

StartleBloom

THE GCU LITERARY REVIEW

VOLUME 7

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Cor Mortuum

PAIGE WALKER, COLORADO SPRINGS, CO

CLASS OF 2022

It wasn't the shrill flurry of the flutes
Like black butterflies as they flitted amongst the
Searing waves of the sun, burned alive
Crushed under the constant beat of footsteps
All marching aimlessly to the same end.
It wasn't the constant rumble of the low brass
Always drumming through the soul
Vibrating within,
The swells larger than any ocean can boast.
It wasn't the surges of the trumpets and saxophones
Chirping and slurring their songs above
The rest. Brass band colored scarlet.
No, it was the idea that every part had to
Work in sync. In time, rhythm, or rhyme,
Either way, I know one day
The band that plays deep within
That everlasting song in my chest
Will one day have a curtain call,
And once the ruby red curtains fall
That is when the song will end.

Dark Days in Oz

KENZIE ANKENBRANDT, LANCASTER, CA

CLASS OF 2022

As days grow darker
The mindless husk moves with no direction
The empty tin shell feels nothing under his deathly weight
The pathetic feline too scared to make a sound
As you hit the gas and send us propelling forward
The darkness ever so welcoming
As for the lonely girl
She gave up her dreams of returning home
For her home was swept up in the terrible tornado
Taking with it, her ruby red heart.

Colored Optical Illusion

ETERNITY G. BLEU, DALLAS, TX

CLASS OF 2026



Sestina (Painting Mother)

THELMA CURRY, MEMPHIS, TN

CLASS OF 2021

I always liked to paint.
At the end of the day, I'd have it all over my hands
My favorite thing to paint was my mother
I used the softest of colors
to show her timeless beauty
like that of a cloudless sky.

As I got older, I used different colors
because the features changed on my mother.
As she got older, time changed her beauty
There were now clouds in the sky.
She never liked to see her hands.
Maybe I should have used softer paint.

Now that I am a mother
and as the storm brews in the sky
my daughter likes to paint
me with vibrant colors.
I ask her not to harden my hands.
She swears by their beauty.

Wrinkle-free, the love of a mother
Beauty is always her colors.
If your daughter likes to paint
you then allow her hands
to make memories of your beauty
even as the rain falls from the sky.

I still like to paint
but long has been gone, my mother.
I hold on to the colors
of her beauty.
They awaken memories of her soft hands.
My kids ask if she now lives in the sky.

What do I paint
now, you ask? Beauty.
It's all around. The colors
of my mother
often fall from the sky.
With them, I wet my hands.

I never stop seeing the colors of my mother
etched in time like that of a purple sunset in the sky.
The things that are made of beauty.

So Long, Blue Jay

ADRIANNA N. LONG, PHOENIX, AZ

CLASS OF 2022

Out an open window the blue jay flew;
Behind, his empty cage upon the floor.
His escape so abrupt, we never knew
He would be leaving. We expected more.
Months have faded by. That cage laid to rest;
Its emptiness echoing across days.
Pondering if this is just life's cruel jest
And soon we shall awaken from this daze.
Though, that abandoned pen, for us a loss,
Treasured blessing for that delinquent bird.
He built his nest upon the sacred cross;
A joyous foreshadowing in the Word.

Feathers warmed by the Sun, free, soaring high.

It is but a momentary goodbye.

Amongst the Twin Moons

BELLINGER NEALY, LITCHFIELD PARK, AZ

CLASS OF 2022

The twin moons stretch across a dusty blue sky, shrouded behind snowy peaks and calming clouds. Streaks of purple, orange, and pink cascade around their orbit. The towering oaks reached for the last rays of the sun peeking above the summit. A darkened figure stands before the greater moon with eyes brighter than the sky. From miles away I could feel it glaring at me with sorrowful jealousy. It bellowed a strangely harmonious tune as its body contorted in an inhuman fashion. Its body dissipated into the cool evening breeze as its eyes took their place beside the twin moons.

An Existence Adrift

BELLINGER NEALY, LITCHFIELD PARK, AZ

The gavel slammed upon his desk, rippling against my quiet heart. Hushed compliments were shared to my left while a panel of twelve glared at me in disgust. One by one the spectators departed with uncaring eyes. I was alone with my judgment and family, their wailing breaking the silence. The overhanging lights flashed. My hands were spotted and wrinkled, and my joints felt weak to the touch. I looked to my family, my elderly younger sister all that remained. 50 years of my life gone in a flash, and I never even did it.

Destination Nowhere

JESSICA CARPENTER-WELLS, CHANDLER, AZ

CLASS OF 2023



Penny

ASHLEY KLASSEN, BLAINE, WA
CLASS OF 2023

Leave a penny on my grave
Just a cent and nothing more
Come and sit beside my tombstone
On the rocky western shore

Lay a coin upon my resting place
Some copper for my rent
Put your penny on my catacomb
And call it change well spent

Tell me stories, tell me wonders
Teach me things I never knew
Tell the ground I'm resting under
How the grass above it grew

Talk of faeries, talk of princes
Talk of common earthly woes
Tell the moving clouds above me
How your favorite poem goes

Share your worries, share your doubts
Speak the thoughts that plague your mind
Let the weight fall off your chest
And leave your troubles far behind

With your deepest secrets shared
And your conscious feeling well
Take that penny resting near
And listen close to what I tell

Find a child looking troubled
With two eyes all filled with tears
Wearing rags made out of sadness
Looking old beyond her years

See her smile made of fiction
And her laughter sewn from lies
And the joy within her face
That just can't seem to reach her eyes

Take that penny from my gravestone
With that perfect penny shine
And pay a penny for her thoughts
Because it's no use hearing mine

What the Forest Witnesses

LIZZY ESPARZA, CORONA, CA

CLASS OF 2021

A young blonde woman catches her breath, laying her callused hand on an ancient oak tree.

As she inhaled, all around her life was forming.

Laurels whispered as they witnessed the movement of many creatures, big and small.

As she halted, life was flourishing.

A crackling in the distance indicated the hatching of blue jay babies.

As she fell, life was starting.

There was a gentle breath of wind pushing pollen through the forest.

As her eyes glazed over, life was happening.

Greenery surrounded her, yet never warned her she wasn't alone.

As the forest exhaled, life was ending.

For Grandpa, 1927-2021

TARA KING, ALBUQUERQUE, NM

CLASS OF 2022

Heaven is a place made for people like you,
because Heaven is like the Garden you kept
with endless hours of care in every bud and blossom,
every tone and taste of green and sweet.

Without the calluses and cuts,
or the bugs and blight that chew through-
all will be perfect, alongside you.

Heaven is a place made for people like you,
because Heaven is like the Music you sang,
with worshipful verses and faithful lyrics,
songs sung with and of an endless love.

Without a single sour note,
or one sentiment off-tempo-
all will perfect, as you already know.

Heaven is a place made for people like you,
because Heaven is like the Homes you helped make,
with sturdy foundations, cornerstones,
tables that always have enough space.

Without one cold or lonely room,
or any creaky floors or doors-
all will be perfect, and now it's eternally yours.

I'll miss you till I meet you there,
but for now, all I can do,
is tend the Garden, play the Music,
and warm the Home loved by you-
reflecting the love
of the place made for you.

Draped Cross

EMILY DIETLER, AUBURN, CA

CLASS OF 2024



Battleground

JIMMY DANIEL, REDLANDS, CA

CLASS OF 2024

My mind is a battleground, my thoughts they just rattle 'round. They try and pull me down, treading water like I'm gonna drown. They say I'm not worth it, that I should give up and quit. It's like I'm running in place, can't keep up with the pace. But I've been saved by His grace. So any mountain I face, a new path will I trace. I'll never give up nor will I quit, because this new life of mine's lit. I'll reach up and take that crown, I'll be that bride and wear that gown. Speak up and make a sound, because my mind is a battleground.

Oh! lovely Brigantia, where have you been?

D.E. FRÜH, COLORADO SPRINGS, CO

CLASS OF 2022

With only a gentle stroke,
the personal becomes the universal;
a threadbare zoetrope in a child's room,
spinning still
even when the children are grown and gone,
pilgrimaged to the womb
or to the ash or the smoke.
And when we can again see
through the darkly lighted night
or the forest, with tall brilliant trees,
or into the half lighted sky, with little blots of bright Hope
being birthed and dying in each passing moment;
And when we can again hear
over the sound of bombs and screams
or can notice the whispered pleas of a muse
long hidden behind a filmy screen;
And when we can again find
the words which allude us so,
circled in passing glances
or planned advances;
Then,
then
a new era, with the same dedicated precision, will dawn.

*Oh! lovely Brigit, most Beautiful of them all,
Where did you go these many long years?*

Bazaar

D.E. FRÜH, COLORADO SPRINGS, CO

Clipped gardenias, grilled steaks, kicked-up dirt, sweaty shirts tearing with the elapse of the day, strange and sudden moments of incense or lavender, the smells swelled to a climax, and the colours: maroon-woven dresses with little accentuations of blue running up a stitch on the side, great orange tents like the circus, cartons of mysterious purple fruits with little yellow spikes poking out alongside a delicious foreign scent, and the red, the endless blots of red hidden in every corner of the eye; the red in the gown of a woman rushing by, tugging her children along and kicking up more of the dirt, the red coming from lights strung up along the orange tents, glowing at an unknowable frequency before burning out all together in a burst, the red in the palms of children, holding desperately onto a little gift they afforded with the allowance from guardians, the red stains on crinkled little pieces of paper, thrown lovelessly away, catching on the wind and the dirt, floating along the streets of the agora like any other patron, and the red in the bloodshot eyes of many peddlers who haven't slept in weeks, and who would not sleep again until they could sell a single ware; and there was the sound, the amalgamated anarchy of screams, bells, chimes, and whispers, barely heard by the recipient but carried endlessly by the wind until one could hear the same whispered phrase an hour after it was spoken. A child jingled a bell as she whirled passed on her bicycle, her figure defined by golden braids pulled by the wind. An elderly man, low to the ground, with a basket attached to his waist, was handing out flowers freshly cut from his garden; he had parceled them out in neat piles in his open briefcase. In one hand, he held the clipped gardenias whose smell was so strong amidst the chaos, and in the other hand he jostled a wood block with hanging wind chimes, and he yelled: "Come one, come all. Flowers from the void. Smells and beauty found nowhere else!" And his neighbour, a rather fat man with a ripped shirt and stains from food found in various spots, had set up a little turquoise tent, an oddity among the orange, to sell his wife's homemade jewelry—unfortunately, his voice wasn't loud enough to attract any business. There were bicycles everywhere, and they moved towards and away with the speed of the voices, and the bells. The bells echoed. There were bells high up in the steeple, an old church with tan stucco walls beaten down by ceaseless wind and rampant vandalism, and there were bells

in the carts and carriages and on bikes and in the hands of vendors with faint voices. It was a choir of bells. I too had a bell. It was old, a present from my grandmother, an aged silver cast in four plant-like mouths that seemed to bleed out and reflect when I cupped it in my hand, and the little red band tied at the top which would slide between my fingers, swinging with my feet. I had come to the bazaar to sell my sleigh bell. But, looking around, there was little need for more bells—or the sound of more bells. I kept the bell in my jacket pocket, protected by my hand on the outside to prevent theft or accident. An older gentleman with curtain skin stopped me. He jumped out from an alley, nearly pulling over an orange tent, and grabbed onto my arm. His face was red, like Santa Claus, with his long white beard and coal eyes that had already begun to fade into the next world. His breath smelled like bourbon, and there was almost a visible cloud every time he spoke: “Could you spare some change?” I jingled around the things in my pocket; all I had was the little bell, its sound, so faint through the threads, and I wasn’t prepared to give that up yet. I had to shrug the old man off and continue down the market road. He disgruntledly stumbled back into the dark, this time tearing the orange tent and pulling out a silver support rod; as it hit the ground, there was a sounding echo, like the sound of a bell, then it settled in the dirt, rolling off the stone supports. I noticed a tall foreign woman sewing in a nearby tent. Her hands were grey, the skin no longer fit them, and as she attended to her craft, there was a sense that she was not in control of those hands. There was music coming from her tent. Another man, much less aged, was seated in the back with a harp in his lap, the wood inlay, an image of creeping vines, his fingers carefully working too, the wobbling of a string barely overwhelming the ringing of bells. I considered stopping, but the general push of the crowd drew me forward, a single white-cap current in the human river. We passed many orange tents, each with colourful characters within. There were stands with fruit, peddlers with jewelry and pendants hanging from their necks, little constructed grills releasing uncontrolled smells upon the world, a small forest constructed of fir trees ripped from the land where they were birthed and now for sale, and many thin lines weighed down by various wares, of every colour and every size, of every country, of every type of craftsmanship—juvenile and master. A certain tent snagged my coat and freed me from the current. When I entered, pushing up the low hanging orange fold, the scents caught me off guard. Piled up to the roof was a collection of exotic fruits, each with a uniquely sweet smell and original

pigmentation. As I grabbed them in my hands, the cool fruit squished and resisted, existing somewhere between firm and ripe, forming around my hand movements, cooling my palms. A woman in the back of the tent, hidden behind the fruit pile, dressed in opaque purple pieces of fabric, danced over to me; she placed her hand on mine and encouraged me to try the fruit. Her hands were warm, I felt a sharp pain shoot through my palms, the mixture of cold and warm, and I broke away, instinctually raising the fruit to my mouth, and the taste: no taste could ever compare, I thought. It was a combination of sweet and sour. There was a thin glaze of sugar and salt over the fruit, little powdered dust that rose into the air as I bit in, and the milky yellow inside of the fruit, now exposed, oozed its cool nectar into my palms, sticky, comforting. The sweetness of the fruit shifted into an exquisite sour taste as I moved it around my mouth: like an apple, like a mango, like a plum, like a banana, then like a new piece of bubblegum, the texture between soft and firm, with the juice running down my face, and as I swallowed, the cool parcels of fruit cleaned my throat, coating it in the nectar and making the air sweet and sour in shifting breathy increments. It was delicious; but not what I had really wanted. Reluctantly, I reached into my pocket, the jingle, and I gave the woman my bell, a silver cast of my dreams, my only payment. She took my dreams and she smiled.

But there was nothing like that anymore.

There were no bazaars anymore, they had been lost to time.

I let the image from my youth fade back into my memory, and I continued down the cobblestone streets, careful to look at the reflection of the moon in the shimmering water. My pockets jingled with coins as I walked. There was a little girl resting against the shore, her fingers playing in the sand. She was covered in dirt. I reached into my pocket and threw her a sixpence and she smiled.

Blue Trips

TEANI KALUHIKAUA, KAHULUI, HI
CLASS OF 2025



The Beauty of His Creation

LADONNA RHODES, THIBODAUX, LA

CLASS OF 2022



On the Nature of God

HEATHERLY JACOB, BARSTOW, CA

CLASS OF 2024

gifts from above abound
gentle breezes turning
gusty
leaves traveling in search of
a new home
transforming their purpose
hues of yellow
hues of green
put forth notes
of fall
not spring

The Three Gleaners

IRELAND FLECK, MESA, AZ

CLASS OF 2024

At dusk,
the three gleaners,
still out in the fields,
picking the last remaining harvest of that season.

Hair sweaty,
backs aching,
knees unsteady,
they still have to go on,
without anyone noticing,
or caring about their pain or suffering.

The three gleaners,
have been picking the last remaining harvest
for their whole lives,
wondering.

The Invisible

JOCELYN SANDERS, FRESNO, CA

CLASS OF 2022

You don't become invisible at birth-
invisibility is a curse,
it comes after monsters and hell
when you return to the upper crust
and become invisible to those you love.

The first step – to invisibility -
is forced hollowing then stuffing
reality into a cavernous mind.
Cotton wads shoved into gaping mouths -
forever silenced.

Then the monsters come,
when the hollowing and stuffing are done,
when straw holds fast in veins
binding you for ravenous beasts.

The monsters have their way
and take what identity is left.

With every shred gone –
you are allowed to return to friends.

Invisibility – my inevitable curse.
Though they claim to see you –
and call you spotted and pink,
an elephant on parade,
until you want you want to scream:
“I am Me! I am Me!”
yet cotton on vocal cords cuts communication
and condemns you to drift in the void
you let yourself become.

Afuera

CHRISTIAN MONTENEGRO, ELK GROVE, CA

CLASS OF 2022

Nestled between ranges of surrounding mountains lay the heart of a forgotten town. The laughter of children rang out from the crevasses of houses as they ran the streets, kicking up dust and footballs. A lone guitar player, an older man, echoed his serenades of burden to any passerby, protected by the heat of day under the awning of his family's pottery stall. Many put down their baskets to listen, and the sun fell upon their faces. The ground of dirt and dust, painted in worn brown, blew carelessly in the wind. A long-abandoned bicycle rested upon scorched earth, its wheels corroded with rust. The houses were fashioned from faded clay and cracking cement, and our clothes were smattered with earth. The irises of our eyes, the crevices of our skin, and the sweat off our brows were tanned, signs of a hard life's work. It was a land of brown.

From a young age I did not hold many prospects. I wanted to work in the fields like my brothers, but my father would not let me. Instead, I fashioned clothes, baskets, pottery, and tended to the other household tasks with my mother. I was not particularly good at this either. I could not sing, I was not found to be very pretty, and I struggled to speak. However, there was one thing I seemed to excel at, and that was daydreaming. As I worked in our house, I would often stare out, through the windows, at the green sea of trees that could be seen on the mountains in the distance. I found myself full of longing. Surely, there must be a land more vibrant than this scape of fading color. When I asked my mother about why we did not live in the mountains, she told me "From dirt we were formed, and so from dirt we live. Be thankful, these are the roots that give us life."

Sometimes, when the harvest was good, my father and some other men would take the town's mules and set out down the unbeaten paths, to sell our crop for other goods. This was a moment to always look forward to, for whenever he was going to set out for this trip, he would sit me and my brothers in our living room and ask what we all wanted from the world outside. I always had the same answer, a book. It did not particularly matter to me what the contents of the books were, as

long as there were images from places unlike our home. The words in a book gave me the freedom to live another life. I could see what the world was like from the palms of my hands; it satisfied my constant longing for color. I could feel the cool spray of the ocean, scale the coldest peaks of harsh ice-capped mountains, and talk with people whom I did not know. And so, I lived in a land of my own, where the foreign wonders of the world were daily facts of my life. Then, when new stories fell into my hands – I would devour them, reading them within the day, and then re-reading them over and over, until the binding on the books began to fall apart. Then, in seething anticipation, I would pray that next season's harvest would be bountiful.

It was on one of these trips, when I was still young, that my father brought home a book unlike any he had before. I was accustomed to the different fiction novels that filled my mind with whimsy, but on this particular occasion he brought back something much different. He preemptively apologized to me, seemingly thinking that it would not suffice as a proper gift, and then gave it to me. It was a large, thin book with a cover saturated in a hue of bright blue.

"I am sorry, Mijita," he said in a gentle tone, "The man I usually buy your books from had only this one left." He wore a gentle apologetic smile on his face as he handed it to me. I stuttered out words of gratitude in my usual clumsy manner, it made no difference to me.

It was a bird book, detailing the wide variety of exotic birds that existed throughout the world. Suddenly my small world felt even smaller. I knew the small desert birds that would pass by, stopping to steal any lone beans or maize that were left unattended. But these were entirely different, beautiful birds of every size and color – some almost as big as a person.

I spent the coming months infatuated with the collection, much to my father's delight. I flipped through the pages so frequently that my brothers would often try to quiz me about various facts of the different birds, and I would list interesting traits about them without error. However, despite my newfound extensive knowledge of birds of every kind, there was a singular species that caught my eye – and held my heart. It was called the Hermocan bird of South America. A species of bird, relatively rare, and entirely elegant. Its entire body was wrapped in blue, and it wore its feathers graciously. It was one of the longest living species of birds one can

find, with a life expectancy of around twenty years. Yet – what made it stand out among the rest was the meaning of its name. The name, roughly translated, meant “beautiful song” due to the apparently gorgeous tune it was capable of singing.

It was a creature so beautiful, I often found it singing in my thoughts. As I worked around the house, I could see it flying about the room, a rush of life behind its wings. My embroidery and sewing began to reflect my obsession, and my family soon made notice. One morning, when we were having our breakfast together, my mother mentioned it.

“Mijita, that blue bird, it has been sown into all of our decoration now...” she began, staring intently at me. I stifled my movement, although I could not ascertain any insinuation of displeasure in her voice.

“What’s its name?” I swallowed my bite, and looked up to her. “The South American Hermocan,” I said matter-of-factly, looking down to return to my meal. I could feel the exchanging of unspoken words as my brothers and parents shifted gazes with each other. It was uncommon for me to speak so assuredly about anything; even my bird quizzings with my brothers would have me stumbling over my words.

“I see.” After my mother spoke, they all returned to eating in silence, until after a moment my father spoke up.

“You like this bird?” My father asked, looking over at me as he hunched over his wooden bowl.

“I love it.” It seemed this phrase stirred some reaction inside the rest of my family, as if to say ‘Wow, the mute one is finally talking, it is a miracle!’ But my father had no such reaction. He simply stared at me longer, making unbreaking eye contact as he slowly chewed for a moment and then nodded to himself.

“All right then, next time I travel down south, I will buy you one.” The firm conviction in his voice was betrayed by the casual manner in which he returned to his food. I was taken aback – sitting frozen in my chair at the proposition, and my brothers looked much the same. There was silent protest by everyone at the table. The slight fidget of my mother and brothers was enough to know that they would be discussing this later. They all knew better than to argue such issues with my father at the table. It would have to wait for the breaks between work or the moments before sleep.

Despite the whisperings of protest in the days after that meal, my father

remained unbowed. For a reason I was unaware of, he felt determined to get me the Hermocan. For weeks I was filled with glee, completing my daily tasks with vigor as I imagined the bird that would soon inhabit our home. However, as night fell some days later, reality began to set on me. There was no doubt the cities and towns down south offered a plethora of foreign oddities that we could never have, but to procure such a rare bird, even in a city would be difficult. And not just difficult, but expensive. I began to have second thoughts. The next morning, I set out to talk to my father, and voiced that I did not think he should get the bird. He heard me out, arms crossed and head nodding the entire time. Then, once I had finished, he crouched down and simply patted me on the head, "If there is one thing you should never be apologetic for in life, Mijita, it's love. And you love this bird." He smiled, "Leave it to Papá." Tears welled in my eyes, and I embraced him.

It was many more months before the time came. My father had set out a few weeks after I cried to him and was taking longer than usual to return with the men. The women of the village were all nervous for their husbands, and whispers were beginning to spread about the possibility of bandits attacking them. Then, on an unsuspecting morning, the creaks of our wooden carts faded back into hearing, and the men arrived. I ran to the small caravan to see what had been brought back. My father strolled slowly through the streets, his face downtrodden, as everyone watched. Word had gotten around about my promised gift, and people were in as much suspense as I. When my father lifted the tarp covering the cart, he could not look me in the eye. The usual things we would always receive were there: Toys for my brothers, candles for my mother, and various wares for the house ... but no bird. I let out a sigh, it was difficult to not be upset, even though I knew deep-down the unlikelihood of my dream. I could feel the eyes of the villagers focused on me, no doubt sharing in some form of sympathy. But just as I turned myself around to return to our house, I heard a roaring laugh – the guffaw of my father.

"Come on, Mijita – did I not tell you to just leave it to Papá?" He brought his fingers to his lips and pursed his mouth, letting out a whistle unlike any I had ever heard. The sound ricocheted throughout the streets of our town, and from the corner of my eye I saw it. It moved as a vivid blur, the sunlight dancing on the blue feathers of its wings, as it cut through the air, circling above the awestruck faces of

the townsfolk, and then finally landing on my father's outstretched arm. The people erupted in a joyous laughter as my father looked to me, bringing the bird to my level. It was a special day, when the forgotten town was remembered; I named her Afuera.

With Afuera came a new life in my town. There was a vitality about her that no one could deny. The bird left traces of her deep blue wherever she went. The vibrancy of her beauty was just as I had imagined it, and she would glide around our rooms like in my dreams. I took to her like a mother to her child, watching my baby from dusk till dawn. Many days were spent travelling the streets, bringing wonder to the faces of the people of my town. Yet, despite all this – there was something off about her. So taken with her allure, it took everyone a little while to notice. Her species was named after its singing ability, yet not once had she uttered a chirp. Offput by this, I attempted many different things in my power to get Afuera to sing for us. I whistled to her, talked to her, I took her on ventures into the streets where people would dance with her, and the old man would sing to her with his guitar. Yet – nothing changed. The villagers seemed to take issue with this aspect of the bird's abilities, often voicing their jeers to me.

“What kind of bird cannot sing? A bird who cannot sing is not a bird at all, no matter how beautiful it may be.” But it mattered little to me, for I loved her regardless. It was her bright blue tone that drew me to her, not her song.

Many years passed over my forgotten town, and word of change from outside had begun to pass through our streets. There was talk that the cities, and the aspirations of their citizens, were growing larger. All the while, this town remained stagnant, and the roots that I once thought of as the giver of life became the entanglements that suffocated me. The monotony of my daily life began to take a toll on me, and I desperately needed to break from its clutches. So, as time went by, I found a new vested interest in stories that went beyond reading. I began to dream up stories of my own and dedicated my free time to the craft. Afuera was my muse, and always the first to review my works. I would read them to her in the late hours of the night. However, this did not truly solve the yearning of my heart.

As I walked through the streets, I heard the stories of the great cities beyond the mountains, and for the first time in many years, my heart stirred again for the world outside. I discussed the idea of leaving the town with my father, he knew the

world better than I, but in his old age he stopped making treks beyond the mountains. I told him of the new schools being built, with resources for adults to pursue their passions. He sat in his rocking chair, his face tanned and withered from the years of a beating sun. He simply nodded, and with that, I began to prepare.

As the days approached when I would be leaving for the land beyond the mountains, I was consumed by dreams of the days to come, and I roamed the house lost in my thoughts as I had once done as a child. It was during one of these many nights of listless daydreaming when it happened, like a whisper in the night. I awoke the next morning to an aching emptiness beside me. Afuera was gone. It did not matter how extensively we searched. We overturned furniture, went house to house inquiring about her disappearance – all the same, she had vanished overnight. My heart ached like only a mother's could. My daydreams were replaced by a longing for something which could never be replaced. But I did not have time to afford myself such distress, I was leaving soon. I stifled my tears in the mornings and, full of melancholy, set about my preparations. And so, a week later, with Afuera gone, and nothing but my few belongings, I set out from the heart between the mountains, and unto the unbeaten paths.

It was many years later when I broke the summit of those same mountains again, and drawing the veil of trees, stared down at the town that lay forgotten. My return must have been quite the event, for I was met with a reception of glares from the townsfolk. They did not recognize me. It was not hard to see why, I wore nothing like the garments of my days in the town, and I had cut my hair to a length that my head had not known since I was a toddler. When I walked through the door of my house and met the eyes of my mother she began to weep. A mother always knows their child.

I spent the night recounting stories of my journey with my family. They were amazed by the vividness of my description, and the boldness of my voice, and I humored any questions they had of life beyond the mountains. We spent the remainder of the night together, laughing and talking away into the early hours of the morning. As I strolled through town, the rest of the townspeople welcomed me back with warm regard, but there was hesitance in their demeanor. They treated me as if I was something of a familiar stranger to them.

Then, a week after having returned home, I was awoken by an unknown sound in the midst of the night. It came from outside of my window. In my sleep-induced daze I tried to decipher if I had just imagined it, and stumbled to my bedroom window. Then I heard it again, this time coming from outside the front door – a beautiful symphony of chirps and whistles. It was unlike the song of any bird I had ever heard. I rushed over to the door and pried it open. There before me, bathed in moonlight, with sparse, ragged feathers falling to the ground, she stood – Afuera.

She sat in a timid silence for a moment, and I returned her gaze with tears welling in my eyes and an aching in my heart that I had not felt in many years. She looked entirely different, her feathers were nearly all gone, and they had lost the sheen of blue brilliance they once had – in its place she wore a coat of dirt. Again, she let out the enchanting call that was kept up inside of her, and I embraced her in the light of the moon. At a glance, it was hard to imagine that this was her, but I knew – a mother always knows their child.

Afuera had simply found her voice.

Brown Paper Lunches

KEZIAH K. GLIDDEN, MERIDIAN, ID

CLASS OF 2024

I walked through an alley
Dark in a bright summer day
Partial souls lined the streets sidewalks
Rolling up said sorrows
Into pieces of paper
And drowning reality
If only to dream
To walk without knowing where
To see without thinking
And at that moment
I wished I sat and prayed
But
I shook hands
And gave brown paper lunches.
To the hands of partial souls.

A Heart Read

ANA C. MUNOZ, BOGOTA, COLUMBIA

CLASS OF 2023

Fingers scan, play with corners, barely entertained.
Words float from line to line, swiftly filling up the page.
Writer, inspiration, purpose. This is only the beginning.
A story may be the book's heart.
Fingers follow, turn the page, one more heartbeat.
Words fly in front of her eyes, flowing through her veins.
Places, characters, lines. The muscle keeping pace.
A simple title might capture a book's heart.
Fingers guide, covering words, keeping the story in line.
Words run from margin to margin, firing up the marathon.
Plots, curses, lies. The story is taking charge.
A mortal reader can't contain a book's heart.
Fingers grab, holding on, hoping they won't slip.
Words encase her whole mind, leaving no room to breathe.
Life, humans, reality. There is no going back.
A story will seize a reader's heart.

Untitled

HUGO UBALDO, LOS ANGELES, CA
CLASS OF 2025



White Eyes

NEIL JONES, PHOENIX, AZ

CLASS OF 2022

I walked amongst the trees enjoying the symphony of birds. The smell of the Michigan woods put my mind at rest. After spending all week in a cubicle, this was the escape I needed. Being confident I knew my way around these woods, I let my thoughts wander. The thick foliage above my head created a dark blanket covering my surroundings. Beams of sunlight broke through the canopy and danced along the shaded forest floor. As I was nearing my five-mile goal, a yellow tent in the distance caught my eye. I usually wouldn't pay it any attention, but the half-torn tent flap rippling in the breeze piqued my curiosity. I approached the tent, calling out as to not surprise anyone. Which proved in vain as I found the area deserted and the tent empty. Aside from various cans strewn about the ground, nothing seemed out of the ordinary. Still, the wicket gash in the now useless tent flap and another in the back did not paint a pretty picture. Soft wind poured through the cut; its once pleasant whistle now had a sinister tone. Thinking a bear or redneck with a machete could've made that cut, I decided to check out the inside of the tent. Kneeling, I was relieved there was no blood to be seen. However, looking up through the cut, I made my first discovery, a piece of fluff caught on a bush behind the tent. It had once been inside a sleeping bag. This, in tandem with the chopped-up tent, had me a little spooked.

I wanted to just leave and head back to my car, but the little voice in the back of my head started nagging me. While many scenarios could have happened here, I wanted to ensure none of the violent ones had occurred. I decided to check the surrounding area just to clear my conscience. In silence, I walked further into the shaded woods. After fifteen minutes of meandering, my search had yet to yield anything noteworthy. A growing feeling of unease was beginning to ruin my weekend hike, so I decided it was time to make my way back. When I turned, I came face-to-face with my second discovery stuck to a tree. Its black and red pattern was instantly recognizable; the severed sleeve of a flannel stared me in the face. Something about the color seemed off, but a rustling sounded behind me as I gazed.

My eyes darted to the tree line, fight or flight in full gear. However, the

sight of two mossy antlers poking out of a bush sent a wave of relief over me. While I always enjoy the company of deer, I was suddenly acutely aware of my own solitude. I turned to grab the flannel, but mid-motion, my stomach dropped as I realized what was so off about the color; it was coated in dried blood. Every horrific scene that could have happened at that campsite played simultaneously in my head. I instinctively shoved my hand into my pocket to call the police, only to remember my phone sitting alone in the car several miles away. I grabbed the crusty sleeve with a shiver; I knew it had to get to the authorities. Filled with determination, I took a step in the direction I came.

Before I could get far, sickening snaps erupted from the bush. Reluctantly, I turned my head. At that moment, it occurred to me that those antlers did not belong to any deer. The creature loomed nine feet in the air, antlers piercing the canopy. I couldn't make out any of its features; the only thing I could focus on were two piercing, white eyes. A hooved foot took a massive step forward, and the sprinter I didn't know was in me suddenly took over. The pounding of hooves and leaves resounded behind me. It was gaining on me. The thing let out a terrible screech that wasn't human or animalistic, like a cacophony of suffering spewing out all at once. Tears began flowing down my cheek.

Hurling every stump and fallen branch with Olympic precision, I ran faster than I thought possible. The creature let out another scream that sounded closer than the last. A mixture of sweat and tears began to blur my vision, blinding me from a protruding root. I tumbled head-over-heels along the ground and felt my ankle twist unnaturally. However, the pain was the least of my worries. The beast towered over me, allowing a better look at my pursuer. The only thing humanoid about it was its shape. It was covered in matted, bloody fur. Where I expected to see a head was a skinless deer skull, those cruel antlers protruding from the top. The creature bent down mere inches from my face and opened its long mouth agape, white eyes burning in empty sockets, fixating on its next meal. It let out another roar that nearly deafened me; the smell of rotting carcasses brought me to the brink of passing out. I accepted my fate; this out-of-worldly creature was about to take me to the next. I gritted my teeth and closed my eyes, waiting for the end to come. Instead of gnashing teeth, the sound of rustling filled the air. I opened my eyes to see an enormous grizzly

tumbling out of the bush. The creature immediately stood up to meet the bear; both beasts roared in preparation for the coming fight. This was it; fate had smiled upon me. I scrambled to my feet. Without thinking, I tried running, only for my ankle to give out beneath me, sending me hurdling face-first into a rock. Everything went black.

I awoke to the smell of roasting meat; the aroma had a comforting feeling. I shot up, finding myself in a bed under a homemade quilt. My head spun, and my vision blurred from the sudden incline, but I could tell there was a man in the corner of the single-room cabin. The man noticed I had woken up and started moving in my direction.

“You’re in pretty bad shape there, son. It looks like you went through a lot yesterday.”

“Who are you? Where am I?”

“Oh, I’m just some ol’-timer who loves the woods. I’ve lived out here on my own fer a few years now; luckily for you, I decided to take a walk yesterday, and I found ya sprawled out under a tree.”

I thanked him for rescuing me. I noticed a slightly ajar closet door as my eyes adjusted to my surroundings. My heart stopped when I saw a sleeping bag peeking out, a large gash revealing the stuffing inside.

“Say,” I squeaked, “Have you ever seen anything weird in these woods. I didn’t just fall yesterday. Something chased me.”

“What? You mean like some kinda monster?”

“Yeah, a deer shaped like a man, but its face was skinned clean; it was like a nightmare.”

“Hahahaha! Son, you expect me to believe ya got chased by some fairytale creature? Nonsense! Now, there are a lot of bears in these parts, big ones too. Speakin’ of which, I hunted one down just yesterday, I’m cookin’ ‘er up right now. If ya give me a minute, I’ll have some ready for ya.”

I shifted to face my host. Staring in disbelief, I saw the flannel he wore was missing a sleeve. A wave of horror rushed over me, and I started trying to get up.

“Woah, no need to get up. Supper’s almost ready, son, I’ll bring it over.”

“Oh, no, that’s not necessary, I don’t want to take advantage, so I’ll just be going.”

“With a busted ankle like that? No way, sit back down, son.”

“No, really, I’m a great hiker. I’ll just take my time. Now I have friends waiting for me, and I’m sure they’re all worried by now.”

“I’m sure everything will be fine if ya just explain yourself. You’re injured

and need rest, so you're gonna stay here a while. Now, supper's ready. I'm sure you're hungry so let's git some food in ya."

He walked over and put a plate full of seared meat in my lap.

"Go on, eat up, son."

I tried to return the plate and stand up, but he placed a firm hand on my leg.

"I said eat, son."

He flashed a grin at me, and I noticed a white glint in his eyes.

Whose Son Are You?

CHRISTIAN MONTENEGRO, ELK GROVE, CA

CLASS OF 2022

I dream of a mirage
And shiver at myself -
I know only an image of the man
Whose name is my own.
And the vision I see -
Fret with scorching self-scrutiny -
Is of a man on a trek of burden.

A lone echo strains to the vastness -
the impossible distance from another

The land turns deaf.
A sojourner, I remain.
Lost in unattainable familiarity,
I sift my hands through wading grass.
The land cannot hear
But there are those obliged to listen.
The echo calls to the moon - always near -
It recognizes me not.

Whose son are you?

Struck with wailing words of condemnation
I sink deeper still.
Lost in my own reflection
I find reminders of myself-
My perspective renews.
I remember times when the land would sing to the man
Whose name is my own.
Nothing is changed -
It is much the same -
One cannot forget their own name.
Yet - the echo cries and the land is deaf.

Whose son are you?

Complexion

ELITA JOHNSON, SPOKANE, WA

CLASS OF 2025

Gentle layers of complex creases laced themselves on her face, ashen.
A minute indent settled beside the soft curves of her lips.
Her teeth were a beaming crescent moon, alighted with compassion,
The sun-weathered complexion and freckles were in partnership,

Her rounded cheeks displayed the long-lost years of fatigue and peril.
The withered nose upheld the panes, which reflected lives,
Of loyal companionship and camaraderie. In a delicate bun,
Some strands of auburn hair beneath the silver streaks survived.

Her eyes unveiled the affliction she endured while possessing peace.
The wrinkles of oppression caressed her eyelids, an embodiment of the loss.
Her brows rose above the marred past and affliction.
Her complexion aimed away from the agony, but to Jerusalem's cross.

The Stranger

ELITA JOHNSON, SPOKANE, WA

CLASS OF 2025



Maybe When I Was Sleeping

LIZZY ESPARZA, CORONA, CA

CLASS OF 2021

There is tapping or scratching or
scraping in my ear canal.
As if there's an expedition of my mind
and the destination is my imagination.
I can't even focus on the task at hand
when tiny feet feel the right to invade me.
All I wish is to forget the wants that haunt me.
But the itching and scritch against my eardrum
reminds me of awful whispers from my subconscious.
I tilt and shake
one two three, turn to my desk
pray that the jolt deafens the piercing pitter patter.
But pen to paper could not overpower
The rude intrusion of my skull.
Did a widow burrow into my brain and lay her children to grow there?
Maybe, while I was sleeping.

A Northern Sun

JACKSON NORDICK, FERGUS FALLS, MN

CLASS OF 2023

When I first went to Alaska for the summer to work commercial fishing, I wasn't sure what to expect. What I found there was not forests and mountains, but vast grey ocean and vast green tundra, with the strand of beach like a border in between. It was more barren than I thought it would be, and at first I didn't think it was beautiful, but by my second summer, it had grown on me. I'm a romantic person with a love of stories, and this place managed to sink its claws into me and make me fall in love with it.

There is something bizarrely beautiful about standing on a beach under a dark sky, with tumbling waves behind you, slickers covered in scales and slime, as dark blood runs in rivulets down the sand and mingles with the brine of the rising tide. I had tossed the silvery salmon, one by one and two by two, into their bags and cart, and then dumped out the excess blood onto the grey beach. I often found myself watching the blood run slowly down the shore to meet the tide, digging around with my foot and watching the cavities in the sand fill up with scarlet.

Other times, picking nets in the boat, I would look down and shuffle my feet. Sea-water and salmon-blood mingled to fill the bottom of the boat with red liquid. We would stand for hours picking fish, blood up to the ankles of our boots. Sometimes I would think of Troy, where the rivers ran red with the blood of fallen warriors. If I looked down, I could see clumps of black gore, pink and white gill plates and slender, creamy-colored, trailing guts. Once in a while, I would look down and see a single eye, the iris like a ring of steel and the pupil staring back, black and bottomless, all-seeing. Sometimes, if we had forgotten to clean the boat, the next day it would stink with a stench of death, and the pooled blood would be brown and maroon.

It's hard to not feel invigorated, standing in the bow of our boat after a delivery on a stormy day, the rolling waves slapping beneath us, as the wind and rain whip in my face. My hair lashes out behind me, and the hard-flung drops of spray sting my eyes, but I have never felt so alive and vital than on days like these. My

heritage is mostly Norwegian, and I like to think there's some Viking blood in me that's naturally inclined to a sea-farers life. The sky is bruised and dark, and above us gulls and terns wheel and flap, buffeted by the howling winds. I am cold and wet, clinging with wet, shriveled hands and white fingers to the sides of the boat to stay upright. And this is beautiful too.

Sometimes, I would step out of my cabin and look out over the tundra. The deep bushy evergreen and heather underfoot compresses like a sponge, letting me slowly sink down into it. Once in a while, the hulking backside of a bear can be seen, far off, disinterested in the humans nearby, lumbering ponderously towards distant hills. In the winter, the caribou herd roams this same tundra, before migrating north to calving grounds. But the herd is smaller now, depleted by hunting. Long ago, other, larger things roamed these lands. A man in the village found a mastodon tusk last year, its tip jutting from a recession in the peat cliffside at the edge of the beach, like an outstretched arm from a grave. This land is very ancient.

In a wild place like this, all I have to do is catch the fish, and let each day bring me what it may. Without the comforts of electricity, heating or running water, I can let myself live for a few weeks in the past. For a few weeks, I am the hero of my own legend, the writer of my own story, a lonely fisherman completing his trials in a far land. I am Ragnar, I am Odysseus, I am Cuchulainn.

I look forward to the mornings when the brief summer night is cold, and the morning sun is hot and clear. On days like these, I can strip off my fish-stained hoodie and sit on the one-legged bench on the cliffside, watching shreds of mist flow in from the bay with the tide, rising like steam from the wrinkled furrows of sand, breaking on the cliffs like a tide of their own. The boats at their moorings are shrouded temporarily in the fog, and far off, the pier of Peterson Point is barely visible, a rickety skeleton of timbers shrouded in grey. But above all, the sun is blazingly white, and the sky fiercely blue. This is the same sun that every night bleeds its pink and purple heart out over the horizon of the sea, setting behind the distant fringe of the opposite shore of the bay. A fierce, young, Northern sun, she bides her time in the winter, but comes back to her dominion in the summer. Just like me.

And I think this is the most beautiful thing of all.

Night Flight to Juneau

JENNA SLADE, TUCSON, AZ

CLASS OF 2024



Sunrise

MACKENZIE TKACH, DAYTON, OH

CLASS OF 2024

I've always been good friends with the night,
Preferring her company to the day

She never asked anything of me,
She never asked me to be anyone other than myself

It was easy to hide my sins and my scars in her shadows,
And under her moon I never felt lonely

But the day was harsh and unforgiving,
And she woke me up with a brightness that was blinding

She was demanding,
Forcing me to live in a world that I didn't belong in

And her sun's light exposed all the parts of me
I had tried so hard to hide

So I existed during the night
And spent the day hiding from the sun under my covers

But one night I stayed up so late with the moon,
That I was there when the darkness began to fade

"Please don't go," I begged of her,
"I want to stay with you."

The moon simply smiled,
And took my hand

“You don’t know the day,” she said,
“You’ve never given her the chance to say hello.”

And as the sun began to awake,
The night slowly, and softly, introduced me to the day.

Star Trails at the End of the World

BEN TUINSTRA, LOLO, MT

CLASS OF 2023

