.

# **You Bitch!**

Tori Ingram

And what exactly do you mean  
when I am a bitch who makes you proud?  
Or am I a proud bitch? Too proud, huh?  
My dreams are nonsense to you  
even as the bomb drops, the car engine ignites, the crow falls  
You have ears  
for me,  
my girly squealish she'll-shut-up-eventually  
until we make a wrong turn  
Or, was it my wrong turn? I don't hold the wheel, I don't even drive, it was  
my wrong turn

If \_\_\_\_ is your only identity, anchor,  
I hope you find your peace  
Please understand, I'm not a hypocrite,  
just an unspilling tub of tears behind my eyes—eyelashes, if I'm just a girl  
that day

If I were your limbs and face, I would change your world  
Do my wife's dishes, wear sunscreen, Jesus, man,  
wear sunscreen, let the air in and around me smell safe  
Secretly,  
I would watch me at the kitchen table  
Try to spit up some rage some critique some "That's not how you hold a  
steak knife!"  
Half through I lose steam

Are you mad at my brain?  
Bitch brain, I like the sound of that  
A bitch can be a lawyer, rich, respected, be something, girl, be something  
For you,  
it's no fun when your bitch daughter doesn't debate for money  
I'm too harsh, I know my mind,  
she'll never change, not even for you  
I'm too harsh, you like it but you don't

I won't cry GIRL I'll watch your war movies GIRL I'll change your tire  
GIRL  
Bitter anger, cold bloody oozing, is where you really see me



Don't I make you laugh though?  
Bitchy jokes not allowed in this establishment, don't mention chore distribution or spending  
habits or sitting on couches too long  
Come on, Bitch is my middle name  
I never let you off the hook, you like that = you don't

A little late, but I snipped you together  
I'm a wicked daughter, who are you



*A Moment of Mystery*  
Matthew Chaparro  
Digital Photography

# December Dancer

Rachel Otero

## 1. Littlest

I know it was November because the sky was light gray, and all of the leaves had fallen off of the trees in a final bow. Just before my tenth birthday, my Mom took Ryann, Dani, and me on a short walk to Food Zone. Dani and I bundled up in our too-big North Face coats, which we were overly embarrassed to be seen wearing out in public, while Ryann chose to wear a light zip-up hoodie, convincing herself it was not cold enough outside to wear a jacket. "I'll be fine," Ryann insisted.

"Okay. Well, I don't want to hear that you're cold," Mom warned.

She marched the three of us out of the door and we shuffled relentlessly toward the other side of our dead-end street and turned left in the direction of the grocery store. I listened to the whirring of the traffic and stared at the ground as my feet moved naturally, one in front of the other, familiar with the walk since Mom doesn't drive.

"I have something I want to tell you," she broke the silence.

"For a few months now, Alisha has been going through a lot of changes. I don't know if you girls have noticed," she began.

A hungry silence fell between my sisters and me as my mother lingered while telling her speech.

"Your sister is pregnant with a baby girl," she admitted.

My face felt hot with a unique kind of joy and shock I had never felt before. Alisha was just sixteen at the time, but my young brain convinced me that she was far older and completely capable of becoming a mother. We did not know how to react, each of us asking several questions to satiate our intense curiosity.

"When will the baby be born?"

"How long has she known?"

"Who is the dad?"

"What will her name be?"

Mom answered only a few of our questions. We discovered she would be born sometime that upcoming December. My family had known for some time before they decided to tell my sisters and me. Thin plastic grocery bags twisted in circles as they hung heavily from my fingers as we walked back through biting winds back home. We brainstormed potential baby names all the way, debating whether or not Alisha might choose one of the names we liked.

Arriving back at the house with excited, flushed cheeks, my sisters and I rushed in to find Alisha. How could we not notice all that time that a baby was inside of her belly? We found her sitting in the living room, a TV tray propped up in front of her, eating steak and potatoes while my grandparents sat in the kitchen to eat. She wore sweatpants with cows printed all over the fabric and a hoodie that was too old to tell what logo was on it. Her hair was cut into a short bob that was shiny with highlights which complimented her tan skin. She looked just as she did when we had left the house, but being around her after finding out about her pregnancy felt different. Mom urged us to not ask too many questions,

but it was near impossible for us to resist. “Can we feel the baby?” I asked shyly.

“Sure,” she casually replied.

Simultaneously, three palms pressed gently against the softly rounded surface of Alisha’s belly. It was difficult to imagine that a tiny creature was cuddled up beneath the surface of her skin. It was even more difficult to imagine that there would be a living, breathing baby cuddled in her arms in the months to come. Feeling the erratic thumps caused by the baby’s little legs, I was convinced that within that small homely sac that encased her, she was dancing freely to the reassuring rhythm of her mother’s heartbeat.

## 2. Littler

Even at the earliest hours of the morning, if Mickey Mouse Clubhouse was on the television, she would be up front and center, swaying back and forth to the playful melodies that came through the speakers. Before she could crawl, she was already moving her hips and bobbing her head to any song with a good beat. I would come upstairs before school and find her sitting in the high chair, scrunching her nose and wiggling her shoulders from side to side. Kayleigh was constantly moving her body.

When she was three, while strapped in her car seat on a trip to the grocery store, Usher’s Confessions came on the radio. She nodded her head to the slow beat with a funny smirk on her face. My sisters and I all laughed as I pulled out my phone to record her. She closed her eyes and rolled her fists around one another in small circles, feeling the passion of Usher’s lyrics, fully aware of the joy that she brought to her audience.

Most often she danced at home in the living room, uncaring about which family members were sitting on the couches watching her. It was amazing how flexible she became over time, mastering basic moves like backbends and splits. By the time she was four, she was teaching herself to dance.

“I want to show you something,” she said excitedly.

I looked over and let her know, “Okay, I’m ready.”

She raised her arms over her head and swooped downward, kicking her legs high above herself.

“Since when do you know how to cartwheel?” I said with curiosity, “You know, I can’t even do one of those.”

“I just learned, I dunno,” she giggled with pride.

Afterward, she asked me to play music on the television for her to move around. I grabbed the remote and clicked through the channels until I found Music Choice. Pop song after pop song, she tirelessly whirled around the room, performing twirls and clumsy pirouettes. I was almost sure that she would dance forever if she could. She was captivating as she danced foolishly, passionately, and unapologetically. So I sat on the couch and watched her twist her feet, flick her wrists, and sing the songs she loves the most, only daring to admire her.

## 3. Little

On weekends that my eldest sister worked, Kayleigh usually spent time at my house with Mom, Ryann, Dani, and myself. She was five years old at the time,

much more curious and restless than she had ever been at her previous ages. Keeping her entertained was a challenge for us aunts. We switched from watching television to hosting dance parties to playing with toys repeatedly until it was time for her to leave. During this particular weekend at some point in the gloomy afternoon, Kayleigh decided she wanted to draw with me.

“Do you want to use a coloring book or white paper?” I asked.

“White paper. Will you draw with me?” she asked.

“Of course, I’ll draw with you,” I responded.

I ran over to the printer and grabbed several pieces of blank paper for us to draw on. From under the living room table, I gathered a handful of well-loved markers and colored pencils and drew them close to my chest so none would fall as I walked back to my bedroom. Scattering the utensils all over my scratched hardwood floor, I made sure there was enough variety for us to draw with.

As I scanned the array of colors, I asked her, “Do we have enough? What do you think you’ll draw?”

“I dunno,” she hesitated, “Maybe we can draw each other. You do me and I do you,” she proposed.

“I like that idea, let’s do that,” I agreed.

She finished her portrait in less than five minutes and decided to move on to bigger and better artwork. In the meantime, I was still in the beginning stages of my drawing. To start, I drew a general human figure down to the shoulders. From there I added large, round eyes and a small button nose. Her lips were drawn into a big smile, her missing teeth revealing themselves. Grabbing a caramel-colored pencil, I gently scribbled over the paper to fill in her complexion. A black marker was used to swirl tight ringlets around her face, stopping just above her chin. “Are you almost done?” she prodded.

“Yeah, I’m just adding some final things, then I’ll be done,” I responded.

The last thing to add was a small red dot above the right side of her top lip, a mark that she has had since birth. After putting the pencil down, we revealed our portraits to each other. She insisted that she show me her drawing first and pulled it from underneath a thin pile of papers and held it up to me, grinning with enthusiasm. It was a cute and simple illustration drawn mostly in black ink, her jagged lines forming a full-body portrait of me.

“I love it! Thank you so much, Kay,” I said.

“Now me. Show me!” she said excitedly. Flipping the sheet around to show her the drawing, I smiled, expecting adorable gratitude.

“That doesn’t look like me,” she complained.

“What do you mean? I think it looks a lot like you.”

“I want to have hair like you. I want you to redo me with a lighter color.”

“But that’s not what you look like, Kay. I don’t understand.”

“I want it to be LIGHT! The skin is too brown! I want my hair to be STRAIGHT like you!”

She threw herself on the ground and burst into a waterfall of tears. I tried to comfort her while she begged that I redo the drawing. The idea of drawing her whiter and with straight hair was appalling. I refused her pleas and tried to convince her of her beauty. It was devastating to watch her cry about her appearance.

I thought about the first time I ever held her in my arms. Her hair was black and her eyes were closed as she soundly slept. She was so small. And so delicate. After five years, nothing about those parts of her had changed. She was still one of the most beautiful things I had ever looked at. We sat on my bed, I pulled her into a surrounding embrace, and brushed her dark curly hair softly with my thumb as we lingered within that brief moment of love and loss.



*Dreamy Biking*  
Aaron Cheng  
Digital Photography

# **A Love Letter to My Hair**

Tori Ingram

Forgive Momma. I know she didn't know what to do with you, but you should forgive her. She always did try her hardest. Remember the butterfly clips she bought us in second grade? Or the beanie we wore when you refused to be washed and made detangling Hell? How about the foam rollers when Miss Universe had those big, gorgeous, loose pageant curls on TV?

Stop being mad with Dad. Okay, you can be a little mad, but he tried, too. I don't think he knew how to style more than a fro. And, sure, he smothered you in that Pink Lotion, which would probably just give me forehead acne now. And, yeah, he brushed you down with that boar bristle brush, pulled you into a low bun, and made me look like an overly serious four-foot ballerina who could definitely pull off a good Esther from Orphan costume.

I know you wish it was Momma and not him who gave me you. By the time you met him, he was balding, buzzed his hair off decades ago, and accidentally shaved his eyebrows off once. He wasn't exactly an expert. Maybe if we lived with Auntie, we would have had it down pat by at least eighth grade. But no, something much worse happened to you.

The dreaded keratin treatment. I wanted to change you so bad. Sorry for making you sit through that, making you smell like those chemicals for days. Sorry for relishing in the compliments I got from you, the you that wasn't you. I thought it was better that way. I mean, I didn't spend hours in the bathroom just trying to tame you. You dried within 30 minutes and went into a cute little straight ponytail during gym class. But then, you came back with a fury. You looked like limp ramen noodles for a year until I was finally done with you. I cut all of you off, just to show you who was in charge.

We had an agreement, then. I would never do that again, and you'd look a little bit better. You never did get rid of the frizz, but I think it's sweet now. You took up more space, and that was hard for me to accept, hard for me to accept when people said I looked like a poodle, or that I should straighten you, or wear you up more so they could see the face you overshadowed. I thought I could never be pretty because all people saw was you.

You were crazy back then, and I hated you. So, I did it again, less permanent, just a blow dryer and flat iron, I swear. Momma smiled at you, thinking it made me happy. It did, at least during the drive home, but you started to curl after I washed my face. Two days, you lasted me. I couldn't fight you anymore.

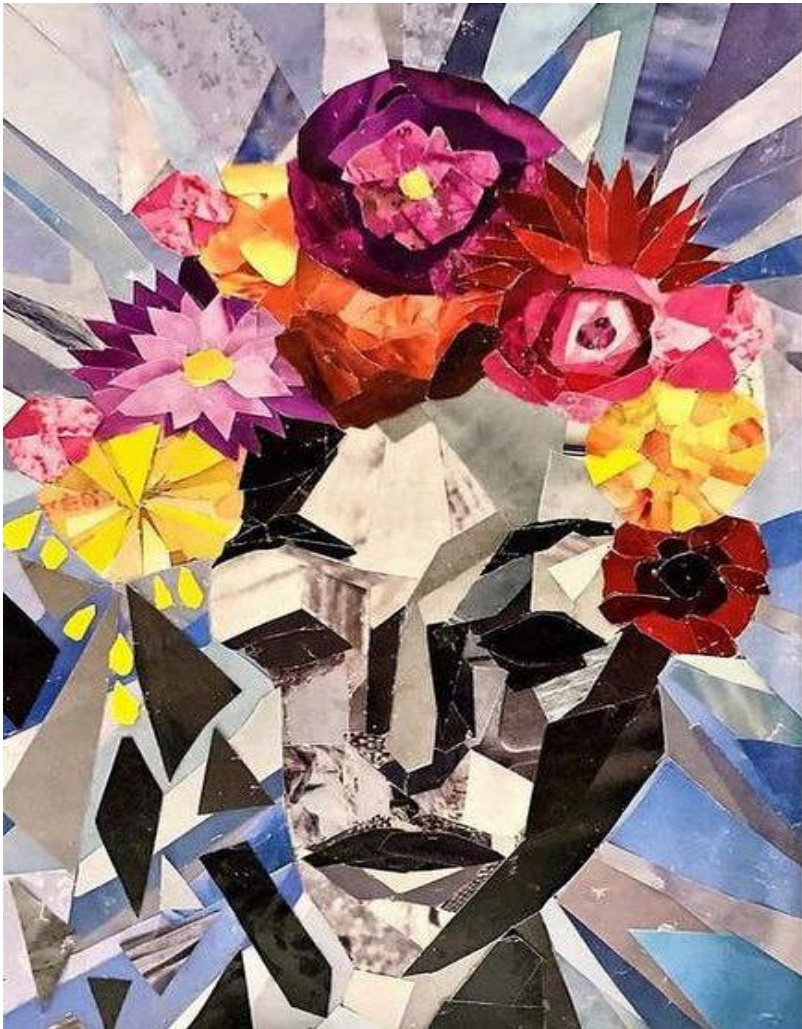
At 17, I remember being confused at something my best friend at the time said. I asked, "Are you straightening yours for prom?" And she said, "No. I wouldn't look like me."

Prom never came, and you stayed you for another 2 years. I did it again at 19, sorry. But, it was the last time. My best friend now doesn't have anything on her head that looks like you, but she looked at me after I did it in our dorm room, made the air smell like burnt hair follicles, and said, "I like it, but you don't really look like you."

I get you now. I researched you, found out which pattern you were, if you

liked Cantu. I'm a little embarrassed it took me so long. You weren't the best companion to have, I think you can admit that. I even fought with you last summer. Remember when I threatened to cut you all off again so it wouldn't take me 3 hours to wash you, put product in you, style you, restyle you because you looked ridiculous, and then air dry you? Even when I love you long, wild, and crazy in the wind?

I bet you're glad I didn't. I am. I tried something new with us, because, listen: we've looked the same since we were 15, and we love it. Bangs! Can you even imagine us in high school having bangs? I'm so proud of you. You've made me cry, you still do sometimes, but you make me smile more now. You're my sister, my halo. So, don't be so mad at Dad when he says we looked better before. He's bald, girl, what does he know?



*Patricia*  
Shea Trimble  
Collage

## **Libra Love**

Rachel Otero

my Dad used to fry eggs and ham  
and butter my toast and pick me  
up on the weekends to show me  
what daughterhood could be and  
he never remembered my birthday  
so now I forget how old he is, too  
and he wore cargos and cut his hair  
down short and never wore boots  
the shoes of a hardworking man  
and sometimes he would rub his hands together  
to create what he called friction a thing I barely  
understood and he'd take two small palms  
pressed flat and hold them tightly in his and I  
wondered how a man who craves affection  
could be so aloof and unaware and I remember  
the time we went to the windy mountains and he  
bought me a t-shirt and saltwater taffy from the  
gift shop which I wanted to save forever to  
remind me of what it feels like to live in a  
smoke cloud and I was convinced he was the  
funniest person on the Earth after he danced  
around the souvenir shop like a fool and would  
only ever dream of having such quick wit just  
like my father

## **A Carol**

Claudia Maurino

the roof there sags a little and the wind tears through  
its bones and in the marsh across the parking lot  
frogs are climbing onto the roads on new legs  
to seek out spring, heedless of their imminent death

I don't think I believe in beauty anymore  
I think I believe only in imperfection  
in hard work and in women, the ancient  
tradition of knowing joy is a moving body



a hundred years ago, cows shook in their stalls  
under this roof, feeling the winter on their  
ankles and the same frogs were making the  
same journeys, yet unimpeded by machines

inside, for a quarter century, her two hands  
have passed the same plates back and forth  
growing hard and rough, tending and fixing  
everything they touch with equal authority and skill

she lifts things like a man, jokes mean  
and quick and nasty, is the only one  
who pays attention to the leaking roof  
or the sounds of spring life in the marsh

one hundred years ago, I hope there were women  
with men's hands, jobs, and strength, and I hope  
someone loved them as reverently as I do  
was moved by their hardy roughness, their ability

in the loft above the gables, the old farm cat sleeps  
she fills his food bowl, pints of beer, the dish racks  
she laughs, yells above the din, and feels her bones  
begin to creak in agreement with the old wood

I, distracted from my work, am happy just to watch her  
to watch snow fall for one hundred years  
for one hundred years to escort frogs across  
roads in the spring, to watch the rain so well

I become it, so long as I may keep watching  
unbeautiful women with soft smiles  
and hard hands move surely, stoutly, and boldly  
like time, right through it



*Kowloon Walled Park*  
Aaron Cheng  
Digital Photography

## **Shilpi**

Helen Rahman

Back in Japan, my mother used to sing me a lullaby that went,  
*Sing, sweet nightingale, sing sweet nightingale*, from Cinderella.  
I would close my wide infant eyes shut, until the last thing I heard before  
surrendering to sleep was the persevering beating of my mother's un-  
shakeable heart.

*Shilpi* is my mother's name, *shilpi* means artist.  
My cat is blue eyed, snow white,  
And everyday he rolls around in the dirt,  
Chases away snakes, and salivates over the birds.

He comes home and chirps a jolly hello  
To my light brown mother, saying hey mama,  
I look just like you. I love you.

He rubs his dirt on my mother's espresso work pants and  
Twitches his tail stylishly to show his undying affection.

We are all my mother's children.  
And my mother is her mother's child.  
And she believes she is God's child.

We are artists but with different crafts.  
My mother is strong. Which I suppose means that I can be too.  
My mother is a science god. Which means, I can be too.  
*Shilpi*, meaning artist, or singer, or painter, or just, mystic.

I wasn't given a Bengali name, so I carry Bengali with me in my every  
move, every word, every sob, and every prayer to God knows who. I sing  
for people and they tell me God gave me my talent. I say, where was "He"  
this whole time? You seen him around? I kept singing but he never an-  
swered. Or so, I thought. I would be lying if I said I knew for certain he  
exists.

I wish I was a sexy siren with no feelings sometimes, but turns out  
I'm a human being who at times isn't really treated like one. So I carry the  
red river of Bangladesh in my notes, especially in my microtones. I draw  
that microtone out like it's a canoe on that river, the one my uncle, a phar-  
macist from a small village, died on.

Say it with me. Bangladesh. A girl who won Jeopardy 40 times in a  
row lost because she didn't know of Bangladesh. Bangladesh. One of the  
most gruesome genocides in the world ended in 1971. Bangladesh. Paki-  
stan tried to kill all of our educators and students to stifle our language.  
Bangladesh. My mother and my father fell in love on that same campus.  
Bangladesh. For all the fucktards and bird bitches that told me I'm too  
pretty to be Bengali, or "Indian." Bangladesh. We are not the same as In-  
dian-Bengalis. Bangladesh. Say it like you should say naan, like when you  
say "love," not bang. Bangladesh. A third of the country will drown because  
of rising sea levels. Bangladesh. More than half of the U.S. population  
packed into a country the size of Iowa. Bangladesh. Two female prime  
ministers and more to come. Bangladesh. A nation that breeds strong, vi-  
brant, passionate women like me. Bangladesh. Cause I talk too much, just  
like all the brown people. Bangladesh. Because it IS about race. The power  
of the tongue as a natural right. Bangladesh. My love, my country, and of  
course my pride.

# **DIVINA**

Alejandro Barton-Negreiros

Divina es mi alma,  
The part of me that I have hidden behind  
heavy lungs and wide rib cages,  
Held in with each breath I didn't take,  
Pushing to be let out.

Divina es mi alebrijes,  
My guides through this body and  
Into the next,  
Either through transformation or transfer,  
They will bring me to my true husk.

Divina es mi elemental básico,  
The fact of who I am and who I was,  
A ten year old boy trying on dresses,  
Fitting into my mom's heels till one broke,  
And now a man without ambition.

Divina es mi traje de cumpleaños,  
The slivers of memory of when I would frolic,  
Moments when my voice reached beautiful melodies  
And my feet moved without self-consciousness,  
Now obscured by the prospect of manhood,  
Dignity, duty, and deliverance.

Divina es mi valor,  
The burning that keeps me from  
Scrapping my body and shaving my head,  
A shameless push to never second guess  
That I was born in a strange body for a purpose.

Divina es mi esperanza,  
Everything will be ok one day,  
My skin will finally fit to my bones,  
And I won't feel like an imposter  
Even when I keep the imposter clothes.

Divina es mi a pesar de mi apariencia,  
Total y completamente.

# Worried

Ziegel

I am looking for someone to bite my nails for me after I die.

Consider one shared pillow and four clammy feet; an elbow against a pink face in the morning and two dry mouths sanding each other down. It is not so comfortable to share one another. An apology, now, for the way my hips fill out my jeans before my kneecaps do. For how my hands look wrapped around a glass of water.. I say nothing and I do not have to: I worry that I will be buried in a dress.

At lunch I am sitting facing the crowd and he is not. I can see people walking towards us by looking over his right shoulder at their reflections in the window. After a few seconds, now at his left shoulder, the people walk past us. But there are two or three seconds—longer than you might expect—where the people are neither in the reflection now next to our table. I can't know where they are all going in these moments; what is happening to them when they are away. He spends all of lunch talking to me and I spend all of lunch trying to spot the difference between the people in the window and the people in the walkway. I hope that in our reflection you can see our hickeys; I worry that you cannot.

I will die of bitterness in a twin XL bed and my parents will get the phone call three hours earlier right in the middle of *Jeopardy!*; I worry that they will not get to hear the contestants introduce themselves.

It has taken me fourteen years to be good at biting my nails. When I was six I looked at my brother in the church parking lot and his mouth was full of his fingers. When it was empty again he could not scratch his own back with his fresh stubs. I admired him for this then and I admire him for this now; I hope he is proud of my permanently serrated front teeth. The last time I saw him he had stopped biting his completely because he is happier now. I worry that he is not. Proud of me, I mean.

A professor who wears red lipstick and her own name around her neck in gold says that hair and nails continue growing after death. It is not true. But she is making money and I am losing it. So I think about what she has said and I worry all day about what my hands will look like when I am dead. I do not want my nails to grow without me.

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## WANTED:

- **strong teeth**
- **flexible schedule**
- **10+ years of nail-biting experience (required)**
- **grave-digging experience (optional)**



*Memento Mori*  
TJ Lalonde  
Digital Painting

## **under the same roof we are strangers**

Nick Lang

grandma & grandson  
separated by this barrier  
I say [bà nội] she says [Nick]  
our best attempt at tearing it down

at five I pet the [con chó] at my [bác] Luan's  
its name is Bingo  
[bà nội] calls out [binGO]  
at sunset we eat lemongrass chicken  
as she cuts me slices off the bone

at ten I lay down sick  
grandma scolds me, [uống nước!]

so she hands me a [Kirkland] water bottle  
and drives a nickel into my back  
it burns but I stay quiet

at seventeen we kneel at the mantle  
[lạy Cha chúng con ở trên trời]  
the words fall out by instinct  
in my mind I echo its meaning  
[our Father who art in heaven]  
[bà nội] then counts the beads on her rosary  
and I no longer know the language

under God our souls are the same, but  
under the same roof we are strangers  
[bà nội] & [Nick]  
[Phong] & [cháu trai]  
our tongues only know one mother—  
are we even still related?

## **Dear Jamie**

Ray Pfaffman

Seeing these strange red-brown flying beetle-like bugs all over the neighborhood. A man on the beach asks me if I know what they are when I walk over to stare at their wings glinting in the sun. His accent is *British* instead of Brooklyn, and when I say I don't, he says, Yeah, just know they're bad. Just know to kill 'em when I see 'em. They're everywhere.

*Everywhere. Everywhere. Everywhere.*

Feelin' kinda sick with this invasion. With death. Breathing in too much you just can't breathe out. Holding it in your hands so long it just turns into your hands. High tide for a new moon. A new moon for another bipolar-depressive episode. Another candle lit for someone who was just there, just Saturday. Just there laughing. And you find that there's not enough you can remember to make them alive again. Remembering sometimes just pushes them further away. There's nothing to reach for. You can't hold the sky. You just can't. But that doesn't mean we won't go ahead and try anyway.

The grieving faces I've learned to know all look like stone. What the hell are we supposed to say? Sometimes it feels like we're all just pretending. Heart attack. Heart attack. Heart attack. *Your heart can attack you anytime*, Bobby said. Yeah. What the fuck is that about? This neighborhood is falling apart and all of us are

dying. It's unreal. It's ridiculous. It's like we're going extinct. All this incomprehensible tragedy. It all just disappears inside of me. I learned so young that anyone along with myself could go at any time. Too many suicide attempts. Too many suicides. Too many broken hearts. *Our hearts are breaking for you baby.*

I am a flower though.

No. A garden. *It turns me into a garden. It turns me into the earth.* Where we walk among roses and their roots and above all the bodies of people we used to know. It's unbelievable and believable that people are still walking their goddamn dogs. The ocean is so beautiful. Isn't it so that we share the same matter as pterodactyls and Hitler? Well, I wanna be Blaze Foley too. And I wanna be Jaimie and Jack and Chad and Tyrone and Sunny and William and Corabell and my uncles Jim and Buddy and Lulu's friend Thea and me and you. All those crazy fuckers. Hopefully they're all sittin' on the other side makin' some place even more beautiful than this for when we get there. (Though this is hard to beat.) All drinking Blue Ribbons and Whiskey and fancy IPAs with weird hipster names and labels. And Kool-Aid and fried chicken. Why Kool-Aid? Don't ask me why. I have no answers. Only dreams. Only gardens. And drunk beautiful people sittin' on the sidewalk—all of our faces stone, even before one of us dies—All our bodies mountains eroded into valleys into rivers into seas

*Once upon a time I was a little baby girl.* Just like you. Just like her. When you're a little girl, everything is color. Just like now, only now there's more you can see. I'm not sure how I feel about that. Sometimes I take off my glasses and let those late August Christmas lights hanging over Van Brunt just blur together hoping maybe everything would look different. But it just looks the same.

I fucking hate dogs. Of course I don't hate 'em but I hate 'em. But she loved 'em. She loved hers. Probably I'll fall in love with someone and settle down and they'll wanna get a fucking dog. And they'll wanna name it something sweet but I'll probably wanna name it something strange. Probably an old white man's name. Probably.

When does a poem become a eulogy? When does a eulogy become a poem? How about a nightmare? How about delirium and passion and too much euphoria? When the mountains turn to valleys turn to rivers turn to seas? The wind takes the salt and seagulls, but it doesn't take me. How can death make you so fearless and so afraid?

We'll miss you like hell. We'll miss your laughter. I'll miss the laughter you made. Wish you could see me here in this wind crying and laughing barefoot in your tour t-shirt. Standing up on the bench overlooking the water and stretching my arms out in the gust because **She said Fly or Die. Fly or Die baby!** Knowing death now so much better than I did that long ago time when we cried in each other's arms about William. I was sixteen then. And I loved him. And I loved you. Even though I got good at knowing death I got even better at knowing love. You



have no idea how good I know love. No fucking clue. No fucking clue about this sunset. This storm. This sorrow. Save me a milkcrate to sit on at the block party in heaven, and a glass of Kool-Aid and I'll tell you all about it.



*Sky Vault*  
Olivia Liera  
Digital Art

## **falling action**

Grace Young

Yesterday, the train tracks; yesterday  
the race of snow down sloping hills  
& the curve of your smile, like a story. I *creeeaak!* on my way  
to the bar, across phantom floorboards for a  
kiss and close enough to  
chase your drink with a grin. Take a shot,  
you're paying.

Yesterday, kiss-drunk with smiling skin and twin  
exhales to cycle through sleep and  
wakefulness. I am not an author, dear;  
I hold my breath and your hand to tell you that  
this is not the story you think it is, this is

not a story at all—stop laughing!—& I won't miss a train just to call  
yesterday a mistake. This is  
not the story where I *make* a mistake. I kiss you,  
I run for the train, I don't look back.

Yesterday, I looked back;  
I am looking back, snow and cherry liqueur  
so that I am red-lipped, red-tongued, author mine & barely  
tipsy when I say your name  
like a prayer. Tell me to look  
back, kiss you goodbye, mistake  
you for Scottish hills & a story  
unresolved.



*The Hills of Connemara*  
Jem Patrick  
Digital Photography

# In the Silences

Sarah Robinson

*“Never felt the feeling of comfort”*

The history I was taught about my Irish heritage was brief anecdotes about Cú Chulainn, Niall of the Nine Hostages, and The Salmon of Knowledge. We are descended from Vikings, according to my Uncle Peter who traced it back himself. One of our great great great great grandfathers is British. But we don't talk about that. We went to a couple museums, but I don't remember any of them. I think one was in a post office. We went to the James Joyce Tower, but I could hardly remember his name.

I asked my father about learning more Irish history. His response was...

“Don't learn about Irish history. It's just depressing,” said my Irish father.

“Okay, Dad.”

Two years later, I told him I was thinking of studying Irish literature in college as a newly declared English major.

“Don't bother learning Irish history. It's all famine and oppression. It's depressing,” he replied.

“And American history isn't? But we studied that year after year in our public school education!” I stormed off during the conversation. But his voice lingered in my mind. I believed him. He is Irish after all.

A semester later I *tell* him, I am going to be taking a class on James Joyce.

“I want to know about where I come from,” I say.

“Good luck,” he replies.

My dad has never read any James Joyce.

I hated “The Sisters” on the first read. I thought it was about a pervy priest who had an inappropriate relationship with a boy. I was reading it within the context of everything we know about the church now. I believed the adults in the story who called the priest weird and his relationship with the boy wrong. But reading it again, a year later, in a class taught by the same professor, I absolutely loved it. This time, it became a complex story of a child's frustrated obedience with the church and the adults in his life. It also had beautifully haunting imagery of death and corpses that drew upon larger meanings of death in Irish culture.

“Eveline” became my favorite short story by James Joyce. The fact that most of the story occurred with her simply staring out a window while still capturing the audience's attention amazed me. I flew through the short story holding my breath for the entire ten pages. I wanted her to somehow win, succeed. I wanted better for her.

I didn't even finish *Portrait of the Artist As a Young Man*. It reminded me too much of my dad and what his experience would have been like in Catholic school. Teachers hitting students, stifling creativity and individuality by any means possible.

*Ulysses* was a mountain. I cried because I couldn't understand the complex political symbolism. It made me feel like a bad Irish person. I didn't know

who Parnell was. I listened to podcasts that our teacher gave us simply to just understand the plot.

For *Finnegans Wake* I didn't understand literally anything. The plot eluded me. But it has such a larger purpose that you don't need to know the plot to get something out of it. It was inherently spiritual to me. I told my Dad this and he said he might read it.

\* \* \* \* \*

*“All my life I've been fighting”*

There are bound to be many silences in my paternal grandmother, Catherine Robinson's (*née* Ball) life: many skeletons and stones left unturned. But knowing her, some things are better left unsaid. She loved a good drink, her boys, and the finer things in life. She had a dirty, bizarre sense of humor. She had immense courage to raise those boys and follow her Brendan out of the sloughs of Dublin. And she deserved the life of luxury she had in the end.

And her husband Brendan? To me the name will always belong to my little brother. I hope that my grandfather was like my brother. Good and pure right to the core. A gentleman first and foremost. I am told that the nickname I call my brother, Bren, is the same nickname my grandfather was called by his sister.

I allow myself to imagine my grandmother as an alternative Eveline or Eihblín Dubh NíChonail (an Irish poet from 1743-1800). I learned about Eihblín Dubh Ní Chonail from Doireann Ní Ghríofa's book *A Ghost in the Throat* where she writes her life in parallel to Eihblín's life as she researches it. I have started to envision what our lives would look like side by side. I wonder what decisions were made for my grandmother. I wonder what tragedies in her life haunted her. I only know her early life in the context of her Brendan.

I can't help but notice the synchronicities between my life and hers. We share a lot of the same characters. It was this past summer from my older cousin Sinead that I learned our grandmother didn't approve of her mother when Peter (their eldest son and her father) brought her to meet them. I couldn't help but laugh. My Dad has a strong dislike for my boyfriend of three years and he reacted just as his mother did years after her.

## **Dublin 1986**

She stood in the front window glancing out every few seconds. She checked her watch impatiently, the face encased with white gold glistening back at her. *Still five minutes to 7:00pm.* A car approached the small enclosed driveway.

The girl stepped out of the car and her blond hair positively glowed. Her son followed suit. They had new puppy love. She had a bottle of champagne nested in her arm and flowers in the other. She looked back at her boyfriend. He smiled encouragingly at her. The woman gripped her heart and turned away quickly from the window.

She looks to her husband. He is staring at the television. *Their first son, their hope, brought home a gorgeous woman. She must've seduced him with her womanly wiles.*

"Mrs. Robinson?" the girl asks, snapping her back to reality.

"Yes," she states.

"I'm Clare," the girl says pleasantly.

She mumbles something in acknowledgement. *Her son wouldn't be so stupid to fall—not fall—not her—anyone but her. From the northside of Dublin. An orphan no less! Adopted by her aunt and uncle—God! Her mother is probably a drunk. She stands tall—who taught her to keep her head held so high? Peter goes to embrace his father and Clare follows. She looks back to Cathy wishing she could read her thoughts as her gaze hasn't left her.*

Clare was the same woman who took care of Cathy while she faded away in the house that she tried to kick her out of. I was told by another uncle that it had nothing to do with her family, or her being an orphan. It was only because she was from the wrong side of the Liffey River. But I can't help but think that, even if not consciously, it was involved.

\* \* \* \* \*

*"I'm in need of a savior"*

### **Granard, Co. Longford; January 1984**

A fifteen-year-old girl named Ann Lovett died giving birth, in secret, to her baby at the hillside grotto on the outskirts of her hometown underneath a statue of the Virgin Mary. She was found by a passerby but by then her baby boy was dead and she herself died later that day in hospital. Paula Meehan wrote this poem entitled "The Statue of the Virgin at Granard Speaks" in response to Ann Lovett's death.

On a night like this I remember the child  
who came with fifteen summers to her name,  
and she lay down alone at my feet  
without midwife or doctor or friend to hold her hand  
and she pushed her secret out into the night,  
far from the town tucked up in little scandals,  
bargains struck, words broken, prayers, promises,  
and though she cried out to me in extremis  
I did not move,  
I didn't lift a finger to help her,  
I didn't intercede with heaven,  
nor whisper the charmed word in God's ear.

Ann Lovett was isolated in death and no doubt in life. I can't even begin to fathom what her life was like. Did her family know? How could they not

know? Did she pray for a miscarriage? Did she love her unborn baby more than life itself? Did she feel shame or was she outraged? Was she a rebellious girl? Did she give birth in paralysis, paralyzed by her choice to tell someone and face those consequences, or face giving birth alone? She was just a child herself. Unmarried mothers in Ireland were coerced into giving up their children or put into what was known as “mother and baby homes” between the 1920s and ‘90s. Maybe Ann Lovett knew what was waiting for her if she stayed and decided to put it in the hands of fate.

\* \* \* \* \*

*“Loving never gave me a home”*

Stephen Brian Robinson is named after his grandfather. His parents competed for custody of him and his older brother when they were very young. He always looked more Italian than Irish, especially next to his tall, lanky, red-headed brother. His grandmother that we do not share was a raging alcoholic. I’ve only heard whispers of her. *No wonder Margaret is as screwed up as she is. With a mother like that? She’s lucky she’s successful.* He has bad genes.

I have bad genes, too. My maternal grandfather was also an alcoholic—functional, I believe. Functional enough to go to work. But the household relied heavily on my grandmother. I don’t need to be told this to know it to be true. My Mimi is a mother in everything she does. Everyone around her adores her. She has always encouraged my creativity more so than anyone else. I think she was cosmically sent to even out the pressure I got from my Dad. She is the only grandparent I have that is still alive and the only one I feel like there isn’t a large question mark next to.

I don’t get much out of my mother when it comes to her father. He died while she was in college at Tufts University.

My grandmother remarried a man named Paul Gahm. He was her and her deceased husband’s teacher in high school, which I found mortifying. They had a 10-year age gap and were both widowers. He proposed to her in front of my mother who was horrified to be a witness to this intimate moment. They had a good couple of decades spent traveling the world, then he got sick, and my Mimi had to nurse another husband to the grave. He was the only semi-grandfather I had ever known. But I never felt any connection to him and I didn’t cry when he died. I cried because I was made to go look at his dead body.

I know now why my younger self didn’t like him. I must have sensed something. Apparently while I was freaking out over seeing my first corpse, Paul was trying to screw over my grandmother. Three weeks before he died, he called a meeting with his sons from New York and Connecticut. Paul wanted to cut my grandmother completely out of his will and leave everything to his four fully grown, employed children. My Dad was unclear on the details but somehow that will was declared illegitimate and my grandmother got mostly everything. But she was pissed, as she should be. She welcomed his four children and his many grandchildren into our family. They fostered children together trying to give them

a

better life. Even in his death she speaks to his children and grandchildren regularly and goes to all of their activities and graduations, because my grandmother is a stand-up, classy woman who loves more and harder than anyone I have ever known.

\* \* \* \* \*

*“I’m tired of caring”*

Luke and Stephen had it worse than me, as I was always told. They were eleven and thirteen when Margaret made them move to Philadelphia. She got her karma fast. When the boys arrived, they brought hell with them. Luke stole Sharon’s car and drove to Six Flags without a license. Drugs, alcohol, and tantrums that they learned from their mother were all regular occurrences. They only lasted a year and a half with her until she *shipped* them back to Ireland.

\* \* \* \* \*

*“Love only left me alone  
But I’m at one with the silence  
I found peace in your violence”*

A silence in my life was being sexually assaulted at age fourteen. I broke that silence a year ago with a jackhammer in a class with the subtitle “How Writing Can Heal.” Healing (if there is such a thing) is grueling, frustrating, and sometimes fruitless work. I wrote fifty pages of a personal narrative illustrating every single event that led up to the assault. I pieced together how he manipulated me into “letting it happen.” Then I wrote about how I broke up with him a week after the assault, the panic attacks, the nightmares, and the PTSD. I still have anxiety, but my flashbacks have lessened almost to non-existent. I will still shut down and disassociate unintentionally. Some wounds are such deep and tightly compressed knots of scar tissue that they don’t ever heal.

I got tough skin because I was “too emotional,” because it was my fault what happened to me. It was my fault that I was bullied by my cousins, and my fault that I was raped. It was my inherent feminine nature that made them want to harm me.

**So I got masculine.** I covered my tough skin with tattoos. I started kick-boxing for self defense purposes.

I wish that people could see my bravery instead of putting this pity on me. I can’t make people see me. But I refuse to shrink to make them feel better. I refuse to be silent to make them more comfortable. A man wouldn’t do that, so why should I?

The rage I feel is not just my rage. I feel this large feminine wound. I feel the pain that so many women have experienced before me under the hands of strangers, blood relations, and lovers. I feel the silence in Ann Lovett’s life. I feel

the isolation of Eihblín after her husband died and being cut off from her family. I feel my grandmother's rage at her husband. I feel Margaret's confusion in figuring out how to be a mother when she had a shitty one. I feel the pain of my strong mother losing her father. I feel the pride of my Irish grandmother and the loneliness and thirst to prove herself to my aunt. I feel all of it. I chose to show you the women in my life in the context of the men and simply by themselves. Because like Dorreann Ní Ghríofa says

*this is a female text.*

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## **Fwd: Student Conduct Referral**

Eliza Keenan

Dear Dean of Students,

I have received an email from the Student Conduct Office providing grounds for my expulsion. I understand that my case will soon reach your office, so I thought I would get ahead of this and forward it to you directly. While the incident report included in the email is, in fact, correct, I feel that there has been a misunderstanding. I would like to explain what happened, and if you still feel my conduct to be worthy of expulsion, I will have to defer to your judgment.

First of all, I did not personally acquire the skeleton. You will see in the report that my roommate, Brett Mungbean, has been of dubious academic standing for three semesters now. What you won't see, however, are the connections he has with skilled archeologists dedicated to the preservation of human culture. Culture is sustained by bodies, and part of Brett's work outside of class involves careful and informed visitations to cemeteries, where he carefully and informedly recovers the invaluable structures that uphold human activity. While this may interfere often, if not reliably, with his academics, his talents transcend any of those he could learn in a classroom, or at any location other than a cemetery.



Second of all, you may initially agree with the report's claim that "digging up bodies" is "disrespectful." I'll have you know that Brett completes his work with sincere, indeed, *inspiring* consideration for the departed. The skeleton's name is Harriet. Her identity is no mystery to us: she was twenty years old when she passed, and until Brett freed her she had been in the ground for nine decades. Brett and I made sure to say a prayer for Harriet's soul when we welcomed her into our dorm, and she even sat with us while we gave thanks for her presence. In no way have we harmed Harriet or her family. In fact, Brett made sure to replace her body so that even the grave did not feel robbed. Though all we had was a life-size cutout of Tony the Tiger, which Brett recently won by defeating local first-graders in a water balloon fight (the competition was open to the public), Tony's fur will keep the coffin warm until Brett finds another elementary school.

You may be wondering: What about the chandelier? It is true, I have not mentioned the chandelier. To the credit of Residential Services, I do see why such an item is prohibited from the residence halls. It was given to us, however, by my stepmother, who happens to be the Vice President of Lowe's Home Improvement. After years of waiting for her to forgive me (for I may have been adjacently involved, I regret to inform you, in the disappearance of her dachshund), Jennifer's gift to me marked an important milestone in our stunningly weak relationship. The chandelier made the perfect centerpiece for the dorm room, and truthfully it would've been poor conduct *not* to hang it up.

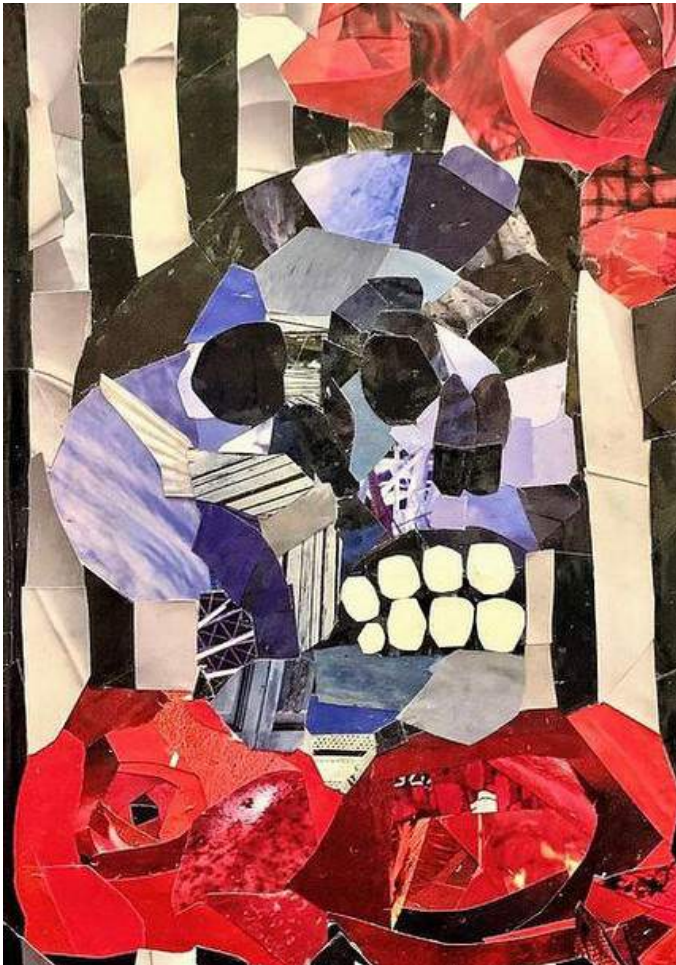
This leads us, of course, to the chief discovery with which the report is concerned. As you can imagine, a 10-by-10 ft dorm room leaves very little space. With limited surfaces on which we could place our friend, Brett's project of preserving the *culture* in Harriet's bones became difficult to maintain. The solution came to us naturally. I like to think that she was happy up there, twirling gently in the breeze of the fan, finally upright after decades of lying in the ground. I understand that the Resident Assistant did not see it this way. I understand that he was frightened. I can even forgive him for pulling the fire alarm, evacuating the building should Brett and I pose a threat to the other residents. I assure you, however, that my roommate and I meant no offense. We did not mean to intimidate or disturb. We only meant to keep Harriet as a companion, utilizing our space efficiently while honoring my stepmother's gift—and Brett's work—with nothing but the utmost respect.

I hope you understand where I'm coming from and that you feel it appropriate to clear my record and continue to enroll me at the University. You can expect to receive a similar email from Brett, though his will not disclose the operations of his colleagues (lest they should receive another kind of referral). It will also exclude the matter of Tony the Tiger, which I only provide to assure you that every formality was diligently seen to. Regarding Harriet: I understand that she had to be taken away. I only ask that she be treated with care, and that your staff does not return her to her grave. You won't be able to find it, so please don't even try.

I will add, as a final note, that should you ever find yourself at Lowe's, you can say that Jennifer T. approves of whatever discount you desire. If I don't get expelled, she probably will.

Respectfully,  
Jeremy Toetickler

P.S. For your troubles, you can keep the chandelier. However, I would like to clarify that the crown on Harriet's skull was *not* stolen from the theater department's costume supply, nor was her tutu purloined from the dance studio, as the incident report suggests. Those are mine, and I want them back.



*Cedric*  
Shea Trimble  
Collage

# What We Do For Happiness

Lily Healy

She sits alone

knowing nobody will look  
and trace her.

that's no body for a sketchbook.

An empty contentedness makes her drink,

say bitter is best

as she hides her  
grimace.

You remind me of green tea.

I hate how you taste

but I love what I think

you're doing to me.

All there is now is a mug to fill,

but with what?

The cream curdled when it heard her scream

and she ate all the sugar

by the spoonful

last night.

So there's just this, hot and caustic,

I've missed it too dearly.

My obsessive tendencies come back

from underneath my twin-sized bed.

I love and loathe that after all this time,

I still drink my coffee black.

i'm sorry

sorry

sorry

sorry

sorry

# **Brutalism**

Aradhna Johnson

I spent all summer wondering  
if you were dead,  
but when you came back to life  
you were no longer a lover  
of saccharine chai  
or languorous days at the piano.  
I hated your meat-eating,  
and new trick mirrors,  
how you'd plan your escapes  
before you even arrived.

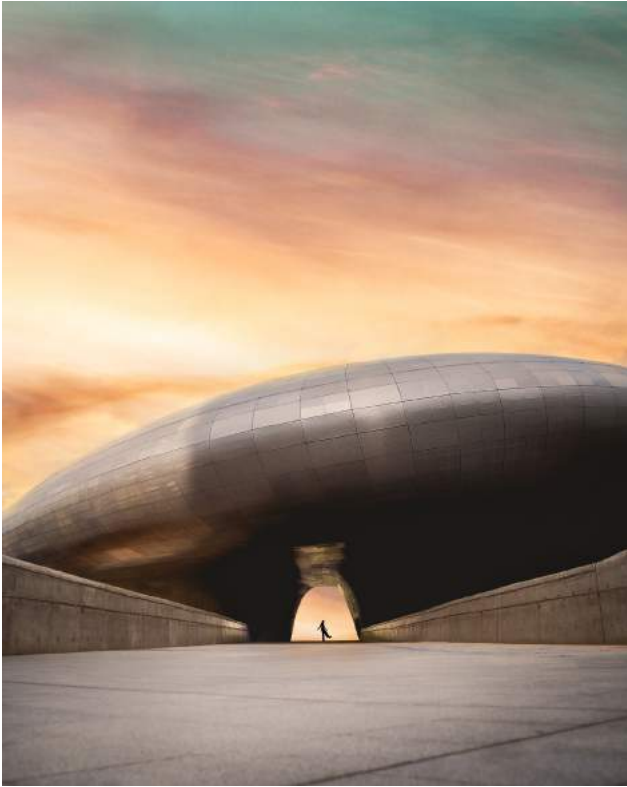
My hair loose, cropped above the shoulder,  
mass produced blue jeans,  
every autumn day in an old man's sweater,  
knowing everything of maple trees, cardinals,  
Battle of Lexington and Concord,  
nothing of the rainforest or farmer's tools  
that sustained my ancestors.  
I am whatever an American was  
to the great-great grandmother  
who held me as a baby  
buried now, two oceans away,  
unimaginable to the men  
whose blood stained the Battle Green,  
men buried  
in the town where I grew up.

"Everything has a price,"  
my dad once told me  
knowing, I suppose,  
that one day, I'd have to pay.  
I consider throwing out  
every pair of pants I own  
wearing nothing but  
the long sleeves, long skirts  
of a religious zealot  
lasering away my tattoos  
waving myself away

till I forgot I'd ever been  
anyone else.  
I'd finally adhere  
to my job description  
and tattle on every kid  
getting stoned in my dorm,  
visit home every weekend,  
go grocery shopping with my mother  
eat up every word of my father's.  
One day I'd have a beachside proposal  
with dolphins leaping from the ocean  
as my beloved gets down on his knee.  
My entire extended family  
weeping tears of joy that,  
"Yes! I would marry him!"  
Rice thrown in my smiling face  
cans rattling behind my new husband's  
new Toyota Corolla  
yelling my shining new lie  
at the top of my lungs.

How do you work to stand out  
and still fail?  
How are you an American always?  
I suppose I will never know  
why you stopped loving me.  
Will you ever shake  
the gray skies and nothingness  
of your suburban hometown?  
Or will you continue to fester  
till you've got no flesh left to rot?

I never understood  
the white socialist obsession  
with the austere soviet buildings  
that populate campus.  
"I like them because they're ugly,"  
they all say.  
My favorite thing about them  
is the inevitable crumbling  
of the ponderous, unvarying concrete.



*Dongdaemun Design Plaza*  
Aaron Cheng  
Digital Photography

**I'm watching Dawson's Creek and  
wishing you were something  
you're not**

Molly Hamilton

Life's not a movie and we're not in love,  
but the water's awfully still tonight and the moon's so full  
I can feel it reflecting off the whites of my eyes.  
Call me to your window, I'll tell you a secret if you promise  
not to write it down. Here it goes: sometimes  
I feel like a stranger renting a room in my own house.  
Do you know what I mean?  
I like getting taller, but I'm not sure I want to get old.

I couldn't reach you behind that silver screen, always had  
another lover staring in your California dreams.  
When I called you from the party, it hurt me, but  
I'm willing to let the past fade  
if it means we can sit side by side tonight.

You don't need to hide from me, darling,  
just do me a favor and hide from me the things  
I'm too proud to admit to myself. When you write my lines  
don't write the parts where I was mean,  
leave my spite and anger on the cutting room floor, won't you?  
I want to remember us better than we were:  
we'll have august sunburns and wet hair, we'll be young  
forever in the tall grass, on the dock, wading in and out.

## **I've made up my Minds**

Milan Portilla

I said I would. I didn't.  
Well, things go on.  
You can't stop traffic on  
a Friday when people  
want to go home.  
Or run away.  
There is time for both. And still  
you'll be home for Sunday,  
for coffee, that my old man  
used to drink at night, when  
we'd watch a movie, and still he'd be the  
first one asleep. No, I didn't carry  
him up to bed like he to me when  
I was a boy. His dad did that for him;  
I hope. I wasn't there to see it  
but it happened. How else would  
he know to scoop me up  
and roll me into bed like a candle  
rolling back in forth  
in the kitchen drawer.  
I ain't made of wax though.  
There ain't no fire in me.  
And I won't be stuck in a menorah  
for eight days, come December.  
I'll remember what I want. Forget  
the rest, I can't be sure it happened.  
Strangers tell me all the time  
the strangest things. There was a  
foreigner, in front of me, in line,

he chuckled to himself about  
a joke he heard 30 years ago.  
He finally got it.  
I am original. Astronomy is the anatomy  
of the universe. Bones of light  
skin of night, dark hair  
will be combed forever.  
Pick the stars off your scalp  
like lice, hold them out  
in exchange for a cigarette.  
My lighter is out of gas;  
this tiny spark that will never catch  
will have to do.  
Strike your feet together  
and hope, and maybe

today is your lucky day kid.  
Child of another, what would  
your mother think of me?  
What does my mother think of me?  
Mothers might not think at all.  
A clump of dust floats by me  
in the basement. I blink,  
it was a mouse chasing his  
shadow along the wall.  
I don't remember being born  
but there was music playing.  
And when I'm gone  
the radio will blare  
a different tune  
and you'll dance less  
but still, some nights alone  
you'll get undressed and move  
those old legs, you'll hum  
melody after melody, and I'll  
sing along in the floorboards





*Detective's Office*  
TJ Lalonde  
3D Model

## **The summer I drew your name in the sand**

Ray Pfaffman

my whole cross-legged body  
A coney island prayer  
awaiting spark and wind  
Awaiting cold  
Awaiting night

At 3AM, you spoke of freedom again.  
Talked about the smoke above your burning  
boat  
Talked of screaming engines and  
white walls instead of windows and told me  
the dying are never saying goodbye but—

That hard fast bullet of dark veils and monsters  
far away untouchable goodbyes and

untamed gardens  
untamed everything.

At night when you couldn't sleep, you saw devils on your ceiling saw ghosts  
instead of the light  
on the grass

the summer I caught a bullet with my hands  
the summer of closed eyed hellish visions and  
Green and Black and  
Blue  
too much Blue for us to bear

Summer of  
Impossible heroes laughing  
drawing your name in the sand and  
giving up everything for your life to Open wide enough for you to Be blood-  
warm  
and near

Travel  
just get rid of the wanting freedom, drop everything as it is by the shore  
and Travel back to this table  
and our lives can become a  
river to wade in

## **Swans**

Rachel Otero

I think I remember her  
moonlit and sun-kissed  
frail and pale and sharp  
boned and kind  
I remember the two of us  
nose to nose  
holding laughter between our  
teeth while we foxtrot  
across the hardwood floor  
where the instructor woman  
made us want to be better

dancers  
and people  
and we believed in love and  
fate and nature  
and laid in each other's laps  
where sometimes a stage light  
turned into a moonbeam or  
morphed into a burning piece  
of rock falling through the  
sky



*I'm speaking to her...*  
Alejandro Barton-Negreiros  
Digital Photography

# **Fits**

Adrianna Crowell

My mother's breasts hang low by her round  
stomach, bra discarded somewhere on the floor,  
hair thinning before it grays and sweatshirt coffee  
stained. They say  
this is what giving up looks like,  
they say  
this is what barely a woman anymore looks like.

No one ever calls her pretty like they tell me my face is  
as they press at my back to straighten it  
and remind me to pull in my roundness,  
but her cigarette smile shines,  
and she never talks about diets like the other fatties we know.  
This is what giving up looks like:  
a woman who's barely a woman  
soft in her home.

They say  
be careful or I'll inherit that softness,  
they say  
trust them, I don't want this.  
But my mother left,  
and this rolling stomach,  
these sagging breasts  
are her parting gifts.

My breasts hang low by my round stomach,  
bra discarded over on the chair.  
They say  
this is what giving up looks like,  
they say  
this is what could've been beautiful looks like.  
But this softness was a gift,  
and my mother's old coffee stained sweatshirt fits.



*Station de Metro*  
Damien Crockett  
Digital Photography

## **Mickey** Frederick Lassabe

Online, there are pages for people who died, or at least the ones we miss. It's usually hosted by the funeral home—in this case, Munderloh Services—with information about when and where the Celebration of Life will be—in this case, March 31st at St. Mary's. There are comments below, where any jackass who can type may leave a message or six.

Now, Jackass, let's say you sat three rows away from my best friend Mickey in social studies class when we were in middle school, and our friend Laurence's Instagram story directs you to this memorial page. This is the perfect place for you to make it about yourself, even though you did not ever speak to him or me or Laurence even once. A few dozen people without two degrees of connection to the fucker wrote he was the best center fielder our middle school, high school, no, *university* had ever seen. (He was not!) But it feels good, Jackass, doesn't it? You did something nice.

Not one of those messages mentions that Mickey's room was flavored with death even before he died. We cremated a hamster here, boxed and stuffed under the floorboards along with a few dozen Uncrustables wrappers and a cigar. Nobody comments that there are foul words spray painted on the wall, phrases brazenly scribbled in Sharpie, and that the floor is covered with notebook-paper

drawings of mobsters from overrated Mafia films.

His mother tried (failed) to pitch this as an accidental drowning, as if anyone accidentally recreationally takes that amount of his Xanax, my Vicodin, and five shots of paint thinner in the bathtub.

But as a rule, you don't argue with a grieving doctor-mother, no matter how ridiculous her diagnosis, so we wept over Mickey's tragic accidental drowning.

I returned to junior year like every day was not a funeral. I studied fluid mechanics like I had not been accused of giving the bastard my painkillers. ("Were you boys using these to get high?" some glorified school resource officer asked, as if losing function of my legs in a car crash was a bit displaying my commitment to med-chasing.)

The funeral sucked. Laurence spoke first. He gave a very pretty speech about all Mickey had done and why he would love Catholic heaven, about the ant farm Mickey had knocked over in our kindergarten classroom that led to early dismissal, about the inflatable Santa he ran over on our trip to Montreal, about how he was going to be the funniest optometrist of all time. People clapped at the end.

I spoke too, but I talked about Mickey's forever incomplete bottle cap collection, and how his dogs have been waiting by the Yorks' front door as if they thought he was just gone for school, and how I was not sure how to live without him. It was indelicate. Nobody clapped at the end.

"You did great, Gene," somebody said.

"I wanna be on TV," Mickey said once, brown hair spilling onto Lottie's lap. His cheek would be imprinted with fishnet patterns by the time he lifted it.

"Yeah? What kind of TV star? A sitcom, maybe a drama. I think you could do a drama," Nazra agreed.

He hummed, thinking. "I want to be a news reporter."

Lottie laughed. "Mickey, you won't even read your notes. The cue cards . . . they'd be way too much."

"That's exactly what my mom said," he giggled. And then he fell asleep, and Lottie did not move him from her lap until he woke up hours later.

Man is irrational, this I know, for the nurses told me so when I woke up in the hospital half-paralyzed.

This irrationality was not limited to my arrogant friend, who was angry and plastered and insistent he could drive even though he just wanted to die.

Man, including Gene, must be irrational, because nobody understood when I said that Mickey wouldn't listen and I couldn't get the keys from him. They did not get why, as my last act as an able-legged man, I chased after his moving vehicle and managed to get into the passenger seat. Bastard was too far gone to think to lock the car.

"I don't care," I told him, fielding slurred complaints that I'd climbed in his car and that he didn't want me to get hurt. "You can't drive like this."

This was inaccurate. He could. He was. Not well—I ended up snatching the steering wheel, but that only does so much good when a suicidal asshole has a

heavy foot on the gas.

By the time we were past a few red lights and to an intersection with no forward path, the only thing I got to decide was which tree we crashed into.

And decide, I did. I jerked the wheel left, putting me on the side that would hit. Oh, but nobody besides his parents complimented my heroic thinking. No “thanks for saving Mickey’s life for another week,” just a whole lot of “why would you do this?”

My phone was on top of a little plastic bag next to my bed. Someone—probably my grandfather, maybe Mickey’s parents—had taken it out and put it on a charger. “Is he alive?” I ask whoever is in my room, on too many different drugs to concoct a more specific string of words.

To my benefit, the nurse who’d been pulling a needle out of me was a gossip, and a chatty one. “Oh, hello! Your friend? He’s just fine, sweetheart. Shaken up, bruised ribs, some cuts. People have been trying to get interviews from him since the Portland Post article came out yesterday. That was the day after you boys were admitted.”

I knew this was bad, that there was already media attention on this when Mickey needed to steer clear of any sort of press. It was worth it for another week of Mickey, but it also sealed his fate, because he had even more Boogeymen than before he tried to off himself in his fucking BMW.

“They took my blood,” he told me when he finally was allowed to visit, scratching at the bandage on his arm, pacing, inattentive to my newfound immobility. “They’re gonna see how high it was, the content or whatever, and then they’ll fingerprint me.”

I was woozy and unsure of how to respond and the date and where my grandfather was, but his tone was making me worry.

“Mickey,” I said, but he walked over to me and began to talk.

“Your legs don’t work anymore because you stopped me, and now you’re gonna have to be nervous they’ll . . .” He swallowed, not wanting to discuss the implications of his fingerprints being in the system. “Gene. Gene! I’m really fucking sorry.”

He was hysterical, but he was also before me almost entirely untarnished. This is all I was awake enough to appreciate. Mickey was alive and well and I had done what I wanted to (and more, because I was alive, too) and now I wanted to rest again.

I did not have anything to offer him besides a hum. He picked up my hand and held it and I thought about how much my body hurt until I fell back asleep.

I dream I am on a ski lift—the kind that’s just a bench and a bar, no walls, nothing to catch me if I fall—with Lottie and Nazra and Laurence, but there is no Mickey. We have a dog. And the dog is on my leash, and the dog jumps around, and we try to stop him, but he jumps out, and his fucking neck snaps, and I don’t know if I should let go of the leash or not, so I don’t, and I sit there holding a hung dog dangling from a ski lift forever and ever and ever.

He read us his email draft, begging for criticism. “My name is Michael

York. We spoke at the career fair last week, and I was interested in your internship for pre-med students, so I'm reaching out to follow up."

Lottie stifled a laugh. "I don't think anyone's going to be able to call you Michael."

"Why?"

She shrugs. "You're Mickey. Michael is . . . serious. Scary."

He frowns. "C'mon, I'm gonna be a doctor. I think at some point I need to get used to 'Michael.' This is a good chance.."

"No," Laurence said, having waited to join in the conversation until after he'd finished chewing his bite of chicken breast. "I think you need to keep leaning into being disarming. Coming off as pleasant to be around is going to do you better than trying to be something you're not." Mickey grinned. "Aww, what's the thing I'm not? Serious? Professional?"

"Serious, professional, academically committed," Nazra said. She patted his shoulder. "But you do well with impressions. I think you can swing this if you play your cards right. And I think being 'Mickey' works in your favor."

Mickey is still grinning, but I can hear his tone shift to something a little more defensive. "I mean, I've still got my 4.0. I'm doing alright, jeez." He stretches the last word out, lightening the sentence into mock-offense instead of the real kind.

"You don't act the part," I say.

Lottie had Mickey's baseball bat. (I don't know where it is now. Nowhere in her apartment that I could find.) This should have been enough to scare Dave off, and I still think it would have been if Mickey hadn't lunged at him.

For once, there was no expression on Mickey's face. There was nothing at all, even when Dave pulled a switchblade.

We were children, I realized, because there was none of the headshot, clean-cut efficiency of grown-ups with real weapons. It was a shitty knife against a shitty knife.

But Mickey's shitty knife was faster.

I choked, not after his first slash—not stab, slash—but his third, fourth, fifth. I came up from the side, tried to disarm Dave, but this just got Mickey's arm grazed trying to block Dave's slice at me. "Shit! Move Gene, God-fucking-damn it!" He kicked me in the back of the knee, sending me tumbling out of arm's reach, and it hurt enough for me to stay down and curse and groan, letting Mickey get back to work.

Their clothes became messes, but it was hard to tell in only the lighting of Mickey's headlights how much blood there was, or who it was coming from.

He was still slicing Dave up, going at his stomach twice, getting an arm after that while moving out of the way of a near-stab like he could read minds.

Dave started screaming, as if anyone was around to give a fuck besides the three of us, but Mickey was more focused. "Don't bring a knife you can't fucking use!" Then he hit another arm and I lost track of what was going on until Mickey stabbed the neck.

Straight through, parallel to the dirt below, Mickey ran his knife through



Dave's neck. Overhand like a pitcher.

Mickey walked forward toward a tree, with Dave stumbling backwards guided by the knife in his neck. The former was bug-eyed with his mouth hanging open. I couldn't tell at this point if he was alive or dead.

I could see Mickey better now. He seemed both afraid and relieved to let go, his eyes meeting Dave's as the former spilled and sank back against the tree.

And I was furious at him even then, because I felt everything that was to come as blood continued to saturate Mickey's clothes from the wounds in Dave's flesh-muscle-fat. I was ill, but there was nothing in my stomach to show for it.

"He really deserved it," Mickey blubbered, hysterical from too much of something (of what, I wasn't sure) and he was crying and I pulled him inside so he wouldn't make a scene in front of my neighbors. Your apartment is too cold, he told me, and he crawled into my bed and wept under my covers. Before the suicide attempt behind the wheel, before the suicide in the bathtub. After the murder in the freezing woods.

What do you do besides sit on the bed until he tires himself out?

"He was a bad guy!" Mickey was nine to me. He always has been, he never aged past that, and now we were here and there were going to be bad consequences for his eternal fourth-grade-ness. "He was a bad guy," said Mickey, choking, "but I was a bad guy too and I'm scared."

"That's okay," I say, because he was right to be scared, and because he had made Lottie and I scared. And because it was his fault. "It's alright to feel that way," because you should fucking feel that way, asshole, because now every time there is a knock at my door I can't breathe. "I understand."

I do understand. I would feel bad if I ruined the lives of the people who love me most in the world. Like he did.

But I must love him more than anyone else, because I could never say this. I could never let him think this. So I pressed on.

"That was an accident. You made a mistake. It was an understandable one, because you were scared." This was true, not that anyone would buy slicing a guy up six times and a finishing stab as being self defense.

This must be what he wanted to hear, because Mickey came out from under the covers and crossed his legs to sit up. He stared at me for a long while. His face was stained with tears and his pretty eyes were red, bloodshot. "Are you mad at me?"

Nothing befitting the situation, like a "can you ever forgive me for making you an accomplice to homicide" or "do you think there is a chance I could make this up to you two" or something serious like that. He was a goddamn child and asked if I was mad at him.

I was furious, naturally. "I am not mad at you," I say, because if you tell someone you love that they are the worst thing that ever happened to you, they no longer understand that you still love them. I did not want to make him feel like he needs to crawl off of my bed and out of my home if I can help it. "It's okay, Mick. It's all going to be okay."

"Okay," he says, "okay." Mickey is smarter than he lets on and thus does

not fully believe me, but I said the right things to make him believe me a little.

An hour passes and he is asleep, for the first time in I-don't-know-how-long, and only after hearing him start to snore could I fall asleep for the first time in three days, and that was the last time I ever slept without waking up crying.



*Burrow*

Bridget Richardson  
Digital Photography

# Little Bird

Madeline Choiniere Barr

I tell you stories of being the last to fall asleep  
yet when we land on twigs I am gone;  
you hear me twitch, feel me chirp  
but something catastrophic nudges my rib once you flutter down and I am  
routine alert to bird-watch your sleeping body.  
you drum in breath and hum it out,  
breathe so much air you startle and stir,  
surprise yourself with yourself like always.  
the other night you trilled a sentence,  
sat right up and spoke it slurred and I thought you were scolding me for  
the light of my phone.  
but you turned to your side-feathers, and on your side your clamor  
quelled.

When it is my turn to fall out of our nest  
and I breathe like a hummingbird  
you cup me in your palms and bring me down, singing:

Imagine our cat at the aquarium.  
Orange eyes wide and robotic on jellyfish.  
Paws dipped into the touch tanks while I tell you the names of the fresh-  
water fish. Imagine baby-holding him by the sharks  
would he try to be bigger than them?  
Or would he ricochet into the penguin enclosure,  
fall in love with a sea lion?

You warble like this into my nape and so I swear  
there's a loon or a waterthrush rushing overhead  
teeming mystic song down on our bed  
and asleep, I am a little bird again.

I'll make those noises that you call akin to fowl,  
not because I am the detective, trench-coated, wet in love for you but just  
because my body makes them.

# **“One man’s waste is another man’s soap...”**

Michael Julian

One man’s rubbish, recycled over centuries.  
No accidents, happiness is what it’s meant to be.

Madlib flipped Frank Zappa, sleeping in a jar. Add a  
dash of hula rock, don’t forget the masked star.

Product is the song “Meat Grinder,” forged by two oth-  
ers. United together by All-Stars and the Mothers.

Fine art of sampling. One taste to the next.  
How West went from windy cities to the best dressed.

Leaving big mess, like not clearing your sounds.  
I.P. theft’s equivalent to Monty Burns’ hounds.

Zounds, many different uses to seek.  
From munching on Donuts, to shoplifting *Paul’s Bou-  
tique*.

RZA-recting *Ironman*, only built for cuban links. Liquid  
swords chop waves up, spit ‘em “between the sheets...

like the Isley’s,” used by the Noble, K-Dot.  
Lines get sampled throughout history since they-  
dropped...

knowledge unto us, gifting sponge-like abilities. Con-  
nect punge, hearing, sight, taste, touch, possibili-  
ties...

are endless! Crate digging past late in my mind. Find-  
ing right ones is trivial, but not wasted time.

I remain fascinated by each layer of the stack cake.  
Head first down rabbit holes for St. Alfonzo’s pancakes.

Stealing is the wrong word, borrowing's the better fit.  
Swapping thoughts ain't new, cryptomnesia for our benefit.

What's important is the sound or the vibe,  
felt deep within our bones. Gray matter personified.

Created rapid flairs connect thousand piece jigsaws. Effortless hogs sneaking meals from out the pig trough.

Big loss, if the ticked boss catch family lacking.  
No o-line protecting pocket passing quarterbacking.

Sacked behind the line by fridges known for snacking.  
William Perry takes the snap, laterals back to Nat  
King-Cole...

back to 72, reverse to Ruler quick,  
painting Mona Lisa for *great adventures of Slick Rick*.

"La Di Da Di" is perhaps the most prevalent  
sample ever heard in an artform so elegant.

Creative pathways be bursting at the seams  
it seems... we're all innocent when we dream.

The feeling is not pigeonholed by production.  
An idea based very much in rule destruction

*The unseen* truth unexplainable to some but  
to me? "I understand you" and what it becomes...

What "it" really is? Leave it for the buzzards! The  
next best sounds are under rocks undiscovered...

# **The Role of Race and Religion in the Conception of Utopian Ideals in *Parable of the Sower* by Octavia Butler and *The Road* by Cormac McCarthy**

## River Riddle

Religion, whether it be used as a weapon of oppression or a sword of freedom, is a recurring presence in utopian/dystopian literature. Going beyond a mere acknowledgement of its presence, it is important to understand why a given author has chosen to portray spirituality in the ways they do because it reveals how an author's identity plays a role in their perceptions of religion. When comparing *Parable of the Sower* by Octavia Butler and *The Road* by Cormac McCarthy, two American apocalyptic novels, each author's identities are integral to their interpretations of Western Christian principles. In this way, Butler's Afrofuturistic narrative and McCarthy's individualistic perspective influences both their respective protagonist's religious views and the corresponding dystopias and utopian ideals in their novels.

Before discussing the implications of each author's identities on their storylines, it is essential to place each of these novels and their authors within the historical context under which they were writing these works. Octavia Butler is an African-American woman who wrote *Parable of the Sower* throughout the 1980's and eventually published her widely acclaimed novel in 1993 during a time when the science fiction genre was largely a white, male-dominated scene. *Parable of the Sower* follows protagonist Lauren Olamina as she escapes her hometown that has been overrun by drug-addicted pyromaniacs and destroyed due to climate change. As her journey progresses, she creates a religion called Earthseed and acquires members along the way until she reaches safety in Northern California and creates a safe haven community called Acorn. The framework under which this novel is written is that of Afrofuturism, which is the philosophical lens through which a future for the Black diaspora is imagined in the realm of science fiction. For African-American writers in particular, this framework relies on the incorporation and projection of their histories (i.e., colonization, slavery, etc.) into the future where certain aspects can be used as tools for liberation. Butler grew up in a religious household: her grandfather was a Baptist minister and she grew up under strict Christian values that favored conformity over individual expression. As such, it is no surprise that one of the tools Butler incorporates in her novel is the reclamation of Christianity, a religion that was used to suppress her creativity and has historically been used to justify racial discrimination and slavery, such as in the widespread use of the story of Noah and Cain's son Ham. Additionally, reading and writing was forbidden for enslaved people, but there was one piece of literature that was readily available to them and one that many used to gain their literacy: the Bible. Understandably, many African Americans have a complex

relationship with Christianity because of its historic intertwining with their oppression, but through the lens of Afrofuturism, this religion can be used as a means for liberation by a process of reclamation and reimagining (Ruffin, Kimberly).

Recognizing Butler's political ideologies that underpin *Parable of the Sower* is also important because they are a substantial contributing factor in the protagonist's relationship with religion. Butler's belief in Marxist and Hegelian ideals (Szaniawski) are clearly seen in the core value of the Earthseed religion that Lauren creates: "All that you touch / You Change / All that you Change / Changes you / The only lasting truth / Is Change / God is Change" (Butler 6). With regard to the influence of Hegelian ideals, Lauren's high regard for constant change and the push and pull for change is based in the Hegelian understanding of the progression of ideas through thesis (a new idea presented), antithesis (opposition to said idea), and then synthesis (whereby the conflict between these differing ideals is resolved), and the continued cycle of this mode of change continues on. The three central ways in which Marxist ideals present themselves in the Earthseed religion are as follows: abolition of social and economic inequality, communal living, and a reimagining of Marx's opinions on religion. Once Lauren and her fellow Earthseed followers reach their safe haven, they name their new community Acorn. Acorn can be interpreted as a commune, an ideal communist living space where resources are communally owned, which is reflected in the fact that Lauren is seen as the head of the community but the means of production are in the hands of everyone (238). Where Butler strays from Marxist ideologies is in her belief that religion can serve a positive role in the process of social change. Marx believed that religion was "opium for the masses," meaning he thought that religion was a barrier to social change. He believed it soothed the minds of the masses in order for them to deal with the harsh realities of capitalism, therefore making them passive and less likely to pursue meaningful changes in their societies (Thompson, Karl). Butler, however, challenges Marx's notion of the superiority of materialism by illustrating that being religious does not always equate to social passivity, as previously mentioned with the central value of Earthseed being continuous change and growth. Being knowledgeable of the circumstances under which Butler created this novel is essential to understanding why religion is understood to be the utopia in this novel's dystopian reality.

With regard to Cormac McCarthy, his identities and the context under which he wrote *The Road* results in a great departure from Butler's understanding of religion and utopia. McCarthy wrote this novel towards the end of his career as a writer during the 1990s and early 2000s up until its release in 2006, and *The Road* is not guided by a distinct framework like Afrofuturism but rather with an "Emersonian individualism that has grown to define the American identity" (Kane, Alex). With regards to McCarthy's political affiliations, he can be considered a right-wing libertarian, which is in direct contrast with Butler's far-left wing beliefs.

McCarthy's politics have an undeniable effect on the dark, nihilistic worldview that is present in his novel. During the time in which McCarthy was writing this novel, he became extremely aware of the possible dire consequences

of climate change because of the increasing degree of concern in the environmental science community which had collected a plethora of data detailing possible disastrous outcomes (Szaniawski). The story follows a father and son from Tennessee as they travel to the southeast coast in search of civilization, though unlike the positive outcome in *Parable of the Sower*, the father dies right as they reach the southeastern coast and his son ends up being adopted by a family they encounter at the very end of the novel. McCarthy's narrative choice to place this novel in a post-apocalyptic period, where humans are presumed to have caused vast ecological destruction and where people are forced to survive *on their own*, is a testament to his belief in American hyper-individualism. Unlike Butler who views community as the main means of survival, McCarthy views community in a time of major crisis as the enemy of survival and expresses that only through self-sufficiency can liberation be achieved.

McCarthy's libertarian views also seep into the role of religion in *The Road*, which is vastly different from *Parable of the Sower*. The hyper-individualism within this novel affects the protagonist's relationship with God, as God is seen as both a dim light of hope and as a figure that has forsaken mankind, and the following explains this dichotomy in relation to the novel:

This social amnesia prevents systemic social analysis of power, wealth and influence in society from taking hold among most religious Americans. Instead, the tendency is to fall back on personalistic and individualistic explanations for poverty [...] and social catastrophe. This seems to precisely pinpoint the basic flaw in the father's anger toward God in the wake of a global catastrophe. Society refuses to acknowledge any fault of its own; simplicity and institutionalized justice come more readily in the form of blaming a single individual for more complex atrocities, in which we are perhaps a great deal more complicit than we would care to admit (Kane, Alex).

However, the protagonist still holds reverence for God, as he views his son as a moral beacon of authority that guides his decisions throughout the novel: "He knew only that the child was his warrant. He said: If he is not the word of God, God never spoke" (McCarthy 5). In *Parable of the Sower*, Christianity and God serve the opposite purpose: God and the religion of Earthseed is a unifying force that serves to connect and support victims of the mass ecological destruction and violence perpetrated by the pyros (those who take a drug called pyro that causes users to set fire to everything around them). Ultimately, Lauren and her followers are able to make it to safety and create the Acorn community, whereas in *The Road* the father dies when they finally reach the east coast of the U.S. and his son is left orphaned and in the hands of strangers. In this way, McCarthy's view of religion in his novel is that it is a crutch: helpful for getting by, but not a solution to the issue. In contrast, Butler views religion as not only a means of survival but as a means of liberation. Butler's belief in the strength of a collective and of organized religion, and McCarthy's 'every man for themselves' mentality along with his critical view of Christianity, are products of each author's differing identities.

As a result of these differing perspectives on religion, the way each author represents their utopian ideals and dystopian nightmares vary greatly. Both of these novels share the main concern of large-scale ecological disaster in the



future which is seen in their shared Hell on Earth imagery (i.e., forest fires in *The Road* and pyromaniacs in *Parable of the Sower*). An obvious marked difference within the dystopian reality of *Parable of the Sower* is that utopia can be found in religion and the community support that can be cultivated from it. Another utopian ideal that stems from the incorporation of Afrofuturism is faith in technological progress, space exploration, and interactions with extraterrestrial life as a mean to better the lives of those in the African diaspora. At the beginning of the novel, news breaks that a dead astronaut is being brought back to Earth after a failed mission to Mars, which sparks Lauren's interest in space exploration. She shares this with her father. "Space could be our future," I say. I believe that. As far as I'm concerned, space exploration and colonization are among the few things left over from the last century that can help us more than they hurt us. It's hard to get anyone to see that, though, when there's so much suffering going on just outside our walls" (Butler 16). For those who align themselves with Afrofuturism, life beyond Earth can be seen as an escape from the continued oppression of Black people on Earth.

In contrast, little utopias can be found in the intangible parts of human life in *The Road*: dreams, memories, and sleep (Szaniawski). Sleep provides the father and the son time to exist without consciousness of their bleak reality and allows them to rest after each day's long journey, but when their sleep involves dreams, this brings about a different kind of utopia. While their dreams are not always positive, they provide a portal into places that are not as grave as their own. The father's dreams largely consisted of things in the past, mainly snippets of memories of his dead wife and vibrant scenes of nature before the ecological catastrophe: "Rich dreams now which he was loath to wake from. Things no longer known in the world. The cold drove him forth to mend the fire. Memory of her crossing the lawn toward the house in the early morning in a thin rose gown that clung to her breasts. He thought each memory recalled must do some violence to its origins. As in a party game. Say the word and pass it on. So be sparing. What you alter in the remembering has yet a reality, known or not" (McCarthy 69). In *The Road*, religion is not seen as an intangible utopia because the father blames God in some part for their current dystopian reality, whereas *Parable of the Sower* portrays God as a factor in creating a new utopia as seen in the Earthseed religion.

The intersecting identities of an author undoubtedly play a role in how one goes about portraying certain narratives and themes. In *Parable of the Sower* and *The Road*, differences between how these two novels conceptualize religion and their associated utopian ideals are a result of each author having contrasting racial and political identities. In this way, religion serves a multifaceted role in both the creation of utopias and the destroyers of worlds, and pinpointing which role it plays can determine underlying motives of a given author.

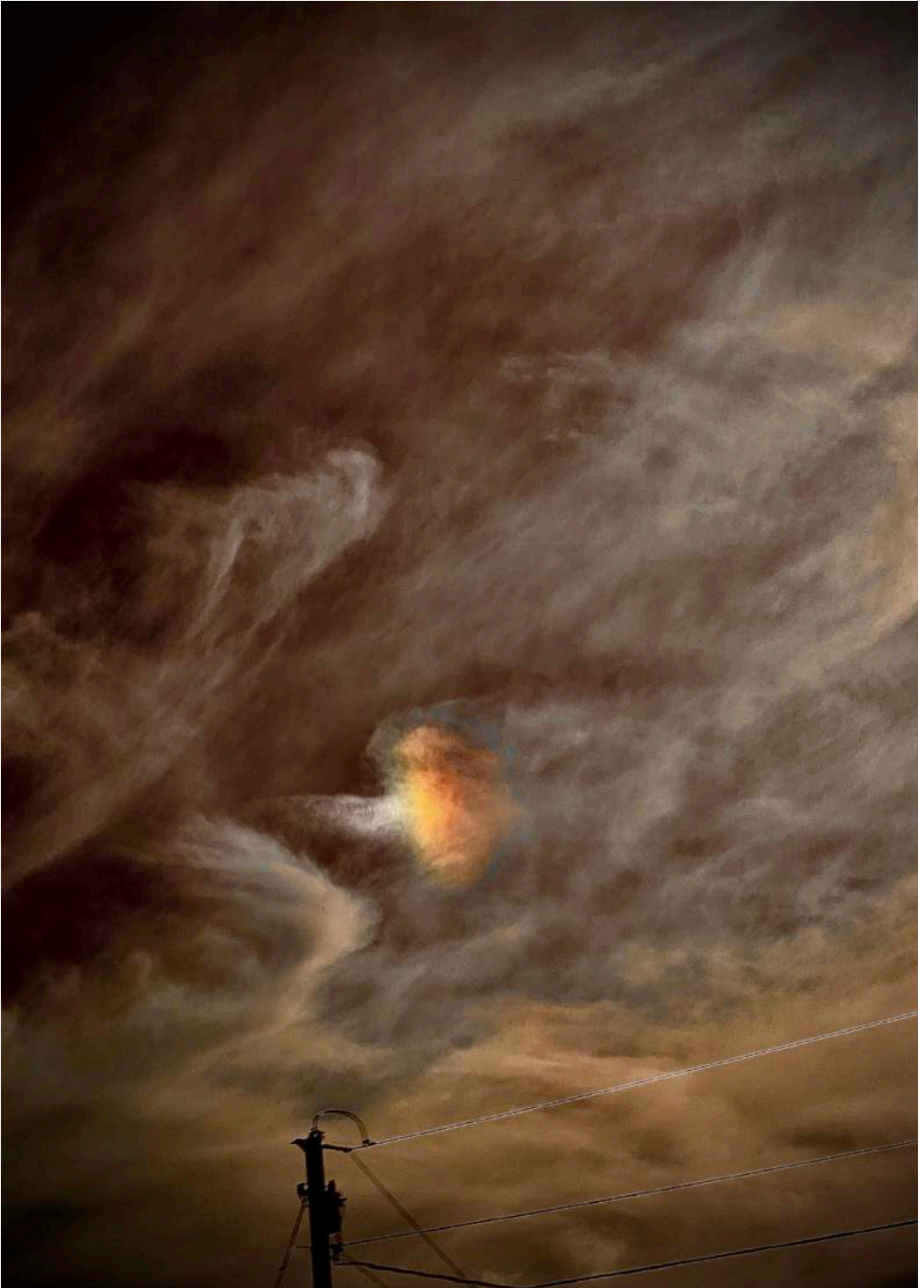
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*crash on the side lane*  
Olivia Liera  
Digital Art



*Crow Descending*  
Alejandro Barton-Negereiros  
Digital Photography

# **Ouroboros**

Siddharth Inderdev Sharma

It comes upon me in the night  
A quiet ember, in that solemn cold  
Her somnolent, seductive appetite  
That feeling, forbidden, untold  
I watch the sun set again  
On the quieting fields of grain

In the deafening quiet of my room  
I am lost in the frigid warmth  
Revolving around a creaking loom  
Day 160, it begins henceforth  
The winds whistle a melody  
What once was, will forever be

Ages ago, there was a daylight  
Still, I am a sinner in your rapture  
Your laughter, like birds take flight  
My anguish frozen in envious amber  
As she sits heavy upon my heart  
All your faults inked in glorious art

In the growing dark I hear their sound  
My torch dies out in the winter chill  
And all of yesterday's hellhounds  
Make their way to my windowsill  
There will be a tomorrow still  
There will be a tomorrow still

## **Civil war**

Helen Rahman

lovers plotting against their own demise

our empire's in savage upheaval!  
the Meditteranea scorched in our repeated civil wars

(Campania, Calabria, Sicily)

you say

not in this lifetime

i say

(Virginia, Florida, D.C.)  
not in this epoch

let us travel to the  
Mistress's throne, imperial yet its hind legs young,  
they galloped beyond the threshold  
and landed at the astrologer's door.  
her palace? It had marron tinges next to its  
orange hinges and lacy shorts  
we smoked something promising at dawn  
so the ascension would blink twice at us with  
half-hidden smiles.

Loyalty, you say... your favorite trait which you  
hail like a throne again the mistress's throne,  
but do not forsaketh my welcome to Rome!

o romeo...

o let my life become blond again, mother nature become  
a radiating balloon with auburn locks.

give into my dazzling oratory,  
not contemplating suicide not swallowing epigrams generating  
gladiatorial neuroses,  
surrender like a baptise'e  
giving up their occultist ways  
your mother's flatteries will not get to me this time

don't compare

me to your father in bed i am not your daddy  
are your wounds wet enough to lick?

don't delay

my desire to break your traditions like  
China platters carrying hot chowder.

my legions do not bear aggressive ways, how your womb bore aggressive babes.  
ask the child for me:

are you afraid of flight?  
no mama, I'm afraid of falling.

the child's eyes glimmer with a glint of the future, watching Pyrrhic dancers,  
prancing on  
their toes, the parents hardly aware of the gifted sight of the child.

your dirty pride is dying

make no mistake, the battlefield will grow but so will your wisdom, butterflies  
fluttering and kittens tiptoeing at the crown of your head.

not quite yet. so, are you ready to let me go?

how Rome could be built in a day,  
if only the bulldozers were on your side,  
how you wish the sex workers obliged,  
you wish the law be on your side.

how many sexual favors have you done for the businessmen my dear?  
far more than you ever could, at least they can give me children.

now now, children, not the time to Alexander The Great the life out of each other.

i am only your marriage therapist, and you my creative juice guinea pigs.

## **Precipice** Claudia Maurino

in a night, painted thin onto the air  
no clouds, no stars, just oceanic blue  
and clocks that do not tick, we climb  
up slippery ladder rungs, across rickety beams  
still in our party clothes, still in awe  
of our youth, our hands, one another's  
warm bodies, sharp bones, secrets spilled  
like wine on the carpet, we run away, fast  
past noise complaints, those who can't catch  
on, we hitch a ride, our skirts up, climb  
high into the dangerous, wanton night  
that paints itself an endless blue symphony  
we throw ourselves at the canvas of nighttime  
see what sticks, what hurts, what reminds us  
of fire and being eleven, when I learned  
how to ride my bike with no hands  
I had no idea I would be chasing  
this feeling, headlong, forever



*The Camper from Mars*  
Jem Patrick  
Digital Photography

## **Another Night Shift** Milan Portilla

Molotov cocktails out of a moving  
window  
and a burning cigarette  
that danced in the dark  
while her fingers moved around  
with her words.

We spoke a little  
about a lot of things.  
And there was some silence  
but it was the okay kind  
of quiet  
where less talking

only meant more time  
to look out the window  
at the city  
and my right arm  
was cradling your neck  
and the other hand was  
wrapped up in your fingers  
and it was the type of warm  
that just seems to happen.

The scar on your forehead  
and I hadn't known each other  
long, but it felt like old friends  
running into each other  
on a visit to their hometown,  
able to pick up a conversation  
where they left it years before.

Except we weren't there  
we were here; somewhere  
new, where we dance with  
strangers every night

their bodies and our bodies  
shaking around a crowded  
room, and a song running  
from the speakers into  
our ears and eyes and mouths

until the cups are empty  
and it hurts to yell a loved  
one's name but we do it  
anyways because we are young  
and we will find our way

back to our rooms,  
where sleep will come  
fast in a bed that is  
weighed down by  
an extra pair of eyes.





*Bloom*

Mary Zeng

Colored dye on silk

## **The Bees**

Katharine Axon

There are bees under my skin.

I'm driving to school, my step-sister, Lily, in the passenger seat, and as we pass the old reservoir I feel this buzzing somewhere between my muscles and my skin. It's a curious feeling. It's like I'm waiting for something I know is never going to happen. Like there's something alive and angry inside of me, but there's no way to get it out. Like there are hundreds of little insects, with spindly legs and fat, furry bodies, crawling around my organs.

Next to me, Lily pulls down the visor and checks herself out in the mirror. She tilts her face back and forth so she can see every angle, stretching and tugging at her skin with her fingers.

"You look fine," I say. "Stop poking yourself."

Lily glares at me, but she shuts the mirror and turns away to look out the window instead. It's a sunny day, the sky almost cloudless. Looking up at the blue, the buzzing in my skin grows stronger. I've always found clear blue skies to be more oppressive than the rain, the blue sky a dome that traps me in. In the

rain, the edges of the world blur like they could go on forever, but on sunny days there's no escaping the harsh edges around you.

Without turning back to face me Lily says, "At least I try."

She might have a point. I'm wearing an old T-shirt and leggings. I didn't brush my hair this morning, and it's possible I look like the crazy witch in the woods. It's also possible, though, that I really don't care.

Lily must have gone shopping over the weekend because she's wearing a pink sweater I've never seen on her before and a pair of ripped jeans. The last time I went shopping with her, she laughed at all the ripped jeans on the mannequins and said they were just another example of rich people fetishizing poverty. She's fifteen, but she thinks she's older.

In her new ripped jeans and pale pink sweater, she doesn't look like herself. She looks like her best friend, Helen.

When I reach the parking lot, I pull into the first spot I see. As I'm reaching around to grab my backpack, Lily finally turns to face me. "I don't need a ride home today," she says. "I'm meeting up with Helen after school. We're going to Dunks."

"Sure." I grab my bag and slide out of the car, slamming the door behind me.

The first time I met Lily I punched her in the face.

It was a Sunday night and my dad had invited her mom over for dinner so that our families could meet. My dad made pasta carbonara, my favorite meal, but when Lily got there she said the meat looked funny and she wouldn't eat it, so my dad had to cook a new pot of pasta, which she ate plain with butter. She wouldn't even let him add any salt.

At the time, I was eight and Lily was six. She wore a T-shirt with a smiling sun and blue sweatpants. I wore a purple shirt and purple pants and the fuzziest purple socks I owned. I had decided to embrace my name, Violet, and I was full-blown into my purple phase.

After dinner, my dad suggested that Lily and I go up to my room so I could show her around. As we were walking up the stairs she said, "My mom says you and me are gonna be sisters."

I looked back at her and frowned. "I already have a sister," I said. Jenna was ten years older than me, already a freshman in college. She was studying physics at UCLA, meaning she now spent most of her time on the opposite side of the country. But it didn't matter how far she was. She was my sister.

"You can have more than one sister," Lily pointed out. We had reached the second-floor landing, and I frowned as I opened the door to my bedroom. I wasn't sure that what Lily said was true. I was pretty sure you only got one sister.

I was going to explain this to Lily, but before I could she walked past me into the room and commented, "You really like purple."

This comment was likely due to the purple paint covering every wall, the purple quilt and pillow on my bed, and the purple rug on the wooden floor.

"It's not purple," I told her, annoyed. "It's violet. Like my name."

"Violet isn't a color," she said. She had reached out to touch the pho-

tograph hanging over my bed, a picture of my family – my mom and dad and Jenna and I – but she turned back towards me when she said, “It’s a flower. Like Lily.”

That was when I punched her. I don’t know why I did it. At eight years old, I had never punched anyone in the face before. And right afterwards, there was a moment where I couldn’t actually believe that I had done it. But I know that I did because the next second Lily’s nose was bleeding and my knuckles were stinging, and then Lily was crying and our parents were running up the stairs to find out what had happened.

I did find out, after Lily’s mom had driven her tearfully home and my dad had given me a lecture on how violence was never the answer, that violet was in fact both a color and a flower. I felt betrayed.

Henry is leaning against the lockers when I get to Spanish. I’ve known Henry since I was twelve years old, when we sat next to each other in sixth-grade science class. He told me that I was doing the worksheet wrong and I told him that he was a teacher’s pet, and we’ve been friends ever since.

“What’s up?” he asks when I walk up.

I toss my backpack on the ground by his feet. “Bees,” I say.

Henry frowns. “What does that mean?”

“I feel like bees,” I tell him. This apparently doesn’t clarify anything for him because he just stares at me, nonplussed. I try to explain. “I feel like there are a hundred bees buzzing around under my skin. Like my skin is itchy, but on the inside. Like...” I trail off. I realize I’ve lifted my arm up to show him, like he would be able to see the bees underneath.

There’s no bees, of course. It’s just my arm. I lower it again. “Nevermind,” I say, and we walk into first period together.

Classes pass in a haze. As I walk through the hallways I hear snippets of conversations: students talking about college apps, about the Patriots game on Sunday, about the test they didn’t study for. I can hear their words, but they don’t mean anything. The humming in my skin drowns out their conversations.

In math class, as the teacher drones on about finding the derivative of complex polynomials, I think about peeling off my own skin, pulling it back layer by layer until the buzzing insects are set free. To distract myself, I doodle flowers on the worksheet, covering the whole page in loopy petals until I can’t see any numbers beneath. Next to me, my friend Steph hisses that I should be taking notes and that this will be on the test next week. I draw a tulip in the corner of her worksheet. She yanks the paper away and erases it, so when she’s distracted asking the teacher a question, I draw another one in pen.

As I walk between classes, I look out the windows and watch the sky. It’s still bright blue, but as the day goes on a few dark clouds begin to gather on the edge of the horizon. I wonder if it will rain.

I pass Lily in the hallway between second and third period. She’s standing outside her math class, hovering at the edge of a group of girls. I recognize Helen, wearing ripped jeans and a pink sweater just like Lily. They could be twins in

their matching clothes. They could be sisters.

“Did you see what Murphy was wearing?” one of the girls is saying.

Another girl laughs. “Oh my god, yeah. She’s trying so hard to be a teenager but she’s, like, thirty. She’s so old.”

“And she’s such a hardass too,” Helen adds. “Like when we had that test about European geography and I lost a point just because I spelled some random country wrong.”

“I didn’t think the test was so – ” Lily starts, but she’s cut off by the kid next to her, a blond girl in a white tank. “I think I’m gonna go to the mall after school,” the blond girl says.

“Anyone wanna join?”

“Ooh, yes,” Helen says. “We should definitely go. I need to get some new jeans.”

“Aren’t we going to...” Lily starts to speak but trails off as Helen turns to another girl behind her. I see Lily swallow, and close her mouth. Her gaze flicks in my direction and we lock eyes. But I’m already walking past her, and we both look away.

I sit with Henry and Steph at lunch. They both bring lunches from home, leftover dinners and neatly cut vegetable slices. Henry has carrots, Steph has peppers.

“Did you submit the BU application last night?” Steph asks when I sit down.

I nod and take a bite of the school pizza. It tastes like rubber.

“The personal essays weren’t too bad,” Steph continues. “I’m more worried about Northeastern, I think...”

She keeps talking, but the humming under my skin drowns her out. I don’t want to talk about college applications. I don’t care which university decides I’m interesting enough that I can join their student body. Anyway, Steph doesn’t really need me for this conversation. She just needs someone sitting nearby so she can pretend she isn’t talking to herself.

I feel the urge to get up and run. To stand up, grab my backpack and walk out of the cafeteria and just go until I can’t go any farther. I don’t think I would make it very far, though. I have five dollars in cash in my backpack and a poor knowledge of the public transit system.

“Do you ever feel like you have bees under your skin?” I interrupt Steph. She cuts off her monologue about the benefits versus drawbacks of applying early decisions. “What?”

“Do you ever feel like you have bees under your skin?” I repeat.

Steph frowns. “Do you mean butterflies in your stomach?”

I don’t mean butterflies in your stomach. Butterflies are a completely different insect. They don’t buzz, they flutter.

“Sure,” I tell her.

“Well yeah,” she says. “Last week I had my interview for Middlebury and I was so nervous. I mean, my stomach was practically full of butterflies and I thought I would throw up. But I think the interview went okay, actually, I mean I wasn’t sure I gave a great answer when she asked me about why I wanted...”

I tune her out again. I let the buzzing of bees wash over me and I sit in silence next to Steph and Henry for the rest of lunch.

When I step out of the building at the end of the day, the dark clouds have gathered in a mass on the edge of the horizon. As they draw nearer, they blot out the edge of the sun and the clear blue sky darkens. I can feel the promise of rain on my skin as the air turns cool and sweet.

I drive home with the windows down, watching the grey clouds loom nearer and breathing in the cool air. The stuffy, oppressive feeling from this morning fades as the still air is broken up with a light breeze. I've just pulled into the driveway when my phone starts to buzz. It's Lily.

"Can you pick me up?" she says as soon as I answer the call. "I'm outside the school."

"I thought you were going out with Helen."

Her voice on the other side of the line is tight. "She made other plans. Can you pick me up or not?"

I've started backing out of the driveway before she finishes the question.

Lily's sitting on the curb by the front entrance when I pull up, knees bent so her jeans pull up and I can see her purple socks. Seeing her sitting like this, I remember the second time I ever saw her, a week after the first.

Her mom had brought her over to my dad's house again so that we could reconcile and become best friends, but I refused to come in the house to see her. I hid in between the branches of the juniper bush in the front yard, even as it started to rain.

Lily was the one who found me, soaked and shivering, hiding between the branches. She didn't have shoes on, and her rainbow socks had turned muddy and brown. She started laughing when she saw me. "What are you doing?" she asked.

"Nothing," I said. I tried to say this with dignity and conviction, like I wasn't hiding behind a bush. I almost had to yell to be heard over the rain, which was now pouring down in buckets.

She kept laughing. "You look ridiculous!" she said. I looked down at myself, and she was right. My purple pants were stained with mud and there were juniper leaves tangled into my hair.

Water streamed down my face like tears.

I stepped out from behind the bush. "Well, you look ridiculous too," I said. "You're not supposed to wear socks outside."

She looked down at her muddy rainbow socks, then at my muddy purple sneakers. "These socks make me faster," she said, as if that were a perfectly normal thing to say. And then, without waiting for a response, she took off running.

I stared at her for half a second, too confused to move, before taking off after her. I think she must have been right about the socks because I chased her around the whole neighborhood, sneakers splashing on the wet sidewalk, laughter bubbling up inside me and mixing with the rain in my mouth, and I never managed to catch her.

Now, she grabs her backpack and slides into the front seat. She's trying to keep her face hidden, but it's obvious she's been crying. I hand her a crumpled-up napkin from the back seat and she accepts it without saying anything.

"Do you ever feel like there are bees under your skin?" I ask.

That gets her to look at me. "Like bumble bees or like hornets?"

"Both."

She nods. "Of course."

Around us, the first drops of rain begin to fall.

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## **Class of 1940 Award**

Every year, the English Department awards students who submit exceptionally well made creative writing pieces. The winner of the 2022 Class of 1940 Creative Writing Competition was Shawn Bajwa, for his fiction story "Do Not Lose Your Head." The story is grace and metaphoric, guilty and swift. Wickedness is everywhere; abuses of power are methodical and violent. And yet the narrator finds a way of living his life as "a curse that becomes a gift."

### **Do Not Lose Your Head**

Shawn Bajwa

It doesn't matter to me in the end. At first it really bothered me because others thought I was weird. But, when the walls were put in place and we suddenly became caged, suddenly the tables turned. I didn't smile, joy isn't something that I can feel. Neither rage, sorrow, or pleasure. This mouth is just a line with expressionless eyes that regard everything that comes into contact with it. Having no ability to feel emotions used to be a defect. Now it's a blessing. I believe those that have malice in their hearts would smile if they didn't have to worry about today's era. For me? I suppose getting to work on time is pretty nice.

A small room with my name on the front. Not that anyone calls me that. A name's something everyone uses more than you do. Unless I talked in the third-person, but that would just make people look at me. While I don't feel awkward about getting attention, it is something I'd rather do without. I've seen some people feel that someone is watching them and that really doesn't help their mental in the end. It's all about the mental these days. Commercials on television selling new and unregulated drugs that promise to erase the bad stuff in your mind only for people to wind up addicted and begging for more. Alcohol is also doing wonders. That's a tried and true method found by our ancestors to forget

about everything. Eventually you are also forgotten except for being the drunk who lost sight of their dreams within intoxication. Did I have dreams? That one's a real head scratcher. I don't like to think too much about the extraneous details in life. We all got a lot going on in our minds. 'Cept me. There's nothing going on because I don't need to worry about much except for coming to work.

People will hold conversations in their head, babbling nonstop to themselves. "I gotta buy this for the kids.", "It's going to rain today, that'll ruin my plans for later unless the weatherman is wrong.", "I used to wear blue everyday, but now it feels like bad luck. Better switch it up." Heh, when did that stuff matter so much that it deserves to occupy a part of that brilliant mind we humans cherish.

I can see it now. Walking down this sidewalk with the world painted in darkness, there are people and stories swerving around me. At a bus stop there's a lady wrapped in a boring coat with a large hat with some wilted flower drooping from... lack of care? Not sure if it's even real. The only piece of color being her purse. A cherry red that lit up in the darkness within the yellow of street lights. Her eyes, black dots that couldn't sit still. She was muttering to herself while one of her thumbnails scraped against the other like a potato peeler. "H...ome... Want to go..." I don't want to think about it. Everyone wants to go home for that brief respite. We can't escape this place even if we get past the walls. To me it's just now a normal life with repercussions. But, I can guess why she's acting this way.

Up ahead was yellow tape blocking my way. An officer approached me. *Ah. There were sirens. Oops.* "What's your name and destination?" The force must be lacking new recruits. This guy's all skin and bones. Is there hair under that hat or are you trying to give off the illusion of not being bald? Ah. I say I don't like to think much, but here I am making fun of the elderly.

"Nulm. I work at the gas consultation office up ahead." An eyebrow rose from the wrinkled officer's pale face.

"Nulm? Hell kinda name is that?"

"Dunno. Parents gave it. I'd ask them but they're de-" I paused. *That's a little too close, no need for the negativity.* "-own south."

"De-own south?"

"Yeah. They went to visit relatives before we were trapped here. Pretty lucky on their part. But I've made my peace with not seeing them anytime soon." I feel no guilt in lying, but it is part of my job not to be negative to these poor souls trapped here with me. Maybe I'm the only one here living a normal life.

"Ha! I'm envious, kiddo. Alright, go on, nothing to see here. Just walk around the tape, it's just... well you work at the consultation, you know what it is."

"All too familiar. Have a good one, sir." I tipped my cap... I don't have a cap... Um. I tipped nothing at the officer and walked away without taking a look back. The rain started to go from pellets to bullets.

The consultation office was one of the few nice looking buildings in the city. That's because it's the best industry we have and the only one exclusive to us. Every building is painted black, but this one has a nice beige. I dunno why it's beige, it's just nice to look at. Well, to me at least. Someone here probably hates the color.

“Nulm? What’s this about beige?” Ah. When did I walk inside? The receptionist is looking at me like a weirdo.

“I... like beige... Do you?” He adjusted his glasses before hunching back over the documents and monitors scattered around the U-shaped desk that he called home. *Your neck is going to be like a vultures if you don’t take better care of it, Marcus.*

“Beige isn’t bad. Most people pick blue for their favorite, or you can just pick a random color and run with it. Chartreuse is one that comes to mind. That’s just booger green. No offense if you like that color, Nulm.

“I don’t.”

“Okay good, because I just personally think there’s better colors out there!” I seem to have struck an unintentional cord within Marcus. I will note his passion for colors and his hatred for chartreuse as they seem to be crucial pieces of his identity. “Anyways do you need anything? I’m assuming you’re just checking in so you can get to work and ‘help out those in need’ like you always do. What time is it anyways?” He yanked a chain out of his shirt pocket, dragging a large watch that dangled in the air as if he wanted to hypnotize someone. “9:09 AM. Heh, you’re cutting it close. You got six minutes, get to your room, I’ll take care of clocking you in.” I nodded, walking around the desk and arriving at the elevator that had no one else calling for it but me. *Everyone’s probably at work already. I should wake up earlier next time.*

Through a series of gray hallways with no windows and the occasional houseplant that is begging for nutrition, I arrived at my office door. While everyone has their name on the front of the gray metal door that’s inscribed on a black plaque with white font, mine doesn’t. It just has a sticker with the word “NULL” on the front. The corners are starting to peel and whoever slapped this onto my door did it at the most infuriating angle. It’s crooked with the “N” pointing to the bottom left and the final “L” pointing in the opposite direction. But it’s not even centered. They just threw it on the door because they wanted to. If I could get mad, I would. But it logically serves as my name tag, so in the end they’re helping me through their little prank... I wonder if they think it’s funny? If that is the case, then I shall leave it up until it finally peels off.

Touching the door handle, I remembered I needed to unlock it. After doing so, I go to open the door only to realize inserting the key into the lock without turning it does nothing. Most places use touchpads or a password, but I was never taught about how keys worked. “They’re just like passwords in physical form!” Marcus would tell me with another blazing passion for the mundane. Eventually I learned that turning it a specific way then opening the door is the way to get inside my office. Though I keep forgetting to dedicate that to memory. It’s of little consequence to not know how to turn a key and it feels like an adventure every time I do it. Ah. Now I sound like Marcus, enjoying the mundane... I stood in the hallway turning the key the correct way, then taking it out until I was confident on how to do it. *I will not be like Marcus. I will be Nulm.* Enjoying the mundane to that point of fascination... horrifying.

Ah. 9:14 AM. I was almost late, I blame Marcus. It’s okay to blame someone so long as you don’t say it to their face. They will never know and only you



harbor the secret. I blame Marcus a lot. He's one of the few people that talk to me here. And that makes him a friend. A friend I can blame without him knowing.

Is it okay if I blame him for my office space? It's a small cube with yellow walls, a plastic plant that stands tall in the corner, my tiny desk that is enough for a monitor, and the office chair I sit in for eight hours at a time. That plant is large, obnoxiously so. Sometimes I swat the leaves by accident which makes me want to throw it away, but it's one of the few sources of color in my world. "If I were to water you like a real plant, would you water me?" No response. "The feeling is mutual it seems." The monitor blips on. A person's face is uncomfortably close, their hot breath clouding the camera until they wipe it off, then back up. *We're starting early today.*

Another man, not too far away from the officer from before. Skinny, balding (oh, you have more hair than the officer, congratulations), skin is a slightly darker complexion than pale but is malnourished, and those blue eyes have popped blood vessels. What could you have possibly done so early in the morning to be like this? A button appears on the monitor to say "Hello!" to the customer. This tells them that someone has taken their call. I hit the button. They smile, but it is of fleeting joy. They grab the red phone connected by a spiraling wire, pulling it close to their head where they lean on it. Reaching into their coat, one that looks to be for camping in the woods with that shade of woodland green, he pulls out a lighter and cigarette with shaky hands. "Hi, hello. Please give me a quarter t-tank." His shaking won't stop, it's even infected his voice. Giving a quarter is of no consequence to our supply. It's a happy moment when we can give them such a small quantity in fact. Not that I feel the joy of it, I just hit a button. On the monitor are three see-through boxes.

White round rectangles with a cartoony canister in the middle showing different levels of fullness. The far right one is the quarter option, then there's half a tank, finally a full tank. I press the first option, a quarter tank. Much like an airplane, a mask falls from the roof of the stall. He grabs it like a kid snatching a treat placed before them that's about to be plucked away. Quickly, the man presses it against his mouth and nose, a blue mist leaks through the sides as his eyes roll back in ecstasy. Though, this pleasure is cut off by the cranking stop similar to the one you hear at a gas station once you're full. He snaps back to the sad world he lives in. I could feel the disappointment as he let go of the mask, his shaking now reduced. With a sudden jerk, the mask flies back into the ceiling. The man smiled, lighting his cigarette before waving goodbye. The monitor cut back to a blank screen leaving me back in my tiny cube.

*No report? I suppose I shall wait for the next request as always.* I left my book at home and I have no source of entertainment other than the clock on the wall behind the monitor. It ticks incessantly. That call was only a few minutes and yet I'm here for hours. That tick gets louder. Second hand, why are you in such a rush? The day won't go faster even if you do, you're locked down. It gets louder, the room's deafening silence fighting against it. Tick. Tick. Tick. Ah. Another call.

"..." I hit hello. "Half..." Oh. It's that woman at the bus stop. Small world. Unfortunately, despite her lack of communication, she needs to explain why she deserves half a tank at this moment. She knows as well, biting her lips running

with makeup with her head tilted down. I can't tell if that's mascara or just black tears. Guess they're both in this sad case. Even though she doesn't need to explain it to me, she must explain it for the sake of the recording.

"A boy was going to school. He suddenly paused, then... You know it." Her terror choked back. She's not going to last long unless I do something. But it is up to her to finish this testimony. "The thing. It happened to him. I never knew the kid, yet I feel so guilty. I watched as he... as he..." I pressed the half tank button. The mask dropped and immediately she had it pressed to her face. Same expression as my previous client. Ecstasy, but with gasps for air as the gas flooded the lungs. After what felt like a minute of watching this customer gas up, it stopped with the same clicking of a gas pump. She was not disappointed like the man. Still looking down, she wiped her face with a handkerchief then applied something to her face. Now, fully facing the camera, I realized she was ugly. A clown. Kissing the camera and getting her lipstick all over the lens, she waved her fingers and walked away. The monitor cut to a black screen. Blue text like those old terminals flickered.

The report. A simple thing. It simply asks "Why?" and it is your job to answer this single-word question. "Why did I give half of a tank? Because she was about to die. Isn't that obvious?" Normally the reports are longer. Tiny encounters cannot even be captured in a paragraph. You just have to keep on writing about all these tiny details that led to your decision of saving a life. But I have found simplicity is best. Not like anyone reads these reports to inflict criticism on the person who wrote it. This is a society that strives to remove negativity. No one learned that failure is a way to learn, only it is a way to get closer to dying.

With it filled out, the screen turned black, now showing a reflection of me. I regarded this stretched version of myself and the room I'm in. Nothing remarkable. Just someone living life with a curse that became a gift. His face blank with a desire to express the bare necessities. The features are soft like a child's, but there is age showing around the eyes. He hasn't slept well and will continue to do so until he submits to this world's drugs. But, he will never submit. This man knows horrors and that these substances are just a means to stave them off.

"Hey hey!" Gah. Why is this man so energetic? "See this, buster?" Shoved into the camera is a piece of paper. It's made to look super cute with cartoonish characters huffing gas and a font that looks like something out of an elementary school hallway. "This is my m-e-m-b-e-r-s-h-i-PAH! Come on down and deliver the tanks, I'm waiting eagerly, Nulm!" Ten tanks to the docks. If you do a delivery you are done for the day, go home and rest up for the next day. My monitor turned blank with no sign of coming back, then a surprise knock on my door signaled it was time to go.

Clara, a part-time worker who needed some help getting used to working here, showed to be the source of the knocking. "Nulm..."

"I'm taking your delivery, aren't I." Her face slobbered with tears made it quite clear that I was right. "I can't feel the negativity of doing this or the stress behind it. You're at more risk right now than I will be on the whole run. Wipe those tears off and take a lunch break." Her face fought to stop the tears, but they still trickled down.

“It’s not fair to have to do these runs. They’re too cruel, even for you...” She’s resilient, but this is teetering on the edge of danger.

“Clara.” I reached into my jacket’s inside pocket. “Take this.” Grabbing her hand, I put an inhaler in the center of her palm. “Use it. Please.” Holding it like a toy she’s unsure of how to play with, reluctantly, she put the inhaler to her mouth, pushing down the switch on it like a trigger causing a brief gust of gas to come out. At first she coughed, unused to the feeling. Then smiled. “Don’t rely on it, but use it when necessary. Or not at all. Just do not lose yourself to the curse of this city.” She gave an understanding nod before sulking away. I adjusted myself before walking towards the delivery point of the building.

A small hangar with enough room to house three shipping trucks. Only one remained and it was for me. *Ah. How lucky.* Getting inside, I felt the worn down nature of this vehicle. Used only for business with no regard to the interior other than an air freshener that dangled from the rearview mirror. Apparently it was supposed to be mint, but it must have lost its scent. Pressing the ‘On’ switch, I felt the truck rev to life. Taking it into drive, I began my traffic ridden drive to the docks.

Unremarkable. All of it. That drive was cluttered with cars that purred in silence. The horns are a gunshot of stress that could kill those in front of you. Want to be tried for murder? Just try and honk that horn. Psychopaths probably find that tempting, all it does for me is slow delivery time down. I do not mind taking these. It’s a big hurdle, but you get to go home afterwards. Not that it stresses me out, it is essentially a free ride home. You even get paid extra since so few people actually are able to take these. But, the man on the monitor, a returning customer that likes to make our lives a pain. Even mine. I may not be able to feel negativity, but that man somehow manages to make me understand what it is like to be angry.

His name is Golden. Parents probably thought he was something that’ll shine bright. They weren’t wrong. That guy is up there among the richest people on this earth. How does a dock boss get that much money? Well, when your city is closed off from everything else with no one wanting to enter here, you become in need of supplies. He regulates all of our resources. Imports, exports, and so on. He could challenge the mayor with ease, but that would upset the balance he has. Being able to control all of those prices for the city makes him powerful. While the gas is used as an exclusive industry here, it’s just another drug to put on shelves around the world. Some kid stressing about a quiz can just pop a pill in their mouth and all the worries disappear. Here everyone is that kid, and the quiz is their death sentence. Guess all my quizzes are excused. How lucky for me.

Ah. Here. They see the truck, they know to let me in. No need for identification, the truck has a kid huffing gas on the side. A morbid symbol to outsiders, a sign of salvation for those in the know. “C’mon in, Nulm. Boss is expectin’ ya.” Wonderful.

Getting to a parking spot, I opened the back of the truck, pulling a lever that lowered the tanks of gas onto an electric trolley. Pressing a button on the handle causes it to pull for me so I don’t break my back lugging these metal tubes

of drugs around. *I'm a desk worker. Not one of these musclehead sailors.* "Nulm! Long time no see! How are ya, friend?" Speaking of muscle heads, here comes Gront. A fitting name for the type of work he does. A towering man with a white mane of hair that connects to a flowing beard. His sailor uniform is torn at the sleeves to reveal muscles with powerful veins coursing with blood. While everything here looks like doom and gloom, he is a beacon of strength in the community... Also very chummy with me for some reason. He was a ship captain that accidentally entered the city's border. Now he can't leave, so he began working with Golden and finds it to be a new calling in his life. "That the delivery? What am I sayin'?! Of course it is! Let's get that to Golden's room, it's for his personal stall." *Ah. So he's not sharing with his underlings... Guess that's the benefit of being rich: you don't have to share.* Taking the handle from me, Gront signaled me to follow as we went across the busy dockyard.

Some boats were hung up by hooks so they could be repaired, but they seemed to be neglected. Everyone was at the long rectangular dock platforms where crates drifted in. To avoid coming into range of the city's border, importers just put their cargo onto boats which are programmed to come over to us. Once they have unloaded the goods, the A.I. tells the boat to come back. Looking at the people doing this, they all seem to be young men who need some cash. Most jobs are pretty stressful, but doing heavy labor here seems to be fun for these guys.

"YOU! I NEED THAT GAS!" Well... Fun for most of these guys. A slacker resting his head against one of the crates plucked from a boat jumped to his feet. Nothing distinguishing him from the rest in my eyes except for his quitter attitude.

"Nathan. There's no need to make a scene. Just go to the stall and get it like the rest of us." Gront tried to keep his friendly grandfather impression going, but it's hard when you're a wall of muscle carrying the one thing that will make this Nathan guy's problems go away. *Sorry Gront, but I do not believe you are the friendliest looking person I know.*

Stomping towards us, Nathan tore at the packaging of a tank, his efforts futile since the boxes are made of wood and his hands are not equipped to break them apart. If it were Gront on the other hand then... I'd rather not think about that sight. The two entered a scuffle while everyone ignored it. Smart, don't involve yourself in problems that will cause you stress. That's what I'm doing and I am not even under threat.

"Now what is happenin' here, gentleman! Fighting over MY gas? Oh, hi Nulm!" Another problem has entered the scene. Golden hobbled over with that same tacky outfit. Why is he dressed for summer in early spring? A straw hat covered his head while sunglasses obscured his eyes. Wearing a tropical yellow button-up showed that he really wanted to shine in a crowd. His walking cane was just a simple one you could buy in a store, but the detail that always broke this gentle old man facade he had was that smile. Whenever trouble was brewing, Golden would smile a grin full of teeth. But instead of a pearly white gleam coming at you, it was pitch black. His teeth black from chronic smoking. Even now as he looks at Nathan struggling like a cornered animal to get some respite in this world, he was smiling that wide-mouth grin showcasing every blackened tooth

with a cigarette pinched between.

“That ain’t a way to treat your peers, Gront! C’mere Nathan, tell your Uncle Golden what the matter is?” Wrapping his tanned stick of an arm around the young employee, Nathan gave into the trap.

“Boss... I don’t think I can work here anymore without getting a gas prescription. Just give me a little of yours today and I’ll cause no problems, I swear!” That grin... The malice on that thing was only apparent to me.

“Sure! Of course! But, Nathan, this is MY gas after all. And this is a business.” Pointing his cane across the dock, Golden highlighted a small crate that everyone seemed to be avoiding like the plague. “Just prove to me you’re a hard worker. I like to reward effort. Hell I hand out awards like they’re free! Here Gront, you get a pay raise. Don’t ask how much.” Gront smiled. Guess he’s an optimist, even a penny more is enough for that man. “See, now bring that over here and I’ll give you a whole tank. Heck, why not two!”

Ignited with this easy deal, Nathan ran across the dock, placing his hands on the side of the crate. I looked over at Golden who was still smiling that ugly grin. His lips just thin lines around that maw of his. That cigarette burned as smoke leaked through the tiny crevices in between each tooth. Yet Golden’s face remained plain. *Ah. He’s having fun.* Looking back at Nathan, I saw the source of his pleasure. The boy could not budge the box. He was about to throw his back out. “C’mon Nathan,” Gront shouted heartily, “give it your all!” Frustration entered the poor boy’s face as he finally went to a last-ditch effort. Hugging the box, he put everything he had into lifting it. Barely getting it off the ground, Nathan waddled towards us while dozens of sailors tried to ignore this struggle before them. Each step a cry for help as the boy’s nostrils flared with exertion. But there was a drive to surpass the limits of being human. He surely hit the limit, but he refused to accept it. The curse of this city would not trigger. He would win by any means.

And so he did. Placing the box at Golden’s feet, Nathan fell to the ground with a true smile that was gasping for air. “I... I did, G-Golden...” He looked up, finally able to support himself by breathing through his nose. The boy was a mess with snot mixing with tears, and eyes that were more red than white.

“That you did boy! That you did...” Leaning in close, Golden still holding that grin of his, he let out a puff of smoke into the boy’s face... You don’t know. You’re just an outsider. One who never knew what it is like to live here. Sitting at home with that smile on your face regarding the news of another world that neighbors yours. I live here. But I also have the ability to be ignorant of another person’s issues as if I didn’t know them. Sorry. I didn’t mean to get hostile. It is this curse that simply does this to us.

The smoke irritated Nathan’s face. His guard was down, he had given it all and more and was rewarded with such a disrespectful death. That cigarette smoke was the one that flipped the on switch putting it all into motion. Nathan didn’t even know he died.

POP!

POP!

POP!

I guess others were also watching and understood the hopelessness of the situation when they heard the noise. Why would you want to burden yourself with someone else's emotions when it could cost you your life?

Confetti. Nathan's head was gone and replaced with a party popper's confetti that danced in the air while the soul maneuvered through it, rising into a world beyond us that would atone for what these kids went through. Nathan was only one, two others also went with him. And yet Golden still smiled. Why? Because his gas was his. No one else should need it but the man holding the membership paper with his name on it.

The body's fell limp as blood trickled from their necks. The confetti landed in the puddles of red. A sign that the day was to go on with three less people than before.

To experience too much stress, to feel the negativity and reach a breaking point that you expect at the end. That's the curse. Don't lose your head. Or else it will pop into confetti. That is what we fear.

"Oh, Nathan! My sweet boy, what happened? Gront, take his body to where they... uh... take bodies. Nulm, you finish the delivery." Golden spat out his cigarette, pulling me along with the cart of supplies while Gront hid his face, scooping up Nathan's body where it would go to begin the preparation of receiving a return to earth. The parents would be notified in the best way possible so they don't face a similar death.

And me? I will continue to walk around with no reaction. That is because this doesn't bother me. Remember, I am cursed with a blessing. And so long as this life of mine isn't disturbed, I will continue to live a normal life. Because here there is kindness, love, and care for one another. But, underneath all that, there is a desire to not lose your head.



*Through the Trees*  
Zoe George  
Digital Photography

# A Letter From The Editor-In-Chief

Dear Reader,

When I first came to UMass Amherst to begin my college career, I was preparing myself for and anticipating a myriad of new experiences. Yet, lo' and behold the chaos of the world and of youth took grasp, interrupting everything I set myself out to do and accomplished none of it in my first year. And yet again, I wasn't even able to truly finish my first year on campus. I almost shut myself off from the world, but that's no way to live or to accomplish the things I set out to do.

During our year-long stint in isolation, I decided to get back into the groove of "normal" life and submitted to *Jabberwocky* for the first time (baby steps). One of my poems was accepted and I was invited to join the virtual launch party to talk about my submission. The community I felt, the depth of creativity and shared knowledge, and the overall, collective support for students; it was the precise boost of confidence I needed to feel I was on the right path. Once we returned to campus, I joined social clubs and RSOs, I submitted to more journals, I made more friends, and I made it onto the *Jabberwocky* team.

At the start of my senior year, I didn't think I would be Editor-In-Chief of the journal. I was Head Editor on last year's Nonfiction team and I was prepared to keep that position or take on another role. I was asked to take on the role voluntarily as I've been asked to take on voluntary roles before, and each time when I was uncertain of how I'd perform, I told myself this; just stick with it. I'm not saying it's been easy or without any given range of drama and conflict, but I would be remiss if I didn't say this literary journal has a clear purpose on our campus and in my heart.

*Jabberwocky* is a unique collective of people; like-minded students who have a passion for the arts and humanities, and for uplifting the students of our campus community through their own words and aspirations for the future. One of the goals of this journal is to give students transparency and recognition of their works and lived experience. Art is often (if not always) an imitation of real life, and given the circumstances in which we all live—**distant and divided**—we should all have the opportunity to share our experiences of the world. Not everyone sees themselves as an artist or a writer, but we all have a story (real or not) that's worth telling.

It is my sincerest wish for this journal to keep growing exponentially, far more than the 120 submitters we had this year. I want the journal to reach all corners of this campus and to become a melting pot for the undergraduate class, to converse and to recognize each other's struggles and successes. *Jabberwocky* gives students the opportunity to be a part of a larger discussion, one that will set the tone for us as we set ourselves up to be the next generation of leaders.

Sincerely and soulfully,

Alejandro Barton-Negreiros  
Editor-In-Chief





Univeristy of Massachusetts Amherst