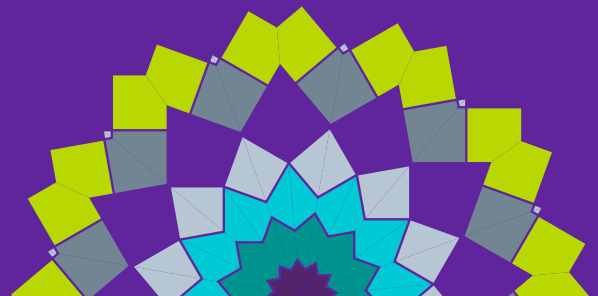
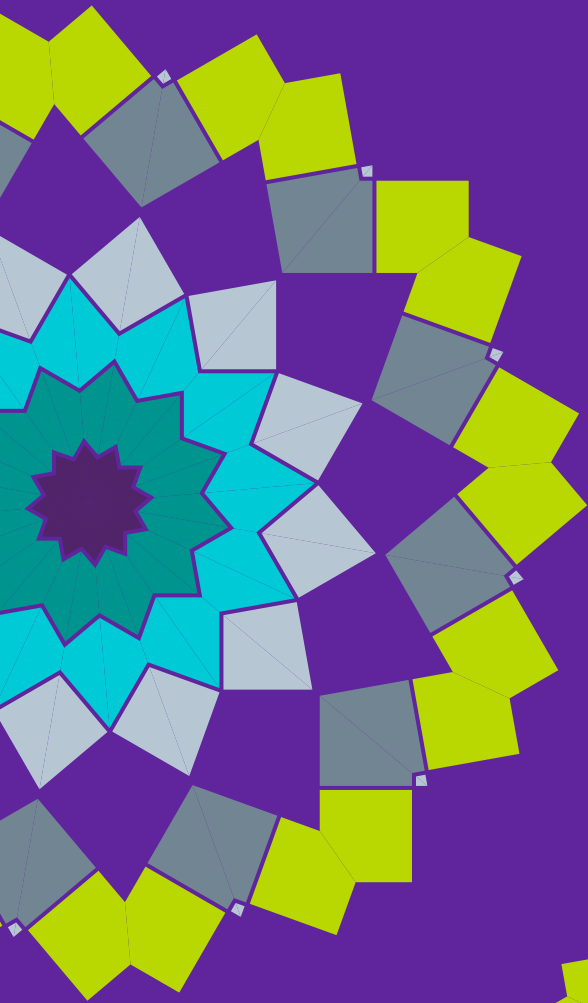




StartleBloom

THE GCU LITERARY REVIEW

VOLUME 4



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Buzz Aldrin Bird

KAYLOR JONES, B.A. IN ENGLISH-PROFESSIONAL WRITING, 2021

The peace of birds seems
different up close;
clumped together they have
a barbed-soot look,
wait so clear that
after he passes the
magnetic field he
smacks right into them.
Put the spaceman on
the other side and
you can see how he
travelled so far his feathers
burned off, but now he's
made it there and it's not
familiar like his yard
or stone bath or
telephone wire. At least
back home he could
make time to breathe.
Still, he thinks,
I could spend a little
longer hanging in the cradle
of the cosmos.
There's no sad
in space. The tears turn
into disenchanting crystals.
You can see your own reflection
past the smudges on
his polished mask,
although it's also
you on the other side.
You can see the bird locked
behind the polycarbonate.
You can see the worms
he wants for breakfast.

1979

SHYANN PAPIA, B.A. IN ENGLISH-PROFESSIONAL WRITING, 2019

Discarded kettle corn floats in gray waters.

Seaweed, memories, ice cream cone dust, Volkswagen seats.

Indian blankets smell of fire and beer from that night in November. You said the water was too cold as you floated toward the small island, face to the sky with either a look of concern or indifference. I swam beside you and once we reached the shore?

Discarded kettle corn had followed us.

Soft carnival music and the smell of wood and paint, children's sandals, photo booths, balloons, and too much rain water. Cotton candy had melted into your jacket and peanut shells stuck to my sunglasses.

Where we sat from the island, the waterfront dream seemed just bright enough.

The Sitting Room

JEWLEA TRUJILLO, B.A. IN ENGLISH-PROFESSIONAL WRITING, 2019

We shall sit
In a sitting room
With nothing else to do,
Between us,
A pane of glass,
And in the corner,
Our shoes.

We shall count the needle as it ticks by.

On the glass between us,
We tap
And tap in time.
Our rhythm –
Of Morse code –
Taps its tune of friendly rhyme.

The clock ticks in agreeance with us.

I tap,
You tap,
Together, we sigh.
This method suits us:
Words never said
What we meant.
So, in the glass
We built trust.

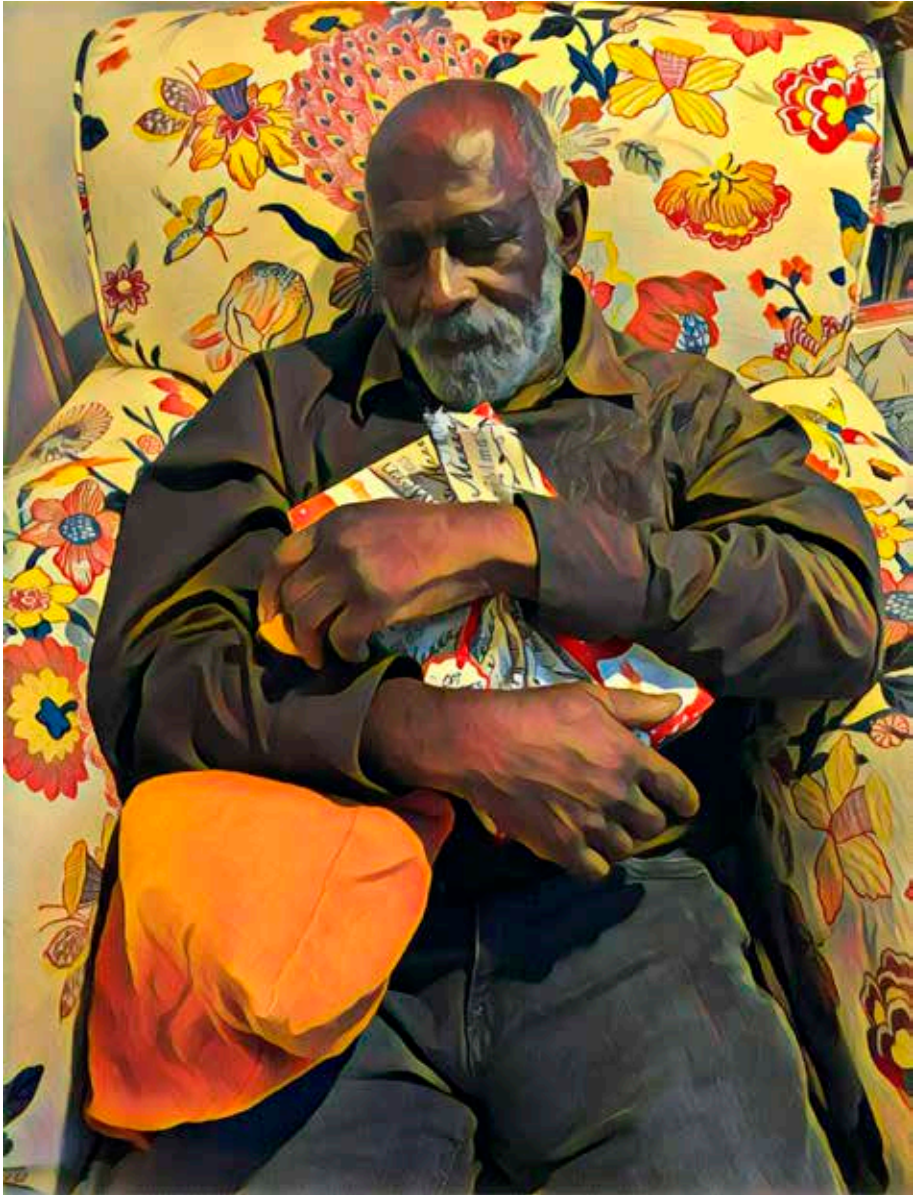
Had Jericho's wall always been there?

You sit and smile,
But intent is in your eyes.
Your fingers march a prayer -
Don't you know what you are doing?
I raise my hands to support

Our solitary divide of glass,
But there – oh there! – I begin to see a tear.

Tock – it is deafening in our silence.

Don't you know what you are doing,
My partner of the sitting room?
Have you made yourself like the clock?
You ignore the shards
That were our defense,
Oh, is it you
Or me,
Who is fooled by innocence?



Not Forgotten

INGRID BOON, B.S. IN PSYCHOLOGY, 2018

A Ramble

HELEN I. BROWER, B.A. IN DIGITAL FILM, 2020

It isn't that I'm afraid. I'm not. It's that caffeine is secreting from me like sweat. I drink it to power through a day I'm not sure I want, because of expectations that no one placed on me but myself, until it pulls and tugs me to the ground. So I drink another cup. Expecting a wizard to enter my mind and file each item into neat rows and cabinets so that the coming months become clear in the dense fog. But they do not. And after two more, things start to turn hazier, but I convince myself that the storm is fizzing down. The creative juices are no longer milking, but possibly it is because my hands will not stop shaking and actually write down sense and order. I take another to be polite, since social life is hard enough. And by the sixth I no longer give a damn about consequences. Instead I steep another mugful, paired with ginger biscuits at 9:00 at night. The consequences come nonetheless.

So I lay battling. Tossing and turning.

Covers become fingers, and a forgotten ad from YouTube replays with ever added detail. A nun haunts a convent. I lay awake. Toes curl. Mind throbs. Regret ensues.

I swear off horror films.

My mind is creative enough to fill gaps and to scare myself awake from twisted dreams.

Instead I keep twitchy eyelids shut and I think on pleasant things. A cat. A dog. A home five thousand miles west. The dog is old. The cat is older. A slow spiral.

The dog is Poppy. My family bought her and I was almost in sixth grade; my sister would've been in fourth so it sounds about right. She got stung by a bee, on a wasp, hornet, on the lip while leaning on a tree trunk in the Redwood forest. Her forehead against the wood and her lips in clear view, while we hid away like sprites. Poppy the puppy became ours two days later at a KOA somewhere on the Pacific Coast Highway. I held her in the shower of the motorhome the entire way back, so she wouldn't crap where we couldn't clean. I was eleven or possibly twelve. She's the oldest dog I remember in our home.

Which isn't entirely true.

A foggy memory of a sandy, shaggy redheaded Queensland named Max flickers through the headache.

She walked the dairy farm with my dad. By his side, every moment. Till she couldn't.

She escorted him to the barn after that, waiting by his desk. The one covered in daddy long leg webs, fly bait, and dead flies that crunch if you walk barefoot. Till she couldn't.

She hobbled to the side of his truck. Always by the driver's door, not the one that buckles and groans like a dislocated hip. She'd wait until he pulled from the drive. Then hobble back to the washroom door. Till she couldn't.

She stood. Up from her stained dog bed that she'd bite holes through till the fluff escaped. Up she'd stand as my dad walked out in the mornings. Getting a pet and a bowl of food she wouldn't touch.

Down she laid. Slowly, slowly, each move quiet to not wake the arthritis. And wait till he returned in the evening to chastise her over her untouched bowl.

Till she couldn't.

She would only lift a head. A grizzled white snout with greying eyes. A small nod towards my dad. He'd pet her longer those days. A big pause on his usual routine. He knew than what I didn't.

Max walked one last time.

She limped twenty feet forward towards the vine strapped arches that introduced the cool barn. She turned left. Past the beaten white truck. It looked old before it was old. Down the drive. Past grass, mailbox, fence, and rose bushes. Facing the corn stalks, the ones that moan when you're not looking.

And there she waited.

Who knows how long. Sitting or standing or even lying down. Till dawn approached and the first semi-truck went by empty of grain.

She could and she did.

The driver was certain. He'd seen her pass by when the sun hadn't made it over the six foot tall stalks. A small figure next to the road. He'd entered the field, did his round, came back laden with grain.

And still she sat waiting.

He did this trip once more. There and back. Empty of grain, through the field, laden with grain. Not once did she bark. She did not nip at tires. She did not look at the eighteen-wheelers that rattle windows and sway corn.

On his third trip towards the field halfway down in the middle of a caravan of four semi-trucks.

She stepped in front.

We've had many dogs since Max. Ones I remember and don't. Holly was a lab. Pup was supposed to be taken by animal control. A dairy farm attracts human beings with good intentions and ignorance. Pup was dumped and left. We found her

drinking spilled milk by the tank. My dad insisted we not name her anything but Pup. She became his new one. A dog that loved him desperately. One that scarred his beaten truck by a nick on the passenger window when he tried to go without her. Holly was my mom's. They were yin and yang. I preferred Pup, but Holly protected me from shadows. Always too much. Animal control didn't take just Pup but Holly too, when they cornered a delivery man and bit him. They faded to sleep together.

Blompy was a spark. She surfed on a boogie board. She jumped from a diving board. She rode on top of my dad's beaten truck till the metal would pop out of shape from her paws. She could take a peanut and spit out only shell in seconds. She was a dynamite dog that my dad loved. A dog she loved rode in a different truck and she tried to join. She didn't calculate for the trailer behind.

Shay was a boxer lab German shepherd mutt, who ran like a rabbit, ate dirt, barked at bushes and was my cousin's dog that we fed, housed and took to the vet for five years. His friend was Blompy. And Maggie never compared to her. Maggie lit up the backyard. A golden retriever of simple mind and simple pleasures. She uprooted flower pots well. She curled nose to tail underneath the blooms only popping up her head from the badger hole she made. She stole pizza from hands and donuts from children. No food was safe. Her favorite beverage was Pepsi. Her previous owner told us she was one but more than likely she was three. She grew grey quick. And when Shay left us and Poppy came they were friends. Till Maggie grew blind when she was supposed to be five. Little Springer Spaniel Flower came and went just as fast. Dairy dogs don't last long.

We had Sweet Pea, my dad's dog that he doesn't call his. She has a special spot in that beaten truck covered in a pool towel so her paws don't get the seat dirty. Sweet Pea was a pup. Poppy was a dog. Maggie was old too fast. A brain tumor, made her a reincarnation of Max.

I visited her one last weekend. Swore to my parents in summer time I would teach her to walk without hitting walls or stairs. I would mash her food since her teeth fell out and rotted. I'd make sure she could groom herself. I returned to university. And they called me the next day. Maggie was gone, assisted by the vet, she was at peace.

Sweet Pea is grown. She stays by my dad's side. Past torn down stalls and corrals where a dairy farm once was. Curled by his side as he scrolls through his iPad in his armchair. Against him as he drives and I cover her seat.

She has a pup named Dandy who isn't a pup, because she's two. My parents use that term to keep from training her, since their lives have stacked up after their kids ebb and flow through the home. And who has time for a little pup anyways; she has time to grow and learn, and besides she takes after Poppy.

Poppy my dog.

The one who snores. The one who's fat. The one who lets my nieces and nephews use her back as a race track. The one who tries to squeeze ninety pounds into my lap.

We sit together uncomfortable praying my mom doesn't come in and see us both on the couch. And if she does, we both try our best to shut our eyes, and my mom walks by. Too afraid to disturb the idyllic sleep.

And as I type, and lie to myself that the computer will relax me, all these horrid, horrid thoughts that are worse than a haunted nun come rushing back. Cause what am I to do at fifty-four minutes past midnight, five thousand miles away from home, where a silly dog a year off from being half my age sits and waits growing old.

Not knowing if I'll return. The only thing she knows is that my mom cries when I'm away, and she's positive I've died. Because it isn't just two weeks or four. It isn't broken by weekend cuddles and kisses. There aren't car rides mixed throughout and long sleeps with tugged ears and scratched backs. There is only time, months, half a year. A return at holidays, and then more days, months. And what if I don't stay?

What if when she needs me, the way I've needed her. When I've hugged her thick neck through panic attacks. Where my chest heaves and her head rests waiting. Where I've matched my breath with her long snores. Where I could only cling and cling until it faded. And she waits. And waits. And I do not come.

It isn't that I'm afraid, when my mind topples over itself gasping for relief from a caffeine crash in the middle of the night when I'm alone five thousand miles away. I'm not. I can control fear, but anxiety I barely keep at bay.

On the third street

KYLYN McCARTY, B.A. IN ENGLISH-PROFESSIONAL WRITING, 2019

vines coil up a burnt, slanted mail box
smooth, sharp leaves
hunchback trees and tangled oak limbs
at the windows
black stained bricks, tall thick weeds
a splintered down door swinging back
on rusty hinges
wild orange and yellow
trembling petals
the sight steals any breathe
of how tragedy bloomed from the only old house
a decor of ashes
in seclusion, it speaks truth
of what was and will be
started last spring and grew into autumn
it's one secret
still exhaling swirls of thick smoke from the chimney

How I See Home

TAYLOR SIPOS, B.A. IN ENGLISH-PROFESSIONAL WRITING, 2020

The house third from the far concrete corner
brick and wood walls where none felt more foreign
on cloud covered gray days of the mourner
where I, lone, turn in the maze-like warren.

The orange dim fire seems out of all flame.
My eyes closed to those enduring embers
burning bright licks, those sirens call my name.
My face grows hot, dead-eyes recall their members.

The wood door chiming a dreamy bird's flit.
My knock weighing, weighing in the door way.
The fire was out; the door opens, it lit
brick and wood. For some memories we pay,

once home a heart, the hearth, flicks and ignites.
Come back, stay, brick and woods have read their rights.



Southern Rain, Gretna, LA

STEFANEE BIEDENKAPP, B.A. IN ACCOUNTING, 2022

Silk

ROSALIE MICHAEL, B.A IN ENGLISH-PROFESSIONAL WRITING, 2020

please, do not mark me.
spare me your ink-stained knuckles,
and let my eyes rest.
rip your endearments off my skin,
and place petals over the wounds—
don't worry, I will spill over you like red wine over a silk canvas,
staining the untouched fabric of your subconscious.
you won't be able to get the taste of my name out of your mouth,
and don't you dare spit me out.

Threads Hung

JENNIFER PATRICIA LEITER, M.S. IN ADDICTION TREATMENT COUNSELING, 2020

threads hung
chopped, frayed, frazzled
a mishmash of
cluttered strings
various sizes
in stages of discord
yet all together
woven
who would want that?
then
i walked past it and turned around...
my heart paused...a breath
beauty entered in
i saw the other side
a tapestry
intricately woven
with patterns of the sky, sun,
rain, love joy, sadness and
sorrow
made into a robe of many colors
to cover a bride
of the King



D4

JILL LEDBETTER, B.A. IN HISTORY FOR SECONDARY EDUCATION, 2022

To Dance

CAROLINE YARBOROUGH, B.A. IN ENGLISH FOR SECONDARY EDUCATION, 2021

“Mama, watch.”

“I can’t, El.” Ava absentmindedly rolled the handle of her brush between her fingers. She stood with a canvas in front of her, attempting to create something of worth. Inspiration had been illusive for weeks. Her bills had been stacking up on the table, creating a monument to remind her of her shortcomings. Worrying about finances didn’t create good art.

Her daughter slipped from the kitchen to the living room, ghostly in the corner of Ava’s vision. “I want to show you.”

“In a little bit, love. I need to get this started.”

“Mama, watch.”

Ava chewed the inside of her lip, frustrated. Elouise’s stubbornness had been inherited from her, yet the little girl had grown it even further. Ava lifted her eyes for a moment. Across the living room, she saw her daughter in a white, sleeveless dress. It only came to her knees, with a little tear on the side from a year before. Ava had told herself she would mend it a thousand times, but never got around to it. The stack of envelopes on the table shoved its way back into her thoughts. Another thing she couldn’t seem to get around to.

Elouise sighed, bringing Ava’s attention back. She noticed her daughter’s bare feet digging into the shag carpet. With Ava’s eyes back on her Elouise grinned, unaware of the food crusted in the corner of her mouth.

“I will dance.” Elouise whispered.

Ava nodded and watched her tiny arms lift into the air. She had seen her daughter dance hundreds of times. A clumsy waltz with no partner. A tripping ballerina with poor balance. She would always watch, though. She never seemed to tire of that little smile Elouise had when she danced.

Elouise’s fingers waved at the ends of her small hands, reminding Ava of tiny birds taking flight from her chubby palms. Elouise shut her eyes gently, as if there was some unheard music drifting to her ears. She turned her face up. Ava noticed how the dim yellow lights from the ceiling resembled the warmth of the sunlight just moments away from dusk. Her fingers continued to roll the paintbrush between them. The girl took a clumsy step forward, followed closely by a spin. Her lips drifted apart further. The grin became a smile. A half-moon against that sun-kissed face, Ava thought. She saw pale yellows against her canvas. Elouise’s hands kept floating. Her fingers never stopped moving. Was she pointing out hundreds of stars past where Ava could see? The room became a universe, spinning around the two of them, and the

little girl's toes grazed the surface of Saturn's rings.

Did her feet touch the floor any longer?

Ava tightened her grip on the paint brush. She refused to tear her eyes away. Elouise looked older now. Her hair drifted across her face as she turned. The immense wonder she had always had still shone wildly in her wide eyes. She moved with more grace. She didn't look at Ava. She spun again, leaving her back to her mother. Ava saw wild brush strokes. Finches and hummingbirds fluttered around Elouise, whipping her hair about. They flew beneath her uplifted arms, pulling her into the air a little higher than before.

Older still, Elouise finished spinning. Her lips were fuller and her dress was longer. More understanding showed in her glassy eyes, but a glint of that familiar wonder still came through. She looked at Ava, smiling even more gently than before. She loved to have an audience. This time, her feet landed on soft grass as she moved toward Ava in her dance. Branches reached towards Elouise, caressing her shoulders with their leaves. Draped with greenery, she emerged from their arms. Ava tried to imagine creating that color. Moss was tangled in Elouise's hair, and a ladybug crawled across one of her dainty hands. Her fingers followed the delicate pattern of dandelion seeds blowing through the wind. She had become prettier, taller, stronger, and wiser.

"Mama, did you see?" She whispered.

The sound of Elouise's voice startled her, causing the paintbrush to slip from her fingers. She snatched it up from the floor. When she looked back up, the ladybug had crawled from Elouise's hand. The birds had flown away. The stars had assumed their places back in the sky. Her daughter's feet had found the carpet once again. Elouise's tiny hands reached for her mother's. Ava lifted the girl into her lap.

"Did you see, Mama? I danced for you. Did you see?"

"Yes." Her throat tightened with emotion. She set her daughter back on the ground and began mixing colors for her new painting. No, paintings. She finally knew what she had to say. She knew what she had to offer. She leaned down to her daughter, taking those dainty hands in her own.

"I want to show you now."

Feigning Distance and Waiting for the Hummingbirds

KAYLOR JONES, B.A. IN ENGLISH-PROFESSIONAL WRITING, 2021

It's me. All-me, just-me, but still,
it's inauthentic—possibly ironic;
it's not about a faceless old man
who sits in a rocker on the porch
to watch the hummingbirds feed
and sometimes says, "Hello little
humming-hummingbird. Hmm-buzz."
That man would have wings
just like them, and once they'd left
he'd remember to stretch them out,
even if it's just for a trip to the store.
But I've never met him.
It's about my old man.
He's not faceless, just unvarying,
like the sigh that releases from the rockers.
Still, there are faces in everything—
nestled in the fingerprint on the window and
abandoned in the smudges on the feeder.
In winter the rocker stays inside but
the hummingbirds are there just the same.
When the flowers change shape,
so do they, and the old man watches
on and thinks of someone else crooning back,
"Hmm-buzz," but he doesn't wonder what
it's like. I will for him. That's how to
drain an unconsumed Sunday
when the world fits nicely in the
profound groove of the floorboards.
You don't need any wings to
wait for the hummingbirds. Hmm-buzz.

Minutes to a Major City

CYMELE LEAH EDWARDS, B.A. IN ENGLISH-PROFESSIONAL WRITING, 2018

A hundred helmets heading toward the bunker spread like croutons in a Vietnamese salad; they bounced to the tune of air pickets tracking enemy aerial movements through a radio, half obliterated by a mine hidden underneath Guillermo's digies as he wore them. Mists of imperial red blended deeply into the hibiscus sunset as it hit the singed canvas of our tent while we bent and crawled beneath it. A canteen still gripped in Guillermo's hand during the explosion reflected the last natural light in view as I turned to see what was left of Devil's Gorge. Our team at the head of the convoy led the rest of the platoon as we circled down into a nearby valley out of range from enemy fire, and I couldn't care less about the men next to me.

Each explosion pulled and grew from its center. Smoke rose like the silk of a venomous spider we'd seen on earlier rucks that had been caught in the muted trap of fire as it spun. We too, spun to dodge the timely frags that cursed our ears with memories of a time we thought was surely behind us. I sat up from beneath bush shrapnel. Just the hovering whites of my eyes peered over a tactical ATV with its motor running, its roar indistinguishable from that of the fire. To my left, a body festered below burning artillery, and if he had been screaming, my intentions were too selfish to hear.

Back in the city, I knelt before elder locals and clapped alongside them in ministry on the weekends as they worshipped, and although our petitions to God ran a disparate course, I still learned how to have disdain for myself and my enemies without confusing the two so far as to swallow the weight of my misery. At home, I spent a good deal of my life trying to find somewhere to live, and always ran out of time—it was the unfortunate obligation of time to conquer everything like holding onto a balloon conquered gravity—that always pulled me back to say, I'm better off staying near the water.

I could never choose.

Finally, the decision was made for me. That briny wilderness off the coast of the southern sea became home, and it scorched to ruin like the sands of Gehenna. Nature—a grand accomplice—had sorely sewn a web of indifference. Each pious summit I could see from beneath the edge of my helmet wept mercilessly with ash.

Lt. Cassan spit what I imagined was the last of his energy and blood onto a couple of shredded half shafts and fell just before my boots. He slowly threw his hand across his right breast pocket and pulled out a child sized rosary. I just watched as he struggled to mince words and movements with a displaced shoulder and an artillery duffle bag at the end of his thigh where his knee cap should have been. My first day under his command he tried to sway me toward atheism. He said it's easier to kill and be killed when you can confront your killer the same way they confront you, godless. "Everyone's religious toward the end, same way -," he choked, "they all lie in the beginning," the beads fell onto his chest, still.

There were only a few men alive crouched next to me, loud blasts surrounded us. I remember thinking you don't have to believe in something to like the way it sounds, and perhaps that was the same philosophy Lt. Cassan applied to religion, or death in general, and I applied it to settling down.

No one had ever heard of this place before the war. They knew someone, another soldier, who passed through on their way to a major city with more to offer or stopped to sleep, then saw the local shops in the morning. I always thought I'd never be satisfied there, but I could leave for a while to make my way back to the city instead of being swept away by what felt like provision. At least it felt less like a choice.

The fire stayed on the other side of the tent where smoke struggled to reach my nostrils, then it didn't. I could not bring myself to remember the faces of the elder locals, or the men I had slept next to for the past year. Shades of red outlined in the shape of an insect kept flooding my memory. Or, it was just blood from the blow that seeped into my brain as I sat with my knees tucked deep into my chest parallel to the ground, they hailed flies. I submitted to death and let it take me from the Devil's Gorge, and the valley, then into this tent where I've hardened to brimstone immovable from my place, swaddled in smoke.

Never Alone

HANNAH COX, B.A. IN ENGLISH-PROFESSIONAL WRITING, 2019

Different degrees of the same temperature
Not so different after all.
When we're against the wall,
The traps are set
All doubt does is capture.

Dancing around each other
Masquerading vulnerabilities,
Shadowboxing truth.
Loneliness isn't lonely at all
When we are each the loneliest of them all.

Isolation does not rest.
Adrift without a hope,
The lighthouse shines
Brighter than the night
A heart reaching out.

Look up my child,
You were never alone

A Mi Hija

KARA LAVERY, B.A. IN ENGLISH FOR SECONDARY EDUCATION, 2019

My abuelita once told me to never look back. I have always listened to her advice in the past, but today is different. Today marks a year in which I can no longer feel her frail arms wrapped around me, protecting me from the dangers of the world. As I drive along Sunset Cliffs Boulevard, which borders the Pacific Ocean, I pass by houses decorated in various colors of foods my grandma used to make like dried and salted unskinned tilapia, fresh peaches, over-ripened plántos, chilled tomatillo sauce, steaming rojo pozole, and half-baked torta. She was an incredible cocinera—sometimes. When a recipe turned out badly, she would throw her head back and laugh boisterously, joking that she was an Americanized Mexican woman.

It's been years since I've seen my childhood hometown, but everything still looks the same. I recognize the white picket fence that probably hasn't been touched up since I last lived there. I park the car next to the sidewalk along the fence line, grabbing a tattered, dark magenta camisa from the passenger seat before getting out. The humble abode appears worn down from the sun, and I search for the tiny rusted nail sticking out from the side of the fence under the leaves of an overgrown bush. My forefinger pricks at the tip, and I brush my hand away to touch the scar on the tip of my right shoulder.

The house just behind it is a deep, sapphire blue with delicate white trimmings like the crocheted doilies my abuelita used as placemats and décor for the curtains, which can still be seen through the dusty windows. Being careful not to step on any of the broken clay antiques littering the small yard, I hesitantly climb the three white, deteriorating stairs onto the wrap-around porch toward the blue door. I wiggle the iron handle to find it locked and step back to see numerous cracks and splinters from old age and disuse.

I remember the day I was brought here. A woman in business attire knocked on this same door to which my abuelita opened in shock. I remember my abuelita looking at the woman and then glancing down at me, her eyebrows furrowing in concern. After speaking to the woman, she ushered me in with a small sonrisa that held a hint of sadness in her dark eyes. The other woman left without saying goodbye, and I didn't bother saying goodbye either. I wasn't fond of her, anyways. We barely spoke to each other in the past few days I lived with her in a strange, fancy apartment that smelled like dust. She didn't love me like my abuelita did. As a child, I always loved visiting my abuelita, and I was elated to live with her.

Turning away from the door, I see the little wooden house in which I used to play, hiding among the tall weeds and dead flowers, withering away in the salty

breeze. My abuelita and I painted it together after we collected enough crates from her job picking naranjas at a family's orchard nearby. I laugh as I remember begging my abuelita to paint the house just like hers. On the inside, though, it is yellow because she wanted me to remember the warmth and happiness that comes from the sun. Spider webs brew inside the pots and pans, somehow looking very similar to the "comidas" I made out of anything I could find in the yard. Sometimes my abuelita would join me inside my little house for dinner, and I remembered feeling safe and happy.

A salty gust of wind brings me back from my memories, and I hear the waves lapping over each other as the high tide begins to roll in. I take the road my abuelita and I used to take when walking to the beach. On her days off from work and after mass, we would walk along the pier all the way to the ice cream parlor at the end of the dock. Every Sunday, my abuelita would buy me a single scoop of fresa on a cone. It's still my favorite flavor of ice cream, but hers was always vanilla. Though the pier is still there, the parlor is now a tourist shop.

Reaching the edge of the beach, I take off my sandals and stand in the soft sand, sinking into it as the tide pulls back into the ocean. As a child, I remember thinking the sand looked like brown sugar, though it didn't taste like it once I tried it. In California, sand will inevitably get into all articles of clothing, and so I do not bother rolling up my pantalones as the cold, foamy waters touch my toes and rise up to my ankles. A couple sits in the sand further away from me, facing the sun. The woman smiles as the wind blows her dark hair around her face, and her husband holds onto her from behind, burying his face into her neck. Both are laying their hands on her very round belly, swaying in the breeze. I look away rubbing my stomach, wishing my novio would do this for me.

Standing there, I stare at el cielo which is so cloudy and gray that the airplanes flying just overhead cannot be seen. The engines cause the air around me to tremble and rumble, bringing back an early memory of my papa's gruff voice calling my name after his long nights at El Salvador's bar down the street. Before living with my abuelita, I lived with Papa in a house far more unkempt than my abuelita's. The two bedrooms in the house had very little furniture in them. Our mattresses did not have bed frames to hold them up, and my closet concealed only a couple of dresses—my Sunday's best, white with yellow ribbons, and my black and white school uniform. Both had frayed at the edges and had begun turning gray from constant use. I remember wearing the same pair of pink-strapped zapatos to school for three years until the rubber soles wore away and my feet formed blisters in between the holes.

Pictures of various family members hung on the wall in need of dusting and straightening. The old-fashioned, flower-printed wallpaper, stained with my papa's favorite cerveza, began peeling in the living room. The floors were always dirty, and

the dishes never washed. An occasional mouse scurried in and out of the kitchen cupboards, and the smell of rancid milk ventured its way to the front door where it lingered every time either my papa or I came in. No one had visited our house since Mama died. Papa wouldn't let them.

Papa tried to hide his sadness from everyone in this house. Bottling up his emotions until he came home, drunk and tired from El Salvador's. Every night, his sadness would turn into angry yelling matches with his shadow. His demonios would taunt him until he collapsed in exhaustion. Every morning, he would wake as if nothing had happened the night before and carefully open his beautifully carved cofre at the end of his mattress to look at his most prized possessions, including Mama's favorite camisa. I never knew what else it was that he kept in his cofre until the day I snuck into his room and dared to look in it. I wasn't allowed in his room, let alone touch Papa's beautiful cofre, but I was curious to know more about Mama. When I lifted the lid, though, all I could find was Mama's camisa. A plain magenta tank top which still had Mama's scent on it.

I remember that day so clearly because that was the last day I would see my Papa. That was the day I took the camisa.

Holding up the camisa, now in my hands, I stare at its bright purple-red color, still vibrant after all these years. I don't know why this camisa was her favorite. In fact, I don't know much about Mama at all because I was far too little know who she was, and Papa was always too drunk to tell me. Not even abuelita told me much about her, except that she was a generous, caring woman. My abuelita once told me that my Papa used to smile and laugh. That when my Mama brought my Papa to meet her family for the first time, my abuelita had never seen a man smile so adoringly at her daughter like he had.

Even now, I try to picture it, but I can't. I had never seen him smile. No, he used to drink cerveza every night and come home angry. His words would cut through me, but not like his hand.

I feel the waves from the ocean pummel into each other as the tide throws the ocean backward and forward, faster and faster. The movie in my head continues to play in time with the ocean's ensemble.

I should have known he would find out. He looked at it almost every night. He stomped around the house yelling, throwing the bottle of cerveza across the hall towards my room. I hid under my bed, hoping he wouldn't find me. The yellow liquid from the cerveza splattered against the wall and dripped down my bedroom door.

I wade further into the waters up to my hip, not caring that my clothes will get soaked, though I probably should. Seaweed grabs my ankles making me gasp, just as Papa had as he dragged me out from under the bed. Crying, both now and then, I remember managing to disentangle myself from his grasp and run far away, knowing

my abuelita lived only a few blocks away. After finding her casa, the windows were dark. I thought she wasn't home, so I hid in the bush against the fence opposite from where my then-future little house would be. I peeked through the leaves in the bush as I saw Papa fumble up the street and stomp up the stairs to bang on abuelita's front door. He yelled profanidades at my abuelita, cursing her for birthing a daughter who carried so much hold over him even in death and who had given birth to me, an extra mouth to feed in his disparity.

My heart races as the frigid waters rise over my belly and up to my chest.

The light turned on for the front porch, and my abuelita hurried out telling him to watch himself, unafraid of the commotion he was making. I accidentally slipped in the dirt and brushed against the bush.

I slip in the receding sand, and the current pulls me under...

Papa saw me and began staggering towards me, eyes filled with fury.

The waves rumble as they tumble over my head and back into the chilling sea...

His hand poised, ready to strike me.

Salt water surges up my nose as I flounder, trying to come swim towards the surface...

I was afraid and jumped out to run away. The end of a nail cut my right shoulder.

I manage to reach the surface and find my footing in the sand again...

The open wound stung, as I ran back home where several men in uniform waited for my Papa to come home.

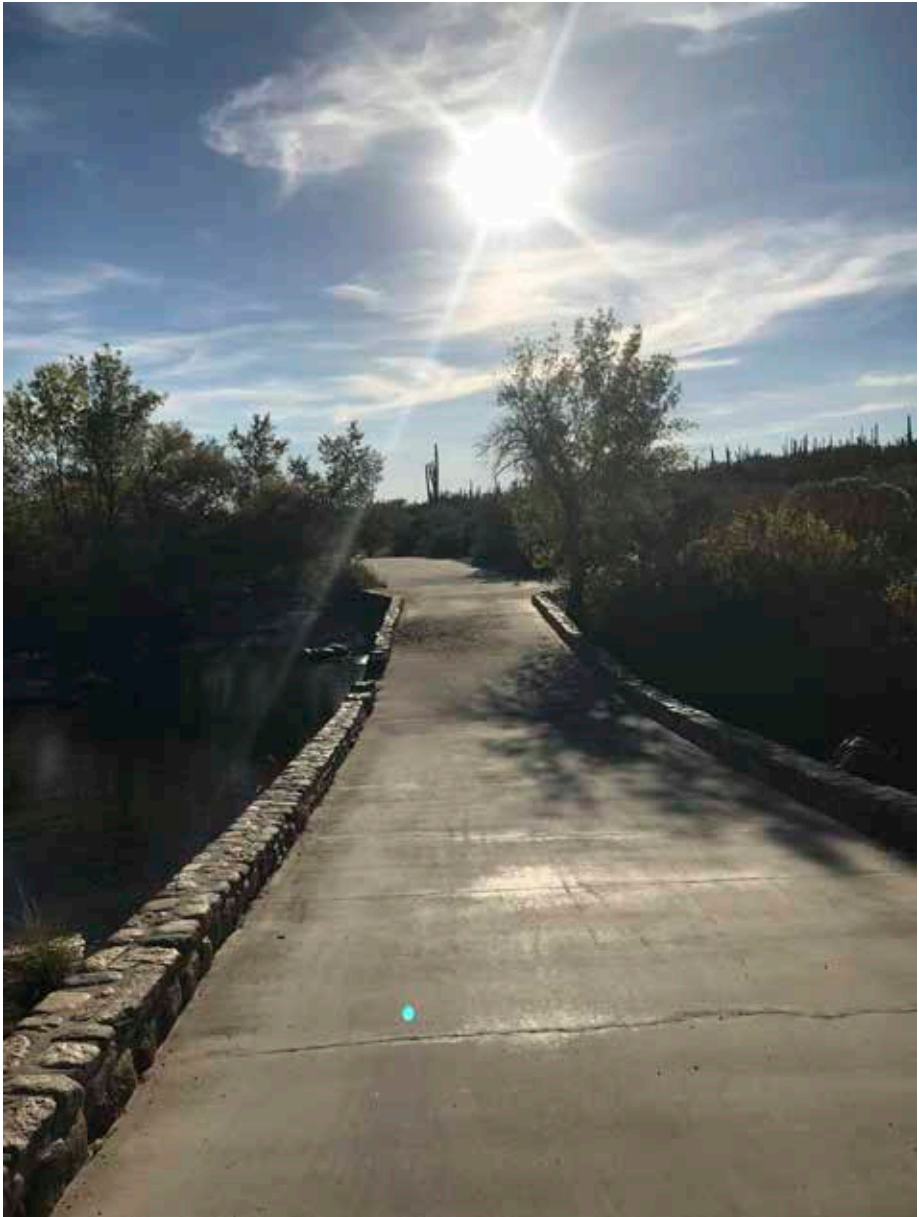
Wobbling, I walk back where I can stand without falling, where the water reaches my knees instead of my neck. These were my nightmares. After that, I couldn't leave my little house without being afraid that Papa would be able to find me. My abuelita would find me there most nights and have to carry me back inside for bed.

I think of my abuelita's face, soft wrinkles framing her sunken eyes and the edges of her smile. She was endearing, and the kindest person I knew. She loved me and protected me while I was unable to protect myself. She gave me hope in my darkest moment, and as a child, I knew I wanted to grow up to be just like her.

The sand beneath my feet filters back in to the sea, allowing me to sink deeper into the ocean's floor. I hold my stance firm. I won't let another nightmare control my life. I will no longer worry about where my Papa is. I don't care. Still gripping the magenta camisa, I know Mama would be proud of me. Scrunching the wet fabric into a ball, I throw it as far as I can into the ocean's dark waters where I can no longer see it.

An overwhelming feeling of love and compassion wash over me as I realize

I am just like my abuelita. Now I can protect myself and the ones I love. I look down at my own round belly, now wet and aching from the night's swim. Smiling, I whisper, "No te preocupes, hija. Mama's going to take care of you."



Pathway to Peace

ANDREA PONTI, B.S. IN PSYCHOLOGY, 2020

Bridges

J.M. RADCLIFF, B.A. IN ENGLISH-PROFESSIONAL WRITING, 2020

I burn every bridge,
Often forgetting to cross it first.
Not one left intact,
Only smoldering ashes of my anger and self-destruction.

The pillars of smoke rising endlessly
In the fetid air at my back.
The slow relentless march of my feet
Carry me ever onward
To the next bridge to be kindled.

I hope I remember to cross
Before
Burning it

Cigarettes and Thoughts of You

LAUREN PHILLIPS, M.A. IN ENGLISH, 2019

I had a deadly addiction
To both you and nicotine.

The taste of smoke
Lingered in the back of my throat
In the same way that you
Loitered beneath the plates of my skull.

No matter how many times
I flicked the butt of the cigarette,
I found it harder and harder
To evict thoughts of you
From their newfound home.

My lungs were slowly coated in tar,
Disabling every breath I took,
Similar to how you poisoned my veins,
Damaging every pump of my heart.

I coughed in an effort
To clear my chest,
But I choked on remnants
Of your destruction.

And yet, I continued to inhale
The thing less cancerous
Than you.

Wasted Ink

NICK McCORMICK, B.S. IN FORENSIC SCIENCE, 2019

I write to the one
Who these words will never see,
Lyrics for the one whose ears
Will never again choose to hear.
Open letters never opened
By the one to whom they aren't addressed
Explicitly. Maddening, I must confess
My mind will not stop begging you
In sullen silence: *read my bitter gazes*
Differently. Why does it seem to faze
You? The verses on the page do more
Justice to the way I feel for you.
My face has always been contorted
In expressions leaving my emotions
Distorted. Is it easier for you
This way, my dear, who will not
Ever be reading this?

Yellow Paint

CHRIS JOHNSON, B.A. IN ENGLISH FOR SECONDARY EDUCATION, 2020

There is a picture in the living room that reminds me of someone I had loved.

There were no people in this painting that hung in the living room.

It was brought up from the depths of my insecurity and it was raised in a box in the basement on Fourth and Main Street.

You can tell from the blues that highlight the sky that it was beaten.

The swirls of orange and the yellows that personify the sunflowers enamors even the most frightening of ghouls and beasts.

But do I need to say that? It's certainly quite obvious.

The light from my window has made this painting faded and old.

The textures on its face have gone from smooth to rough, leaving scars only a painter can pity.

I take it down during the winter months, for it should not see the darkness that finds its way into your heart and mine.

I put it in the basement on Fourth and Main Street. I left the light on for it. I hoped it was happy.

The picture that hung in the living room was the most beautiful painting in the house.

The picture that hung in the living room was the only painting in the house.

Perrier & Pistachio Gelato

SHYANN PAPIA, B.A. IN ENGLISH-PROFESSIONAL WRITING, 2019

“Champagne bubbles tickle my nose--under which I have a small mustache of course.
I’ve just been made a groom you see,
My bride is a delicate, lovely little thing,
A fox girl with a jovial, peach-coloured tail (I’ve always wanted to put a ribbon
‘round it!)

We met in a coffee bar at the corner of 3rd and Main I do believe, and I instantly
fell in love with the scent of wild pine she carried with her, gracefully strewn about
her shoulders as a silken shawl made by dream-spiders. My, she was sight enough to
make my rounded glasses slip from the edge of my nose right into the fresh cream
a-top my mug!

Thankfully my checkered undershirt also doubles as a napkin, so with cream-smearred
spectacles I introduced myself: ‘Orville Clearwood my good madame. She smiles,
balancing gingerly on the ball of her foot, for she was a good head and a half shorter
than me, and punches me square in the left cheek!

With a bleeding nose I confess my love, to which she accepts, expresses her mutual
feelings, and kisses the bruise she left me with--what a gem! Hand in hand, er
paw, we zip to my bike resting outside, a gift from my great, great, great, great,
grandfather who won it from a traveling camera salesman with a bum knee and a
polished wooden knuckle bone he keeps in his breast pocket, and we rode off into the
tangerine sunset peppered with hot-air balloons, women in iron corsets wishing us
luck with waving handkerchiefs.”

Well now, that’s a lot to find written in the sand in various shapes of frosted sea glass.

Paperwhite

SAMUEL SPRAGUE, B.A. IN GOVERNMENT, 2020

Many travel the world from the comfort of their home,
reading until they've seen every angle of the same grayscale sunsets.

Each crisp description jumps from the page into scouring eyes,
begging for a grain of color amid oceans of black and white.

They live lost among their favorite pages,
the rest of their world still bound a spine.



Fandomworld

SARAH ALVIS, B.A. IN DIGITAL FILM, 2021

Suspended

SIDNEY RASCON, B.A. IN ENGLISH FOR SECONDARY EDUCATION, 2018

Suspended between floors second and third
is not what she had intended, and yet
she was there, afraid and alone, somewhere
twenty-something feet in the tethered air.
The light had gone out the first hour in,
when she was most in need, as if the hope
it provided was no more desired
than her life on a cord and pulley
was meant. Long moments had passed when at last
her hope was restored by a noise above
the steel walls of the cart that confined her
in solitude. Soon, a soft light beamed down
from the sky of that world, and a hand reached
out to meet her and lift her from the dark.

What If...

DENISE WILLIAMS, B.A. IN ENGLISH-PROFESSIONAL WRITING, 2019

What if...

The quiet earth began to shake
So you dropped the birthday cake
You had been saving?

What if...

Curiosity killed your cat,
But its sixth life brought it back
Leaving you laughing?

What if...

The young cactus started singing,
The pet rock caught you dreaming,
As you took your pill?

What if...

The scarf you knit your grandmother,
Was stolen by your brother,
And given away?

What if...

Every cane were made of candy,
All the candles were waxy,
Instead of plastic?

What if...

Apples and oranges could compare,
And love could truly be shared,
Like children believe?

What if...

My rhyming words were adequate,
Not poetic nonsense,
That leaves readers lost?

What if, asked the poet,

As she laid down the pen she wrote with.

The Relationship Between Wind Chimes and Unapologetic Weather

SERENA VILLALPANDO, B.S. IN SOCIOLOGY, 2020

Thoughts of you ruined the tranquility set within me in the way the wind triggers a melodious sequence of harmonized notes prior to the arrival of a storm.

With each note from the chimes I heard snippets of your laughter, tones much too high to resemble the rasp in your voice yet I'm still reminded of the gentle symphony I heard as you spoke.

The storm arrives and the wind begins to hurdle into rapid waves, morphing the once melodic movement of the wind chimes into one sound of ugly clamor, almost apologizing to the weather for being of such delicacy.

Birds, who once sang along to the memories that danced between the chimes, have ceased and commenced their search for a stormless place of silence, calm and undisturbed by the thoughts of you.



Unexpected Company

KARA LAVERY, B.A. IN ENGLISH FOR SECONDARY EDUCATION, 2019

On Display

JEWELIA TRUJILLO, B.A. IN ENGLISH-PROFESSIONAL WRITING, 2019

The museum is filled with entirely nothing except one statue. A magnificent sculpture made by a sculptor who left no signature behind besides the mark of perfection. The white alabaster curves and flows like the smiles from convivial women. A Grecian face of both geniality and dignity stares blankly at its admirers from the world over. At its center, the heart sits alarmingly bright. Carved from veined carnelian, little white branches spread over the tubes and muscle segments of the organ, too divine and delicate for such a grotesque sight.

Those who adore the arts marvel at its beauty. They ignore the vivid anatomy for it is merely a reflection, a snapshot, of reality. It means something, though they do not know.

Those who disdain the arts shake their heads at the appalling behavior. Having one's insides on the outside is a feminine notion of those who think the world needs change. The heart glints in the harsh museum light like a drum beat, winking at the foolish minds.

A hole in the chest suspends the heart; ink drips through the white expanse of Heaven. Once considered a stray fleck of dirt, the ink has mottled the statue, spreading from the carnelian heart day by day. Rivulets of black drip down the chest, soon forming a river that stains the floor. Shining, wet, gross. The red of the heart twinkles sadly as drip by drip it suffocates in darkness. The visitors stop coming, stop admiring. The heart stops twinkling, stops beating.

If You Were Here Today

CHRIS JOHNSON, B.A. IN ENGLISH FOR SECONDARY EDUCATION, 2020

The telephone rang and it was
lunchtime. Eggs were boiling on the stovetop
and the mayo was sitting on the wooden table.
The phone rang sharply at one o'clock.
It was my mother. The eggs were still boiling
on the stovetop. I answered the phone.
I heard what was said and
I ran out the door, leaving the eggs on the stovetop.

In Memoriam

TAYLOR SIPOS, B.A. IN ENGLISH-PROFESSIONAL WRITING, 2020

I remember her.
Full frame dancing seashell of a woman,
long flowing sunlit hair,
entwined with the cool salted air,
walking on dove soft feet,
her toes wiggling, leaving imprints of her
fight in her wake.

I remember her.
Eyes that were filled with the salt of the sea.
Crashing as they woke to meet each day,
like mine. Filled with a hunger, a fury.
I remember her.
Hair long, thick and unkept as she
danced across the tickle
of waves that threatened to pull her out of being.

But...

I just remember her now....
One day her eyes stopped rising to the day,
as the battling waves swallowed
taking her deep deep deep down
under...

I remember her.
Bones squeaking and scowling
against their jarring scrunched frame.
Her exposed head shine ablaze in the
rays of the sky's scorching sun.
Ghosts of those bright wisps that were once
alive cling to her though salt does not cling here anymore.
Not by her ghosts of those ocean eyes.

I remember her.
Those dove feet leave no trace of flight,
or the fury of the fight in her wake.

The waves come on too quick,
washing washing washing away each step behind
and before us.
Each step, though gone now, a triumph for me,
a burden for her slowing
I remember her...

When the wave crashes into her
she grabs onto me clutching at my full frame;
she needs me to hold her, now,
I remember her.
As she holds me.
Chubby legs and little baby salt wisps
of sunlight hair.
The waves crashing into me knocking me
down down down into her ready embrace.
She holds...held me
As I remember.

I remember her.
Now as I hold her.
As I hold what was her.
As I scatter apart her ashes.
Watching as they mix and bubble into the salt
of the waves, always effortless, always moving,
clinging with love out out...out of my embrace.
I remember her

A Smile for One

KAYLA DAVID, B.A. IN ENGLISH-PROFESSIONAL WRITING, 2020

“Yes, sir. We trade in smiles here,” said the lady, waxen face stretching to encompass her own enormous smile. “Would you like one?”

The man fiddled with the cuffs of his suit. “Yes.”

“This way, please.” The lady walked off, limbs stiff.

They stood in the reception room, the walls white and shining bright enough it stung the man’s eyes, causing him to squint. The lady headed to the only hallway leading towards the back of the building, and the man followed, hunching his shoulders as he glanced around him. The beginning parts of the hallway started off as one would expect; smiles cased in small frames that lined the walls flashed at him as he walked past, the teeth brushed so no speck could be seen. Lights inside the case pointed directly at the teeth to accent the whiteness, and the man averted his eyes, shuffling faster after the lady.

The farther they walked, the more the shadows lengthened until the lightbulbs in the ceiling illuminated only spots on the floors, like spotlights to showcase two smiles on each side of the wall. These smiles sagged at the corners, the teeth yellow. The man examined these smiles, straightening as he leaned in closer to the cases.

“This one,” he said, stopping. The lady halted, staring straight ahead before she turned, slowly, empty eye sockets peering at the smile plastered in its case, corners of its lips lolling.

“I’m sorry, sir,” she said, “but that one is not for sale.”

“I want it,” said the man. “This one.” He pointed.

The lady hesitated, hands reaching up to stop an inch before the case. Then she opened it, carefully removing the smile and handing it to the man, who cradled the waxen skin, marveling as the flab of lips settled into his hands, the smile all but disappearing.

“It just won’t do,” said the lady.

“It’s fine,” said the man, bringing the smile up to his own, chapped lips, holding the tips gingerly between his fingers. “How is it?”

“Oh, sir. It’s awful.”

“I’ll take it.”

The lady shook her head, motioning for him, and they continued down the hallway until no more smiles aligned the walls and only the little pools of light remained. Their footsteps echoed in the small space, a simple clack clack of the lady’s heels and the thump thump of the man’s shoes. She opened a solitary door on their

right, stepping inside. The man glanced down the rest of the hallway, lights tapering off to a stretch of darkness, nothing visible within their depths. Turning away, he went inside the room, barren save for the operation table that the man laid down on, still holding the smile he chose. The lady hovered at his side, staring at the smile.

“Are you sure it’s the one you want?”

“Yes. I like it. I want it.”

She nodded and disappeared. When she returned, the doctor was with her. He was a thin, sallow man with the same waxy, eyeless face as the lady. Unlike her, his smile was fixed to his face, revealing rows upon rows of white, even teeth. He snapped on his gloves, tutting as he went about gathering his tools and setting them aside.

“What an awful smile,” remarked the doctor. “I don’t know why we still keep those. You should get one like mine, you know.” As if to demonstrate, the doctor’s lips split open even wider than before, until the doctor’s face resembled a caricature. When the man blinked, narrowing his eyes to peer closer at the doctor’s mouth, he saw tiny, black stitches embedded in the doctor’s skin.

“I like this one.”

“Of course you do,” said the doctor, grabbing his scalpel and cutting a thin line around the man’s mouth, who relaxed against the operation table, staring at the ceiling lights. His eyelids heavy, the lights blurred together. “It’s a hideous smile, though. I told them we should stop selling those kinds. People only come for the best, like mine.”

The man said nothing, his lips gone as the doctor peeled them away, and the skin dangled, edges frayed, like moth-eaten curtains, to reveal the man’s brown teeth. The doctor set aside the man’s old lips, reaching for the new set with the droopy smile and laying it across the man’s teeth. Then he stitched the new smile in place, working slow.

“There,” said the doctor. “Your lips are exquisite. Excellent care, I say! They’ll fit just right with our new set of teeth to make a wonderful smile. Can’t say the same for your new one.”

The man sat up on the table, fingers caressing the stitches, tiny bumps around his mouth.

“Is it done?” asked the man.

“Yes.”

The man smiled. It transformed his face. “No,” said the man. “This one is perfect.”



SkullHoney

ASHLYNN HOOVER, B.A. IN DIGITAL DESIGN, 2022

Rapunzel 2.0

AMBER HINSON, B.A. IN ENGLISH LITERATURE, 2019

It began, as always, as a dreary tale
Once upon a time, a trapped maiden gal.
There lived a beautiful girl about age 19.
Her long locks of gold, spilled across the floor
Her honey brown eyes glimmered in the sunlight.

A slim thicc bod
Made all the boys come to her yard
However, none could seem to reach her.
In a tower of stone
Is where she was thrown
And condemned to stay forever.
Her stepmother was wicked, a very sickly woman
Who didn't feed the poor child nothing but chicken.

Every day, the stepmother would leave,
For she had work from 7-3.
With homegirl's hair
She'd descend the broken stairs
Down to the world outside.
And every Friday from 7-3
When the wicked stepmother would leave
Homegirl would sneak in her boyfriend, Sheen.

Well one Friday the 13th
When the stepmother took her leave,
The maiden waited to hear her cue.
Rapunzel, Rapunzel, let down your long hair.
She chucked her head out the window
And Sheen ascended the jacked up stairs.

They talked and sang and played Uno throughout the day
When they completely lost track of time.
It was now 3
And the evil stepmother would soon be

Back home to find them.

You must leave! You must leave!
Rapunzel cried out to Sheen
And quickly raced to the window.
But when she threw her head back
Poor Rapunzel's weave was not intact.

Time with the King

VICTORIA SINCLAIR, B.S. IN PSYCHOLOGY, 2019

She dances to music only she can hear,
In a bejeweled dress, in an ivory room with open windows
With her unicorn prince. Prancing together,
Swinging and laughing; she waits for the door to open.
The key sits on a desk in the corner, never used.

Her guest arrives, as she hoped!
The prince is forgotten as she dances with the King.
Her feet on his, twirling and spinning
They spend the day swaying
To the music only they hear.

She taps to music only she can hear,
Hugging the matted unicorn prince.
In jeans and tee, in an ashen room with half drawn windows,
She passes time glancing at the key.

The King's visits are scarce and short.
Dances have stopped and so has the joy.
His mind is somewhere she can't go,
And when he leaves, she locks the door.

She listens to music only she can hear,
In pajamas, in an ebony room with closed windows,
She cradles the threads of her unicorn prince.
Rocking and crying she stares at the key,
In two pieces for the door that will never open again.

A Night in the Dollhouse

DESTINY HALVERSON, B.S. IN BEHAVIORAL HEALTH SCIENCE, 2020

Before the sun falls, the light shines in.
But with it, faces look and hands subdue.
With every move and bend, the faces stare intently.
With every step and turn, the hands twist sharply.
With every shake and tremor, the house sets unsteady.

No move is our own, no turn is our choice.
They stare into a porcelain face, where tears can't fall.
They twist the plastic limbs, which can't run away.
They care not how we feel, nor what we desire.
They make the choices, we play their game.

When the sun falls, the darkness creeps in.
It creeps through the cracks of wood and glue.
Through the wooden windows, the ones with no glass.
The windows where those faces stare.
Through the wooden door, the one with no lock.
The door where the hands swoop in.
Through the glue, that holds the half-house together.
The glue weakened by the tremors.

The darkness seeps through the cracks of our tightly wound limbs.
It jumps to our lips, forever shaped into a smile.
It spreads to our cheeks, painted blush to appear warm.
It looms over our eyes, wide open to watch the darkness consume us.
It seeps down through our chests, still and silent without life.

Where are the faces as the darkness takes over?
Did they not watch our every move before?
Why do they only watch in the light?
Where are the hands now?
Do they not care what happens to us after the darkness creeps in?

They don't care, I suddenly realize.
They don't care at all, I repeat to myself.

Those faces and hands only play.
Those faces and hands do not love.
Their light is no different than the dark.

No move is our own, no turn is our choice.
They stare into a porcelain face, where tears can't fall.
They twist the plastic limbs, which can't run away.
They care not how we feel, nor what we desire.
They make the choices, we play their game.

Those liars, cheaters, and abusers,
Have they no shame in what they do?
They watch us with those faces,
Critiquing every step we take.
They twist us with those hands,
Bending us to their own chosen path.

*I promise myself,
I will be free from these nights,
From this dollhouse hell,
From the faces,
From the hands,
That trapped me in this porcelain.*



#MeToo

JACQUELINE RENEE KASHKOUSH, M.A. IN ENGLISH, 2019

Fire

THOMAS PACE, B.A IN DIGITAL FILM, 2021

you asked me if I would say anything
about the bridge or twinkling lights,
and it felt so much like a eulogy
that I couldn't speak that night.

a missed opportunity,
no words after would reach your heart
I guess I doused the fire
that I had tried to start.

Puddle

CATERINA ZAMORA, B.A. IN ENGLISH FOR SECONDARY EDUCATION, 2021

My grandmother is watching us kids play from the wooden bench. It is a hot day, but then again, every day in the Barcelona summer is a hot day. I am wearing leather sandals, and the sand from the park keeps getting inside my shoes. Every now and then I have to stop and shake my foot in the air. Tiny rocks come flying out.

One of my cousins stares at me from the other side of the park; he has his back against a tall block wall, meant to protect us from mud slides caused by copious amounts of rain. It did rain, three or four days a year. It used to be more though, old people would say.

We were just children, all between the ages of three and ten. My cousin keeps staring at me. He is giving me the eye. I know what it is, what he wants. He places forward his right foot and leaves it there, challenging me. He is standing as tall as a tiny twig can, which is not very tall.

I wait. Wait across our dry, sandy, parched park. *Our* is the important word here.

He takes his index fingers to his head, placing one of them on each side of it so they stick out. I am ready. I take out my invisible *capote*, the one that is bright magenta on one side and saffron yellow on the other, the same yellow as our grandma's Spanish rice. I shake it midair, the motion that indicates that I am expectant, that I am ready, an invitation.

My cousin paws the ground with his foot, one time, then one more. He then switches his weight onto his other leg and paws with the other foot: there is starting to be a little cloud of dust around his scrawny legs. So intimidating. I feel unsure, but I cannot show it; it is part of the deal, a pledge of valor.

A bull fighter never shows his fear in front of his four-hundred-ton opponent. Who cares if I only weigh forty-eight pounds and the bull weighs a hundred times more? I am a matador, fear is not plausible. Besides, deep down I know it is only a twenty-nine-pound bull, not very impressive, although he can still gore me to death.

I put all that aside. I truly have a bull staring at me, giving me a deadly gaze. The bull keeps pawing the ground and shaking its head, pointing with its sharp horns at me. I imagine one of them clawing at me. I feel it piercing my flesh, its tip reaches my heart and it tears through it. But there is no blood; instead, a million red rose petals burst into the sky. I am out of breath.

I feel my chest with my hands where my cousin jabbed me with a stick screaming "how do you like that!?! Do you think us bulls like to be gutted to death?"

I feel perplexed, I did not see that coming. I had taken out my matador *capote*, but I had forgotten my matador's sword, the tool that I would use to finish him off. I was no matador, I lacked the killer instinct. I was so disappointed in myself.

I walk across the park back to my ever-patient grandma. My hands are in my pockets, my head down, I am thinking how a three-year-old tricked me into switching roles. I hug her hips and my hands touch each other behind her back—she is so slim, even at her age.

“Don't be sad *hija*,” she says. “In my time they performed this ritual with real people. To entertain the soldiers, you see. They killed *real* people.”

I look up at her face, she seems lost far away. I am hugging an empty shell.

I have no idea what she is talking about. I wink. She senses my loss and looks down at me. She is back, *thank God*, I think.

“But this was just a game, right *Yaya*?”

“Yes, this was just a game.”

She stares across the park, to a bunch of rose petals that have become a puddle of blood.

The Seasonal Cycle of Crushed Petals

SERENA VILLALPANDO, B.S. IN SOCIOLOGY, 2020

The veins on your arms branch out like naked trees in winter
And I want nothing more than to be wrapped by you.
I always saw myself as your fragrant flowers,
Cherry blossom buds clinging to your branches,
Wanting everyone to see the beauty we created in a forest of one.

When autumn arrived, I fell with the leaves
And our departure crushed me into thousands of fragmented petals.
You were left bare but still beautiful as you ached
While I became floral dust lying on the sidewalk.

Spring is upon us and as the remains of me float in the late winter breeze,
I've noticed new flowers have begun to blossom with you.
I am happy those sprouts soon will make you whole
And I wonder if there is a heaven for forgotten cherry blossoms.

N

HALEY PEARSON, B.A. IN ADVERTISING AND GRAPHIC DESIGN, 2022

It's one word.

One word.

And yet, it still scares me.

People might say, well you can say it--but we can't.

We claimed it, they say.

As if no one is ever reminded of what place they were once put in when hearing it.

I wasn't there, but when I hear that word--I might as well have been.

Why are you so against it? They say.

I simply don't like being reminded.

I don't want to be reminded of where I once was.

I want to remember the strength that my ancestors had, not the hateful words that forced them

to have that strength.

Words rooted in hate do have power, it's true, but what happens when people abuse that power?

When I hear it walking down the street.

When I hear it in the comfort of my own home.

When I hear little kids saying it because they can.

What happens when I start saying it?

It's no longer a reminder of the struggle of my black brothers and sisters, or uncles, aunts, cousins, fathers, mothers.

It's a cycle.

We can say it, but you can't, we can say it, but you can't, we can say it, but you can't.

We can all say it--but should we?

Come To Me

CALEB DAVIDSON, B.A. IN DIGITAL FILM, 2020

Life, like waves,
Recedes and pounds.
At first there's silence,
Then all the sounds
Of a busy life
Come crashing down.

In finding room
For peace inside
One's own mind
He must divide
To receptionary parts
In heart and mind

Specially partitioned time
For listening and quieting
Me and my busy self down
From all my mental rioting



On Fire

JILL LEDBETTER, B.A. IN HISTORY FOR SECONDARY EDUCATION, 2022

Abandoned Shoreline

RYAN BETCHER, M.S. IN PSYCHOLOGY, 2020

Sandy hair; streaks of sunshine; sound of crashing waves whispers wind; breathing salt from cool breeze; an ocean blue paradise. Crabs crumble shells, rocks, crackling pops scattering across. Are you mine? As I whisper out, abandoned shoreline.

I Know What I Saw

CHEYENNE REED, B.A. IN ENGLISH-PROFESSIONAL WRITING, 2020

My feet touched the hard wood floor and it was surprisingly cool considering it was July. I felt a sigh make its way out of my mouth and into the still air. The days were passing in a way that made me slightly uncomfortable. Get up, go to work, come home, sleep, and repeat. During the summer months here, everything moved in painful and repetitive slow motion. I rubbed my eyes for a while, partly because they were itchy and partly because if I itched hard enough, I could see colorful and squiggly lines in the deep depths behind my eyelids. That is what excited me these days. How sad, I thought. As I stood up, I felt my bones crack and my back was stiff like a tree branch. I made my way over to the sink and stared at myself in the mirror. It never is exactly what I want to see in the mirror, but hey, can't change it. I reached for my phone while mindlessly moving the toothbrush back and forth with such monotony I am surprised the job even got done. My thumb pushed at the screen and I scrolled through news stories. War, lottery winners, betrayal; all the usual.

After I finished staring at my cell phone, I returned my gaze to myself in the mirror. I attempted a smile and ended up laughing a bit at myself. I felt kind of pathetic because, truly, I believe we all are so sure we are going to be something when we “grow up.” Just you wait, we all think. One day, you will hear my name and remember me. Selfish? Sure. Maybe. I just can't shake the feeling that there is more to life than a tedious routine, and perhaps there is. I just haven't found it yet. Or it hasn't found me.

I made my way to the closet and ran my fingers through my hair while I looked at the clothes. Boring. Black. White. Gray. Pencil skirts and straight-legged-slacks. My ring got caught in my hair and I essentially had to rip it out. I felt myself getting irritated at the situation. It is a constant state of self-loathing, that is true.

Before I knew it, I was running dangerously close to being late for work. I am a secretary for an insurance company, which is exactly what I always wanted to be. (It isn't). I grabbed my coffee mug; it was warm to the touch, a soothing feeling in my palm despite the suffocating heat that would greet me as soon as I opened the garage door.

I buckled myself in and began to drive towards work. The drive seemed to pass by quite steadily. As I pulled up to the stoplight, I let out a dramatically deep sigh. The sun's rays beat through my windshield with an unrelenting violence. Cars whizzed by. Everyone speeding; impatient, as if they were the only ones needing to be somewhere. My fingers danced across the stereo buttons, waiting for a somewhat tolerable tune to break through my speakers. But then, like a magnet to metal, my

eyes were drawn straight ahead through the cars and the red stoplight in front of me and the elderly man crossing the street. I continued to look, farther than any distance my eyes could normally make out. I saw four perfect dots. Twinkling, but not wavering. An almost perfect square, unmoving ahead. Time slowed around me. My hands fumbled through my purse, searching desperately for my phone. I began to snap pictures not believing the seemingly supernatural and unexplainable sight. A sight oblivious to everyone too wrapped up in their various, unpleasant tasks. Time felt unmeasurable.

A honk from behind me pulled me out of the awestruck sea I had so quickly sunk into. "Oops, sorry," I muttered, though no one would hear. As I began to move through the street with everyone else, I couldn't help but feel maybe there was more out there. Maybe my purpose was finally being shown. I cracked a small smile at the thought. Aliens coming to Earth and choosing me, out of the billions and billions of people, to help execute their mission. My hands and face felt tingly, as if in a hypnotic state from what I just witnessed. I pulled into the parking lot, but something was telling me to turn around. I couldn't go in. Whatever I saw wanted me to see it and there certainly was not enough time to wait. I turned around and dialed my work.

"Hey, it's me, Margaret. I was on my way to work and all of a sudden got so dizzy. I think I need to go home and just rest my eyes." I was lying through my teeth.

"Oh my goodness, that sounds terrible," my coworker said, genuinely worried.

"Yeah, it isn't any fun. Anyway, I'll make it up to you guys later thi-" I couldn't finish my sentence.

"You know, Margaret, the flu has been going around. My granddaughter Liza got it and it was just terrible. Maybe you should go to the doctor." She continued to go on. I sighed heavily. "Or you know, there was an outbreak with that romaine lettuce. Did ya hear? Oh my gosh, Margaret, you eat salad! You need to go to the hospital. It could be eating away at your brain as we speak!" She was practically shouting.

"Oh goodness, okay, didn't think of that. I will go right now. Thank you!" I hung up as quickly as possible and rolled my eyes. If only they really knew what I was doing, what I had just discovered.

I peered over at the clock. It was two in the morning. I hadn't slept a wink, but I didn't need to. The caffeine from the coffee mixed with my adrenaline was all I needed. The blue light from my computer screen was extremely bright on my face. My fingers scrolled along the mouse, while I examined pictures of UFOs and aliens in plain sight. How did people not see this? Unless people are chosen. It would be ludicrous if everyone had the ability, I thought. As I continued to stare at pictures, articles, and videos, my cat Henry meowed. He sounded like a broken record.

"Not now," I shooed him away with my foot.

But he continued to meow such a deafening cry, I finally stopped and looked at him.

“What?” I asked, knowing good and well I would never get a response.

He looked at me and I looked back. I felt my eyes grow wider. Cats can be messengers from extraterrestrial beings, I remembered. Leaning forward, I quickly picked Henry up and flipped him to face me. He was incredibly heavy and I could feel his extra weight drooping over my hands. I held him close to my face. So close in fact, that his whiskers tickled my cheeks and his wet nose was flat against mine. I closed my eyes and waited to hear something. Now I know cats cannot speak, but I figured I could feel the vibration in order to hear what the aliens were trying to say. He broke the silence with another meow and wiggled out of my arms before sauntering off to the kitchen. I followed him, thinking he must be leading me to something magnificent. My hand slid up the wall, searching for the light switch. When I finally flicked it on, I saw Henry standing in front of his empty food dish. I felt a rush of emotions fill me: embarrassment, exhaustion, and everything in between. I started to laugh a bit at the thought of me really believing my cat could translate what the aliens were trying to convey. “Sorry Hen,” I said to him as I poured food in his bowl. I moseyed back to my bedroom and sat back down in front of the computer. Somewhere between listening to Henry crunch his food in his teeth and the sound of my keyboard tapping, I fell asleep.

Startled, I awoke to my alarm screeching. I jumped up to turn it off. Then I ran into the bathroom, brushed my hair and teeth, put on deodorant, and ran out of the house in the same clothes from the prior day. I needed to get back to the spot. I needed to catch a red light. As I approached the intersection, I was the first in the line of cars behind me. The light was green and I knew I had enough time to make it, but that wouldn't be long enough to catch the sight if it was there again. I needed more than a fleeting moment. My foot slid over the breaks and I started to slow down. The cars behind me braked hard and honked as I sat fully stopped at the green, watching it turn to yellow and eventually red. I didn't care. They didn't know the work I had been given. I squinted through the sun and gasped when I saw it again. The perfect image of four little dots shimmering in the gritty and dusty distance. “Unbelievable,” I muttered. The light turned green and I drove to work, not even fully noticing the angry group of cars trailing me the majority of the way there.

I could not focus all day at work. Everyone asked me how I felt and if I needed anything. I had forgotten I was supposed to be sick. The phones were ringing and there was paperwork to fill out, but I could not get over what I saw. What I had seen twice. That was evidence enough. The clock crawled and by the time lunch rolled around, I was starving. Not for food but for answers. I rushed home and immediately opened my computer. Food, sleep, and everything else could wait. I had been looking

for answers my entire life, a purpose if you will. It was here and I couldn't let it slip between my fingers.

On the way out the door, I noticed my voicemail box was blinking. Hesitantly I slid my hand over to click the button to listen to it back. I didn't usually get messages on this box anymore. Perhaps it was communication from them? The aliens?

"Good morning, this is Ash over at the Eyecare Center. I just wanted to remind you about your upcoming annual appointment. It is this Thursday at 2 pm. Be sure to bring your glasses. Have a nice rest of your day and call us if you have any questions!"

Oh. I had forgotten I had an appointment for my eyes. In fact, I had kind of forgotten about everything in general lately, including my glasses. My head had been hurting a bit and my eyes felt a bit more fatigued lately. I walked back into my bedroom and retrieved my glasses off of a stack of papers I had printed on alien sightings and subsequently left on the bedside table. I put them on my head and immediately felt some relief. I checked my watch and knew if I wanted to catch the lights again, I needed to leave now. I hurried out to my car and got in. I drove as fast as I could down the road. The light was just turning red as I approached it. Perfect, I thought to myself. I inched my car forward and peaked around the car in front of me. There it was again. Hovering in the darkening monsoon sky. Turning, I looked at the cars around me. Nobody seemed to notice. As I turned back, I squinted and looked at it a little longer. I tried to remember the pictures and videos I had been viewing to see if perhaps it matched anything. And that is when it all hit me. I felt my hand come up to cover my mouth. It couldn't be. I was not looking at alien spaceships or anything close. I was looking at powerlines. More specifically, I was looking at the sun bouncing off of the powerlines. A surge of thoughts and emotions went through me.

The light turned green, and as I drove forward my mind felt numb. I had invested hours and thoughts into what I thought was a magnificently important discovery that was imperative to the future of mankind. Instead, it was just a reminder that I needed to wear my glasses and definitely go to the eye doctor. I could not believe I had felt myself going mad, losing sleep and meals over this. Over something so ridiculous. I pulled into the parking lot of my job and let out a long sigh. With each breath I took, I closed my eyes, and thought back to everything that had happened over the past couple of days. Then it dawned on me: of course it was real! It was as real as I had wanted it to be. It had given me purpose, so why should I let it deflate me now? Children believe in Santa and the Tooth Fairy until they are told it is all some sort of game. Until they are told that, however, they believe it with every fiber of their being. It gives them purpose. Purpose to be good all year and purpose to brush their teeth. In some way, this was my Easter Bunny or Tooth Fairy or Santa.

I wouldn't stop chasing what could be out there. I would just make sure to update my glasses and take care of myself first.

The Breath of a Whistle

VALERIE MELVIN, B.A. IN COMMUNICATIONS AND B.A. IN ENGLISH-
PROFESSIONAL WRITING, 2021

I am the breath of a whistle –
The soft pitter-patter of a drizzle.
I am the tears that flow in night,
The laughter in early morning bright.

I am crumpled ideas thrown under beds –
Fears hidden inside innocent heads.
I am the tune sung to the steering wheel –
The exhilaration of tasting a decadent meal.

I am the cold sway of sun-beaten grass –
The creaky desk that rests in the class.
I am a small room with no decorations,
A tiny community in a sea of large nations.

I am the forbidden thought of a deep desire,
And moonlit conversations beside the fire.
I am a pen with everlasting ink –
The merry noise of a glass's clink.

I am the white shirt speckled with spots and stains –
The cleansing river, the flood, and the rain.
I am the joy heard at midnight with faces aglow –
The rigid wall that stands to watch children grow.

I am the sorrow that separation provides –
The voice of a friend who yearns to confide.
I am the letters that make up a word –
The wind beneath the wings of the bird.

I am the dips of a bumpy ride,
And the pain that is felt inside.

I am the hot sun on a peaceful afternoon,
Yet every night, I battle the moon.

I am all of these: the good, the bad,
The ups, the downs, the frowns, the glad.
I am the blacks, the grays, and all of the blues,
The yellows, the whites, and the golden hues.

I am me and no one else.
I've taken so long to understand myself,
But who I am is who I want to be.
I would never be anyone else but me.

Rebuild

MARINA ALVAREZ, B.S. IN FORENSIC SCIENCE, 2018

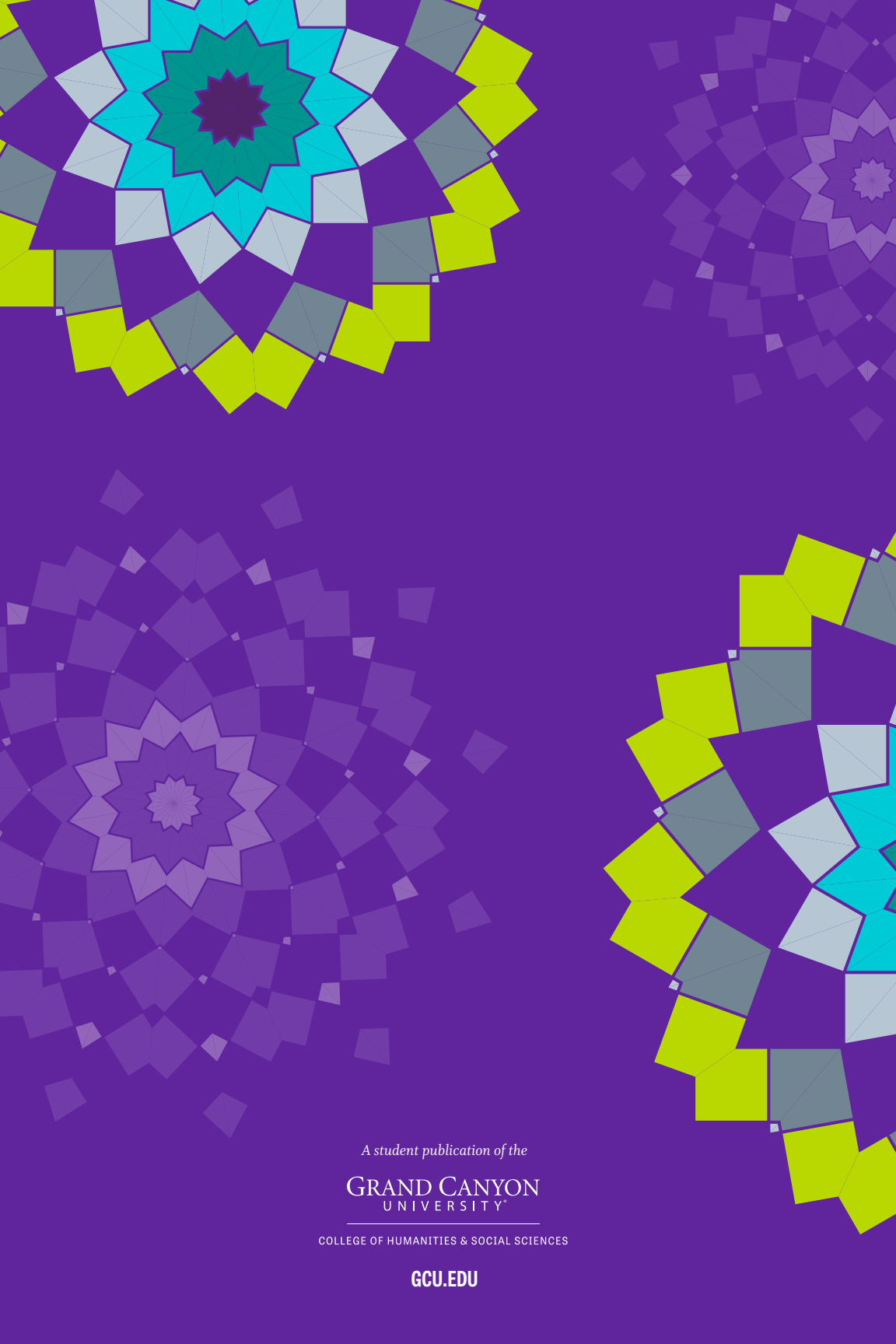
I have worked
so hard
to fall in love
with these bones,
with this skin
and these eyes.

I have taken a journey
and collected pieces
and slowly stitched them
into someone
with joy in their mind
and love in their heart.



Divine Discovery

ASHLEY M. BENNETT, M.S. IN PSYCHOLOGY, 2019



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