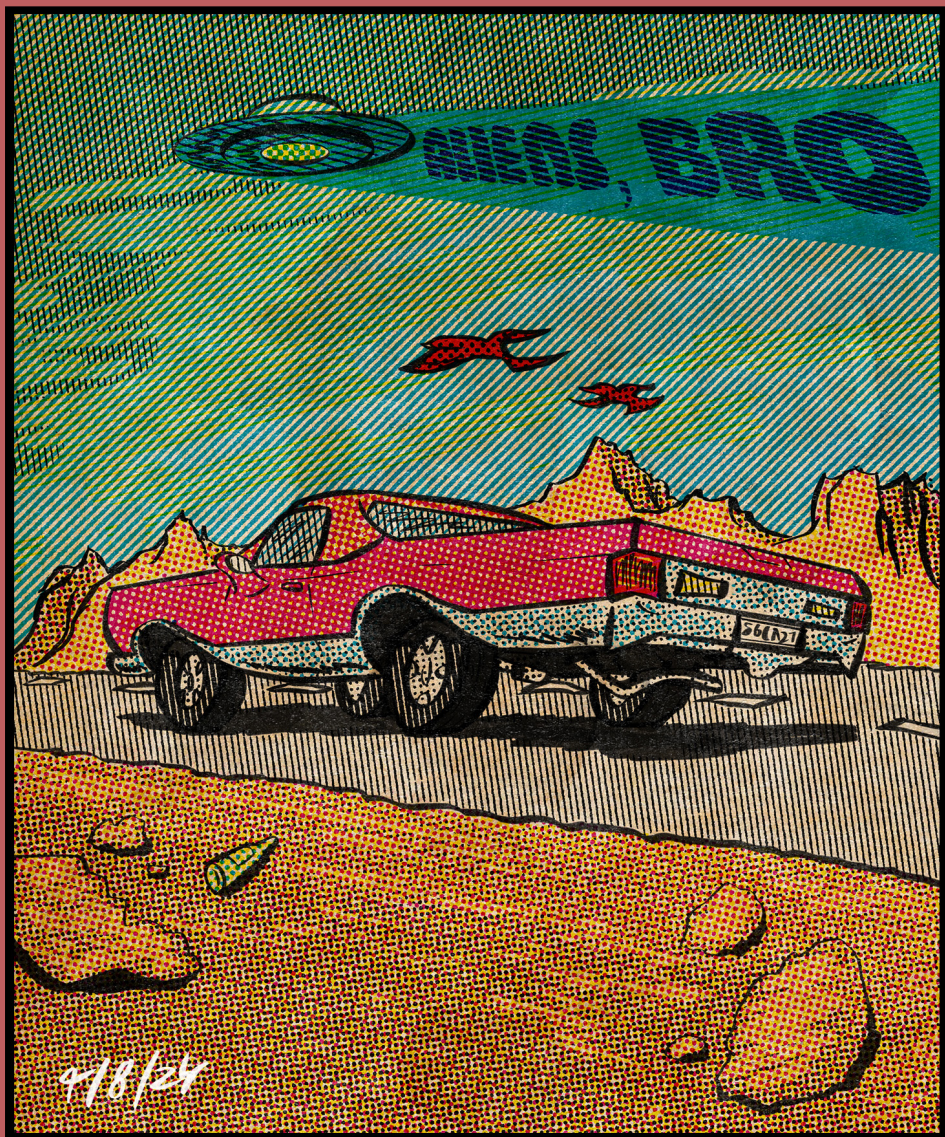


— The Other Writers Guild —

# THE VAGABOND

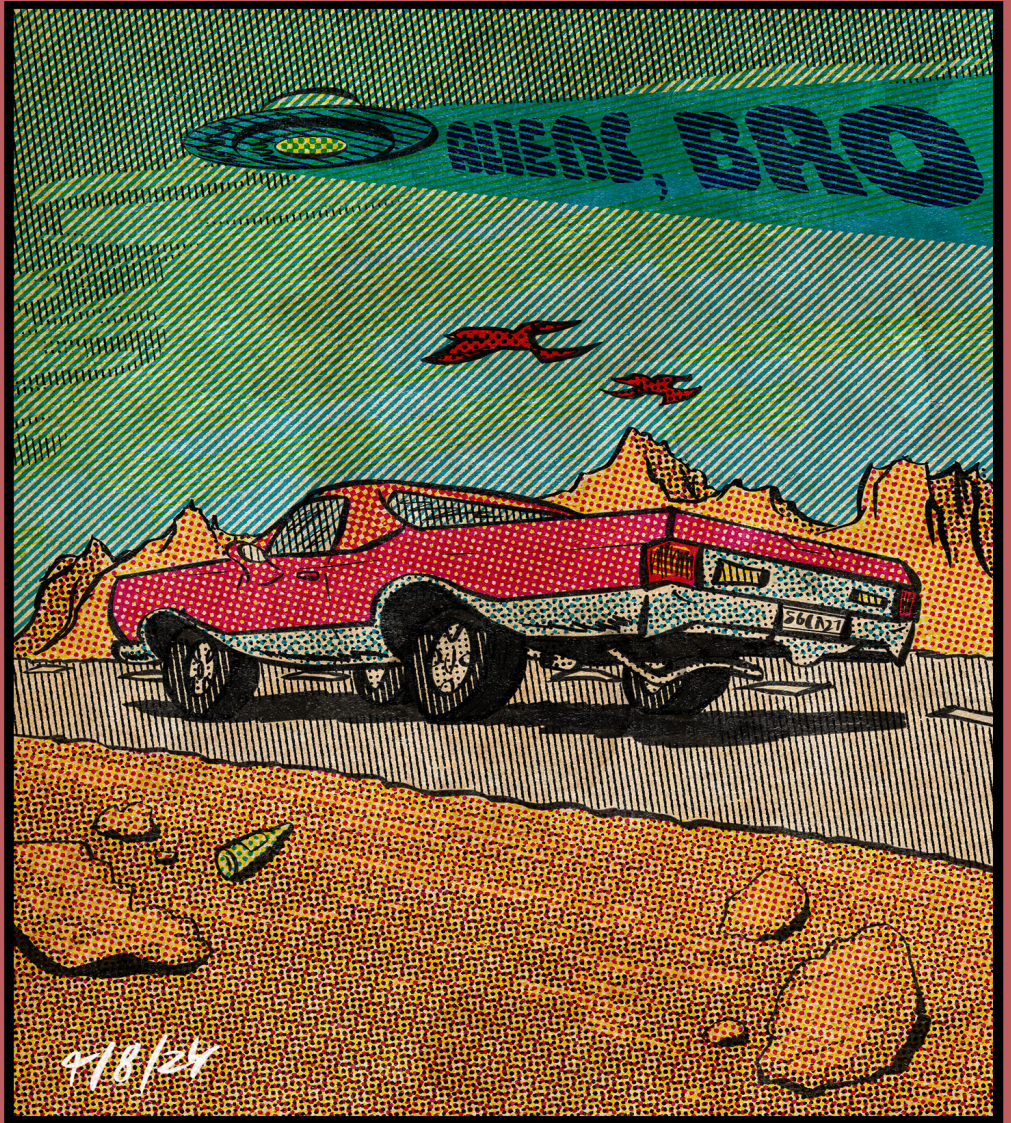


# SPRING 2024



The Other Writers Guild

# THE VAGABOND



SPRING 2024

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Special Thanks

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## Editor's Note

Writing and Art go hand in hand. One inspires the other and often are created together. One of the main things they share is that they both offer a peek into the soul of their creators.

This semester's Vagabond, like last spring's, we worked with the school's Art Club to include art in our magazine. It truly is something special to witness the creativity of the students at our school across different mediums. Whether that be pen to paper or brush to canvas it is evident that we all have a story to tell. This semester we received 85 submissions from 32 different writers and artists. 43 Poems, 20 art pieces, 18 prose pieces and 4 flash fiction pieces. This is one of our largest turn outs ever. I truly do appreciate everyone's participation and I hope everyone continues on their creative journeys.

To everyone who submitted and put work towards this magazine,

Thank You.

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# AB INTRA

**When** has the present ever become so acquiescent?

Vivamarievie

**It** runs in every cell of my imperfect body,/So powerful that  
can wake up my numb heart,

Gonzalez

**Was** It Fate, That Brought Me Here?

Zavala

**I** immediately turned away, kept walking, and thought, “It’s in  
the past. Forget it.” I let those bullies hurt him.

Hopkins

**And** as much as I want to stay in ignorance/His true colors  
attack me in heavy raids

Martinez

**Friends**, experiences, and bonsai

Williams

**It’s** an uninvited guest who arrives and makes a mess./Yet, we  
admire and are inspired.

Suhmuntu

**In** my mind I never thought I was being neglected or an emo-  
tionally abandoned child.

Perez

**If** that star went out, o how much darker the universe would  
be

Suhmuntu

**Perhaps** the search for a response to my prayers just lured my  
soul deeper into depravity.

Escobedo

**Please** make it stop, the leak just invited the mildew

Hugo

**She** is saccharine, ripe and plump, leaving a trail of her scent  
wherever she goes.

Martinez

**You'll** put up with anything for sugar.

Villafana

**Knowing** There Will Never Be Another Wonder

Zavala

**Was** it ever meant to be discovered, touched, or loved?

Martinez

**After** all/we are no strangers to making empty promises.

Zuniga

**Sitting** with the popular girls was not the goal and I didn't feel  
any better about myself just by being there.

Suhmuntu

**But** only the living mourn.

Wright

**I** removed that song from my playlist, by the way.

Suhmuntu

**Will** you embrace the gloom, or will you bloom?

Hopkins

**There** is agony felt by those who have never experienced flying, and when they jump off bridges, they land on their face.

Martinez

“**Oh** but I was quite fond of It.”

Suhmuntu

**But** I was not upset, after all if there was a day for memories and tears to visit me it would be that day.

Zuniga

**Dónde** pensamientos e ideas fluyen/Algunas sirven para crear/Y otras para enloquecer

Yahel.AC

**It** wouldn't matter as long as Jordan wasn't trapped, as long as they were free, as long as they could *breathe*.

Villafana

**He** hopes three years of good behavior is enough,

Kunkel

**We** were the ones that played not for glory, nor a trophy, but for the sake of playing.-

Arvizu

**She** won't allow anyone to undermine her

Zavala

**Breathing** our last, our flame becomes a wisp, searching for heaven's gate.

Hopkins

**To** grow is to break open that seed that contained you.

Martinez

**As** rain strikes his rough leather/Melodic like a dead bird's tweets

Rios

**Without** direction I headed to tomorrow

Zavala

**Her** fingers rested over the keyboard and she stared down that evil blinking cursor. The time was now.

Fletcher

**The** garage smells/like piss and spilt coronas

Zuniga

**I** wanted to crumble and melt away, knowing that the person I disappointed the most wasn't my mom or my school, but me.

Suhmuntu

**They** found sparkle, even in my blood

Martinez

**This** felt like a horrible nightmare. I just knew I was going to wake up from it at any moment, however that moment never came and now this nightmare became my reality.

Brunelle

**I** wish away my cape of darkness as I turn; it befalls/And remove my phantom mask

Wright

**But** you keep peeling it, piece by piece, each piece stabbing back at you, causing you pain that shoots up your arm, down and up your spine and sits at the base of your skull—and it festers there.

Zuniga

**It's** the theology of being blue.

Vimarievie

**You** would've been perfect/But apparently just not for me

Yahel.AC

**"I** need to talk to you about your future," Danny said.

Stephany

**And** why do I love you already?

Soria

**Just** say the bland image of scribbles can be something more

Kat

**How** privileged to think/That he would be ready or willing or  
able/To be anything different/Than what the world has made him

Soria

**You** have eyes so deep/So sweetly brown/But hiding tears/  
That could drown

Moscare

**Do** as you wish, my friend.

Partida

**All** souls were weary, with only hopes of what tomorrow  
would bring.

Wright

**The** craving of being together/And kill the poison of silence.

Gonzalez

**Sorrowful** and full of envy of that of which I cannot touch

Martinez

**It's** ironic because that was our sudden death

Zavala

**A** place to be for the likes of me. From the first visit, I grew  
to enjoy it more than any other,

Partida

**My** life will not allow me to live without me being an exten-  
sion of that time.

Escobedo

**She** destroyed it piece by piece, and I never knew it was happening.

Ramsey

**Cars** speed so fast, they blur into an array of silver, white, red...

Villafana

**But** I can't say no/This is a bad idea/A garbage fire idea

Wright

**The** ground upended as roots met the sun

Williams

**To** the rest of the galaxy, it was a deadly omen of what waits for them

Partida

**Pensamientos** que controlan la realidad

Yahel.AC

**I** have my mother's eyes/Reaching towards the end of time

Soria

**Why** do you cry,/For something old?

Wright

**I** argue the 'settled' are less settled than us since they keep leaving their place.

Fletcher

**Love** is so feared

Zavala

I say let's show them that this will not only work but will be the future of corrections.

Paris

**Una** maleta llena de miedos/Y un paso hacia la incertidumbre

Yahel.AC

## **When?**

**Vimarievie**

When has today become the same?

Colorful yet plain.

When has the present ever become so acquiescent?

Reasonable yet vain.

There's a price to be paid.

So tame and lost in a lesson,

fleeting moments left to maintain.

Do we contain all of our pain in a simple bottle of champagne

Or do we wait?

What you claim is as dim as a flame

A long race to fame

Everything is the same

You say, that nothing has changed

When you frame reality

In all actuality, you're the alchemy

Like the literature and all of its fixtures

It never ends, it only transcends the stars of whatever it starts

That's what you are.

You're a poet's dream

A strange seam in the quilt of all things that beams

Simplicity and yet perfect symmetry  
I'm left with nature's sympathy  
My equanimity in all things above  
Your blue eyes that tell no lies.  
The designs of an autumn sunrise,  
A creation in spring's repose  
Benevolently knows all my sows and don'ts  
Like all things that grow, you are what we hope to bestow  
Glow in every chateau  
Forgotten but we spoke.  
Altruistically soft like calligraphy  
Every city knows our history  
We meet by the tree  
Where the stone seats the leaves  
By the ants that believe for what it perceives  
And for the person that makes the best fricassee.  
I'll always wonder what's on your mind  
With eyes that never let me see inside.  
I'm left with an array of bouquets  
For the Artesian and from the Cartesian.  
Endless questions about the seasons  
Filled with rhyme and reason  
A thousand mysteries

Every day we pass by history  
    Ten words to seal it all  
Parts that complete the heart  
    Again filled with refrains  
        Now and then  
At the den of all his wonders  
May his hopes and dreams come true in the summer  
And let all the bad things go down in the gutter.  
    I promise you'll see it one day  
The golden string of happiness is on the way.  
    Just let me say, one final hey  
        Before we sway away.  
    We'll reunite by the cafe  
        I'll be there today.  
    By the fields of yesterday  
        And the echoes of  
            when?  
    Has today ever been the same?  
    How does one leave, Elaine?  
Who do we entertain our thoughts to across the lakes?  
    We drew our maps so cleverly, back then  
    with a silver pen, I wrote to comprehend  
What has been said, compiled with my defense

When will I see your face, again?  
One must claim all the games  
They used to play  
in order to stay awake.  
It's the only way to stay safe.  
All the promises you planned to keep  
And all the days you wished for in your sleep.  
Have beckoned and graced so deep  
Behind every little thing.  
Is a broken wing.  
So when?  
Has today ever been the same?  
When will come my way?

## **In Love**

**Carolina Gonzalez Llamas**

There is something truly special, but different,  
Something someone else can not distinguish,  
And yet it can make both souls feel in tune,  
The thing is, I can only feel it around you.  
It runs in every cell of my imperfect body,  
So powerful that can wake up my numb heart,  
Knowing that there is finally something worth it,  
What I don't know is when or how it will turn out.  
But I won't give up, because I'm ready.  
Not to say goodbye, but to write this story,  
A story of love.

# The Rose Without a Thorn

Luis Zavala

I Tumbled Down The Road  
Not Knowing What I Would Find  
Was It Fate, That Brought Me Here?  
Or Was It My Flowing Tear  
I Followed The Beautiful Voices  
With So Many Choices  
My Heart Only Spoke To One  
But I Was So Broken  
That I Didn't Realize  
I Have Made My Peace  
For I Just Found  
The Rose Without A Thorn

# Love Is Fragile



*Acrylic and Oil Paint  
Rachel Hopkins*

# The Sweetest Cake

Rachel Hopkins

A rush of excitement flowed through my veins like a riverbed. My heart jumped up and down as if it were skipping rope. I knew that soon I would be turning ten. Double digits!

I held my dad's hand as we were on our way to pick out my birthday cake at "Ms. Honey's Cake Factory." I could see it now: the blue gingham cloth spread along the table, with my cake as the centerpiece, surrounded by my presents and underneath an arch of balloons. I hoped to get the new Dragon-Slayers card game and its new miniature dragon figurines.

"So, what kind of cake do you want?" Dad asked.

"Chocolate!" I said excitedly.

He chuckled, "I knew you'll say that!"

We turned a corner and arrived at the bakery. Blue and white striped window awnings sailed in the wind. Each gold letter of the bakery's name shined like a birthday candle in the sunlight. The heavenly aroma of freshly baked bread, sugar, and cinnamon dragged my nostrils to the shop window. My eyes feasted on the cakes and cupcakes on display. The coconut shavings on one cake looked like powdered snow. The icing on the bundt cakes looked like tentacles emerging from their centers. There were some marble cakes with dripping chocolate like melting wax. Then I saw it. Chocolate cake! But the best part? Chocolate-covered strawberries to go with it!

My mouth began to water. I could taste it now—the smooth and velvety sweet taste of chocolate coated my tongue, sending shivers to every inch of my body. Every bite would taste like heaven. Oh, but the strawberries! Shards of chocolate soaked into juicy sweetness!

I pointed, “That one!”

“Excellent choice!”

I held my breath when we saw the employees inside take the cakes from the display one by one, causing my heart to beat fast. I breathed a sigh of relief when none of them touched the chocolate cake. It was the last cake left. We had to act quickly.

Then, my dad's Bluetooth buzzed in his ear like a pesky mosquito. He turned to me and said, “Go in and tell them what you want. Then meet me back here, and I'll be in after my call.”

I opened the door and breathed in the sweet sugar and spice. The heat from the ovens filled the room like a warm blanket on that chilly day. Ms. Honey stood by the counter with a welcoming smile, and I told her what I wanted.

I whistled a happy tune on my way out. The cake was mine!

I met Dad at the corner. He was still talking on his Bluetooth! Every second felt like an eternity.

Looking down at the other corner, my stomach twisted like a pretzel knot. There was Ryan, one of my classmates. There were holes in his dirty shirt, baggy sweatpants, and sneakers, and his loose soles brushed the sidewalk, causing him to walk funny and to pause and pick pebbles from his shoes. He would constantly blow his blonde hair out of his eyes. His dad looked no better.

Then Ryan's eyes lit up, and he pulled his dad to the bakery window like a dog on a leash, "Look, Dad! Chocolate cake! Can we get it? Please?"

I knew that it was Ryan's birthday too. Yesterday in school, our teacher, Ms. Thompson, announced our birthdays to the entire class and gave each of us a birthday pencil.

His dad took out his wallet and counted the loose change. While Ryan was looking at my cake, I saw his dad wear a frown, and his eyes shone like glass. When Ryan turned around, his dad tried his best to smile, although his eyes said otherwise, "Maybe you can have a cake next year. Let's see if they have chocolate cupcakes."

“Aaaww,” Ryan sighed when he saw my cake taken away.

His dad rubbed his back, and they walked inside.

My dad used to give me that look.

A chill ran down my spine.

I felt holes in my shoes.

My sweater and pants grew looser.

I gasped when I saw my reflection through the window. My sweater was stained and had holes in it! I immediately turned away and looked down at my sweater. There were no stains, no holes, and it fit just right.

I sighed; it was only my imagination, a horrible memory. I tried my best to forget that picture.

I didn't like Ryan.

Ryan would slouch like a candlewick, stare at his shoes, and curl up in any corner. No one at school would play with him at recess or sit beside him at lunch. During lunch, my friends would smirk, “Look at beggar boy! All alone, what a loser! He's such a gloomy kid! What a freak!”

I tightened my knuckles and clenched my teeth.

*Beggar boy, loser, gloomy, freak*—I was called these names back in my old school. Hearing these names again made my blood boil. Why did Ryan have to remind me?

My friends would crumple paper or tin foil and throw them at

Ryan, immediately looking away when Ryan turned around. Ryan knew it was them because they would giggle between their teeth. But that was not the worst incident.

One time on the playground, I saw the big kids shove Ryan against the wall. Those mean sixth-graders! They were a pack of wolves circling a shaking rabbit. They would laugh, “Nice clothes, loser! Where’d you get ’em? It’s too bad your dad made you so poor!”

One snickered and pointed at his shoes, “And what are THOSE?! Did you fish them out of the dumpster? What’s the matter? Is your dad so broke he can’t afford a new pair?”

Tears filled Ryan’s eyes, and his lips trembled.

“Aaww, are you gonna cry?” one laughed. “Look! He’s gonna cry because he comes to school looking like a beggar! Go ahead, ‘Cryin’ Ryan!’”

Ryan’s eyes locked with mine. I’ll never forget that look. Those frosty blue eyes were engraved in my mind like yesterday. Whenever I looked in the mirror, a window, a puddle, or anything I could see my reflection, sometimes those eyes stared back at me. Glassy eyes imploring for help. Help that I refused to give. But when Ryan looked at me, I did not see Ryan . . . I saw myself. Me in his worn clothes. Me in his beaten shoes. Me getting picked on like I used to back in my old school. I immediately turned away, kept walking, and thought, “It’s in the past. Forget it.” I let those bullies hurt him.

My stomach twisted like kneaded dough. I could've helped him! I could've looked for an adult!

I saw them leave the bakery, and Ryan had a small plain vanilla cupcake in his hand. My dad gave me a cupcake like that for my sixth, seventh, and eighth birthdays. I nibbled mine like a mouse to make them last longer.

Ryan smiled at his dad, but I knew the smile was forced so he would not disappoint him. I did that too. I wondered how many birthdays Ryan had gotten a tiny cupcake.

I had the sweet taste of chocolate on my tongue, but now it was bitter.

I thought, "My birthday will be happy, and Ryan's will be miserable. I will have a whole cake; Ryan only gets a tiny cupcake. I will have a table full of presents, and Ryan's dad probably has little or nothing to give him. Ryan will continue to suffer like I did, getting teased for the way he dresses, being treated differently from other kids, and having no friends. Poor Ryan. No kid deserves it. It's not fair . . . it's not fair."

"Thanks for your patience." Dad touched my shoulder and said cheerfully, "Ready to get your cake?"

I only stared at my shoes.

"Charlie?"

A tear slid down my cheek.

Then he got down to my level and coaxed, "Oh, Charlie . . .

what's the matter?"

I shook my head, "Dad, I don't want it."

"What? I thought chocolate is your favorite."

I sighed, "It is. But there's someone who needs it more than me."

After I told him about Ryan, he said, "It's because of what we experienced and you know what it feels like to not have much . . . are you sure?"

I nodded, "I don't mind having cupcakes."

Dad hugged me, and his voice almost cracked, "You have a good heart. I'm very proud of you. You know, if it weren't for the kindness of a stranger who paid for my tuition, I would not have the career I have now and we would not have the life we have now. Every kind act leads to another. I know we'll make Ryan very happy."

...

Inside the bakery, we asked Ms. Honey to write "Happy Birthday Ryan!" in vanilla icing. Then we went to the mall to purchase new shoes and clothes. Ryan had the same height and body shape as me, so we guessed his shoe and clothes sizes.

I remembered the house where Ryan lived because my mom once drove through a neighborhood near my school, and I saw Ryan on the front lawn of an old wooden house. The windows had rusty blue shutters that groaned in the wind. The edges of the

tin roof were covered in rustling dead grass, giving them a blonde color. The white paint was peeling off like a lizard's skin. All was quiet except for the soft tinkling of wind chimes from a distant house and the cheerful choir of finches perched on the roof.

I had the cake, and Dad carried a birthday bag with the clothes and shoes. We approached the house, and I knocked on the screen door. Ryan opened the door with his eyes in disbelief when he saw me. He looked at my dad, the cake in my hands, and then back at me. He shifted from one foot to another. His mouth was slightly opened for a few seconds until he said in bewilderment, "Charlie?"

I held out the cake and smiled, "Happy birthday Ryan!"

Ryan took the cake and said astonishingly, "You . . . bought this cake . . . for me?"

"I know chocolate is your favorite!"

"I saw you at the bakery through the window." Ryan said, "I thought you got it for yourself, but it was for me?"

"What is a birthday without your favorite cake?"

Ryan blinked and then smiled from ear to ear, "I—I don't know what to say. Thank you so much!"

His dad stepped into the doorway, and Ryan proudly showed him the cake. His dad was as baffled as Ryan. He looked at me and my dad and said, with a lump in his throat, "I—I can't thank you enough. Thank you so much for making Ryan's birthday special. You have no idea how much this means to us."

But Dad and I did have an idea how much this would mean to them.

“I won’t forget this, Charlie! You’re so kind!” Then Ryan paused for a moment and said, “But it’s your birthday too.”

Ryan handed the cake to his dad, “Can you cut this in half?”

Then he turned to me, “I’ll have half and you’ll have half. Even Steven!”

“Oh no, Ryan.” I said, “It’s your cake.”

Ryan smiled and repeated my words, “What is a birthday without your favorite cake? You’re right; it’s my cake, and it’ll make me happy if we both get what we want. So, I’d say we share.”

Now I was baffled. Ryan could have kept the whole cake for himself, but he wanted to give me half.

“Well,” I said, “if it makes you happy, then I’m happy. Thank you, Ryan.”

Our dads smiled at each other.

...

Ryan was not the same. At school, he was all smiles in his new clothes and shoes. His eyes brightened like a spring sky instead of a frosty winter. He no longer awkwardly lurked in any corner; he was more active. With new shoes, he ran freely on the playground and played more recess games. I had never seen Ryan so happy, and seeing him smile made me feel good. He rarely smiled before, but now he no longer looked sad. He was more cheerful and laughed

more. I was glad no one teased Ryan anymore.

However, when I saw Ryan sitting alone at lunch, my friends—I mean, my former friends—would whisper, “I wonder what happened to beggar boy? Where did he get those clothes and shoes?”

One of them smirked, “I bet he got them from *charity*. His dad’s so broke they can’t afford new clothes. That’s how pathetic they are.”

That was the last straw.

“Hey! Where you goin’?!”

I left their table and sat across from Ryan.

They were speechless.

But I didn’t care.

“Hey, how are you?” I asked.

Ryan grinned, “I’m great!”

Then he whispered so others wouldn’t hear, “I love these shoes and clothes. There are no words to express how much I appreciate them. And the cake was delicious! Thank you so much.”

“Of course. I’m glad you had a great birthday,” I said.

Then Ryan pulled something out of his pocket, “Look what my dad got me!”

It was a set of Dragon-Slayers cards!

“Wow! How did he get these?”

“A neighbor gave them to him,” Ryan added. “What did you get?”

I wore a sly grin and pulled out my set and figurines, “My mom got these.”

“No way!” Ryan said, “You collect them too?”

“I love Dragon-Slayers!” I said, “Want to play during recess?”

“Yeah!”

...

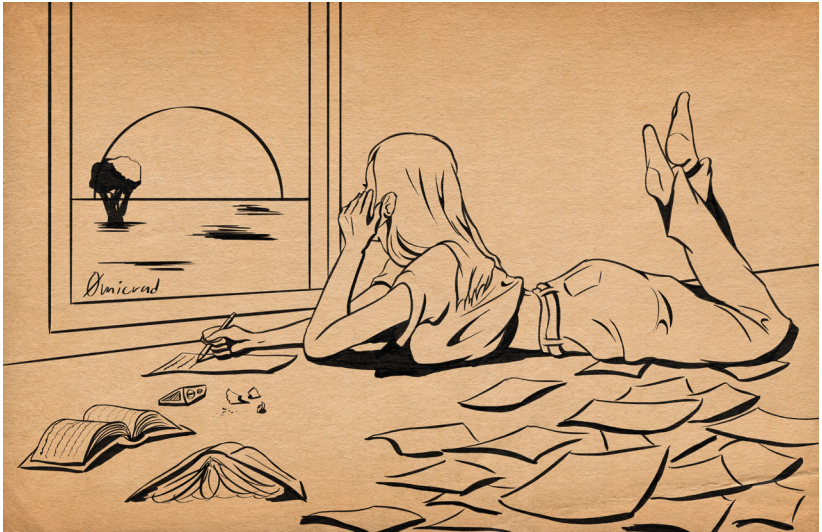
Ryan never ate lunch alone or played by himself. We always spent time together. He was fun to be around and told the funniest jokes and stories. He was a better friend and kinder than my former friends. I was happy to get to know this side of him and see him break out of his shell.

As we spent time together, our dads formed a friendship too. Dad learned that Ryan’s dad was a skilled computer coder and helped him get a job at the tech company where he worked. Thanks to his new job, things got better for them. His dad was like a new man. He dressed better and was happier whenever he picked up Ryan after school. He eventually surprised Ryan with a new house!

“See how one kind act leads to another?” Dad said, “Always remember that.”

I always remembered his words. And all it took was some chocolate cake.

# Daydreaming



*Digital, Procreate  
Omicrud*

# The Idea of Him

Aranza Martinez

I think about the way he does things  
The key movements amongst his nonsense  
I think about many awful things too  
But my head hurts and is troubled by the way he changes his mood

I feel his anger in my own emotions  
They clash and crash like untamed waves  
And as much as I want to stay in ignorance  
His true colors attack me in heavy raids

I think about the way he says things  
The way he smiles at gross and awful jokes  
I don't think I know this man that well  
If his very true intentions feel like a play or a show

I saw him in everything but the nice and pure  
Like in thorns instead of roses  
And sickness instead of a cure

I think about the way he listens  
As in he doesn't listen at all  
But the more I stay and whisper  
The more I know, the more I load

I think... Gosh I hate how I think  
That with the idea of him I'm in love

# Forever Doesn't Exist

Chloe K. Williams

Grey streaks grace the temples  
and wisdom has made the eyes a rich  
brown.

Arched feet have traveled from  
one coast  
to another  
in search of  
a meaning.

Friends, experiences, and bonsai  
plants in the foyer are  
but for a moment.

Careers and Hawaiian vacations  
only encompass but a breath of  
accomplishment and joy.

A homesick heart bellows  
and  
mourns  
as the place it is  
most fond of no longer  
exists.

## **Shower**

**Suhmuntu**

The rain unleashed is like a beast, an enemy to many,

But the controlled rain is peaceful, beautiful.

How did we manage to make it our pet, puppet?

It's an uninvited guest who arrives and makes a mess.

Yet, we admire and are inspired.

# From Darkness to Enlightenment

Michael Perez

A journey begins with an idea then moving towards your destination. For some individuals their journey in life may simply have just been the hand they were dealt consider it fate. This journey I am about to share with you is how I finally became aware of the darkness I was swimming in, and where and when I had my great awakening.

My entire childhood I never knew I was “stuffing my feelings,” or that was even a term. I came from a family where sharing feelings simply did not exist. There was no “bedtime stories, how was your day at school, what’s wrong let’s talk about it” talks.

*School of hard knocks:* I was born to 16-year-old teenagers. Who were ill equipped to care for me. They would rather be out getting high running the streets. How do they ever expect me to learn

how to become self- confident, feel secure, loved and a sense of belonging while they have a joint, sherm-stick, glass pipe, or cigarette in one hand and a beer in the other? They never offered the proper tools for me to succeed in life. It wasn't until I was in prison 20 plus years that I heard the term "stuffing your feelings" in a self-help group.

*Abandonment issues:* As a young child, I was often neglected, and able to do as I pleased. My grandparents were my guardians by age six or seven. They worked from seven to three, provided a nice home, and upbringing. I can honestly admit being the first-born grandson I was spoiled. However, I learned to wear a mask while underneath their roof. Being respectful, taking out the trash, cutting the grass, and pulling weeds when they got out of hand, and other chores. But, once I was out of their yard I would put on a mischievous mask. In my mind I never thought I was being neglected or an emotionally abandoned child. How was I to know I'm a child, it was normal for me. When I would walk home from school to an empty house and have an otter pop, occasionally treat my friends to otter pops, able to hop on my bike, and ride all over town to do as I pleased. I was having a blast pushing boundaries. There wasn't the slightest idea of abandonment issues mulling around in my adolescent mind. As long as I had my basic needs met (food, clothes, shelter, and warmth) all's fine and dandy in my book.

My grandparents were amazing providers. Why I choose a destructive lifestyle, I may have finally answered that question. It was seeing my mom and dad choose their lifestyle of darkness over

me. Over the years, I continued stuffing my feelings of anger, fear, pain, and shame.

Then at 16 following in their footsteps, I brought a child into the world. I can barely care for myself much less a child. I do not know the first thing about being a parent, how do I expect to teach my child about love, safety, security, and the other building blocks of life when all I ever knew was neglect. Just as my mom and dad choose darkness, I was on course keeping the cycle of addiction alive (drugs, alcohol, neighborhood gang).

*March of 1999:* At the age of twenty-two, I was now on a journey facing a carjacking and attempted murder case for a crime I had absolutely, no involvement in. However, I knew the three individuals from my gang that were responsible. My pride, character, and selfishness would not allow me to cooperate with the police investigation, nor did I ever think about the severity of the consequences. My twenty two year old mind frame could not grasp, or consider the feelings of the victim because I was lost in darkness. Having empathy or a moral compass never existed, plus who could I discuss my worries with? When I heard the judge say “guilty!” my entire world was shattered, as I broke down and cried in the courtroom, with raw emotion, I asked how could this be? By the end of 2000, I was on my way to Tehachapi reception center with a 25 to life sentence.

My first couple of years incarcerated I went through a journey of different emotions. The blame game that it was everybody else’s fault but mine, poor me, boo-hoo! If my mom and dad would have been parents, to blaming my so- called friend who actual-

ly committed the crime. Then after my 18 years of incarceration something happened, I started mature and realized it is nobody else's fault, but mine why I'm sitting here in a prison cell. I had a choice. I could have easily cooperated with the police investigation. Searching for acceptance and attention, mixed with poor decision-making clouded my judgement. I never considered how my poor decision-making affected others, or the ripple effect it had. Today, I am mindful of how my decisions or actions affect others.

*Self-Realization:* I had just gotten out of the hole for being in possession of an inmate-manufactured weapon. I am now in my early 40's, in ad-seg (the hole) doing a lot of self-reflecting on how I've been living my entire life. How neglect, drugs, alcohol, and the streets affected my early childhood and teenage decision-making. How at sixteen I started engaging in drug and alcohol consumption with my mom and dad. Would I have become that same parent to my son or daughter if not for these concrete walls? It is fair to say these walls may have actually save them and others from future destruction.

However, today I'm happy to share that Christmas season 2018 was my last drug use of meth. Alcohol would follow in July 2019 as I drank a cup of pruno (inmate-manufactured wine from smashed fermented fruit) before exiting building one at Tehachapi A-yard heading towards R&R to load the bus for RJD Donovan, state prison in San Diego. That clean break is what I needed to sever my ties from substance abuse.

The five years that I have been at (RJD) Donovan I have accomplished more here, than my entire twenty incarcerated else-

where. It started with unlocking the door and taking the first step towards recovery. Then learning to believe in myself, getting in tune with my emotions, and becoming mindful. Every Tuesday mornings here on A- yard from (9:00 - 11:30) I go to a group called Brilliance Inside (also check out Brilliance Inside.org) run by a Ms. Mariette Fourmeaux du Sartel. I have shared with the group a few times how every time I walk through the door to our group setting the feeling I would get in my chest and stomach was like a constriction. I suppose it's from never having a safe place where I can share my thoughts, name my feelings, or just becoming vulnerable. This is new territory I'm trudging, learning to release my past fears, guilt, anger, pain, shame, and not allow that constriction of demons to hold me captive. As I write these words that familiar feeling in my chest is constricting, trying to keep me from progressing. I refuse to let that feeling win. I want my inner-child to be free to express his feelings of vulnerability, and air his thoughts without judgement. Every child and person deserves to be seen, felt, and heard.

*Facing My Fears:* It was during Christmas 2023 that my siblings took our dad to the hospital for stomach pains. It was during a following checkup the doctors discovered he has stage 4 cancer and a few masses growing on organs. I learned this in January, and here we are ending March and I've only called twice. I rarely call, and talk to my mom, and dad, nor have I seen them in my 25-years of incarceration except through the occasional photo. I have so much I want to say, but do not know how to express my feelings to anyone even my own dad (Fear). I challenged myself to call him on 3-24-2024. This would be my second phone call in six months.

With just the thought of calling him, I can feel that familiar feeling of constriction creeping through my stomach and chest. So I begin to journal about my situation releasing the discomfort. Then once I felt comfortable, I reached for my inmate issued tablet, and dialed, hearing the rings, my anxiety is fluctuating like butterflies throughout my stomach. Then his familiar voice saying, “Aye, what’s going on mijo” as I respond, “aye, what’s going on dad.” We are only allowed fifteen-minute phone calls, and I wasn’t able to say what I wanted until the last five minutes of our conversation. When I found the courage to say something along the lines of “aye dad, growing up I was never taught how to express my feeling. I was always stuffing my feelings, why am I afraid to express my feelings to you, you are my dad I shouldn’t be afraid to express my feelings to you.” Then the interruption from the prison recording “you have 60 seconds and your phone call will be disconnected” that recording was a breath of fresh air as I was able to release that pressure and constriction I was feeling. Then I quickly said, maybe during our next phone call we could express some of our feelings.

*Self-discovery:* Today with my sobriety, I’m in a happy place regardless of my surroundings, I’m free. I have learned to surround myself around like-minded individuals who want a better and brighter future. I am still learning to find my voice, confidence, and emotional intelligence each day. Call it metamorphosing. Who would ever think someone like myself would find a journey to freedom inside these concrete walls of broken dreams? Many go their entire life trapped in a prison of addiction, abuse, fear, or a state of mind. Never knowing another journey exists if they find the key unlocking their door of captivity. Then courageously tak-

ing that first step towards progress. I encourage you today search for that key unlock that door and see where your journey leads you.

As an adult looking back on my childhood experience, I can now understand the value, and importance of every child having the opportunity to be seen, felt, and heard. I never realized life is a journey of discovering, what is your discovery? If you find yourself going through a situation, I would encourage you to live in your light, have the courage, and strength to express whatever it is you are feeling. At the same time, allow others to be heard, felt, and seen. I wish you well on your endeavors, and Blessings.

Best wishes, sincerely: M.Perez

## **Faraway Star**

**Suhmuntu**

The far-away star is one in a multitude of other glimmering lights  
Untouchable and barely noticeable, beauty unimaginable  
Still just as precious as all the surrounding ones  
For the Creator made this one to be special too  
Even when the far-away star can't see it  
He created with purpose, full of worth  
Designed to mimic His own shining light  
If that star went out, o how much darker the universe would be

# Clown I



*Oil Paint*  
*Electra Lopez*

## untitled poem

**Abel Escobedo**

With the eyes of the gods I perceived you would have all I could never attain. I acknowledged your present and I witnessed your past. Perhaps the search for a response to my prayers just lured my soul deeper into depravity. Perhaps the harder I yearn for something the further away it becomes. I should have known better than to be so hasty, to yield myself down and let go. Still, the elusiveness of my beliefs seems beyond me to surrender. As futile as they are, my brain can not distinguish what's real from what's not. Perhaps for once in this moment of solitude, can my head rest down and remember its form. If time has no shape in my sense of beliefs, allow me this moment to be with no need of release.

# No Service

A.J. Hugo

— Your call has been forwarded to an automatic voice message system —

I feel like a boiling kettle

Can you really see me without listening?

Tip, tap

Please make it stop, the leak just invited the mildew

Chirp, chirp

That stupid cricket has been living under my fridge for five months.

— Hello? —

I just want to take out the foil from the microwave

Marching and marching, waiting to call all night

No answer

Beep, beep

Just a tone

Please tell me, please call me back

Can you tell me how much soap the washer needs?

I know you are busy, but I made an appointment last week

— We're sorry; you have reached a number that has been dis-

connected or is no longer in service —

# Unholy, Ungrateful, Demeaning and Unsavory Love

**Aranza Martinez**

The fruit falling down from the tall, old tree,  
Rolls down the unstable grounds,  
Through roots, rocks, ridges, and leaves.

She rolls down valleys, boulders, and hills of great length and size,  
Claiming God was there to witness her momentous demise.

She is saccharine, ripe and plump, leaving a trail of her scent wherever she goes.

However she is bewildered and petrified,  
For her scent might be what brings her the most unwelcomed foes.

She rolls down roads that are uneven and broken,  
Through lands of the shadow of death  
Which have cut her skin wide open.

She's been pushed and pulled until reaching a furious river;  
Bleeding nectar in those cold waters only meant for a sinner.

Let it be, outspoken and true,  
Her mission and purpose have become obtuse.  
She was always meant for so much more,  
Makes you wonder if the promise should've remained untold.

A prophecy is not a prophecy if those who listen are poor of faith.  
But it becomes a curse that hangs like daggers,  
Held by angels who become blinded by day.

She stops as a rock blocks her and hurts her unsightly,  
And now she is barely a pulp with dismembering flesh;  
Her ligaments and muscles hold on tightly.

She doesn't cry,  
What a strong little girl.  
She knows her place,  
Oh my, she knows it well.

A mouse, look at it go,  
Unhinges his jaws ignoring her pleas of despair;  
Before she can look up, he has taken her without a care.

He drops her, almost as an instinct or intuition,

As her once honey-like taste has turned bitter and stale,  
She gave up on delivering her dreams their light and fruition.

She swears there was some divine meaning behind this cruel pearly  
gate,  
That both scripture and man sought for her to be a martyr,  
Although one with a less than graceful faith.

She was torn off her skin, and replaced with sackcloth and ashes.  
Like clothes that were burned, and stolen; she wailed loudly and  
bitterly,  
All while the ground beneath took her in through pain and hot  
flashes.

There was purity once, inside her essence and pit.  
It has melted through the mud,  
Until only her worst version she carried within.

*“If I remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance from elsewhere shall  
rise”*

She looked up, finally, almost to find mercy in the firmament.  
It was all she had left, except for the muck and filth;  
The remains of the unwanted, now claiming her in permanence.

As her eyes were placed up above,  
She sees a tree that reminds her of a home,  
A home she once knew, a home she once loved.

It consoled her maybe, and that's when she saw,  
The truth amongst lies, perhaps in a ruleless world,  
There still remained one unspoken law.

*“Me and my city will perish, they will come one and one, until they come for all.  
But I will remain firm until I see the last of us fall.”*

She became food for the mighty,  
And her seeds grew and blossomed,  
Raising the branches that once held her tightly.

Grace and fortitude fell on her like thin white veils,  
She turned into what her ancestors knew,  
What they have told each other only through legends and tales.

She saw her branches let go of the prettiest fruits she'd ever known.  
Sending them to spoil, rot, and vanish, like she once did,  
Not even seconds after touching the Earth's vengeful soil.

# Unholy Ungrateful, Demeaning and Unsavory Love



*Oil Pastels*  
*Aranza Martinez*

# The Perfect Cup of Coffee

Dana Villafana

How do you make a cup of coffee?

First you start by rewinding, to the first time your mom lets you try some. Five years old and clueless, you take a long sip and spit it out. You hate it and pull a horrendous face which makes her laugh and laugh until she cries. You take offense and ignore her to watch Blue's Clues all day until she gives you hot chocolate in a grown-up mug as an apology. She still laughs at your chocolate mustache but that's fine. You'll put up with anything for sugar.

Second you jump a bit, to the coffee flavored ice cream you have outside the hospital when you are eight. You are desperate to try it again and your parents are stressed and need a break from you, so you are sent away with your aunt while they watch over your brother who is just out of surgery. The ice cream is disap-

pointing, and sugar can't save it. Your aunt eats it while saying, "I told you so." She buys you a scoop of cookies & cream instead and avoids any questions about your brother going home.

Third, you jump a little more, to the first time you drink a full cup—sort of. It isn't real coffee. It is a frappuccino with more sugar than coffee and whipped cream on top. You buy it after nearly ripping your hair out over algebra. At fourteen, it actually tastes good, but not good enough to get you a passing grade on your test. You live on Starbucks until you scrape by with Cs, it's disappointing and your dad lectures you until your ear bleed.

Fourth, you jump one last time, to seventeen, burning out on school and life. Every responsibility hangs on your neck like an ugly tie, like a confused koala bear...like a noose. You haven't seen the floor of your room in weeks and the overdue assignments keep piling up and up. You drink coffee like you'll die if you don't, not caring about the taste, only that it gets you through the next essay, the laundry day, the next dinner, the next time you open your eyes...

Of course, you can also just boil the water, put two teaspoons of instant coffee and two teaspoons of sugar into a chipped mug with a cat on it, pour the water over, and put just enough creamer to make your dad say, "Do you want coffee with your milk?"

Then again, you use the same brand of instant coffee your parents have used since you were five, so following steps one through four isn't really a choice.

At least, it *is* a perfect cup of coffee.

## **Wonder**

**Luis Zavala**

She Can't Compare To Her  
They Were Never Clear  
It Was Just The Breeze Of The Air  
It Won't Be The Same Again  
I Can't Comprehend Nor Understand  
Why She Left, And Stayed On My Mind  
A Impression Like No Other  
Allowing Room For Slumber  
Knowing There Will Never Be Another Wonder

# **A Line Across the Horizon and a Renaissance of My Own**

**Aranza Martinez**

Looking out the window of this metal pod I inhabit,  
I can tell so much has bloomed and so much that hasn't.  
Dry roots and drier ideals lay down in rows,  
Like caskets in cemeteries and empty promises that never grow.

I recall looking at the sunrise for the very first time;  
Through the round glass in front of me, I saw a world that wasn't  
mine.

Was it ever meant to be discovered, touched, or loved?  
Am I meant to step on it and care for it, perhaps hate and loathe?

I imagine what my world could now be if this one even lasts,  
I imagine it for merely seconds before my lust for the undiscovered  
becomes too crass.

Sugar and violence are all that for me awaits;  
Not too sure whether these are traps, warnings, obstacles, or baits.

Before my journey, I was running the good race,  
I was lost in conformity while suffocating in its haze.

I have to remember how to pray to ask Him above,  
What good was this race? Was it good at all?  
If my feet were numb, my heart was cold,  
And my wings without my body began to soar?

I was left, empty and terribly alone;  
I was left and what was left of me was simply flesh and bone.

I surrender and deny my life to be a hoax or a ploy.  
That cannot be all that I'm sent for, not in this life, nor the one  
before.  
I am now elsewhere and the splendor of novelty doesn't strike, but  
it coils;  
There is still a lantern inside me, one that burns and boils.

**A Line Across the Horizon and a  
Renaissance of my Own**



*Watercolor  
Aranza Martinez*

## **Hopes and Prayers**

**Jose Zuniga**

What can you do when you  
are between a rock and a hard place?  
You hope and pray  
    people will understand,  
you hope and pray  
    that you make the right choice,  
you hope and pray  
    that people forget that you put yourself there.

And so we leave  
as if in defeat  
with our tails tucked  
between our legs  
while the ones that are left behind  
cry to us on their hands and knees  
begging us to stay

We can't.  
so we make a promise  
based on the words of those  
who will devour them  
after all  
we are no strangers to making empty promises.

We spread our wings wide and  
take off to the sky  
as the ones left behind  
hang on to our legs  
we shake them off  
telling them to trust their conquerors  
as they trusted us  
    who left them  
as they trusted their leaders  
    who deserted them.

They fall.  
all we bring ourselves to do  
is wipe the single tear we shed  
for the cameras.

The rest of the world  
scrambles to help  
All the while we  
    hope and pray you forget  
All the while the ones left behind  
    hope and pray they survive.

# The Listener Speaks Up

Suhmuntu

The name Samantha means “listener” in Aramaic. I fit the criteria. I listen to a lot of people, music, and whatever. But this “listener” *label* became something I loathed. It meant that I was supposed to be an obedient daughter, a rule-following student, and an open-minded person; but, I yearned for an identity of my own other than being a conformist. If my voice had a flavor, it would probably be a bitter melon, otherwise known as “ampalaya” in Tagalog. Liking the flavor is an acquired taste. It takes time to get used to and requires a willingness to appreciate it. Not everyone enjoys the first bite. Some might take a couple of nibbles, pretend to tolerate it, then say, “I’m good.” The flavor of an *ampalaya* is exactly how my voice developed out of my identity because of the way that my flavor affected others.

For thirteen years, I lived in the same stagnant and quiet neigh-

borhood of Chula Vista. No major commotion like robberies, kidnappings, or murders were making headlines from here. Just across the street from my house was my elementary School, the soil that the seed of my *ampalaya* was planted into. It had a small population of students that were mostly within trick-or-treating distance in the neighborhood. These kids that lived here and whom I grew up with set the standard for how I expected to be treated for the rest of my life.

Lunch time consisted of kids playing sports, sitting on the brick wall chatting, and running around on the play structures. As a young, energetic girl, I would always try to engage with my classmates whenever they'd run, laugh, and do activities together. Despite my constant attempts at hanging out with all of them, I realized that the popular girls tended to avoid me and never invited me to their sleepovers as well as the groups of athletic boys and gamer boys who wanted nothing to do with me either. If you were to time travel to a 2014 lunch period, you would find me equipped with a sketchbook and my pink ukulele at the blue bench on the hill overseeing the playground underneath the large tree by myself.

Looking back at the rejected little girl, I noticed that my personality changed from being an extrovert to becoming an introvert. However, I began to learn more about what I liked, what I didn't like, and who I wanted to be friends with by the time I moved schools for the first time. The new school was the one that my cousin attended. We weren't in the same grade so I was thrown into a completely new atmosphere without any sense of familiarity among my peers. My fifth grade experience could be summarized

into one game: *Wallball*. Two tall brick walls with court paint on both sides were primarily being played by all of the boys from grades 4th-6th, well, all of the boys plus me. For some reason, these guys just clicked with me. I wasn't athletic, I didn't exactly share all of the same interests with them either, but they never let me be alone during lunch. They dragged me over to the court to play and always made me feel welcomed and accepted, which was once a foreign feeling to me.

Even though I had finally found friends whom I was comfortable with and actually *wanted* to be with, my parents didn't approve of this behavior. They saw it as inappropriate for a single girl to be exclusively playing among boys. It was the same for my straight male cousin too, who would also have a tendency to be a single boy among a crowd of girls. Our dual personalities and friend groups confused our parents, but their opinions made no difference with the people we remained talking to. Unfortunately, I had to move back to my old elementary school, but I only had to last one more year until freedom: middle school.

As a second-generation Christian, I learned the Bible stories, I knew the hymns by heart, and I even memorized the order of the books of the Bible. Middle school was the time I got introduced to a church youth group. I joined activities for the young Christians around my age and was encouraged by the youth group leaders who held devotion sessions every week. My newfound passion towards my faith led to a lot of internal conflict. Ideally, I was taught to avoid using foul language and keep my mouth and mind clean, but I had to fit in with my friends at school by matching their

vernacular. I even immersed myself into music that contradicted the conservative mindset I was supposed to follow. Like, why is a twelve year old girl in a pretty dress cursing and singing along to Green Day, Fall Out Boy, Imagine Dragons, and Twenty-One Pilots about depression, sex, and death while on her way to church? My identity was split in two, for the sake of pleasing my parents and pleasing my friend groups, to live secret lives from each other.

After attending public schools for so long, I wound up in a place that I dreaded the most: a private Christian high school. At the end of 8th grade, once I broke the news to my friends from middle school who would be moving to the same high school, they mourned for me just as much as I mourned for myself. I believed a Christian school was going to be so boring and lame that as a public school kid I'd end up brainwashed. Little did I know, I was about to be underwhelmed by the surprisingly present toxic environment this place had to offer.

My high school was just a church building with some extra classrooms and a gym acting as our entire campus. The structure stood facing the street, but there was a small entrance to the church's parking lot off to the side of the building. From ages 4 to 18, there were approximately 100 uniformed students total throughout the school. My "batch" or freshman class was eight students, including myself. I initially thought that such a small group of people per group would mean that I'd get to have really close friends and share lots of memories with them. I was mistaken.

Unlike the majority of my public school friends, my private school friends had grown up with each other—already becom-

ing besties in the nursery. Sure, there were times when I felt close to the girls, regardless of my interests and tomboy-ish nature, but I still couldn't compete with the fact that I was new to this community. There was an unspoken hierarchy that I could never climb. I wasn't a part of the school's church and I wasn't an "OG" of this batch. I realized the hard way that being friendly is different from actually being friends. Seeing my classmates' Instagram stories—how they interacted with each other, especially outside of school but even during school—made me jealous of the fact that they were not close with me. I couldn't do anything about my closeness with them because it always felt one-sided or that I was trying too hard whenever I would reach out to them.

*The Artist, Ukulele girl, the Smart kid* were all titles I held throughout my school life. People saw me as giggly, intelligent, and selfless, but I think that's it. It seemed like nobody took the time to get to know the real me. So as I began to feel depressed about the fact that my limited number of classmates chose not to be close friends with me, I was hurt even more by the fact that my feelings went unnoticed. I wanted to share how I was feeling, but I feared the answers I would receive depending on who I'd try to vent with. I didn't feel close enough to any of my classmates for them to care and I was intimidated by my church youth teacher because I didn't want her to tell my parents whom I knew would just get mad. Instead, I chose to post my feelings on Instagram to pour my thoughts out there, saying how I wished I could *disappear* from the world *permanently*. Taking one's own life is considered a sin. Of course my classmates saw the post and alerted my teachers who told my parents. But I needed a reaction from my peers. I

was yearning to know if anyone was going to change the fact that I was lonely. Crying while being suicidal in the middle of an debate during English class seemed too dramatic, don't you think? It genuinely felt like none of them were taking my feelings seriously.

I expected some sort of revelation to occur. "Hey, Sam, are you down to come to the mall with us?" or "Let's take some pictures together so I can post it and tag you!" was probably what I had hoped for. All I got was "come sit at our table while we talk about getting k-pop concert tickets." Sitting with the popular girls was not the goal and I didn't feel any better about myself just by being there. After graduation, I had my own revelation. These classmates simply had to put up with me while our paths remained the same, but the moment that we graduated, our '22 seniors group chat was deleted. I haven't found "my people" yet. I needed to search for the people who appreciated my existence, not my notes for the test.

I treated my new college life as a factory reset. I needed to find the friends that I click with and that would want me to hang with them. If my voice is to be appreciated, I cannot force appreciation onto those who half-heartedly listen to me. I need to pursue the things that would cultivate my own growth as a person because my voice was not made to please anybody else other than myself and God. No matter what flavors you might try to add to mask the flavor of the *ampalaya*, the bitterness will remain the same. People may gravitate towards sweet melons, but I will have to wait for someone to appreciate my flavor for what it is.

# Transcend

Andrea Wright

Death feels no fear

The dead rest

And feel no longing

Death feels not tired

The dead rest

And feel no-thing

Life is the pain and fear and tired

For it is the living that

Long, that mourn, that tire

That anger, that ache

That barter and lie

And eventually

Die

Life

Is the one that's always left

Behind

As Death always moves forward

For life cannot enter Death's domain

The dead have Lived

And died

Have been in Life and

Pass to Death

But

Life cannot enter

Death's domain

And mourns

And Death's occasional sporadic visits

Lets it known that it can "live" and loom about

From time to time

But only the living mourn.

As death feels no longing

Only life tires

While death is at rest

Only life sees

While death is born blind

Only life hears

And only the dead can know

# In Your Image



*Digital*  
*Emmanuel Alejandro Ramirez-Burgos*

# Losing (Feelings)

Suhmuntu

Do you even remember the color of my eyes?

Remember when your texts were 3:1?

What are you up to right now?

I brought you your favorite...something.

Do you still like it?

My gifts for you are piling up in my closet.

Can I just open them for myself?

I used to tell the story every time someone asked about the scar.

Could you manage to recall the details?

I removed that song from my playlist, by the way.

I hate that your name is so common.

You know what?

I forgot the color of your eyes.

## **Butterflies and Moths**

**Rachel Hopkins**

Joy is a butterfly.

It happily bathes in the warm sunshine.

Spreads delight fluttering from flower to flower.

The garden beds have an aroma so fine.

The butterfly knows its nectar is sweet and not sour.

Ensures flowers will bloom on the vine.

Bitterness is a moth.

Sensitive to the sunlight, darkness is its concern.

A moth lives its life attracted to a flame.

If it plays with fire, it will burn.

With its cold frame, the moth easily finds others to blame.

Of all the good things it learned, it decides to spurn.

Oh, caterpillar in a dark cocoon, will you emerge as a butterfly or  
a moth?

Will you embrace the gloom, or will you bloom?

Are your hopes high seeing the light of day?

Or do you still grieve about the past and worry about the possible  
doom?

Do you anticipate your future will be dreary, dull, and gray?  
Or will it be bright once you emerge from your tomb?

# Criss Cross Apple Sauce

Aranza Martinez

Alberto Manzano Cordova held the hand of the woman he loved when he was ninety-eight years old; tenderly and almost too delicately.

He was smiling.

Before that day they were young, whatever young meant for them anyway.

He studied law at Sabina's Catholic School for men, a distinction made only by its title, since everyone knew that the school was filled with girls roaming the halls of locker rooms and dorms; they stayed there so often and for so long that they might as well have gotten a Bachelor's degree.

Alberto was a quiet man, not because he was timid or serious,

but because he usually had nothing to say; he used to say he had tact.

“If there’s nothing for me to say then why risk saying something stupid?”

His friends used to mock him and poke at him, like a stick to a bear, just to see what would make him finally scream! Or anything in between, but regardless of the bets, he never gave in.

He would often stay in the school’s library, reading newspaper articles and roaming through databases older than the school itself, looking for stories and cases about people sent to death row.

He memorized every last detail of these trials and looked at the evidence like a detective with a mission for justice, except that his idea of justice was twisted; he wanted to know exactly what he would’ve done differently in order to save these criminals. According to him, he was preparing to be the kind of lawyer to defend the undefendable; not because he wanted to, but because he potentially could.

And there was nothing more powerful than that.

Life at Sabina’s was fun; the classes were short and the parties were not.

You could tell who was going to be a good lawyer by the way they excused their hangovers to their professors, you could tell who was going to be great by the ones who got away with it, and you could tell who was going to be excellent when they walked in late with a doctor’s note and the class work for that week done.

These kids, and I call them kids because they were children disguised as adults, were the most undisciplined people you'll ever meet, but they were kind and had a stronger sense of family than you could imagine. They had hope, hope for a better world, hope that there was still happiness somewhere out in that dark space they were sent out to save.

Alberto wasn't like them, he wore hand-knitted sweaters while they wore freshly ironed suits, he had obnoxious patterns while they wore solid colors, and his hair was messy and could never make sense, while theirs was perfect. Maybe someone up in the heavens got confused while molding them out of the soil and clay of this Earth, and sent them all out in a straight line to the furnace, while Alberto was sitting in a corner made with scraps and sand instead of soil and glass instead of clay.

"Alberto!! Are you ever going to ask Mónica out? She's dying for you, and just look at her! I mean- If you don't want that I'll take it off your plate don't you worry"

"Go ahead Nico, I'm not really interested. She's nice I guess. She's just um... She kinda has a thing for everyone in our class"

"Not true! She has never talked to me"

"Carlitos don't make me laugh! Why do you think that is?"

"Nico!"

Carlitos, or, I should say, Carlos González Cruz and Nico Armando Ceguera were both in the student council and Sabina's was a better school because of it, in the sense that it really wasn't, but

the fewer things changed the better, at least for the students but not so much for their future clients.

“I have a proposition for you Alberto, and there is no way you won’t accept it!”

“What is it this time...?”

“What do you say to driving in a new Mercedes with the president’s wife’s personal assistant in the back seat?”

“What? Is this another one of your hypotheticals?”

“Can be! Or! It can be very real”

“As in having her as MY assistant too or...?”

“Not really, you would just be driving her around”

“Like a chauffeur?”

“Sure! You can put it that way”

“What other way is there? I mean- Okay, I’ll entertain this for one second, why exactly?”

The student board, the ones in charge of actually keeping the school in order, had met weeks prior and concluded that Sabina’s reputation was not the best, especially after the incident at Barto’s Café, which I should mention, they asked multiple times not to disclose, but ever since, they wanted to appear as if they have always been a unified university focusing on community service and a full-rounded education for all their students, so...

“The president’s wife is in charge of the project ‘Protocolo del

niño', you know, where they send out free textbooks and whatnot, and her assistant is personally going to five schools in the district and you know, make a report I guess"

"Why is a place like Sabina's even involved? Is this about what happened at Barto's, becau-"

"YES! And I told you not to mention it again! I barely got out of that one"

"But I don't even have a car"

"See? You never listen to me. Remember, 'new Mercedes?'"

"Why me though? Mendéz and Vizintín are both in their last year, they look more professional, no?"

"They are busy with finals, plus, you're the only one that really wasn't involved in all this, and they have a list of names, and let me tell you the Algorta's cousins need to remember their catechism classes and start praying if they want to graduate this year"

Alberto accepted, reluctantly and stubbornly, but accepted nonetheless. However adamant he might've seen, there was something in the way Nico spoke that always managed to convince him, that or it was the fact that they kept owing each other favors since preschool.

He put on his best sweater and brushed his hair at least twice before putting on a hat to cover up his failed attempts.

He had this girl's address written behind a receipt for two bottles of vodka, a bag of chips, and five CDs.

“Was no one carrying a notebook?”

He got there at 5:30 in the morning, and he was freezing; he had his right hand in his pocket and was smoking a cigarette with the other; he looked like an old man slouching and shivering, and the cigarette was trembling in his hand and his lips.

He wished he had stayed in the car, but he wasn't too sure what impression that would have given.

His nose got runny and he wiped it with his sleeves and sneezed so loudly he scared all the pigeons near him.

“Bless you”

Said a voice coming from the other side of the car, and this time he was the one to jump back.

“Where did you?! I thought! Isn't your house the big yellow one right there?”

“I don't live nowhere near here, I wouldn't just give out my address like that silly”

“So you walked here?”

“Maybe, but I like walking”

“Even in heels and a dress?”

“Especially in heels and a dress, makes it so comfortable”

“Are you being serious?”

“No. It's called a joke... Um, are you going to open the door

for me so we can get going or do I have to explain that to you too?”

She had a funny laugh, familiar too; like the clickity clackity of your third-grade teacher’s heels walking to your desk or the tick tick tick of that old gas stove in your childhood home.

“So? What’s your name?”

“You don’t know? They didn’t tell you?”

“They probably told my friends but they’re not the most cordial to remember nor care”

“Hm, it’s Rosa Elena Flores”

“Your name is Rosa and your last name is Flores? What’s the other name, Jardines?”

“Funny! It’s Román, but I don’t like my mother that much, so I don’t really use it”

“Don’t worry, my mother doesn’t like me”

“With that charming attitude of yours? I wonder why”

“My name is Alberto by the way”

“Just Alberto?”

“Manzano Cordova... Don’t say it!”

“How unique!!”

“It is unique, and stop laughing”

“I’m not, I swear!... WAIT! Your father isn’t Guido Manzano Castañeda, is he?”

“Um, yes actually... You know him?”

“Oh gosh! No wonder you can afford a school like Sabina’s”

“I also have a scholarship, but it’s not like my financial status is any of your concern... How do you know my father though?”

“Isn’t he a famous politician”

“Yes but not that type of famous, he’s not a household name or anything, that’s for sure”

“You’re surprised. Why? You didn’t think I would know about my country’s politics? You do know who I work with, right? Or did your friends forget to tell you that too?”

“No, no, it’s just, I don’t know, it’s all boring stuff. You’re better off saving that space in your brain for other things”

“Aren’t you going to be a politician one day?”

“No. Yes. Well... It’s complicated actually. I’m not sure if that’s for me”

“What’s ‘for you’ then?”

“Eh... Stuff. You know?”

“I don’t! Because that is the stupidest answer I’ve heard”

“I don’t know, I mean, what do you like, huh? It’s not that eas-”

“Literature, operas, poetry readings, philosophy, art, ballet recitals, museum galleries; I can keep going”

“Are you just naming the first things that crossed your mind?”

“I’m actually reading it off this very messy agenda you left back here. Do you really go to all these things, I mean, I get the classes, but I didn’t take you to as a guy to go to ballet recitals”

“Didn’t your mother teach you not to snoop?”

“She did actually! One of the reasons I don’t like her”

“Give me that”

“Fine...”

“I have two younger sisters, twins, and last Friday they did ‘The Princess and the Pea’”

“Transcendental”

“Truly”

“And the art gallery?”

“That was more of a personal thing”

“Mysterious”

“I owed a family friend a favor and I passed by and ended up buying two pieces that night for too much money”

“And the opera?”

“You might not want to believe this, but I enjoy the opera”

“Ajá”

“Ajá indeed! It’s peaceful, and no one really talks to you”

“How joyful”

“You can make fun of me all you want, but when your brain rots in the movie theatre I’ll be enjoying ‘Las Bodas de Fígaro’ VERY joyfully might I add”

“You are so friendly, it’s actually unreal”

“HA HA! I can be friendly! Like... Do you have hobbies?”

“You could at least sound like you care... Um, I like art too! I’m not making it up this time, it’s just not the only thing I do; I have friends, ever heard of that concept?”

“Que chistosa, really. I have friends, the same ones that put me behind this wheel”

“With friends like those,  
who needs enemies?”

“I swear, I’m this close to just leaving you hear so you can walk”

“Fine, geez, you have the best of friends”

“What do you do with your friends?”

“We dance! We go out to ‘Pista de Ángel’ or sometimes to ‘Medio Sol’, and we sing too! It’s fun”

“I have a friend that got banned from ‘Pista de Ángel’ like last

week”

“Sure that wasn’t you? I bet you’re such a party animal”

“Oh yeah, I have these intense karaoke private sessions in front of my pet turtle”

“OF COURSE you have a pet turtle”

“Okay, I can take your insults, but I won’t accept any slander for ‘Bonito Cabeza Dura’”

“His name is, adorable stubborn? Huh, I guess is true what they say, pets really are just reflections of their owners”

“Ha Ha! I’m not stubborn, just opinionated, but that’s good since I’ll just end up being a politician anyway; it’s like they pay them to be opinionated, even if it’s nonsense”

“You are though! The most stubborn man I’ve ever met. I called you cute and you only heard the bad part”

He stopped the car, hitting the brakes quickly; they had arrived at the school and he found a space to park rather fast. A bell was heard a bit far away, along with children running and their laughter and tiny voices dispersing to their classrooms.

He turned around in a flinch. Starred at her and her eyes were wide open, like if she moved even an inch, he would run off and never be seen again.

They kept looking at each other, until... He left the car and slammed the door behind him.

She looked rather confused and didn't know if she should do the same. She grabbed her bag from under the seat and was about to grab the door handle but it opened before she could do it herself.

He sat down next to her and neither of them said a word.

“Do you smoke?”

“Uh, yes, but won't the car smell horrible after?”

“It's not my car”

“Shouldn't that be worse then, idiot!”

She laughed and took the packet of cigarettes, putting it inside her bag.

They both had something stuck in their eyes, they were seeing things they were not supposed to.

He placed his hand on her leg, near her knee, she flinched briefly at his cold touch, uninvited but not unwelcomed; she took his hand and guided it up her dress.

Alberto kissed her softly, a kiss that lasted less than a second, but before he could pull back, she pulled him in by his white collar under that scratchy and quite frankly, ugly sweater that he was regretting even buying.

“Wait! At what time do you have to talk to the principal?!”

“I have ten minutes”

...

Alberto Manzano Cordova held the hand of the woman he loved when he was ninety-eight years old; tenderly and almost too delicately.

He was smiling.

Before that day they were young, whatever young meant for them anyway.

“What are you looking at you old fool”

“You’ve always had such a gentle way of talking to me, didn’t you”

“You think too much. Go back to sleep, and stop touching my hair”

“I will when I die. Also, I don’t think too much, I was just remembering, which is different; like those parties you used to make me go to”

“You should thank me instead of complaining, that’s why you even had friends, to begin with”

“Those were my friends if you don’t remember, or maybe the dementia already got to you”

“They might’ve been your friends, yet they invited me not you”

“And you dare to say I’m the stubborn one”

“Because you are”

“You know I love you, right?”

“I know it, Manzano, I knew it since the day you freaked out when I called you cute”

“You pinch the bridge of your nose when you’re annoyed at me, you know?”

“Yes”

“You’re doing it right now”

“You just keep asking dumb questions”

...

I think that between impulsivity and prepense, there is a road that crosses and crashes.

There is agony felt by those who have never experienced flying, and when they jump off bridges, they land on their face.

I sit down like a child, criss cross apple sauce, looking at how my feet and legs are tied up in a knot; I see maybe then, how balanced and controlled this mess becomes.

That maybe, Alberto was meant to be reckless with the right girl at the right time, and maybe I should hold his hand a little tighter, so he doesn’t unravel or untangle whatever mess we have created.

## Criss Cross Apple Sauce



*Acrylic Paint  
Aranza Martinez*

# The Weather Report

Suhmuntu

“Where is our little ray of sunshine?”

“It seems that global warming has escalated the rate of evaporation  
Leading to the formation of clouds, blocking that very sunlight.”

“Oh but I was quite fond of It.”

“So was I, but now these clouds have gotten darker and heavier.

Will It rain?” “I think so.”

“Hurry, get your umbrella, you wouldn’t want to get caught.”

“It’s been raining for quite a while now...”

“Will we ever see our little ray of sunshine again?”

“I doubt it.”

# An Overcast Saturday

Jose Zuniga

Nothing brings a family together like funerals. I got up that morning with my whole body feeling heavier than usual. I looked outside and it was obvious that the sky had cried last night like I had these past few days. At my door there was a black suit in its bag just back from the dry cleaners. The last time I wore that suit was three years ago at my Tia Maruchi's wedding. I remember how upset some of the family was when she decided to have a black tie wedding with an officiant instead of a traditional Catholic wedding at a church. *Your name is Maruchi Resendiz Benavidez stop trying to act white, pinche guerita culito prieto*, her brother, Tio Beto, told her at the time. I get dressed and slide on my jacket as my dad knocks on the door, *You ready mijo? Its time to go*. I opened the door to tell him I was, but I stopped when I looked at his face. His eyes were slightly red and puffy there were dark heavy bags under his eyes and his

usually stoic countenance seemed deflated. He gave me a forced smile that took all strength he had to muster, put his hand on my shoulder and said *Vamos everyone is waiting in the car.*

I didn't really pay attention during mass. My grandma wanted a very traditional mass for her funeral, like before the changes of Vatican II. The priest faced away from us and spoke in Latin the whole time. For some reason not having the judgmental gaze of a priest occasionally staring back at me, made it feel ok to let my mind wander.

Our family was big we filled almost half the pews in the church. I was sitting on the third pew on the left side in front of where they keep *El Santisimo*, between my Mom and Dad. I looked around and I saw a bunch of tios and tias who I haven't seen in years. There was Tio Coyo, Tio Felito, Tia Chari, Tia Papo, Tio Josafa. They were sitting to the other side of the church, in their Sunday best each one surrounded by their children. Some of my primos and primas were babies and toddlers, some were kids, others teenagers and there were those who were older than me that I grew up calling them tios or tias because of the age difference.

We were a big family but we were fractured. We always talked about how united we are as a whole and how we will always have each other's back, but in reality we were broken up into our own little cliques. They often overlapped but it was rare that we would all be in the same place at once. For instance Tio Coyo was not talking to Tia Papo and he would not go to Tio Felito's birthday party because she was there, and then we had Tia Chari would always go get mariscos with Tio Josafa and Tio Beto but they wouldn't invite

anyone else. Then there's us my dad who everyone called Chepo and my mom Luisa who they called Uca, we mostly hung out with my Tio Beto with his wife Tia Maribel, along with their daughter Janeli, who was five years old, and son Chuy who was nineteen. And there was my Tia Maruchi, her husband Tio Bradley, because every Mexican family needs at least one white boy, and their newborn daughter Rosaura who was born last April.

A lot of people say that family only comes together during weddings and funerals. But that's not entirely true. At a wedding if there's drama with the couple and some family members they might not show up, if they're even invited at all. But at a funeral everyone shows up no matter the issues you might have with anyone, even if you end up sitting as far as you can from someone in particular.

After mass grandma was buried at El Panteon de San Pedro. Once her casket was lowered, we each approached the grave with a carnation, her favorite flower, in one hand and a clump of dirt in the other. One by one each nuclear family and sometimes individuals walked to the edge of her grave dropped the carnation said something then dropped the dirt and said goodbye. I couldn't hear what everyone said but I remember Tio Felito said *Tanto te enfadamos viejita, that you had to leave so soon?* I couldn't help but crack a smile.

We held a reception at our house after the burial. I was helping my mom in the kitchen heating up the tamales and getting the containers with salsa ready. Everyone was in the backyard sitting down and reminiscing about abuelita. I was running in and

out of the kitchen bringing plates of food to everybody and as the evening went on everyone's spirits got higher. Eventually someone made a beer run and Tio Josafa brought out the tequila. The racheras and banda music filled the air and during one of my trips I saw my dad and for the first time that day he was smiling. That smile turned to laughter and he laughed so hard that tears of joy ran down his face and he almost spilled his beer. I just grinned at the sight of it all. That was what my grandma would have wanted at her funeral and what she always wanted in life. She used to joke that when she died it would be for the sole purpose of bringing us together. Seems like it worked.

But life isn't always like that, because the next day abuelita would still be dead, but Tio Coyo would go back to not talking to Tia Papo, Tia chari, tio Josafa and Tio Beto will continue to exclude everyone else from their marisco outings, and us we would go back to only hanging out with Tia Maruchi and Tio Beto's families. As we go back to how we were we would slowly start to forget abuelita, until the only one who remembers her would be abuelito.

### §

I grabbed the Chile guajillo from the old mayonnaise jar and put it into the pot along with some chile puya, chile pasilla and tomatoes. I put that to boil and moved over to the meat. Then I trimmed away the excess fat and separated the meat from the bones. *No tan cercas mijo don't dig into the bone or you'll ruin the knife*, 'buelita used to tell me. I smiled at the old memory and wiped a tear from my eye using the back of my hand. *Weird*, I hadn't chopped the onions yet. Once I cut up the meat I grabbed the

heaviest cleaver I had and chopped down on the ezpinazo. *Why are we putting bones in the birria 'buelita? you can't eat bones. Es para darle el sazon mijo.* Another memory, and another tear. But I was not upset, after all if there was a day for memories and tears to visit me it would be that day.

*You need some help primo? Nah I'm good.* Ever since he got a girlfriend el primo chuy has been trying to learn how to cook. *Girls love a man that can cook.* I guess I was ahead of the game. Him and all my cousins used to make fun of me for helping abuelita in the kitchen. *Pareses vieja Juanito, or better yet Juanita.* But my grandma would just throw salt at them and yell *Andale cabrones mucho ayuda el que no estorba* and they would leave laughing at how I looked wearing my grandma's old aprons. *No le bagas caso mijo you're my little chef, tus primos ni se pueden limpiar bien el fundillo.*

Everyone was sitting at the table and I brought them all the plates filled with *birria, sopa de arroz, frijoles refritos and tortillas* along with *salsa verde de aguacate and salsa macha.* I sat next to my grandpa who had an empty seat on his other side. He tore a piece of tortilla grabbed some of the meat with it and dipped it in the salsa on his plate and put the whole thing in his mouth. As he chewed he couldn't help but smile with tears streaming down his face. *Just like your abuelita used to make.*

# Inspiración de Medianoche

Yahel.AC

En las noches se enciende la luz  
Dónde pensamientos e ideas fluyen  
Algunas sirven para crear  
Y otras para enloquecer

Una dosis de silencios  
Aumenta la locura  
En espera de la oscuridad absoluta  
Hacia la entrada a los sueños  
Apagando pensamientos  
Cediendo el control al sueño

# Dreams



*Acrylic Paint*  
*Edgar Sanchez*

# Someone's Truth

Dana Villafana

There wasn't anything specific that had tipped Jordan off. It was more a bunch of little things that didn't make sense.

Damian said, "You love playing the piano." Jordan's playing sounded like a cat dying.

Damian said, "You're so excited to have kids one day." Jordan felt nauseous at the thought of giggling children.

Damian said, "You're the one who decorated our house." Jordan would rather burn their eyes out with a lighter than keep seeing the minimalist hellscape that was their house.

Damian said, "You're my spouse and you love me." Jordan... had believed that.

That lie was the one that made the others so easy to ignore.

Head injuries did funny things, but they didn't make people fall in love. Head injuries didn't make people's hearts skip beats or want to hold a person's hand. Sometimes Jordan swore they almost had memories of Damian holding them, kissing them, taking them on their first date, crying as they had said 'I do.'

They swore they almost remembered it, but almost wasn't *actually*. Almost wasn't *reality* and everything else was too off to ignore.

It was a Wednesday, the only day of the week Damian went into the office, which meant he'd be gone for hours. He'd pecked them on the lips and reminded them to stay inside, don't open the door, and call him if they needed anything. Jordan had been tempted to ask—*And if I don't?*—but they didn't. The last time they had, Damian had just smiled at them like they were a stupid kid. Besides, it was better to not give him a reason to be suspicious.

He'd been gone for hours, and Jordan only had three left before he'd be on his way home.

It had seemed so simple that morning. Pack a bag, grab the savings, and get the fuck out of town before Damian knew what was happening. They'd done the first two as soon as they heard Damian's car leave the garage, but the third had been giving them trouble. They'd stepped up to the door, and then stepped back to walk through the house. Then back to the door, then back to the house, and again and again, for the last five hours.

The plan wasn't solid. There was only so much in the savings, enough for a month of motel stays and food, but they'd need a

job after that. They had an I.D. and a birth certificate and a social security number, but they didn't know if it would hold up.

Damian was lying. They were sure of that, but they didn't know how far it went. Why didn't he want them to leave the house? Why didn't Jordan have any friends? Why could Damian leave the house for work and movies and groceries, and they couldn't? *What if he had a good reason?*

Had they been together? Had they known each other? Were they some John Doe lost in the system taken to be a house spouse by a total stranger? Was their name even Jordan? *Or was he telling the truth and Jordan had just gone crazy?*

They shut their eyes against the pristine white walls and stalked over to the bedroom. It was the most comforting place in the house, another reason why they'd been fooled for so long. There was a warmth in the paint and the floors, blankets and books and board games everywhere were the exact opposite of the mausoleum masquerading as a home. Jordan would have easily bought that they'd decorated the bedroom, and Damian had done the rest of the house, but that wasn't what he'd said.

The worst part, the thing holding them down, holding them back, was the unknown. If Damian was a liar, then why? If he was telling the truth, then why did Jordan feel like this? If they did leave, would things be better? Or should they shut up and stay locked up for the rest of their life?

Damian said, "You don't want to go outside." Jordan wanted to go outside more than anything.

They rolled their shoulders and went back to the living room, checking their phone. Two hours left. They threw the phone on the couch. The reasons and the truth would haunt them forever, but living in Damian's mindfuck would kill them. Whatever would happen after would happen. It wouldn't matter as long as Jordan wasn't trapped, as long as they were free, as long as they could *breathe*.

They slung the bag over their shoulder and walked outside.

# Fields of Redemption

Patrick Kunkel

In the heart of South Dakota, amidst field after field of green cornfields, and endless skies, lived a boy named Patrick. Born into a life of simplicity on his family's farm, Patrick spent his days beneath the sun, tending to his father's land and animals wanting to be anywhere but there. Life on a rural South Dakota farm as a boy isn't the greatest life most would believe it be. You don't have friends to play with after school, you don't get to play sports because your main purpose in life is working on the family farm. Patrick's father believed nothing was as important as him, or the farm. It was Patrick's father's dream for Patrick to take over the farm after he retired, but that was his father's dream not his.

But as years passed, Patrick grew restless, fueled by his father's demands upon his life. Driven by a desire for change, he left the farm behind, setting out for the promise of adventure elsewhere.

It wasn't long before Patrick found himself ensnared in a world far darker than he could have ever imagined, hooked on drugs to deal with a dark past. Seduced by the allure of easy money and fast living, he made choices that would alter the course of his life forever.

One fateful night, those choices caught up with him, and Patrick found himself behind bars, sentenced to life in prison for a crime he never meant to commit. Stripped of his freedom and haunted by the weight of his actions, he was plunged into a world of despair and regret.

For twenty-six long years, Patrick languished in the depths of California's prison system, his days marked by monotony and misery. Yet, amidst the darkness, a flicker of hope remained—a chance at freedom that seemed just out of reach.

It wasn't until the final three years of his sentence that Patrick's journey took an unexpected turn. As he watched his fellow inmates come and go, he began to question the choices that had led him to this place, and the choices that he had made while in prison. With guidance of a seasoned inmate named Joseph, and a compassionate Chaplain, Patrick embarked on a journey of self-discovery and transformation.

Together, they delved into the depths of Patrick's past, confronting the demons that had long haunted him. Through introspection and reflection, Patrick began to unravel the tangled web of his mistakes, inching closer to the redemption he so desperately sought.

Driven by a newfound sense of purpose, Patrick immersed himself in education, self-help courses, and the church. With each lesson learned, he felt the chains of his past begin to loosen, replaced by a glimmer of hope for the future. Through learning, he found solace and a sense of direction he had long forgotten. But change did not come without its challenges. Patrick faced resistance from both within and outside the prison walls. Skeptics doubted his sincerity, while the scars of his past threatened to drag him back to the darkness he felt within.

As the days turned into months, Patrick underwent a remarkable transformation. He no longer felt defined by his past mistakes, or the guilt and shame related to those things, he embraced the opportunity for growth and self-discovery. He became a source of inspiration for his fellow inmates, offering guidance and support to those who had lost their way.

With unwavering determination Patrick pressed on, fueled by the belief that everyone deserves a second chance. As Patrick prepared for his parole hearing doubts gnawed at the edges of his mind. Would the parole board see him as the man he had become, or would they be blinded by the sins of his past.

In the years and months leading up to the hearing, Patrick grappled with fear and uncertainty, his hopes balanced precariously on the edge of despair. Yet, as he prepared for the parole board, he knew that each self-help group, college assignment, and church function was a testament to the man he had become—a man defined not by his mistakes, but by his unwavering commitment to change, and to God. Heading into the last several months before Patrick's

parole board hearing, Patrick felt a sense of peace wash over him, knowing that he had left it all on the table and left no stone unturned. He had become a new man.

In the end, it was not the past that defined him, but the courage and resilience with which he faced it. Patrick has often dreamed what the words “Parole Granted” would mean to him. He knows he is a changed man, but the uncertain future is a scary thing as well.

Would Patrick return to the wide-open plains of South Dakota, or start a new journey, and a fresh start somewhere else? The same cornfield after cornfield that once seemed so suffocating now was welcoming him back with open arms, a symbol of the endless possibilities that awaited him.

Patrick thinks back on his journey frequently, hardly believing where the journey has taken him. Though the road has been long and fraught with hardships, he had emerged not as a victim of circumstance, but as a testament to the power and the resilience of the human spirit.

With a renewed sense of purpose, Patrick sets out to forge a new path—one defined not by the mistakes of his past, but by the endless potential of his future. As he thought about his future, he knew that his story was far from over.

Patrick is trying to find something that is talked about in whispered tones but hardly discovered, finding a peace and a freedom while still being locked up. He finds peace in going to work and reporting on time and doing what’s asked of him. He finds

peace in completing his college assignments on time, and bettering himself with each new assignment he turns in. He finds peace in going to each self-help group he is a part of and contributing to the conversation knowing that talking about his past not only helps him get rid of the demons that were a part of him for so very long, but it might also help someone else open up and deal with their demons as well. Patrick also finds peace in helping others where he can, be it a ear to talk to, or an assignment that they might need help with. Patrick wants to give back and help others, after being a taker most of his life.

As Patrick's parole hearing gets closer of course he is nervous about the outcome, he has done the hard work, but also knows that it's only been three years since his last 115. He wants to be prepared if the board says no, and denies him for three years or more. The parole board possibly wanting more time since his last 115. He believes that it's probably fair as he gave CDCR 23 years of bad behavior of not following the rules, and not caring about anyone but himself. He hopes three years of good behavior is enough, but he could see that the commissioners might want to make sure his change and his journey is real and complete.

Patrick knows that no matter what happens he will never go back to his old life, he is committed to change and a brighter future, and nothing that happens at his upcoming parole hearing will change that.

# We Were Los Rookies

Omar Arvizu

We were the losers, the renegades, who got picked last when making teams. We were the ones that had never played before. We were the ones who had to train with old balls and rusty aluminum bats. We were the ones who had to change clothes in the middle of the field because we were not worth enough to have lockers. We were not invited to the games, not even to warm the benches. We were not a part of the team, but we were in every parade, every event, and every training. We were the joke of everyone in the school. We were the ones who foolishly believed that we were going to be on the actual team after a semester. We were the ones that couldn't catch all the balls. I was the one who caught one of those balls with my left eye. I was the one who was replaced with someone else and lost the opportunity to stop being just a rookie. Los Rookies (as we were called) were the ones that cheered me

when I came back after two months of a swollen red eye and a lot of eye drops. They were the ones that laughed with me and not at me. We were the ones who accepted the challenge of facing the High School team, a challenge that was only made to make more fun of us. We were the ones that played not for glory, nor a trophy, but for the sake of playing. We were the ones that scored 10 runs and only allowed the rivals to score 4. We were the ones that against all odds, defeated a team that was clearly more experienced than us. We felt like all those teams that appear in movies. We were The Avengers, the A-Team, the Justice League, the Incredibles, we were the Sandlot, the Benchwarmers, the Rookies of the Year, we were the Dodgers, the Yankees, we were Babe Ruth, Lou Gehrig, Jackie Robinson, Robinson Cano, Derek Jeter, Fernando Valenzuela, Sandy Koufax, Ken Griffey Jr., David Ortiz, we were everything. We celebrated more than anyone could imagine. We were Los Rookies, and we were proud of it.

# There Is Always Hope



*Oil Paint*  
*Rachel Hopkins*

# As She Read

Luis Zavala

She read as she bled

Reminding her of what he told her

Every word a failed promise

As a new chapter was near

Every page left her speechless

As this was the life she dreamed of

Her “prince” convinced she was in distress

But she has always looked out for herself

Never expecting or waiting for the dread

She won't allow anyone to undermine her

She is of a very unique lineage

The bohemian kind

The kind that won't settle for less

Or the kind that is refined

When she is addressed

She has every reason to wait

Meanwhile as everyone else is desperate

She lives on peacefully without a checkmate

# We Are All Candles

Rachel Hopkins

We are all candles.

We burn our brightest during the day

And we light the night to show the way.

Each of us is gifted with a spark

That we carry, whether in the sunshine or the dark.

We are all candles.

However, life tries to make us burn out our flame.

To avoid shame, we find others to blame.

When we have no strength to continue burning, we dismember

Until our light is faint as an ember.

We are all candles.

Our light may tire from the wind groaning.

Our light may tire from the weeping rain moaning.

Our light may tire from the lack of air without any sign of relief.

We feel our light become dimmer as we cry, stress and grief.

We are all candles.

Faint as an ember, we are tempted to put out our light.

Dismembered, we are on the verge of fight or flight.

We are tempted to give up and expose our plain wick.

Burnt, weak, and deformed, a sight that reveals we are sick.

We are all candles.

Although there are times when our light is faint as an ember,

No matter what, our light never goes out; that is important to remember.

We are meant to spread our joyful light to others who are lost.

Sharing our flame with others to strengthen their spark is worth the cost.

We are all candles.

When we work together, we make the room brighter.

When we face the dark, we are all fighters.

Whether our light grows or dims, our light is still there.

Whether times are slow or grim, we shine bright through any affair.

We are all candles.

We continue to burn our brightest through the rest of our days.

As time passes, our stature changes through every phase.

We continue to shine our light until our foundations deteriorate.

Breathing our last, our flame becomes a wisp, searching for heaven's gate.

# Migraines, a Slice of Uncomformity, and Two Hundred Reasons to Live

Aranza Martinez

Loneliness comes for those who forget how to pray; devotion tends to fall into a tricky path between obsession and fear.

“I haven’t seen the sunrise for five years”

“Don’t be ridiculous, every morning we go for walks, Philip”

“That’s not the same. I see light and it is day; my brain tells me that but I used to see something more... It meant something”

“You feel bummed out, is that it?”

“No, not bummed out... Why do you always have to diminish my problems?”

“I’m not! Just give me a reason, like, what are you trying to say? That there’s no “magic” in waking up? Don’t be childish”

Loneliness comes for those who forget how to listen; passion is lost in translation.

“I want my wife to give me a daughter”

“You’re not even married, Philip... Are you sure you’re okay? Are you delirious?”

“I’m not!... asshole... I want a daughter that’s all”

“Where is this coming from?”

“I want to carry the spitting image of the woman I fell in love

with... When I do so of course”

“Why not a son?”

“I’m too selfish for that and too idiotic; my son will be the worst parts of me. Can’t have that”

Loneliness comes for those who forget how to feel; patience comes thin, like rice paper.

“I don’t think you get a choice”

“I will”

“How so?”

“Because I just will. She’ll be beautiful and I will raise her right”

“What’s to stop your daughter from getting your traits?”

“Nothing, but I’ll teach her”

“And you can’t do that with a son?”

“Boys can’t be taught. Not well at least”

Loneliness comes for those who reject change, those who can't become the wind; to grow is to break open that seed that contained you.

In a year's time, Philip had his child, but it wouldn't be his for too long. His wife lost her love for him quickly and I soon became an uncle and half-father.

The daughter that Philip so deeply dreamed of became a "burden".

In ten year's time, his daughter forgot how to pray, lost all devotion, never listened, had no passion, unwelcomed any feelings, was impatient, and avoided change.

However, she grew. She became a woman and he couldn't have been prouder. She was rebellious and obnoxious, and the worst parts of him were burned into her heart, almost taunting him.

She had come straight from the moon, rather than the sun as he had hoped; she was cold and distant, but somehow she was everything he asked for and more. She wouldn't be lonely, not in

the ways he expected; she found company in unlikely places, and she was happy.

Loneliness comes for few, those unwilling to have an open heart or to be sensitive to pain, wrangling, and torture.

Loneliness comes, but shall not stay. Loneliness comes for those who are unwilling to wait.

# Migraines, a Slice of Uncomformity, and Two Hundred Reasons to Live



*Oil and Acrylic Paint*  
*Aranza Martinez*

## Eternal Entwine

Heber Rios

*(Star-crossed love begins to fade*

*As it lets go of itself in a blind masquerade...)*

A nowhere man wanders faintly  
In the charming, cobalt streets  
As rain strikes his rough leather  
Melodic like a dead bird's tweets

His musk grows thunderous  
Walking among debris and scraps  
Wet grease drips down his cheeks  
As he struts down the railroad tracks

His eyes lay flat like stones  
As his mind gazes towards a dream of day  
It takes him back to his roots  
One sunny afternoon in May

He could still see the dry leaves that were once cherry blossoms  
The ugly brown puddle that was once a crystalline stream  
How the death-filled odor smelled of daisies  
And the burnt hills were once bright green

His mind clouds with each drag  
As he feels the growing dusk draw near  
It was when the stars would paint the night sky  
That the worry of doubt would disappear

His tender touch flutters the weeds  
As dead dreams drip down sunken eyes  
He can still hear the mouths that spoke the serpent's slither  
That once filled his golden heart with lies

*(Yearning for life's once gentle grace, the nowhere man wanders on...  
His troubled mind in search of love is now gone).*

## **Familiar Places with Similar Faces**

**Luis Zavala**

Here I am months removed  
From the day I dreaded  
The only day I wanted to end

I'm still standing, but what did I gain?  
I'm still walking under the rain  
Drops falling on my head is my pain

I heard the cries and the sorrows  
But as I got closer, they Froze  
Without direction I headed to tomorrow

I arrived where I planned my escape  
To a beautiful and peaceful landscape  
But why is it misshapen?  
Or is this just a mishap?

## Photonic Ambivalence



*Damaged Polaroid*  
*Sebastian Hernandez*

# Counsel

Ambrose Fletcher

Te tapped rapidly against the cracked surface of her desk. The computer lit up a bright blue and its cursor blinked in and out. She hummed. It awaited input. She had an hour before she had to deliver her speech.

A speech to update her people on what they would do next and, hopefully, bring them back together. A compromise to get things to be just like they were.

Her jaw and fist clench tight at the sudden memory of loss. *There were once a little over three hundred of us. What mistake have I made to lose so much?*

Te was a Siren, as were nearly three hundred others, before many of them were killed. Many Sirens heralded an odd power of control and were killed for it. For good reason, arguably. Even in

what she once called her domain, other Sirens were killed if they weren't a part of the original group.

She and her cohort were special; four hundred-years-old special.

To those who weren't Sirens, she had often felt omniscient. Unstoppable even.

She could pick out one of the many mind-controlled thralls and see through their eyes, could shudder a foe to the bone if they dared raise their shoddy gun at her, and could find any that sought to escape.

Their unified song of control over minds had been broken. Broken by men who came from the west. They were denoted by the brown bear insignia etched in their chest with a star above its head. Te called them the "Bears" for an obvious reason.

These men had changed her feelings of ease. She was limited. Defeatable.

Te could not pick out the Bears before they raised their gun, couldn't take control of one and turn him against his friends, and certainly couldn't even get a read through those heavy helmets of theirs.

They had come in helicopters, their rotating blades jaunted off to the side and running along a spoke that jutted out of the ass end. They whir and cut through the air. Te called them "humming-birds," since she didn't know what they were.

She imagined her feeling wasn't unique compared to her fel-

low Sirens but there was a certain expectancy Te had for herself. She may not have been the oldest of what remained but she was supposed to be the strongest. The one who was meant to lead, even if she didn't quite want the role. Or even remember how she got it.

*Had the loss of America and the arrival of the storm so long ago made me ignorant? Did I fly too close to the sun? Should I have guided us to leave immediately after the hummingbirds came? Or was I just content? Should we have been doing more? Less?*

She settled on 'less.' It felt... oddly right.

Te typed in something and deleted it quickly. It wasn't the right fit. The right way to put it. She froze up at the sounds of arguments outside her door. And then relaxed. She hoped the two would resolve it, without her having to get into the confrontation.

There were two groups that formed shortly after their exile away from the Bears. Those two belonged to one of those groups. The Majors and the Minors. Bleeding hearts and pragmatists. The two groups that formed after their exile away from the Bears.

The Majors and Minors began intense and heated debate instantly when they formed. If the fighting became too much, Te would demand they stop. They would listen, but their fights still simmered underneath her lid.

Their song became discordant because of this infighting and both Te and the Sirens struggled to even fend off pitiful nomads and marauders. Together, they didn't dare raise a finger to the Bears'

hummingbirds that went in search of them. Alone, they certainly didn't raise one to Te, but she felt it was more out of respect for the years she's led them rather than her ability as a leader.

What she deleted related back to them. It sounded too "Major"-ey. Too much like caving in to bleeding hearts. Giving in to their desire to continue forward and just trust the people they came across.

Te and her Sirens had dealt with many groups before. Nomads, the citizens of Phoenix, and the odd marauder. The Bears, however, were far more powerful.

Before the Bears' arrival, she and her Sirens had a massive collective of servants. Taken as tribute and slaves from the weak-willed around them. Those given servants would then have their self-control stripped away. They only followed orders relayed by the constant humming of the Sirens.

The Bears' first hummingbird was spotted landing not too far away from Phoenix. Te sent ten thralls to "negotiate." They were slaughtered by rifles and scorching hot plasma bolts.

These men were resilient to the song. Resistant somehow. So she sent ten more to negotiate - actually negotiate. Followed by a few hundred behind and a Siren to take charge just in case things went bad.

But the Bears had no desire to talk after her failed attempt to enslave them.

At first, the Bears put up an unexpected resistance, but not

one that Te and her Sirens didn't think they could overcome. Their legions against a few dozen men would win in the end. She questioned her chances when three more helicopters - *three more hummingbirds* - arrived.

All of this happened so quickly, so in-tune, so aligned. She shook angrily at her desk as the argument outside heated up, *how had it come to this? To argue? To fight between ourselves? Was it me? Did I lead us astray? We had fifty thousand thralls under our three hundred joint-choir command...*

She snapped her fingers and began to type up more. She started with a sentence and copied it to the side - she liked the opening.

But she didn't like the content that came afterwards. It sounded too "Minor"-ey. Too much like caving in to the pragmatists. Giving in to their desire to slink into the shadows and plot an eventual return to Phoenix.

There was a compromise to be found. And Te knew she would seize it. She would keep all that remained and she would regain all that was lost. There had to be a way.

The three extra helicopters circled overhead of her small fort back then. After dispatching a few of their armies, they tracked Te and her Sirens' home down. There was a light buzz of the machine's blades cutting the night air, then a clunk of a door, and a whirring of a gun warming up.

It roared out with a heart-pounding thunder. The buildings were shredded. The walls were shredded. The thralls were shred-

ded. The Sirens-

The Sirens were the worst part. She clawed at her heart in pain and shook with a light sob. Four hundred years she had known them closely and now they would never sing again.

Her throat caught and she felt like she was choking. Her breathing was ragged and for a moment her hum slipped. With a deep inhale, she resumed her song in connection with the other Sirens. She couldn't let the thralls free now. The Minors had a point; they needed to be rougher and more secure. They were too loose. She started typing again but then a thought occurred.

*Was it cockiness? My harsh negotiations? Was I not willful enough? Was I too slow? Too fast? Too demanding? Too aggressive? Should I have approached it differently? Studied them more? Been more open? Been more closed? Maybe I should've gone myself? Maybe-*

Alarm. A forty minute warning.

Te shook her head and started clacking away at the computer, more memories of her past year resurfacing.

She had tried to fight back at first. But with each Siren's death and each thousand thralls killed, she was forced to rethink her approach. She settled on escaping with what remained.

They came first to Tucson. The Minors wanted to stay. Argued that they had run far enough and that there was enough here to quickly grow their numbers. The Majors wanted to keep going. Argued that they needed shelter from the storm and from the helicopters.

Te agreed with the Majors and continued on. A choice that she felt was far for the better, even if the Minors disagreed to their dying breath. They were able to scavenge so much more from different ruins and even shook all pursuits of their past. Not a single helicopter or old nomad had been seen this far east.

What to write was immediately clear for her.

She started her speech again but stopped far before the half-way point. If she did that, the Minors might leave. She deleted all of it. *Perhaps this is a signal that I'm doing too much of what the Majors want? Perhaps now it's time to win back the Minors and-*

But Te knew that wasn't going to fix it either. She had agreed with the Minors' way of doing things just as much as she had agreed with the Majors.

Te and her Sirens had come across a city called 'The Pass' where they found an old factory. The Majors wanted to go straight to the Pass, seek refuge. But the Minors argued that they wouldn't be accepted there. Instead, they should shelter in a nearby factory. It would provide them a home in the offices and the material and equipment they needed to kickstart their reconstruction.

The factory reignited. Its machinery was converted to make bullets and guns and the offices were refurbished to be lovely cots and abodes for the Sirens. More importantly, the cohort could restart their enthrallment process.

Both factions agreed on getting new servants and went out curiously, snagging a man here and there.

Despite both seeming to be for the better, she wondered if it truly was? *Was there a missed opportunity by Tucson? Could I have turned us back against the Bears and the hummingbirds and won? Or maybe I should've trusted The Pass to not know of us? To just let us in?*

She grit her teeth and rubbed her temple. *Why is getting along so hard? We did it before. We're careful now, at least. We aren't taking people indiscriminately and The Pass doesn't seem to care or know about us.*

The factory had brought some amount of peace to the arguments. But as the growing shouting match outside her door made clear, it wouldn't stay that way. Te couldn't focus, so she shot up and poked her head outside the door. Sheepishly.

The two Sirens shouting at one another quickly died their debate down. One spoke up and asked for Te's opinion on a matter that really shouldn't have had this much conflict: aesthetic choices for thrall uniform. An argument that should've been handled back when she chose the aesthetic for thrall guns.

The Minors didn't like how Te had given special care that their weapons be a bit more reliable. They wanted firepower. The Majors loved that. It showed that she cared about the thralls at least a little. Even at the cost of success.

This was practically the same for the clothing.

Te decided that compromise was best. And so she sided with the Minors. They both got what they wanted. Were it so easy.

A scowl from the Major Siren and a grin from the Minor Siren. Just like with the weapons but in the inverse. She wanted

to desperately change her mind, or explain herself, but the Major Siren had sulked away.

She went back into her office, disappointed about the settled argument and the lack of happiness from both sides. Just the coyness of one's victory against the sourness of one's loss.

That outcome was exactly what she wanted to avoid but it was becoming increasingly more impossible as both sides of her Sirens became more toxic. They each dug in their heels and refused to listen to each other. They only listened to Te. She narrowed her eyes angrily, she was being used. At least a little. Their opinions, she believed, were justified but they each wanted her acceptance, her choice, over the others.

*Maybe, if I make the speech just right I can win over both sides? I can keep everyone, I don't have to lose them. This journey didn't have to be in vain. We can return to Phoenix, we can return to-*

She shuddered in place. She didn't know how much more she could keep telling herself that. The second alarm of a twenty minute warning cleared it all for her. She had done next to nothing with her speech and she couldn't figure out a way to appease everyone, get everyone to hear what they wanted to hear. No rehearsal, no preparation, and certainly no compromise was offered to her.

She sighed and sat back down at her desk. Her fingers rested over the keyboard and she stared down that evil blinking cursor. The time was now.

Majors or Minors.

Continuation or Revision.

Thralldom or Freedom.

The Pass or Tucson.

Diplomacy or War.

The groups were so tense that Te knew no matter what her decision was, she would have to lose half of them. Even with the greatest compromise, she knew it would just make them all continue their discordant song. Continue fighting amongst each other and not fighting the enemies that were beginning to surround them.

She breathed in and started typing, with one faction squarely in mind. She would have to deal with losing what felt like half of herself. Despite how much it stung more than their deaths... at least she would save some fifty and so.

## **28th and G St.**

**Jose Zuniga**

Saturday night time to  
party under the apartments in  
the garage coronas and  
modelos in coolers DJ's  
playing bootleg cumbias they  
bought at the swapmeet from  
a shady guy named pedro who  
has a CD binder that  
never runs out of CDs  
kids wrapped in  
blankets sleep soundly on  
a chair with their head hanging to  
the side while a lullaby about a  
man who kissed a trans woman soothes them  
into a deeper sleep police are  
called and they tell the  
DJ to turn it down which he  
does but only until they leave and  
they keep playing that  
game pretending to care about

what the other does throughout  
the night cumbias turn to  
rancheras and rancheras turn to  
chente and the men begin to  
sing and cry their wives drag  
them to the cars and fight with  
them all the way home about how  
he promised to not be a borracho in  
the morning the garage smells  
like piss and spilt coronas a  
man brings out a hose to  
wash it all away

# Spelling Bee Catastrophy

Suhmuntu

Outside of a small, circular window was a vast expanse of blue--the Pacific ocean. Alongside the smell of warm prepackaged airplane food of chicken and rice, my mother continuously recited word after word for me to write down in my notebook. Sweaty and uncomfortably positioned in my seat, I spelled out each word she threw at me. Although I was tempted by the other snoring passengers around me, I forced my lulling brain to stay awake and absorb every word, root, silent letter, pronunciation, and definition. Motivated by my sadness of leaving the beautiful land of Hawaii while the rest of my family got to stay there longer, I resumed studying for the contest.

We arrived at the Balboa Sports Museum where the County Spelling Bee would be hosted. Pounds of dread were constricting my shoulders and chest. The entrance room was decked with

trophies and banners of famous sports athletes and their achievements. A stage was visible through the hall ahead, in the center of the museum arena. On the speakers, the staff hosting the Spelling Bee had called for the contestants to a designated area to wait as the event started. Families in the audience took their seats in front of the stage. The numerous middle school students filled up the chairs surrounding me. We were arranged by the name of our schools, rather than our own names. News reporter staff were still transfiguring the cameras and lights to the proper settings. This was being broadcasted live on television. My eyes fixated on the daunting stage, I dreaded the idea of messing up in front of all of these people and the audience behind those camera lenses, until I heard a voice next to me.

“Hi, I’m Nathan. It’s nice to meet you.” A boy dressed in a collared shirt, vest, and tie topped with sandy blonde hair had spoken to me.

“Oh, hi!” I responded with a shaky voice.

“Are you nervous?” he said as he subtly rocked to and fro in his seat. “I sure am.” He added with a chuckle.

“Yes, I’m really nervous about it. I- I mean I think I prepared enough but then again maybe it’s not enough, you know?” I said.

“Yeah, I get it. But talking to you is helping me calm down a little more.” he said.

Interrupted by a voice over the speakers, the host began the commencement. After presenting the rules of the Spelling Bee

to us, my nerves started acting up again. Soon enough, the first student was called up to the stage. Then, the person to my left had gone up, and then it was my turn. I made my way to the stage, blinded by the lights, up to the microphone. I let out a quiet sigh to release the tension from my body.

“This word might be tricky, but your word is ‘Homonym.’” said the man in the suit by the podium.

I hesitated at first, slightly confused because I thought that the word he was going to tell me had a homonym. I pictured the word with my eyes and began, “Homonym. H-O-M-O-N-Y-M.”

“That is correct! Thank you, onto the next contestant.” said the host.

As I returned to my seat, I was relieved that I got through the first round. However, as most of the contestants had passed the first round just like I did, there were some who didn’t pass. I could hear the cries of sobbing kids being consoled by their parents as they left the building. I didn’t want to have to leave early either. Patiently waiting for the next round of the Spelling Bee, I was glad that some of my nerves weren’t affecting me anymore. I was confident in the next round. Making my way to the stage once again, there I stood, all eyes on me.

The host announced my new word, “Your word is ‘zucchini.’”

Immediately, I smiled, knowing that my mom had given me this word thousands of times because it was a commonly misspelled word. Little did I know that my confidence had overpow-

ered my cautiousness.

“Zucchini, that’s like the cucumber thingy, right?” I joked as I looked at the host. I got a couple of laughs from the audience and the host too. I was ready. I spelled it out.

“I’m sorry,” said the host. “That is incorrect.”

I was dumbstruck. I thought I had spelled it right. I knew that word. How did I actually get it wrong after practicing it so much?

“The correct spelling is ‘Z-U-C-C-H-I-N-I.’ You forgot the ‘H.’” said the host.

I walked off the platform, knowing that it was already the end of my journey. I wasn’t even the first place winner, but all three of us weren’t able to go. I volunteered to cut my Hawaii trip short to make it, and I studied so much just for this moment. As my mom and my friends caught up to me, I was drenched in tears. I wanted to crumble and melt away, knowing that the person I disappointed the most wasn’t my mom or my school, but me. I was so disappointed in myself I never wanted to think about the contest ever again. I now loathed the word ‘zucchini’ which is such a stupid word to hate. It was more than just losing a contest. It was a reminder of how I disappointed myself because I sacrificed so much time, money, and possible memories I could’ve made with my family in Hawaii all because I was careless.

## Clown II



*Oil Paint*  
*Electra Lopez*

# The Shallow Waters in Which I'm Fated to Drown In

Aranza Martinez

Does it come as a shock to you?  
That I like sparkly things?  
That I move through sparkly rivers?  
And breathe this sparkly air?

They found sparkle, even in my blood  
They said, oh what a shame  
What a shame she is rotting amongst it all

Does it come as a shock, really?  
That my smile comes from sparkly lies?  
I'm not too sure if I understand that  
I enjoy the warmth of this sparkly disguise

It is no longer shocking, I guess  
That my skin glows and shimmers  
That I see the world as pink and blessed  
And that even my tears seem to glimmer

Shock? No. It has become familiar and expected  
That everything I touch rots in the scent of tulips  
That my pain and joy seem to be connected  
It lingers in the corner of my lips  
This sparkly venom that I keep fermented

# Unconditional Love

Marcel Brunelle

“So, is it Michael or Mikey? Which would you rather that I called you”, I asked this precious little boy. “Umm, how about son?” he exclaimed with a bit of nervous excitement in his voice. “That would be great” I said, as my heart began to melt and tears filled my eyes. Often, I replay that memory and it brings a smile to my face because that was a moment which changed my life forever. It’s crazy how deeply I was emotionally affected by such a young child. I have had many people come and go in and out of my life and I never could have imagined that a child I just got to know would reach me as profoundly as Mikey was able to reach me.

The word ‘journey’ is defined as any course or passage from one stage or experience to another. In life, we take many journeys. Those journeys lead us into the overall adventure that defines our life. One adventure that is defining my life that I would like to

share is my journey into fatherhood. I had always wanted to become a father and was able to accomplish that when I was 26 years old. I was always the guy that all my friends' kids loved. I'd wrestle with them, play tag, and fool around with them for hours on end. I would turn back the clock and transition into a child again whenever I was around kids. When I finally had the chance to become a father, I screwed up that opportunity past the point of no return. My life was on a downward spiral. There wasn't anything that could stop my downward spiral other than death or the state of California intervening in my life and locking me up in prison. I was incarcerated two weeks after my biological son was born and after some court battles, I received a sentence of 350 years to life in a state penitentiary. I was convicted of several non-violent offenses, such as burglary, car theft, and a couple of property crimes. This felt like a horrible nightmare. I just knew I was going to wake up from it at any moment, however that moment never came and now this nightmare became my reality. My life just kept getting worse and my biological son was relocated. He was moved so far away from me that it felt like it might as well have been the other side of the world. Many years passed and I tried to get in contact and stay in contact with my son but he and his mother moved on and their circumstances changed. Many years went by and I gave up on reaching out to him, I gave up on myself as well as my dream of getting out of prison. I also gave up on being a father. There did not seem to be any point to my life. I felt like it was easier to give up and give in to living the rest of my life in prison. I gave in to the desolation that had become my existence. I started acting out violently. A prison gang noticed me and wanted me to join. I was

desperate to be part of something, so I foolishly joined. My energy was negative. My negativity showed up in all my relationships in and out of prison. I tried to mask all the pain that I was feeling but nothing worked. I became desperate, I did what I could to survive in my crazy prison world. I had dug myself into a hole so deep, I didn't see a way out. I ended up in the worst environment possible surrounded by murderers, thieves, and the most hardcore gang members in the state of California. I knew, in my heart and soul, I did not belong in this environment. Ironically, I did everything I was required to do in order to fit in with these hardened criminals. I reluctantly followed all the rules of the gang. The path I forged with these lowlifes was violent and ruthless. The whole time that I was a part of them I was scared out of my mind. I was afraid they would find me out, that I was not like them, that I was not one of them. I was not a naturally violent man. I was not a mean person, and I was not like them. I was a gentle giant covered in tattoos that I used to hide my own insecurities and fears. I became so good at faking what I thought a gang member should look like, I was elected to be the leader of this prison gang. I started ordering these men to do all the things I couldn't. I had been afraid to cause harm to another human and now that burden was taken away. Deep down in my soul, I hated every moment of living a gang lifestyle. I wanted to be at home playing in the park with my son. Days became weeks and then they became months which turned into years of doing nothing and being nothing.

My life became a vicious cycle of emptiness and despair with unanswered prayers for help. I knew I was a good person inside. I even started to doubt if what I thought about myself was really

true. Maybe, I really was just another monster in prison. Maybe I was that person who should be locked in a cage, never to be let out. I started to doubt who I was; was I a good man who simply made some very poor choices? My actions directly contradicted my ideas of how a good man should carry himself. I was doing awful and negative things to people that did not have that coming. I questioned myself, was I a good man? My heart and soul told me that I was not a good or even decent man. I had enough, my heart was broken. I finally was fed up with my life and no matter what I had to do; I was going to remake myself. I was determined to be a better man.

I made a commitment to myself. I was going to change. I started taking the appropriate steps needed to remove myself from all the negative influences in my life. First, I had to begin to live a sober lifestyle. I needed a clear head. I promised myself I was going to effectively make the hard choices necessary in order to keep moving forward. I had to remove myself from being active in a gang. This process of leaving a gang is a very dangerous decision. I no longer wanted to be the fake gang guy living in an infested cesspool that had become my life. I don't want to get into the details, but this decision definitely was not an easy one to make and even harder to carry out. The mantra, "blood in blood out" is real and I am truly blessed that I made it out alive.

I finally began a new life and started to get things on track and that is when an angel fell out of the sky. She came into my life to help, and I never could have imagined how desperately I actually needed it. That angel's name was Melissa. She is my saving

grace; she was a childhood friend who came back into my life out of nowhere and reminded me of who I really was inside which snapped me out of my nightmare. She's now my loving wife and she brought with her this amazing little person Mikey and his older brother Justin who is now eighteen years old and loves to talk with me about anything with an engine.

As I became a better person, amazing things started to happen to me. My sentence was reduced, and I am now working towards earning my back freedom. The most unexpected thing happened to me as well, all of my prayers were answered and I was able to become a father to this special little boy Mikey, and it seemed as if he wanted me, just as much as I needed him. Mikey was six years old at the time and we became the best of friends instantly. We talked every single day on the phone and Melissa brought him to visit me as much as she possibly could, we laughed, we joked, and had an amazing time together. I helped him to get through some of his tough times and he definitely helped me every single day whether he knew it or not. Our exciting expedition as father and son had begun. I was finally able to have the relationship that I always wanted and have always longed for. I now feel the unconditional love that only a child can share. I feel alive again, reborn, the sky is the limit and then some. But this time nothing could ever stop me from becoming the best damn father that I can possibly be to this amazing, intelligent, adorable special little boy named Mikey.

# Inner Thoughts on Waking Up to Feed my Cat Then Leaving for School

Andrea Wright

*For parting is such sweet sorrow*

For I must say goodbye, my dear  
As the last of the dust settles  
And the splinter light splutters

*What say you dear, why cry?*

As in twilights time  
You will dine on flesh once mine in sorrow  
and form a grave from my bones

*For I shall say goodnight*

As divine thirst spurts forth  
and thine wrath emerge

For mercy, I plead mercy

*I drown in ocean, dying of thirst*

I dry in desert, sitting in shade  
I hunger in pain while eating a feast  
I die of thirst whilst drowning

*For as the curtain falls*

I bow a final time  
I wish away my cape of darkness as I turn; it befalls

And remove my phantom mask

*It's over, it's over, the midnight music is over!*

Good be you dear, farewell

Be the favorite dream I share no more

As in midst of us, I prefer not to be known

As dramatic of the night but, as the chaotic neutral of day

*For in a world full of all wonders, boredom exists*

And I pray

to never fall into it

# Reflection

Jose Zuniga

You wake up this morning asking why, not with the innocent curiosity of a toddler trying to understand the world, but with the bitter experience of a grown-up who understands it far too well.

You go to the bathroom and look in the mirror. You see the weight of life and the burden of pain in your face. The weight pulls down on your forehead. It pulls down on the bags under your eyes. It pulls down on the edges of your mouth.

You sit at your table. Your stomach growls and grumbles, pleading for food. In front of you there is a fruit. You don't recognize it. It's dried and deformed, brown with patches of yellow orange and black. The skin is rough and hard. You bring it to your nose and your stomach immediately regrets being hungry, but you still are, nonetheless. You dig your nails into the skin. Once the

skin breaks it fights back and digs under your fingernails. But you keep peeling it, piece by piece, each piece stabbing back at you, causing you pain that shoots up your arm, down and up your spine and sits at the base of your skull—and it festers there. Despite all that your face doesn't twist in disgust or pain. It remains the same solemn face.

You finish peeling the fruit and at the center of all the pieces of brown dried out skin, stands a white sphere. You take a piece and bite down on it. It's soft and bursts immediately in your mouth. Juices flow around your mouth and slide down your throat. The overwhelming flavor makes the inside of your cheeks quiver. You feel tears at the edges of your eyes and your lips curve into a faint smile.

You walk alongside a cliff where the sea meets the world. At its feet lay jagged rocks that fully submerge when the sea climbs the cliffs.

You close your eyes and feel the breeze in your face, its gentle touch with a hint of salt caress your weary face.

You listen to the waves crash against the rocks and cliffs. You listen to the hiss the seafoam makes when the sea pulls away. You wonder what it would be like to disappear into the sea, below all the chaos from above and just dive deeper and deeper into its safe cold embrace.

You open your eyes and head back home. There is someone standing close to the edge. As soon as you walk past them, they slip and fall over the cliff.

You instinctively dive to grab them while keeping yourself firmly on the ground. You reach out and grab their hand and pull them towards you. You look at them and they look at you. They have your face. Your eyes your nose your mouth your pain. You look at your hand and see it's holding your hand. You loosen your grip, and they begin to slip away. You look back at them.

They smile and you let go.

# The Theology of Being Blue (I Actually Wrote This About You, but You Left Too Soon)

Vimarievie

Iridescent smile that makes the moon blush.

It makes the blue birds rush and crush

The sun hushes and the stars hum.

I brush it off

but my heart goes beating like the punches.

The thrushes follows the duchess.

A compass pointing to your heart

Only you make me fall in love.

The echoes of your poise, the dagger of a choice

There so much noise, But I only hear your voice

You left me in foist.

Why do my thoughts fill out your face?

We meet by the staircase

“Up in space” you say

But it’s never the same

Just like the look on your face

Do you chase fate? Or do you leave it in space?

Awaiting the day, to finally find your place.

We pace in circles,

Do you look for me to? Does your eyes roam, like flowers waiting to bloom. Or is it just waiting to leave this room? Are you hoping to see me? Or just waiting for the day to leave me?

Or is it just the shadows of yesterday's moon, that fades like your blue shoes.

Another excuse to use,

- lapis lazuli suits, men on the loose
- cerulean jewels, conquering all the fools
- Azure sitting on a stool, nobody knew
- those oceanic eyes
- can't drown me tonight, inquired the vampire
- my mind is sharp like sapphire, oblique satire
- a turquoise tourniquet, to save me from all the blues

The artist's antics in the attic of the arctic:

- A long list that no one can conclude, hidden in an igloo

Watching pingu, with you:

- Pointing to the sky, you know it's time

A reprise of what you find inside, it wasn't teal you collided.

I am no longer your muse. Just someone you didn't choose

It's the theology of being blue.

And it's hues of truth.

# Sea Lights



*Acrylic Paint*  
*Edgar Sanchez*

## **Not in Sync**

**Yahel.AC**

Just one kiss,  
one kiss  
And then just maybe  
we could have something that's beautifully complicated  
Making it even more complicated to the point of no return

Just one kiss,  
One kiss  
To live something extraordinary  
Sealed by a touch

Just one kiss,  
One touch  
Broke the fantasy  
You would've been perfect  
But apparently just not for me

# A Centimeter of a Journey

Neil Storm Stephany

American Gym, Costa Mesa California: I receive my first job, teaching kickboxing, from my mentor Scott “The Hitman” Hern. On my first day he told me, “The leg kick is the jab for your feet. The fundamentals are the most important part of any martial art. Everyday practice a combination and end with a leg kick. Practice makes permanent. Placement is important, a centimeter can be the difference between hurting your opponent and hurting yourself.” I love kickboxing because of the intensity of the work out. Kicking takes so much more energy than punching. That is why MMA and kickboxing matches are so much shorter than boxing matches. I studied different types of kickboxing; Savate, Jeet Kun Do, and Muay Thai. But my favorite is Thai Boxing because it focuses on power. The goal of the leg kick is to use technique to gain momentum, gather enough force to push power from your

lower shin to the exact spot on the middle of the opponent's thigh until it breaks. This kick was literally designed to break the femur bone--The biggest bone in the body.

“Hammer!”

A deep voice yelled at me. I immediately turned around. Over the years I'd gotten used to this nickname. It stemmed from the training I had shown in multiple fights I'd been in since I'd been incarcerated.

“I need to talk to you about your future,” Danny said. Who to me didn't look like much. He was an old man. Glasses, shaved head because he barely grew hair there anyways. He definitely wasn't in very good shape.

I never understood prison politics that much. I didn't grow up in that environment. Danny had done 40 years in the SHU. Which is why I always told him that he aged like a can of peaches because he didn't look as old as he was. However, he was extremely dangerous because he was a council member of a gang that was in control of every white inmate on the mainline. That meant at any time he could have other inmates plunge steel into your body. Or send someone to threaten your family's life outside of prison. Telling Danny “No” was unheard of, and definitely not allowed. Which is where I made my mistake.

“I've been contemplating putting you up. But first you have to do something for us”, he said. I stayed quiet. My heart was pumping. I could feel a drop of sweat hanging from my eye as I fought to wipe it away. He continued, “We want you to get rid of

Damage, and when you're finished you need to wait for the CO's to come get you, when you get released from the SHU you'll be my brother."

This guy must be crazy, I thought to myself. He wants me to kill someone and go to the Hole. To be part of a gang that I wanted nothing to do with. Knowing that I was not allowed to say "No" to this individual I knew that this was a life altering choice. A specific choice, a centimeter of a choice. Where any misdirection could end up with me being murdered.

"No disrespect, but I am about to get married, and I want to go home someday. I have no aspirations to be your brother or part of your organizations." I was so scared; I was barely able to speak.

Silence.

"Are you telling me No?" Danny was more surprised than angry. His calm tone suggested he wasn't a man who needed to yell. He was also someone who had never heard the word "No" from another inmate. "Do you understand the consequences?" He asked again, giving me a second chance to bend to his will.

"I am, and I do." I squeaked. He walked away without another word, and I knew I had just sentenced myself to death...

In prison you cannot say "No" to orders. It is a lot like being in the military. Except in this case the consequence is that you become the target, and someone tries to kill you with a knife.

I immediately walked back to my cell and started talking to my Celly, Raven. I told him everything. And after what felt like hours

he said, “You know they’re going to come after you, maybe you should think about locking up.”

“I’m not scared.” I lied. “I’ll never drop out. I’ll take whatever I got coming.”

“No matter what happens I got your back.” He said, and he meant it, his word was good and that is a rare quality in prison. I knew I could trust him with my life. Literally

Every day for the next 2 months I went to the yard and waited for something to happen. And every day my heartbeat felt like someone was swinging a sledge hammer against my chest. My adrenaline clouded my mind and gave me tunnel vision. I was nervous, and terrified. I would rather be water boarded than endure the torture of waiting for them to kill me. But nothing happened... For two months nothing happened! I endured this mental torture every single day. But again, and again nothing happens. Finally, I start to think maybe it won’t happen, and I start to get a little more comfortable.

It was a freezing day in December. The wind chill factor made it feel like we were in the Antarctic. Lancaster State Prison is surrounded by mountains. This creates a dustbowl effect, and the wind blows so hard it feels like getting hit in the face with a block of ice. The aura that surrounds that prison is always dark, always gloomy.

I remember walking the track with a *Sureño* a couple weeks before Christmas. Again, I hear my handle being called.

“Hammer!” This time it is more urgent than the last so I abruptly turn to check out the commotion.

“Bam!” I feel a thump dead center in my throat. Out of the corner of my eye I see crimson red spray across the Southerners’ face. And I immediately knew I’d been stabbed.

My cellmate had seen my assailant running up behind me and screamed at me as he was chasing him. A centimeter after the steel hit my throat, my celly had thrown a haymaker rocking the assailant and throwing him off balance. Before I could comprehend what was happening to me my body reacted. I spun using a left back fist followed by a right leg kick. I could feel the bone implode a centimeter after I made contact, and as he fell, I flipped him into a full mount. I could see the shank in his left hand. So, I grabbed it with my right, putting my left underneath his forearm and twisting it into a chicken wing. By this point I now see it is Damage. The guy who I refused to kill in the first place had taken the same offer, my life for his.

When you hit any person’s pressure point the body reacts in desperation. It is something you can’t control. And when I twisted his arm and tapped into the pressure point, he freaked out, and his body tremored and spasmed, violently. And I could see the fear from his soul as I stared into his wide eyes.

“Ahhhhhh ahhhhh ahhh!” “HELP! HELP! HELP! He’s going to kill me!” A high-pitched screech exited out of his vocal chords as he wailed, and screamed.

As I looked up, I could see the old man who had called the

shot to end my life as he whispered to another white inmate. All of a sudden, in a flash, the inmate sprinted towards me. A centimeter before he connected, Raven tackled him like a quarterback from the side. They rolled together on the ground, fist and feet moving in every direction.

“Boom!”

A teargas grenade explodes on the ground right next to his head. I roll sideways and put my hands behind my back. I am still full of adrenaline as I sit there and start to think.

Suddenly I am aware of the massive throbbing on my neck as my adrenaline dissipates. I start to relax as my heartbeat recedes. And my muscles finally loosen. All of a sudden, I can hear again.

“You. Put your hand on your neck and walk over here slowly.” A female CO says. “I’m not going to repeat myself Guy.” I see a nurse has brought a wheelchair over to me, so I comply and get in. I am again suddenly aware of the wind blasting against my face as I get rushed to the ambulance at top speed.

I spent three days in the hospital and have a mild wound on my neck. The doctor tells me if the cut had been a centimeter in any direction, I’d be dead.

Damage is in the hospital for 2 weeks. My kick broke both bones in his thigh straight through the middle. His femur bone was a clean break. He ended up with 16 screws in his leg and a couple months later they have to cut off his two end-toes because of the lack of circulation through his leg.

At this point in my life, I was forced to weigh my options. I never imagined myself dropping out. I viewed it as weak. But I never really viewed myself as a gang member either. My goals were to get married. Start a family. Own a house. Live a normal life. In prison I never really fit in because of that. It's not much of a life when someone is incarcerated, I guess that's the point. My life is outside these walls. And although I'm glad I have had the training to protect myself, I don't enjoy hurting people. My heart goes out to Damage. I wish he didn't let worthless individuals take control of his life. They pretend to be your friend and look out for your best interest, but it's a lie. They use you, take advantage of you, and expect you to throw your life away for them. Misery loves company.

Having had a spiritual awakening, I did end up dropping out anyways. I refocused my energy on my sobriety, my physical health, my education, my family, becoming a better person, and working on earning my freedom. I practice the 12 steps. I pray and meditate every day. I exercise and eat healthy. I put my sobriety first. I practice Buddhism, which teaches me love and compassion for everyone. I don't miss my old life or way of thinking at all.

I wish I knew that dropping out was an option when I first came to prison. I was put in an area where they housed the most hardened and violent inmates. The education I had been taught, of how to live as an incarcerated individual, came from inmates that were trying to control me and use me. I learned what they wanted me to learn.

Hindsight is 20/20. But everything happens for a reason. I

believe it is part of God's plan. I wouldn't have spent the hours making myself a better person if I never came to prison. I did a lot of harm in my life. Made a lot of mistakes. I want to be able to make up for what I've done. I want the chance to give back to society. Talk to kids about how prison really is. It's not like the movies make it out to be. It is not glamorous or cool. It is somewhere nobody wants to be. People will try to make you do things you never thought you were capable of. Being a free citizen is cool. Taking care of your family is cool. Living a life of service and compassion is cool. Life can change in a centimeter if you let it.

# The Beckoning

Anzie Borrealus-Soria

Rise! Rise Hermaphrodite, beautiful and large, towering and frail.

The sound of breathless singing- a whine, lulls me as it waltzes  
past.

Come! Come to us.

Yes, I think I'll go to you after all.

I sit in the uncertainty until my long legs finally free themselves  
from the sweet fingers of the grass and drag across the ex-  
panse of the plain

(I hear the mongrel beside me dragging a pair of anchored legs  
through the gravel and dirt- the slow and gentle scrape urges  
me forward to get away from him.)

and I arrived there.

I came to the command,

And found myself in front of the jury of trees;

Five dirty and rugged disciples that looked over me in a sorrowful  
stupor and perpetual fraudulence.

Five violent, solemn and pouting faces

Sprouting from the deep gray chasm of the bark.

Their limbs stretched towards me

Creaking and prodding and scratching at me with twiggy caresses.

Their faces all became one within another,

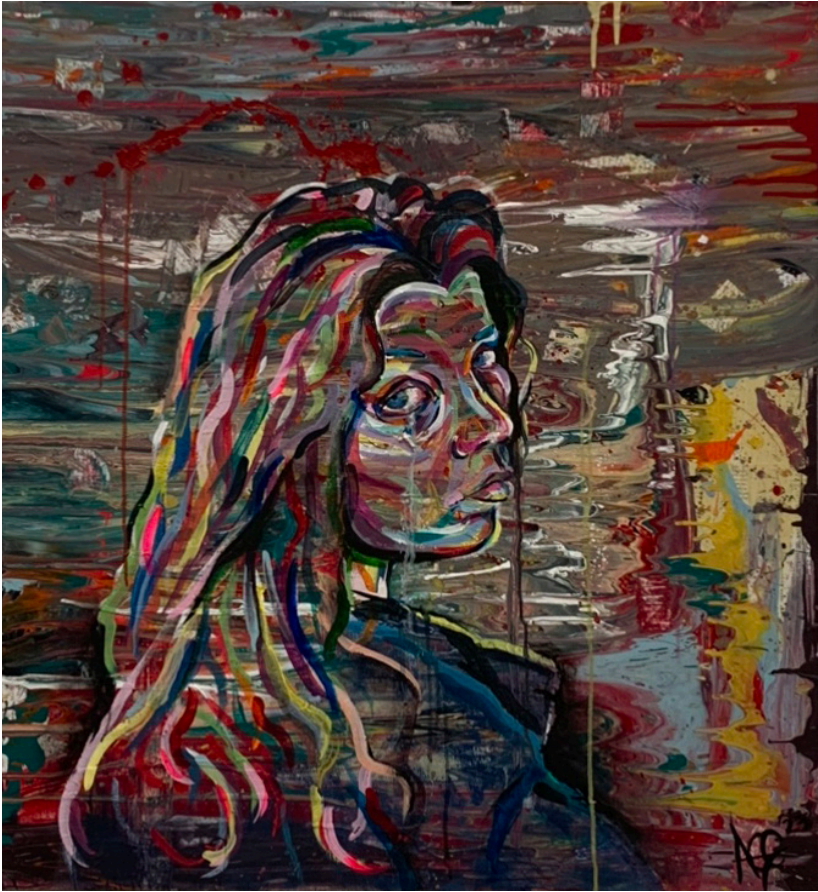
And I knew I was looking at the amalgamation of man.

What kind of sickly, accursed animal are you?

Who or what has eaten out your bulging eye?

And why do I love you already?

# In My Life



*Acrylic on Canvas*  
AGC

## **My Personal Riddle**

**Amelie Kat**

Melt

Melt into the maze of lines

Indistinguishable from the synonymous marks of ink

Peel back the layers of fibers

Highlight the different kinks

Burn it, cheat the lines, and go straight through to the end

But do not clump it into the mess of the puzzle

Just say the bland image of scribbles can be something more

Contort the unimaginative straight lines to frame beautiful scenes

So it knows what it could be if it willed itself enough to be beautiful and pensive

Dissolve

Dissolve into the masses of pages or

solve the riddle and be seen

# The Lizard

Anzie Borrealus-Soria

The lizard lives here  
He lanks and writhes  
The sybarite  
Founded his ugly harem here  
In muted and twisted agony  
But He is beautiful to me

I walk up to the familiar chain link fence. The sound of crunching dirt grinding beneath the soles of my shoes, straggling rocks being swept away by the power of my dragged waltz is the default symphony of the valley, of my hometown. The dirt and hot, beating sun are exigent when focused on this plot of land. Long, dry weeds, and stubborn shrubbery that thrives in desert

heat scatter the terrain; they get stuck on the hem of my bell bottoms, slithering their way underneath the fabric to lick at my ankles with sharp tongues. I look through the metal diamonds of the fence, haphazardly locked with a binder clip and string, in search of the lizard. The old trailer sat poignantly in the middle of the drab landscape, its mundanity interrupted by its only adorned spray paint that reiterates old phrases of love and of ownership, is where I search for his presence. The door of his lair is on the other side of the trailer, facing an opposing metal fence; there's no sound- no shuffling or slamming of the door, no shaking of unstable wooden steps, so I don't expect him to slither out from around the corner. I wait to see him instead crawling around his domain, over the clunkers whose tires are restrained to the earth by the same long weeds trying to grab me down, scuttering past empty bottles of Hennessy and through twinkling aluminum beer cans, over piles of crispy tree branches and fossilized garbage. The dryness and incessant beating down of the sun produces the illusion of sensual heat rising from the ground, gyrating and moving its hips as its thickness obscures my vision of the farther atmosphere. I'm mesmerized watching it, and I fight my body's urge to crumble under its pressure, under my hip's desire to undulate like the mirage. I don't know why I came to the lizard's den. If I should sprawl myself out, whether on a burning gray rock or the burning hood of his dilapidated car, I don't think he would care to find me either way. I undo the "lock" because I am familiar with the lizard's lair, and I used to be welcomed here; am I still?

Traversing the lizard's den is a familiar battle. The creeping scent of old, pungent marijuana leaks like a thick fog from the

cracks of the trailer's windows, and pools into the heat until it's sickening. I pass a spigot that's dripping sour water into a plastic pool lined with a thin, lush, green moss- or maybe mold. The pet ducks are missing from their surrogate pond, and their jabbering quacking is also absent from the air. Inside a metal barrel, used to make roaring fires during the cold nights, where the lizard and I were friends, there are now two dead, bloodied pink ducks. Half of one's body is flopped over the side of the barrel, dusted with char and kept in place by a heavy branch left over from the previous night's fire, I presume. I examine the death and take note that it seems to have been violent. The suspect, a huge American bulldog with an xylophone of ribs starting to poke their way through his skin and fur, watches me examine his work from behind another metal fence tucked away in the back corner of the plot of land. I poke at his handiwork with a stick, we share a morbid curiosity; he stands on his hind legs and props himself up on the edge of the fence. The lizard has left him a large plate of dry kibble, but the vomit-colored pellets don't look nearly as good as the two dead birds. I think about chucking them into the enclosure, but I don't want to touch them. I wonder what it is I'm supposed to do once I see the lizard, maybe I'll point to his dog's budding ribcage and suggest what to do with the death in the barrel. The lizard has told me he's going to father a child soon- I worry for it whilst it floats in utero, wherever it may be, if it even really exists.

Anywhere is better than the reptile's enclosure, though. The last time I was here, I was a man. I think the beard, mustache, big clothes and extra 20 pounds shielded me from the unglamorous reality of the habitat, but even then, it wasn't much help. My fe-

male qualities had haunted that body, but now they are obnoxiously plastered all over me, tangible and real and obvious, which is just as exciting as I feel it is dangerous, but I've missed the lizard's boney limbs and lanky figure, and the way he would waltz. His objective being has become tainted by my memory and longing, and I know this, but I don't care. He is just as enigmatic and dream-like to me as he was when I first learned of him, a hyperreal surrogate for my own ideations and recollections of what he was like, a year ago, before we fought and I left with bloody knuckles and a bruised face, resenting him. But even the terrible memory of that night is mingled with the lizard's curly hair, his big nose, his warm eyes, his birthmark, walking down the sidewalk together and placing himself on the side of the curb, him sleeping on the couch and lending me his bed. It makes it more difficult to separate the myth from history. I look around me. Judging by the state of affairs, however, I don't think Ronnie has changed. But I don't care.

He sulks in the garden  
Of circuitous lust and of weeds and of need  
We walk through his labyrinth of pungent and yawping youth  
This life has aged him  
Ignorance befalls him  
Takes him in its cradle  
And rocks him to the serenade of junkie rambling  
The stench of death emanates from the rotting wood of the abandoned home

Where he would be a beautiful child and play  
Where he would be loved  
And watch it be taken away  
Poverty, the wretched and rotten disease  
Eats away at his fingers and at his hair  
Until he is a black and thick smoke  
Choking me with an indifference  
Not worthy of disdain nor surprise  
Maundering with him  
Dizzy and drunken  
Through the ragged streets of the country town  
Ragged as the scar across his strong and stern brow  
(I remember your gentle juvenescence- these years are beginning  
to ravage you; I still find you beautiful)  
We are faced with my escape  
We are faced with his stagnant longing  
Of something that we both know will never come  
How selfish of me  
How privileged to think  
That he would be ready or willing or able  
To be anything different  
Than what the world has made him  
So I suppose I can love him anyways,  
Even when he's just goddamn awful.

## **Ravin**

**Isaiah Moscare**

I wish you saw yourself  
The way we see you  
The way the world sees you

The way I see you

You have eyes so deep  
So sweetly brown  
But hiding tears  
That could drown  
When you allow them to escape

And lips plump  
Like ripe strawberries  
But contort themselves into a frown  
That breaks my stone heart

You smile and laugh  
So warm, it spreads  
Like 7:00am sunshine  
Reminding us the sun always returns  
To melt away  
The frost that grows in our chests overnight

I wish you loved yourself  
The way we love you  
The way the world loves you

## **No Old Man's Journey**

**Noah A. Partida**

I'm warning you, buddy,  
There's no telling what lies  
far in the cosmos  
beyond those blue skies.  
I'm warning you, buddy,  
some time, in some place,  
you'll wheeze your last breath  
somewhere far out in space.

Big and beautiful,  
dark and plentiful.  
Places where no man has been.  
An adventure for sure,  
with plight to endure,  
and oxygen bound to run thin.

I've said what I said, you've made up your mind.  
Do as you wish, my friend.  
But no one will see, no one will hear,  
As you near your untimely end.

# Insignificance



*Digital, Procreate  
Omicrud*

# What Tomorrow Would Bring The Finale Part III

Andrea Wright

## Previously

*Drirri shuffles up to her and drinks it with a short thank you. (For him, it tastes like strawberries, and he doesn't really know why he gets this treat every day.) Emri's smile shakes, as she knows that these shakes that happened occasionally were the price that the cup of life and death claimed of him.*

## Now

“Hey. Hey! Emri? Emri!” questions Drirri, who had skipped up ahead but quickly runs back again to his sister. *Try to make her think funny stuff. If she is happy, then everything will be fine!*

“Hmm? What Dri?” questions Emri, having been lost in thought drafting a supply list and figuring out what they could get with the money they had and what they could probably haggle for

anything they were missing. *Maybe if I sold this quartz, I could get a few coppers...*

“Do you remember the room incident back when we first started to share a tent after I burnt mine down by accident with Nin?”

*Urg, How could she forget...* “Yeah, that’s when we started placing privacy shields when we needed them...” Emri states.

“Yeah! Yeah! I went in because I forgot my cloak on my way to the river, and you said *Aabb! Get out of my room!* and I said **room? What’s a room?** and you just curled up under your cloak and looked at me and said...” Drirri starts, hyped up about the memory.

“I remember,” Emri states, blushing furiously as she remembers how close the situation came to becoming uncomfortable.

*Room! That’s what I overheard the people in the big wood and brick tent say when they want privacy!* and then momma came in to figure out what all the screaming was for and kicked both of us out and told us that if we couldn’t share a simple tent, then we shouldn’t have one at all!” Drirri finishes.

“Yeah, then Nonna came up and knocked her upside the head and told her to knock it off, and to let us in or we were going to freeze. Then Nin and you went to the river to have a very important conversation and that was that,” Emri says, looking pointedly at him.

“Yeah...” says Dri. “It was a very, um eye-opening conversa-

tion. I'm still sorry about that though!"

"I know, I forgive you. Now come on, last one up that hill's a rotten slug beast!" Emri says as she starts running up the hill to continue their way to Neahtun.

When they arrived on the outskirts of Néahtún around mid-day, she took out the muddy green elixir in her bag and chugged down half, giving the other half to her brother.

"Yuck! I hate drinking this!" mutters Drirri, wiping off the slimy green mustache courtesy of the elixir.

"I know, I know. Now give me your cloak," says Emri as she shrugs hers off. She then quickly folds and puts away their cloaks in their pack.

They both shudder as the elixir took effect, and their dark hair slowly bleached to a golden hue, their eyes turned blue-green, and their skin either turned fairer or a little darker in both cases. Disguises ready, they set into town to gather supplies.

While traversing through the marketplace, haggling with the vendors for fruits, scowling with disgust at the slab of meats, and happily obtaining a few silver pieces for the quartz, the calm was interrupted as a steady whinny pierced through the busy market. People panicked and threw themselves to the side to evade the galloping horses marching quickly down the dirt path across the village. Some screamed as they huddled close to the dilapidated wooden structures that made up their homes.

Emri quickly grabs Drirri, stuck in the middle of the sudden-

ly empty pathway in shock as he trembles, staring up at the big hoofed beast and the red-caped monster that rode it, and pulls him to the side.

Stopping, as though used to the commotion, the messenger blows a horn and unscrolls a mottled yellow paper.

Hands flying to cover their ears due to the screeching horn, the people huddle near quickly to hear what the man had to say.

With a perverse smile, as though knowing exactly why people were in pain and enjoying it, the greasy man yells out.

“Hear ye! Hear ye! At twilight this e’en [*evening*], his Most Wondrous Royal Highness King Uther Pendragon. The current regent of the most wondrous kingdom of Camelot did state yond the ongoing war ‘gainst the evil charm of s’rc’ry shall increaseth in power.” he exclaims. Licking his lips as his dark beady eyes twinkle with proud contempt.

“Though we art currently winning, you are forewarned that anyone accus’d of practicing the dark arts shall beest [*be*] immediately put to perpetual wink [*death*] by pyre or by beheading f’r desecrating this land with the h’resy of charm!” the soldiers near him shuffle impatiently, itching to grab their swords and start swinging.

“Anyone that hast [*has*] any inf’rmation about possible s’rc’r’s shall beest highly reward’d. Anyone suspect’d of harb’ring or aiding these vile creatures out of some twist’d sense of pity...”he spits. “Shall eke [*also*] beest sentenced to perpetual wink!” the people murmur around, still huddling around each other.

As anyone that merely broke a law or had a tiff with a neighbor would be sentenced to death purely out of contempt. The death excused on the law of suspected sorcery would only keep feeding the fear.

The man continues, “As death is the only mann’r to purify this nation of their evil deeds. So hast his most wondrous highness did declare. As thee w’re *peasants*...” spitting out the last word out as though it was pure torture to even think of being near the serfs. How could he!? They would only sully his pristine nature with their dirty simpleness!

The knights of Camelot march out as quickly as they had entered, swords rusted with old blood and full of the lust for death, excused genocide singing through their veins as they cared not for whom they pointed their swords at.

Shuddering, Emri looks over at Drirri. As the people around them dust themselves off, muttering about and continuing about their day as though the reason for this fractured trust in society hadn’t just proclaimed itself again, jumping up and down and waving excitedly, screaming, “Look! Look! This is what the king said! If you do anything, you die! Isn’t that wonderful!”

Looking over their gathered supplies, Emri figures that they had enough. It was high time they got out of there and back on the road. Their glamour was about to fade at any moment, their druidic tattoos would be free to see by anyone, revealing them as “*other*.”

They needed their cloaks, but it was a good thing that they

didn't wear them, as the red monsters would have recognized their nature instantly, or at least suspected enough to kill them and ask questions later.

Hurrying out, just in time too, as their glamour fades, they take shelter from onlookers behind a small hill, they put on their cloaks, and set off. The kingdom in the North, Mercia, was rumored not to be part of the Purge and that it was accepting of magic.

After a bit of walking, trying not to harbor suspicion as to why two youngsters were traveling on their lonesome, they finally entered the shelter of the forest once more.

"Hey. Hey! Emri? Emri?!" whispers Drirri, shorter legs working overtime to match his sisters' frantic pace.

"What?" says Emri.

"Why do other people think magic is evil?" questions Drirri.

"Because the king said so," answers Emri, feeling both too tired, too young and too old to have this conversation. The evening sun was waning.

"Don't they know we can't choose it, though? It just comes, and it's not bad, it's lit-lite-literally all the life around us! It's the trees!" says Drirri. "Trees aren't evil!"

"Hmm...I don't know Dri. The king said so, and people believe him." replies Emri, already trying to draft a possible location for their camp for the night.

“They must be daft then! Magic is like, like, a sword, you know! Nonna said that people choose what they do with their magic like people choose how to use a sword! It’s neither good or bad!” exclaims Drirri.

Emri looks up and turns around, surprised she just looks at him. Chuckling softly and shaking her head, she says, “When did you get so wise? You know I’m supposed to be older than you, right? Can’t go around being smarter than me, squirt!” she nudges his shoulder playfully.

“Hah, no, I just pay attention. Even to the things you think I don’t actually know.” He looks at her, trying to get her to understand something she couldn’t decipher.

“...”

“Anyway, you never answered. Why do people think magic is evil?” asks Drirri.

“Because the king said so, Dri.” She sighs.

“So...if the king told everyone to go jump off a bridge, they’d do it?!” asks Drirri.

“I guess,” Emri says, shrugging her shoulders.

“Wow. Guess everyone lacks common sense,” says Drirri. “I remember Ma always told me that even if someone you trust says something you know is wrong in here (his bandaged hand rising up to the spot where the heart is), you shouldn’t do it.”

He looks up, a frown touching his lips in a serious face. (Imag-

ine a disappointed puppy.) Emri sighs, breath labored as they trek up a small hill.

“I know that’s what Nin always said, too. But that ain’t how the world works.... When the king says something, it’s gotta be done, or else...squish.” She says. Clapping loudly for effect, startling Drirri, who looks up tiredly and wavers, he raises his arms. The heavy adventure of blood loss of the morning, the frightening encounter with the red capes, and the tireless walking had taken a toll on his energy.

Fond, she picks him up, she heaves him up as he wraps his small arms around her neck, piggyback style, and continues walking.

“Squishing?” murmurs Drirri, breath ghosting on the crook of her neck.

“Yep.” She says, popping the ‘p’. “That’s what Nin, Nonna and Ma told me. Said we should still defy it and be careful or else the world is doomed due to fear, whatever that meant.” *I’m still figuring it out myself, Dri...*

“Okay, wake me up when we get ready to camp. My magicks stronger for shields.” Drirri says, laying back down and settling down for a nap.

“I will, Dri, you can sleep,” Emri says. *I’ll keep you safe. I just hope the North’s rumors are true... and if not...that at least the prince grows up to not be such an evil prat as his father!*

“Mmmkay, love you....” Drirri whispers, cuddling closer.

“...I love you too, magus. I love you too,” whispers Emri, moving onward as the effort of putting one foot in front of the other lumbers in, on the lookout for shelter.

The evening was starting to set in fully. The panic and heaviness of the day had passed away from the minds of all as the forest began to gently lull itself to sleep. The nighttime creatures finally waking up for their turn to play. The sky had changed hue, and the stars had begun aligning themselves amongst the world to signal directions to travelers.

All souls were weary, with only hopes of what tomorrow would bring.

# Thinking on You

Carolina Gonzalez Llamas

On a cold day of November,  
Then is when I came to realize this rawness  
Of one unique and vulnerable desire  
-The desire-  
The craving of being together  
And kill the poison of silence.

But then, I start to think,  
And continue putting it on repeat,  
Until I get to punish myself  
To the point of forbid  
And then... regret.

I just can't stand it anymore,  
There are so many things I don't know,  
There is a sword pointing  
And the wall is waiting,  
My heart is beating,  
And I'm thinking  
On you.

# Wind and Sea



*Oil on Canvas*  
*AGC*

# Curse of Being Tangible...

Aranza Martinez

The movement of my arms, like arrows, in precision and aiming to kill.

Sorrowful and full of envy of that of which I cannot touch.

I rather coexist with the wind as part of it, rather than be a brick wall that deters it from its path.

Take this burden of which I carry far away from me, and bring back the joy, or rather, absence of feeling, from when I was but a simple, ignorant, child.

I take great pleasure in knowing one day I'll be nothing, but even in my nothingness, I'll still be... something.

My legs carry the weight of the rest of my body, and I can tell how much they loathe me more as each second passes and I stand up to walk miles and miles searching for purpose.

I am yielded in a well filled with this torment and despair, for I am capable of taking up space on this Earth.

I swim among currents as the waves of this ocean push me around; the tide changes every moment because I am there, and I am always an obstacle to vanquish.

The skies wail and ramble and pity me for casting shadows as tall as trees and as large as life itself; the sun burns around me and my skin is set ablaze in a battle of intimacy and violence.

I stumble and drop with my own two feet that conspire against me, and I can tell by the bruises and scars on my skin that the ground has left its evidence on me.

Take this burden of which I carry far away from me, and instead replace it with thorns and knives breaking open my soft, pink muscles and ligaments.

Let it carve, engrave, etch, and bleed; let my body be canvas; intaglio from Italian artists until it is no more.

Take this burden of which I carry, far, far, far away; my own eyes fear what they see as I pass a reflection because I am not the rain, I am not the grass, I am not even the boulders up in rocky mountains... I am but a mere mortal, begging to feel alive, whilst also begging to stand at the edge of life itself.

It just isn't meant to be, I wonder. Any of which I wanted, none of this was ever meant to be.

I think far too much, I cry for even more.

There is a horrid sentiment of something rotting in the depths of my very soul; perhaps I am finally perceiving myself in ways I never thought I would.

Perhaps the idea of existing has finally caught up to me, and I have found myself fighting with my own voice during midnight terrors.

Take this burden of which I carry, and deconstruct it until it's nothing but its raw, unmotivated form; I need to see where it comes from, and I need to know why it won't retire.

The movement of my arms, like feathers, soft and delicate, and yes, they are aiming to kill.

They know the poundage of my fears, and the poundage of my dreams; the latter seems to carry an even heavier toll.

I have nothing else left to say, for even my words announce my terrible faith, that of unconformity. Perhaps it's the rivers that will

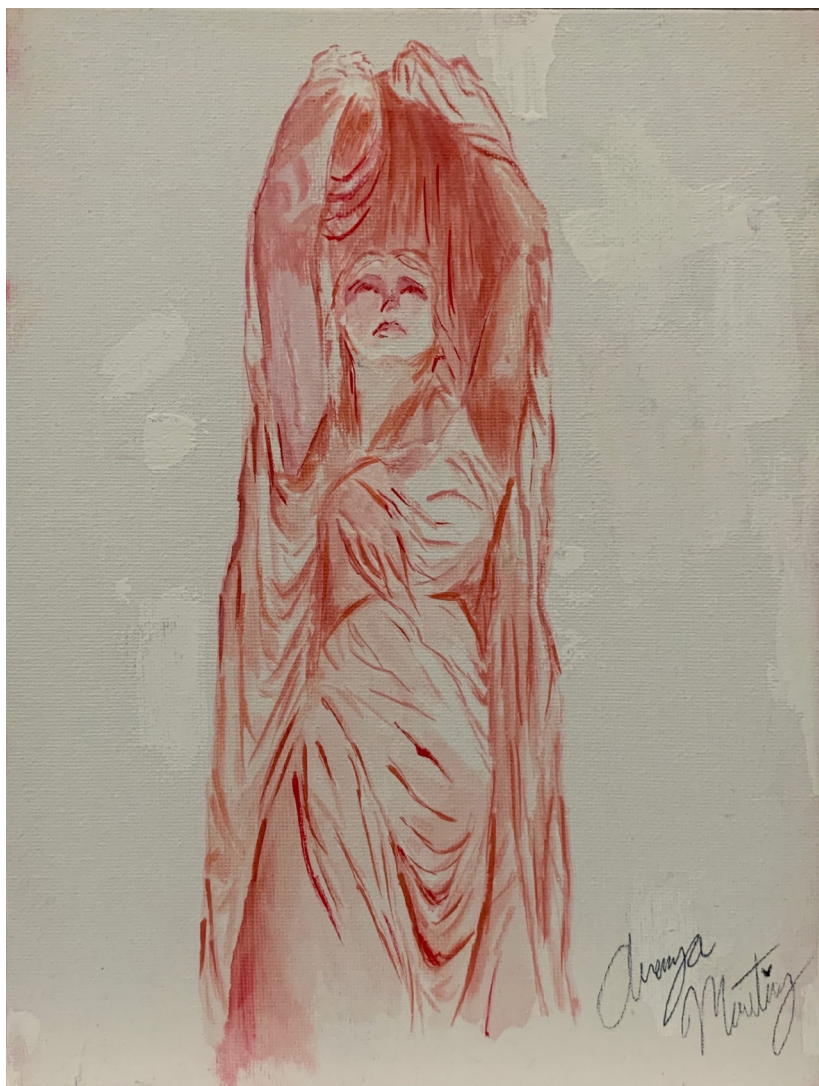
make me move, the thunder that will make me scream, the snow that will make me shiver, and the dessert that will make me glow.

A new life for me would suffice, to expand and grow among the weeds of hideous greens and grasslands; to rest my head upon pillars; to swim with the varmints and creatures down at the depths of the ocean.

Take this burden of which I carry. Take it all.

Make the space I took on this world ultimately and poetically be justified.

## Curse of Being Tangible



*Watercolor*  
*Aranza Martinez*

## **Best Friends**

**Luis Zavala**

Remember the day

When we used to say

We would be friends until our last breath

It's ironic because that was our sudden death

# Ozzy-Pizzerias

Noah A. Partida

I met a shopper from an old megaplex who said:

“One vast and empty concrete lot stands in the mall. Near it, on the wall, taped up, a notice can be seen, among the spotless shelves and vacant sockets, confirming the discontinuation and closure of a pizza place.”

“Though lost to an age of medical masks and online shopping, I knew it well. A delicious and plentiful buffet brimming with limitless dishes and deserts, and in the very next room, games to play and attractions to ride in the dozens.”

“A place to be for the likes of me. From the first visit, I grew to enjoy it more than any other, to the point where I started to frequent the place. Whether it was an event or a birthday party or a school night, I would be there. Gorging myself with pizza, helping

myself to gratuitous servings of ice cream, and riding the Cyclone just to have all of it go back the way it came.”

“...And then there were the games.”

“Oh the games.”

“I could recall spending whole hours, accumulating ticket after ticket, playing that cartoonish ticket rolling machine about catching sea bass. Each time I reached the jackpot, that familiar fanfare would play, and tickets would begin to pour, neatly in a folded pile before my eyes.”

“It was music to my ears. Dopamine to my brain.”

“14,654.”

“That’s how many tickets I was prized with. To my young, prepubescent mind, that figure sounded impossible. Inconceivable. I couldn’t imagine such a big number, let alone count it. I didn’t care. I was saving my tickets. Saving my tickets for that sweet sweet blue and green lava lamp that I always wanted, sitting atop the shelf in the prize corner.”

“20,500.”

“That’s what I needed. So I pressed on.”

“With the caution and wits of a war general, I strategized, only playing the games that would net me the biggest winnings of tickets. I knew every target. Every cheat. Every objective to obtain a jackpot. I owned every high score in the entire arcade.”

“In no time, my name was whispered all throughout the ar-

cade. Fellow children would pout and cry to their mothers and fathers, tugging at their blouses and jackets. They would ask: “Why can’t I have that many tickets, mommy?”

“Seeing all the other children envy my wealth in tickets felt good. Really good. Too good. I hardly remembered why I was getting them in the first place.”

“Foolish me. For I should have snapped out of my high and got what I came for. But I didn’t.”

“I was too late.”

“Nothing beside remains”

“With an entire year gone, what once stood that big and proud pizzeria, a Korean BBQ restaurant now takes its place.”

“Somewhere, someplace, in a dark corner of my abode or a dumpster, there my tickets sit. Untouched, unexchanged, unwanted.”

“All 31,143 of them.”

## **Who Am I If Not a Portrait of the Past?**

**Abel Escobedo**

Since then, nothing remains.

Your voice has all but faded and I can't recall what it is that we  
were,

All of us.

It's all so distant yet here I still stand,

On your couch,

By the kitchen,

Staring out the window in hopes the present could merge with  
your memory.

My brain has forgotten your face but,

My life will not allow me to live without me being an extension of  
that time.

All I do revolves around then,

As if my life has too, diminished itself upon that moment.

It's almost three years since the three of us last saw each other,

And it's been even more since I last remembered the person I am.

I just guess it's in my nature to forget everything I am.

I do this in hopes to forget the person whom I originally stole a

particular behavior from.

I do this in hopes to forget why I like the things I do,  
Without having you in between.

Since I can't live with you, I'll have you be my words.

I am you because we've met,

And with us in particular, that is a horrible thing to say.

# She

## A Journey

### Johnny Ramsey

I was locked up serving a life sentence for mistakes made when I was twenty years old. At good old Richard J. Donovan state prison. I was content with my life, it was not the kind of life that gets you paroled, but nonetheless you would be safe to say that I had accepted my lot in life. I had a decent job working P.I.A. laundry making \$0.55 an hour, I had some family support limited as it was, but it was there. I was in and out of trouble, nothing too serious, just the occasional riot or stabbing, and I was always high. Then everything changed, as She walked back into my so-called content life. She the single greatest thing to ever happen to me, She the beauty that I once held and would again. She, my perfect match, my twin flame. She, my savior, my best friend.

As I drifted aimlessly up and down the wonderful state of California, making a tour of all the wonderful prisons it contained.

Honestly you could say I had no direction, and cared less about anyone or anything, unless it had something to do with me or affected me in some way. I had over the last fifteen years built me a flawless suit of proverbial armor, to protect me both mentally and emotionally. I thought it was working rather well or so I thought. She destroyed it piece by piece, and I never knew it was happening. Truth be told I'm grateful it did.

It all began with a phone text "do you remember me?" I asked.

"How could I ever forget." She responded.

From that point on we began to just talk, her voice was like a gentle springs breeze blowing over a colorful mountain meadow to my ears. She began to inquire how long before I could come home, and I had to be honest.

"Five years, but there are a lot of things I needed to accomplish first. If I do these things, it will all but guarantee my suitability." I told her.

We talked and talked and talked, and time soon found us in the most amazing relationship I'd ever experienced. If I am to be honest, I was in no shape to be a good husband or even a boyfriend, let alone a father to her wonderfully adorable son. It was these feelings of inadequacy that drove my desire to be more than I was, to be a better person, to become the best damn version of myself that was possible. She had started a fire in my soul that could only be sated with her and our son, so that meant things needed to change, and quickly.

Now I was smart enough to know that there was a lot of work to be done. So, I started my education and slowly added some self-help classes. The desire to be a better lover, husband, and father, had me taking domestic violence classes, parenting classes, finance classes, marriage classes and anything else I felt might teach me how to be a better person, father and husband. The transition was slow, all the while I thought I was doing what I needed to for them, my lady, and our son.

Reality, the set of armor that I had created for myself was slowly being stripped away. As I desired to be closer to her both physically and emotionally, she was quietly, and covertly penetrating my thick castle like defenses. Without even knowing it she was instilling a fresh unadulterated sense of worth, deep in my soul past any phony armor I thought I had erected. That's the single greatest gift she ever gave me, my self-worth back! She was showing me that I was not some hideous monster, that nobody wanted or loved. This was something that I had struggled with for my entire life, my self-worth had been as elusive as a cool breeze on a dry summer day. Just a wisp touching your skin causing you to long for more. For this I'll forever be indebted to she.

As she steadily showed me love and tender kindness, I longed for more. I found myself daydreaming about how we'd live, or what our goals would look like. All my free time was spent imagining the things that we would do as a family, trips we'd take, basically all the things you see families doing on television shows I'd imagine us doing. As my desires for she and our son drove my actions, I found myself wanting to hurry up and get home. This

goal played over and over in my head, like an old record player that was skipping, playing the same few notes again and again. I would soon find myself enrolled in another class, or taking on some new set of responsibilities that made me look better as both a father and a husband.

Well it turns out that as I furthered my education and learned more, the more my thoughts changed. They went from negative and violent, completely self-centered, and selfish. To thoughtful and caring, focused on those who truly had my best interest in mind. All the changes she had secretly inspired, and encouraged, were taking place so rapidly I hardly noticed them at all. As all these changes seeped into my soul, filling the now empty recesses that once acted as shelter for all my insecurities. All these changes happened so fast I couldn't tell you when they managed to spill over into my thoughts and actions, but they did! The harder I tried to become a good husband and even better father, the more my conduct and thought pattern evolved. Slowly my new actions became the norm, my new daily program, and this caused me to change even more. This allowed all my new traits to become my new good habits. With my new thought pattern in place, along with my ever-growing education, I soon forgot just how much I dis-loved myself. She had taught me to love myself, never once telling me, but rather showing me that I was loveable, and wanted and not just by her and our son.

The sense of lust she had created deep within me, and not that sexual desire we feel for another. It was the kind of lust that has you just wanting to be close to them, to hear their voice, to

look upon their face, or to just breathe in their scent. To feel her presence wash over my senses, just as a wave crashes upon a beach, leaving behind a mark, like wet sand and that frothy white foam that waves leave behind. Well she too had left her mark, a loving reconfiguration of my soul. She had done it, what no other had been able to do, made me believe in myself! She had secretly laid the foundation of love, belief and desire, hope and need, respect and trust.

For some time, I felt like I needed ‘she’, that I couldn’t do any of this without her. I was wrong! Yes, she had created a pit within me, a pit that I filled with an abundant amount of, well of me. Yes, she had created an endless reservoir of love, not only for myself, but for all those around me. My family and friends slowly came back into my life as they too witnessed the changes in my demeanor and attitude. They went from knowing me to be manipulative and selfish, to demonstrating kindness and love for someone other than myself. I also began to notice the changes, I was not as violent, and found myself making decisions more positive in nature. I had traded in my pride for love, both for oneself and for other people, and their feelings. I found I had become a lot more emotional, allowing myself to be vulnerable regardless of the consequences. I was as vulnerable as a baby rabbit caught in a forgotten snare.

This was all new to me, me the tough guy in the family, always quick to snap or argue and quite often fight. To say it didn’t frighten me would be lying. But change is often frightening, and finding out that I was capable of receiving and giving real genuine

unmanipulated love frightened me. I had traded in my pride for vulnerability, no longer did I need to hide from my feelings, the love she so freely gave to me had given me the skills and ability to embrace my feelings, my fear. She, did a lot for me! She, the love of my life, She, my one true love. She, the one who will always hold my heart. She taught me the most important lesson I'll ever learn, and I'll never forget it either. "I AM CAPABLE OF LOVE TO AND FROM OTHERS." She is and always will be one of the most important people in my life. She is to thank for helping me become the man I've become, all because she was willing to treat me like a beautiful flower garden, first she got rid of all the weeds (negative thinking and actions). Then she prepped the ground and planted the seeds (showed me love and kindness). Finally, she watered these seeds (continuously showing love, through thick and thin). She now has me a kind loving gentle flower garden she can call her own.

Yes, she deserves credit for a lot, as I've told you all the changes she managed to inspire. She does not deserve all the credit though, cause without HE none of this would have been capable. He, is the one who allowed she's love to be received in the first place. He deftly allowed these changes to take place. He blindly loved she in return, and he removed the armor, yes unknowingly, but still it was he. It was HE who allowed his pride to be replaced by fear and vulnerability, he let all his defenses be stripped away, and let she in. So, at the end of this journey, it was she that loved he, and he who allowed she to love he.

If you all have not guessed "SHE" is my amazingly beautiful

wife Jessica, and she will forever hold my heart captive! He is I, who has allowed her to capture the now loving heart. I will always be in awe of her gentle love and kindness that was willing to take a chance on a kind loving man such as myself. Like I said she will always hold my heart captive!

# Cars

Dana Villafana

Sun sets around you as you look over the highway,  
Barbed wire barrier useless at hiding or deterring  
Cars speed so fast, they blur into an array of silver, white, red...

To your left, a half mile down is the convenience store.  
To your right, a quarter mile down is your house.  
In front of you, the cars speed on and on...

What is more tempting?

An Icee?

Your bed?

Or the cars?

What is more tempting?

A snack?

A hug?

Blood on the pavement?

Left?

Right?

In front of you...

In front of you?

# Mount Miguel Road



*Acrylic Paint*  
*M.G. Gorman*

## This Is fine

A.W.

*“I’ll shut my mouth, and I’ll let you go. Is that good for you? Will that be good for you? You? You?”*

Heidi Hansen: “Good for you”

Song from Dear Evan Hansen Play

This is a bad idea

I know it

But you refuse to

This is a bad idea

Broken mess idea

The I-know-your-not-really-into-this idea

But-I wanna-do-it-so-I-don’t-care-what-you-think idea

The we’re gonna do it!

When I know it’s really and I’m gonna do it

The- I’m-gonna-jump-of-the-cliff idea

And the type that -drags-me-along idea

Even when I know it’s gonna be a your-gonna-jump-oh-shit-you-already-jumped-and-I’m-just dragged-along-because-who-cares-

what-I-think-because-this is a disaster, it's- gonna end up in flames,  
but you've already gone off the cliff and your driving...

And who cares if I'm ready when I know I'm not but you feel that  
your ready so who cares what I thought- idea

It's an I'm gonna need to step up and figure everything out because  
you don't think about details you just want the solution, you just  
want the end goal

It's an I'm-gonna-break-but-I'll-glue-myself-up-because-I-asked-  
are-you-sure-I-don't-think-that-its time because I'm the one who  
takes cares and I'm the one who is here and I know I'm not ready  
but who gives a fuck!

Because you just want the solution, you just want the end goal,  
you just want to spend minimum time with what you wanna reach  
while I'm here playing babysitter once more

Like its been only 6 months but you want a replacement

And guess who's home more!

And guess who's gonna be here! Who'll spend the most time and  
who'll be there when they cry! But who cares if I'm mourning  
cause you just want a meme!

This is a bad idea

A disastrous horrible idea

But

I can't say no

I know I can't say no

I've prolonged it for at least half a year at least cause you wanted a  
shiny new toy within just a month

Like, do you even care? Do you even care!

But I can't say no

This is a bad idea

A garbage fire idea

A this-is-not-fine-but-I-guess-I'll-just-grin-and-bare-it type of idea

A this-is-fine-dog-while-the-house-is-burning idea

But who cares what I think

Nobody cares what I think

I've been put in my place

And I know both the world others, and you don't really care what  
I think

My opinions are useless any word I say pointless because its not  
what you think

My perspective is different, my point of view is quite different and  
I thought it was different outside, and that I could share what  
I think because on the inside world nobody wants to know  
what I think

I've been put in my place

And I'm tired

So tired

So, I'm just gonna stop

Non habetis vocem vel electionem

Is something I'll tattoo on my mind

But its fine

It's fine

I'm perfectly okay with everything going on around me

I'm. tired...

This is a bad idea

But its fine

# **The Day of Reckoning**

**Chloe K Williams**

It was something like military precision,  
there were networks of roots intertwined like,  
secrets of the Earth ready to strike.

The peak of dawn, just as daylight hit  
the snooze button was the time they  
were to commence.

The ringleader and his wood henchmen  
tasted the air with their aged bark and  
the stench of carbon set the alarm.

In one accord they made the Earth quake.  
The ground upended as roots met the sun  
and rancid air for the first time.

Trees, trees, trees  
of all shapes, sizes, and ages stormed  
streets, neighborhoods, parks.

Their route was intentional, even callous.

In their wake was only remnants of our own  
destruction, greed, and insensitivity.

The life of air trailed behind these ancestors of  
breath like mournful souls, asphyxiating  
everything in its wake. We did this.

Trees, trees, trees  
of all shapes, sizes, and ages left,  
the place they once called home.

# The Big Ones

Noah Partida

It was a nice and quiet night. The vast plains glowed with a soft blue and the scintillating stars put on a show for all to see down below.

From the front porch of a small, quaint little house, a grandfather and his grandson can be seen, rocking back and forth on a swinging chair, taking part in gazing at the beautiful cosmos above.

They had no light on, for they didn't need one. Glorious celestial bodies above would cast down all the radiance the two needed for such a special night.

“When, Pop!? When!?” The little boy inquired, jumping up and down in his seat.

“Soon, my boy. Things like these take time.” The grandfather

said, holding him down in his seat.

The little boy pouted. “But we’ve been waiting forev-  
eeeeeeer!”

“That’s what makes it so special!” The grandfather replies,  
reeling in his boy to give him noogies.

What’s so special? What was it that the grandfather and grand-  
son were eagerly waiting for on that starry night, that they had  
allegedly been waiting forever on?

An eclipse? A visiting comet? A meteor shower of epic pro-  
portions?

Whatever these two must be waiting for, it must be a spectacle  
for sure.

The mother of the boy walks out from the front door, joining  
the two on the porch.

“Just in time, sweetie.” Says the grandfather

“How long has he been sitting here?”

“Tch. A while.”

“You’ve done your homework?”

The boy nods his head, still dancing from excitement in the  
chair. “Mhm.”

The mother sits beside the grandfather, breathing a sigh of  
relief.

“Mom, Pop pop, can I go get my blanket?”

“Sure son, but get out here quick. They’re gonna be quicker!”

“Ok, Pop pop!”

“The little boy runs back into the house, leaving the grandfather and the mother alone on the porch.”

The grandfather turns to notice she’s silent, looking down at the floor.

“You alright, sweetie?”

She tilts her head up to the sky.

...

“I never thought it would happen.”

“Yeah... me neither.”

He starts to notice tears welling up in her eyes.

“You still think about him?”

The mother wipes her eyes, attempting to rid her face of both sweat and tears.

“All the time.”

“I remember when he first heard about the news.”

“About us?”

“Mhm. He was furious.”

“He gathered everyone at city hall. He preached that he would

put an end to all this, and take back our title.”

Title? What title?

“The whole town was chanting with him.”

She begin sobbing, laughing in between.

...

“He was a hero. He made us believe”

...

“It’s because of you, Tyra.” The grandfather replies.

...

“He traveled across the galaxy, fighting, surviving, all because of you.”

“If he didn’t have anyone waiting back home for him, there’s no chance he would’ve done what he did for this planet.”

Tyra smiles, tears turning from sour to sweet.

“You married a good man, Tyra.”

“Thanks, pop.”

The two hug on the swinging bench, still waiting.

“I should tell Desto what really happened to him on Neptune.” Tyra says.

“...What have you been telling him?” The grandfather asks.

“Nothing.” Tyra says, disappointed in herself. “Every time he

asks me I change the subject.”

“...I think it’s time he knew.”

“That’s a start.”

“You think he’ll understand the whole truth eventually?” Tyra asks.

“...Eventually. Gotta give it time, is all.”

---

The boy runs back out of the house, dragging his blanket behind him.

“There’s the little monster!” The grandfather shouts.

The grandfather picks up the squirming little boy, setting him down on his lap.

“Alright boy, keep an eye out. It should be here any moment.”

“How big is that moon Pop pop?” The boy asks, sparkles in his eyes.

“Aww, aint that big, son. Not enough to be called a PLANET, that’s for sure.”

“I wanna grab it.” Begs the boy, reaching out with his little tentacle.

“Nuh, uh, uh. Remember son.” Said the grandfather.

Sigh “I know I know.” The boy folds his arms again.

“We only go after the BIG ones.” Reminds the grandfather. This time his tone of voice was odd. Strangely...vindictive.

The boy starts frowning. “Why only the big ones, Pop Pop?”

“Well son, sometimes in life you wanna be big. So you try to be as big as you can, only to be told...you aint big enough...”

His voice darkens, turning almost hateful.

“Sometimes...you just gotta show ‘em all how big you RE-ALLY are.”

As soon as he finishes his sentence, Giant shadows are cast over the plains, directing the grandfather and the boy’s attention towards the sky.

“Look son, they’re here! They’re about to take off!”

Hovering over the vast plains, high above the sky, sits a gargantuan armada of spaceships, armed from stern to bow with all sorts of artillery weapons and shields.

Brandished on the side of these mighty spacecrafts is a name. A name dreaded by many across the Milky Way. The last thing a poor soul sees before their planet is taken under their vicious wing.

The name was the Plutonian Conquest Manifesto. PCM.

From the bow of the largest ship stands their leader, who begins speaking to his citizens below on an intercom with a booming, powerful voice.

“MY FELLOW PLUTONIANS, today is a day to be written in history books of all kinds.”

“After endless years and cycles, conquering the planets of the Milky Way who dare refuse to give back our coveted title of the tenth planet of the Solar System, we arrive at the final front.”

“EARTH.”

The cries and cheers of thousands ring out across Pluto as a photograph of Earth is displayed to the masses. Families embrace one another, couples kiss, glasses full of liquor clink together, and officials across the planet applause, both for the dead and for the ones here to see the day.

“At long last, we shall storm the stratosphere of the planet, bring down I-AY-YOU, and reclaim what was once ours!”

They seem to be talking about the International Astronomical Union, only they don't really know what the acronym means.

“If they won't grant us the title, we shall take it ourselves!”

The citizens of Pluto begin to chant.

“WE'RE THE TENTH”

“WE'RE THE TENTH”

“WE'RE THE TENTH”

To Pluto, it was a night of triumph and victory to celebrate for eons to come. To the rest of the galaxy, it was a deadly omen of what waits for them if they dare to oppose the mighty dwarf

planet once more.

## **Dosis Diaria**

**Yabel.AC**

Una mitad de dosis letal  
Con una entera de felicidad  
Cediendo a la dopamina artificial

Pensamientos que controlan la realidad  
Una sonrisa que ilumina a los demás  
Faltante de alegría real

Una mitad de dosis letal  
Con una y media de felicidad  
Sobreviviendo de lo artificial

# I Have my Mother's Eyes

Anzie Borrealus-Soria

I have my mother's eyes  
Large and wide and bulging and strange  
Pop out of my skull to survey the terrain  
The things that I scope hope I don't look again

I have my mother's eyes  
Pleading and pious and awkwardly pitiful  
The first to be noticed- by god it's criminal  
How two curt curiosities can get caught on my face  
Devoid of all reason, rejecting all chaste

I have my mother's eyes  
Reaching towards the end of time  
Why did you do it?  
Skin me alive

I have my mother's eyes  
She sits on her swing, on her dock in our yard  
To stare so abysmal is her passionate art  
Vast and brooding and violently solemn

Trapped in her gaze- the flooding of Sodom  
The waters rush through like heaven's elixir  
Drink from it, girl, I think it'll fix her

I have my mother's eyes  
Submit to her gaze, submit through your teeth  
Submit to sweet, penetrative authority  
A moral compass from which there's no hiding  
She's broken her back, it's your fault she's crying

I have my mother's eyes  
They make seldom friends, they make seldom enemies  
Brought me to the flame, where I'm doused in dark Hennessy  
Beaten me black and purple and blue  
Bloodied and bruised and quaking and pounding  
The Sybarite's breath is mine, and I'm dying  
Though nothing is certain, this much is true  
The resentment you harbor is earned, absolute

I have my mother's eyes  
They laugh and they shrink and they shut and they cry  
"You look just like your mother?"- the comment is sly  
For I really can't help it, the look of deep longing

A great love, a great plight, this thing we share common

## **Fallen Memories**

**Andrea Wright**

Why do you cry,  
For something old?  
Why do you mourn,  
Something that's no more?

It's all in the past  
Distant memory fade,  
Yet, it's still here  
Fresh in my brain

The years seem to pass by  
Yet, the minutes drift  
The memory stays  
Freshly pressed in my brain

With a bit wear and tear  
It's nothing new...

Yet  
tears still fall

# Versus in the Murks

Ambrose Fletcher

I have no love for the Enduring Winds. The Murks to those who came by, poked our home, and was soon stung by the endless spears of storm.

Those people, those foreigners, never stay long. Too wet, they yell. Too barbaric, they cry. Too hard to navigate, they complain.

I don't whine about that, so I feel different from them. Different enough.

What I whine about is how everyone here feels like fighting. For so much thunder and so much flooding and so much vast thicket, I might think that many won't fight. They don't care.

My people see a man with a sword and they think to prove themselves a better, more honorable warrior. The nomad foreign-

ers see a man with a sword and they think to prove a point of why the bow is better. The 'settled' foreigners see a man with a sword and they think to show how plated armor beats wooden. The 'trading' foreigners see a man with a sword and they think to ask him his buying price.

Like any would trade their one weapon in the Murks.

Currently, I deal with the 'settled.' Whatever makes them more 'settled' than us who decide to stay in the same place, in the same storm, in the same thicket, in the same fields, in the same drab green, and in the same so much more is beyond me.

I argue the 'settled' are less settled than us since they keep leaving their place. They go, they conquer a city, a castle, a village, and then they make that their new home. Then their kids do the same. Then their kids' kids. Then their kids' kids' kids.

This man, he approaches me looking like some bonesnarl - mastiff to the 'settled' - who just found his favorite spot for shitting. But he looks silly. His armor is orange - not because it was painted but because it got rusted.

"Why don't we take this outside, Fang," he ribbits with his groggy voice, clearly drunken with dreams. Dreams of getting a trophy. The croaks also come from the drink I threw in his face. Bits of leaf and seed dripped down his helmet. I bet also in his face and cheek but I couldn't see that. Only his eyes which were a gross black.

He called me a Fang, an obvious sign of a foreigner who did

no learning. He sees me with my blade, with my hairdo, and thinks me a man of the emperor. He is mistaken. I serve no lord, no king, no general, and certainly no emperor.

You can tell a Fang by their three blue stripes - made of a paint that does not wash away. You can also tell by their masked face and uniform look. You cannot tell if a Fang is a man or a woman. It is meant to be for they are neither once they become a Fang. A man's nor a woman's teeth differ, so why should the emperor's Fangs differ?

"Why don't we," I speak hoarsely, my voice worn and tired. I speak once I could smell his breath through his helmet. It was like metal. I do not think he ever took his helmet off. Maybe it was stuck to his face. The rust might have made it so.

I got up and saw his friends surround me. Each had breath like his. Unwashed and like metal. Others around saw it too. One yelled up, I didn't hear it but I knew her to be help. I knew since the two backed a pace.

I followed the man and his friends went away. They followed us too but no longer so close as before. I had space.

The outside was always known. The rain grew loud, the ground became mush, the cloths were blown, and the body started to get slick. The two friends went further away as the man twisted on his foot.

The twist was a spectacle. He slipped on the mud, his heavy boot sank deep, and his holding stance for sparring trembled. The

plate metals he wore even began to form small little ponds. Each as a weight for him.

I once asked a foreigner why they wore so much - they said it protected them. But you don't slice the armor. You slice the wrist, the back of the knee, the inner elbow, the neck, and so much more. The foreigner said nothing slices through a chain something and that sounds right. I forget the something but I know it goes around the neck. So you chop the hand and make them bleed. They die eventually.

This man had a chain something I think. There was chains around his neck. If that foreigner was right, then I could not cut there.

“Are you going to fight, Fang?” the man yelled.

I shrugged and stood simply. Right foot forward, the blade upheld around the waist, and with shoulders squared. My mother called it the ‘Intro.’ My mother said that conflict was a song. She is right and I can show it.

I did not twist as a spectacle. My sandals skidded with the mud, not against. I was not heavy and did not sink. I needed not shake from all the weight and sound and thrusting of rain. My wooden plates had curves. Little ponds could not be in them. My straw hat rolled rain away from my eyes.

The man was smirking. You can tell by the body. His chest cowered inward, prideful of the armor. His head hung high, unmoving and focusing through all that rust and rain.

He perhaps fought men like me outside this land. Many ‘settled’ and nomads mock our armor and customs. But then they fall in the Murks. Perhaps they should stay out. Then they do not fall. Perhaps we should stay in, but then we have too much fighting amongst ourselves. Makes us, makes me, want to leave.

The man came forward and I brought my right foot back and swung my blade high to collide with his. There was a way to hold the sword - firm but not too and loose but not too. Too firm and the body goes with the blade. Too light and the blade goes away from the body.

With right foot back, hands high, and blade ringing, I did what mother called the ‘Verse.’ With the sound of harsh, scraping metal, I brought my blade down along his and lightly tapped for his hand. To test his rusty armor. He shook back, glops of mud tearing off of the road with his metal boots.

He was slow - too much weight from rain, too little give from armor, and too much slippery from mud. The metal gloves were also tough. I couldn’t punch through.

In the motions, I brought the right foot forward and then darted back – the ‘Refrain.’ Draw, strike, draw. To be repeated.

Another ‘Verse’ came as I slipped back with a hop to block off haphazard, but strong, slashes. Each sent a chilling buzz down my spine and I knew the man was putting all his weight behind himself.

Another ‘Refrain’ came as I stepped forward with right foot,

struck at the armguard to test length, and sunk back to left foot forward to repeat another 'Verse' against his riposte.

I felt certain. Mother would say now is the 'Chorus' and I teetered on whether I wanted this song long or short. I decided short, I was getting hungry.

'Verse, Verse, Refrain, Verse,' and now 'Chorus.' I held the blade high and swung quickly low with a fake strike. The man moved up to block, his eyes surely covered by rain. I struck past the blade, not wanting to meet it. He lumbered in my opening, swinging low and I dove forward with my blade scraping terribly against his. It gave me time and stopped my death from coming too soon. From there, I let go and had the man's blade fall behind me. I drove downward with my blade before turning to face him. I left a slash at the inner elbow. Blood escaped from his leathers and I watched as the man's sword clambered for the better target as I recovered from my attack. That better target was my neck.

Both feet stretched wide, one hand finally letting go of the grip and grasping the blade, and the tightest grasp I could muster. All combined to allow me the 'Bridge' and stop my head from being cut.

I gritted. He probably grimaced as his helmet looked down at the dripping blood. I would need another 'Chorus.' I backed up to re-enter the 'Verse' and stop a second wayward slash.

He growled some words. I didn't care to hear them. He began his haphazard song again. Random 'Verses' and 'Refrains.' No purpose. No direction. I kept a steady beat. Foot forward, foot back,

strike, draw, strike. My beat only was messed with when I got an accidental 'Chorus' by hitting his wrist. More blood drawn.

The 'Chorus' made me prideful. And soon we entered what mother called 'Pre-Chorus.' That repeat of being struck and striking. The trading of blood onto blades. Both would wash away in the rain but it sapped me. I could only get light jabs and taps here. Each strike sent a scar to be kept across my hand, my arm, and my torso.

Soon, the man believed him well and sent a powerful, ringing strike. It stopped rain with its blow and forced me into 'Bridge' after 'Bridge.' Soon I decided to cut, to send my right foot forward with the 'Refrain' and tap again at the wrist.

So came the next 'Chorus.' 'Verse, Verse, Refrain, Verse.' I held my blade low as the man was made wide. I dove forward and he brought his blade up quickly. It kept mine down but I cared little. I wanted to push. And I did so. He took a step back. I stepped back. Two more strikes at his unable blocks. Each hit exposed flesh and brought up blood.

He, dying, threw one final powerful blow and I set into 'Bridge.' Feet in line and far apart, hands doing the same, and blades ringing. I scraped off, stepped aside from collapsing blade, and cut his hand. I stepped forward, right foot less than a pace from him and cut more.

I heard the mud glopping sound of approaching others. His friends. I went quicker, twice I cut across the chest to get rid of it, once across the torso to make him fold, and once across each

back knee to make him fall. I twisted the blade and stabbed into the eye hole of his armor. The strikes made what mother called the 'Finale.'

His friends caught and I ran two paces before they could hit me. He fell and his friends yelled. I bowed. The song was finished.

"Leave," I yell, "and stop bothering."

"We'll get you for this," they yell back. A promise they won't keep. So I think.

They pick up the dead man and stalk away. I have no love for the Enduring Winds. It is a swamp. It is an enduring storm. It never ends. The thicket grows everywhere. The floods kill once a day. All must slow for the mud. The emperor is vile. His lords sometimes worse and sometimes better.

But it is home. And I won't give it away.

# So Desired, And Yet So Feared

Luis Zavala

Love is so feared  
It's everybody's wish  
Even though it may be weird

It's a growing itch  
If left unattended  
With time it will become  
A everyday flinch

We are left with more  
Answers that bears  
One more question  
Why is it so desired?

## Swan at Sunset



*Acrylic Paint*  
*Rachel Hopkin*

# Still I Rise from the Ashes

Michael Paris

I was basically told at the age of twenty-two “you have no value to the world” and lost any real hope that my life was of any real value. I have been in prison for close to two decades and I was twenty-two when I came to prison. I was sentenced to sixty-one years to life—a de facto life sentence with no real chance for parole...no real chance to make an impact on society. I made a terrible decision that brought me to prison and that is something that I have had to own. It resulted in a young man losing his life because of me. I’ve always regretted that terrible choice that I made but there was nothing that I could do that would change the result, no matter how much I wish that I could. My grandmother who I lived with during high school would ask me, “What are you doing in there? Do they offer any classes to educate yourself?” and I would say, “No only general education classes”. I would just

watch television or go to the yard and sort of see myself rotting away because as the years started to go by I had no real purpose or much motivation. I was pretty much going to spend the rest of my life in prison and that's how I saw things.

In 2022 I got enrolled in my first college course which was delayed by a few years because of the pandemic. I was nervous because I had not been in a classroom in over twenty years. Would I be able to do the work and be able to pass the class? The Professor was amazing. She gave me really good feedback and helped me whenever I needed it and because of her belief in me she helped me to start to believe in myself. I got a B in the class.

This semester I am full time in two different colleges and on my way to getting an AA degree. Who knows... maybe a bachelor's degree down the road! The reason that I and other inmates are able to be in college is because of grants including the California Promise Act. The Restorative Justice program has not only given me but other inmates the feeling of being human again and not feeling like just another number. I now have real purpose and value. Feelings that I can make it because I feel that I can now be something other than my worst choice. If I continue on this journey, I can be a college graduate—something that until now I did not think was possible because most people go to college after they graduate high school or soon after. I did not because at that time I did not believe in myself enough to think that I was college material. I didn't think that I was capable of going to college let alone be able to graduate.

My journey took me down a different path, one where I chose

“Blind Loyalty” because of my desire for acceptance. I wanted my peers to accept me and at that time I was willing to do whatever it took to prove that to them, which led me to make poor impulsive decisions. In 2004 I was involved in a gang related homicide which resulted in a young man losing his life because of my reckless choice. Over the years I have had so much time to reflect on that terrible choice I made. The impact it had not only on both of our lives, his being cut short and mine going to prison.

I know that after many years of therapy and working with some really wonderful clinicians that they were able to help me process not only how I ended up in prison but to understand my story coming from a broken home, going to more schools than I could count, and never being able to find a true home or place I felt that I belonged. All I ever knew was chaos and dysfunction and never really felt that I mattered or was enough, so I just allowed myself to believe this narrative it was my “core belief” that I had developed. In 2012 while in the hole, a housing unit that is separated from the rest of the prison, I met Dr, Bressi. She helped me to see that I was more than what I had come to believe about myself. Her empathy for my story really helped me to begin to heal from all the trauma I had experienced. Over the years I would continue to meet really wonderful clinicians who would continue to help me grow as a person and help me believe in myself and that I could still be able to fulfill my full potential which now includes me being able to go to college and graduate with a degree and being able to get out of prison. I think that one of my game changing moments in my journey came when a clinician asked me why I wanted to change. She asked me to really think about this because

she said, “People really don’t begin to really change until they are tired of going through the same “shit”.” This really resonated with me because I was tired of blaming others and not taking responsibility for my actions. I wanted to change because I wanted more for myself, and I knew things needed to change if I was ever going to reach my full potential.

This journey of mine had had many different twists and turns, highs and lows, plenty of heartbreak, and yet by the grace of God I am still here and so thankful that I can still make an impact not only on my life but on the younger generation so that they don’t repeat the same mistakes I made. When we are young, we think we know it all, we don’t listen to others who try to help us because we think we know it all. We don’t think about the long-term effects or consequences that our choices we make will have on our future. I am so thankful that I am alive to still leave a mark and redefine my legacy and impact on future generations.

The Restorative Justice Program can help all of us know we can earn a degree and with that degree hopefully one day not only get out of prison but leave a legacy and be able to give back to society. I believe that is the real meaning of restoration—to restore and be able to leave a mark for the next generation so that they don’t make the same mistakes we made. I am thankful to all the people who are making this possible and the professors who treat us as people in their classes. I know that not everyone will take advantage of this program, and there will likely be obstacles that come up, it is my belief that there will be more success than failures because of the vision and drive that many of us will have;

thanks to those who have essentially bet on us. To those who have doubts that this program will not work or feel that we don't deserve this chance, I say let's show them that this will not only work but will be the future of corrections. Let's make them proud of us and to all that have helped make this vision a reality: thank you for your belief and support. . . we will not let you down. I know that my journey is far from over and some might say just beginning.

## **Sueños de una Aventura**

**Yabel.AC**

En un avión en camino a donde  
Una maleta llena de miedos  
Y un paso hacia la incertidumbre

Sola en sus pensamientos  
Con Un nuevo comienzo  
Y un amor soñado

Llena de talentos  
Sin saber cual es el correcto para ella  
Buscando el clímax de su vida

Una aventura

## Contributors

PAMELA YAHIEL ALARCÓN-CASTELLON (YAHIEL.AC) is a Latina woman born and raised in San Diego. She's currently a psychology student at San Diego State University. She is hoping to get her masters in sports psychology and work with professional athletes. She enjoys writing poetry from others' life experiences that can connect with different individuals.

EMMANUEL ALEJANDRO RAMIREZ-BURGOS is an art student at Southwestern Community College.

OMAR ARVIZU is a writer from Tijuana, Mexico. He attends to Southwestern College as an English Major. He is planning to become a screenwriter. He is a horror and sci-fi enthusiast. He enjoys writing both fiction and non-fiction.

ANZIE BORREALUS- SORIA is a writer from the Central Valley of California. She is majoring in Art History and has found love and pleasure here in San Diego being surrounded by talented, young artists and other creatives. She hopes the reader can filter her work through their own contexts and perspective and find new meaning, which is what she enjoys most about creating.

MARCEL BRUNELLE is a part of SWC's Restorative Justice Program that offers college to currently incarcerated individuals. Making good use of time meant to punish, Marcel is working toward earning an associate degree in business administration.

KATELYN CASILLAS (AMELIE KAT) has lived in San Diego most my life and hopes to one day travel as much as she can. Right now, she is studying to become a psychologist but still testing her place. This is her first time publishing a piece, who knows maybe writing is her next endeavor.

AMANDA CHAPMAN (AGC) is an artist exploring their style through different mediums while learning and gaining inspiration from those around them and their experiences in this little life.

ABEL ESCOBEDO is a writer originally from Tijuana. They're currently working on getting an Associate's for Transfer Degree at Southwestern College in Computer Science. The short stories they write serve the purpose of being an outlet and are usually self-reflective.

AMBROSE FLETCHER is a student at Southwestern Community College with a major in Political Science. When he isn't being boring and inconsequential as the worst human being, he does have the more active hobby of creative writing. Often, he will spend his free time either reading and thinking up potential ideas for literary expression and immersing into a fantastical world of spirits, myths, humans, monsters, and demons.

SAMANTHA GONZALES (SUHMUNTU) is an aspiring teacher and a hobbyist writer/artist. She attends Southwestern College with the plan to pursue English as her major. Her creations revolve around fantasy and nature, with Christian inspirations. Her content can be found under the alias Suhmuntu. She enjoys writing and drawing as her main hobbies. Her goal is to become a teacher and

being able to implement all of her creativity into her future career.

CAROLINA GONZALEZ LLAMAS is a binational writer who had the opportunity to present her poetry at the Centro Cultural Tijuana (CECUT) in Mexico to speak up about indigenous communities. As well as the chance to be one of the published poets of the Vagabond from the former year. Now, she looks forward to transferring to SDSU and becoming an English teacher.

M.G. GORMAN is a student at Southwestern College going into their sophomore year, studying chemistry. Although born and raised in Virginia Beach, they are now studying in Southern California. M.G. Gorman is the author of six self-published novels ranging in genre from science-fiction to fantasy. They have been writing fiction for four years, but poetry since February 2023.

SEBASTIAN HERNANDEZ is a contemporary artist from Tijuana - San Diego. He goes to Southwestern College as an Art Major. He enjoys experimenting with mediums and he is not scared to go beyond the boundaries of what is art.

RACHEL HOPKINS has been writing and illustrating since she was five years old. She resides in Chula Vista, California, and attends Southwestern College as an English major. She plans to get her ADT in English and Studio Arts. Rachel plans to transfer to San Diego State University to get her master's and teach literature and art at the college level. In her free time, she writes and illustrates children's stories and young-adult stories and hopes that one day, she will have her young-adult novel published.

A.J. HUGO is a Psychology major at Southwestern College from Tijuana. This writer's goals are to pursue a career in Therapy and continue practicing creative writing as a way of transmitting inner emotions through prose or poetry.

PATRICK KUNKEL is a part of SWC's Restorative Justice Program that offers college to currently incarcerated individuals. Making good use of time meant to punish, Patrick is working toward earning an associate degree in business administration.

ELECTRA LOPEZ is an artist from Ensenada, Baja California. Her preferred medium of art is alcohol marker and colored pencil on paper, but lately she has been working with oil paint to make vibrant clowns come to life.

ARANZA MARTINEZ is a Mexican-American writer and painter who is currently studying at Southwestern College to become an Elementary school teacher; one of her dreams is to bring that same passion she has for art to all her future students. She is a very passionate and diligent student who enjoys writing and creating art pieces tied to who she is and what she values most; she enjoys writing stories about fictitious worlds and lives, yet keeps herself and her own experiences at the heart of it all.

ISIAH MOSCARE is a poet from San Diego. He is currently attending Southwestern College as a Creative Writing Major. He is planning on becoming a teacher to help usher in a generation of young men not only unafraid to express their emotions but revel in it as well.

MICHAEL PARIS is a part of SWC's Restorative Justice Program that offers college to currently incarcerated individuals. Making good use of time meant to punish, Michael is working toward earning an associate degree in business administration.

NOAH PARTIDA (OMICRUD) is a second-semester student at Southwestern College. While he's undecided on a major, he's considered taking a major in language arts and has a huge knack for fictional storytelling. He enjoys writing short stories focused on science fiction and fantasy that play with universal ideas.

MICHAEL PEREZ is a part of SWC's Restorative Justice Program that offers college to currently incarcerated individuals. Making good use of time meant to punish, Michael is working toward earning an associate degree in business administration.

JOHNNY RAMSEY is a part of SWC's Restorative Justice Program that offers college to currently incarcerated individuals. Making good use of time meant to punish, Johnny is working toward earning an associate degree in business administration.

HEBER RIOS is an aspiring writer from San Diego, California. He currently attends Southwestern Community College as an English Major. He hopes to one day earn a PHD and teach at the university level. He hopes to one day travel the world and write novels on the side.

EDGAR SANCHEZ is an artist from San Diego, California. He attends Southwestern Community College as an Architecture Major. He is planning to transfer to a University to get a Bachelors

and eventually design homes and buildings. He enjoys painting landscapes, animals, still lifes with dynamic colors and art that calls to him.

NEIL STORM STEPHANY is a part of SWC's Restorative Justice Program that offers college to currently incarcerated individuals. Making good use of time meant to punish, Neil is working toward earning an associate degree in business administration.

DANA VILLAFANA is a writer residing in San Diego, California. They are an English and Communication major at Southwestern Community College. They write short stories and novels, usually in the paranormal, fantasy, or sci-fi genres, with a focus on the human condition.

VIMARIEVIE is a poet and dancer. Her creative journey has been featured in the Literary Journal *The Vagabond*. Currently, on the brink of publishing her debut poetry book, Vimarievie's passion for words and movement fuels her ambition to explore new avenues in the literary world. She aspires to venture into ghostwriting and pursue an editorial role within a publishing company. Vimarievie is poised to make a significant impact in literature and storytelling beyond.

CHLOE K. WILLIAMS is a writer residing in the San Diego area. This is Chloe's last semester here at SWC. She will ultimately be obtaining her MLIS and pursuing her dream career as an Information Specialist Librarian. She loves writing (poetry especially) to express beautiful and meaningful feelings with others. Fun and peculiar fact, Chloe performs etymology on the words she uses.

ANDREA WRIGHT (A.W.) is a Mexican-American writer based in San Diego, California. She is currently attending Southwestern Community College and plans on pursuing a Ph.D. in Veterinary Medicine and an MFA in creative writing. She expresses herself through poetry, fiction, and songwriting and has dabbled a little in playwriting. She loves to go out and explore nature and is an avid nature photographer. She's currently a Biology major with minors in English and Psychology at Southwestern College. She enjoys writing and focusing on the beauty of the duality between the good and bad of reality.

LUIS ZAVALA is a student at Southwestern College. He's double majoring in Journalism and Literature. He enjoys writing poetry as well as listening to music and has a passion for reading.

JOSE ZUNIGA is a writer based in San Diego, California. He is currently attending Southwestern Community College and plans on pursuing an MFA in creative writing. He likes writing fiction with a focus on finding beauty in the mundane.

This literary magazine was brought to you by our Southwestern Community College's writing club, The Other Writers Guild. The Other Writers Guild was created in the spring semester of 2008 by a group of students who were eager to write and wished to have a forum in which to show their work. The club has been committed to offering an open platform for members to show ideas and work in an environment that is comfortable and that offers positive feedback.

Anyone who attends our school and has any interest in creative writing is welcomed and encouraged to join. If you are interested or want more information please contact us at:

[swccreativewriting@gmail.com](mailto:swccreativewriting@gmail.com)

visit us on our official blog

[www.theotherwritersguild.blogspot.com](http://www.theotherwritersguild.blogspot.com)

or visit our linktree

[linktr.ee/theotherwritersguild](http://linktr.ee/theotherwritersguild)

Once again thank you for your continued support.

The Art Club emphasizes the importance of socializing and getting to know the community of fellow artists that also attend Southwestern College. Our activities and events welcome artists of all skill levels and professions to explore mediums outside of their comfort zone. We also offer opportunities to venture into gallery and market spaces and explore the processes that go into their preparation. Any prospective members are free to join meetings at anytime as well as are encouraged to join our social media chats!

If you are interested in joining the club, please join us or message us through any of our socials on our website

<https://linktr.ee/swcartclub>



<b>Yahel.AC</b>	<b>Electra Lopez</b>
<b>Emmanuel Alejandro Ramirez</b>	<b>Aranza Martinez</b>
<b>Omar Arvizu</b>	<b>Isaiah Moscare</b>
<b>Anzie Borrealus-Soria</b>	<b>Michael Paris</b>
<b>Marcel Brunelle</b>	<b>Noah Partida (Omicrud)</b>
<b>Amelie Kat</b>	<b>Michael Perez</b>
<b>AGC</b>	<b>Johnny Ramsey</b>
<b>Abel Escobedo</b>	<b>Heber Rios</b>
<b>Ambrose Fletcher</b>	<b>Edgar Sanchez</b>
<b>Samantha Gonzales</b>	<b>Neil Storm Stephany</b>
<b>Carolina Gonzalez Llamas</b>	<b>Dana Villafana</b>
<b>M.G. Gorman</b>	<b>Vimarievie</b>
<b>Sebastian Hernandez</b>	<b>Chloe K. Williams</b>
<b>Rachel Hopkins</b>	<b>Andrea Wright</b>
<b>AJ Hugo</b>	<b>Luis Zavala</b>
<b>Patrick Kunkel</b>	<b>Jose Zuniga</b>

