

StartleBloom

THE GCU LITERARY REVIEW

VOLUME 5

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three o'clock in watercolor

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

The only thing better than a platonic
relationship is a plutonic one,
one that moves as though it has only
known motion underwater. Here, the
tension over what will happen after teatime
puddles in the hush of serendipity,
inevitable and familiar and looking
as though it could settle between the arches
of their fingerprints, nearly identical. Time
is intractable now, rounder than it was
last Sunday and viscous like honey or
orange marmalade. Suzanne holds a feather
in her facsimile palms, tucks it away
in the crease of her elbow; we have no choice
but to sway toward her balmy skin as she takes
another sip of the idea that's pooling in the
groove of her saucer, set aside for later.

Mint July

AUDREY BARTLETT, B.A. IN PSYCHOLOGY, 2020

In mint July
I can't deny
the way we felt last June
sparks of red
danced in our head
but now we're icy blue

In mint July
I still dot my I's
with hearts in tribute to you
but hearts in paper
can't be saved for later
like the flowers who die after bloom

You Were The Firelight

DALLON ROBINETTE, B.A. IN ENGLISH FOR SECONDARY EDUCATION, 2022

You were the firelight and I was a bedside table
and the symbolism was crap but it worked
I watched you play with whatever burned you away
and whatever would burn within your chest
and I watched you fly away in all different shades of color
colors that went beyond the common characteristics of light
you flew up and over and a little too close to the sun
and you sat by yourself with your sleeves rolled down
and your wings faded to ash
and you took the ash and traced your veins grey
because the color suited who you were that week
but occasionally you glanced up
the timid tightrope walker
under the guise of a fearless flyer
you longed to chase the darkness away
and paint your dark circles in blazing reds and pure whites
you played with matches and expected no fallout
because you had been falling all along
and when your rhythms met reason the lines didn't quite add up
and the words never sank into your soul
so you hung them in your eyes and laced them through your teeth
and maybe one day it'll add up.
You were the firelight and I was a ghost passing by
And the symbolism never met expectations but we made it work anyway.

Living Water

KATIE MOORE, B.A. IN ENGLISH FOR SECONDARY EDUCATION, 2021

The hell-sun bakes; I desiccate.
While incarnate Peace sings
of cool, cool water—
offering a forever taste.
He is traversing the hot sand,
burning His bare feet—
as He carries me.
Finally: dunks me in a crystal pool.
(I think a mirage, a dream...)
Underwater, I can finally breathe.
Come up for air; come back to life.
(Can man do more than simply survive?)
Eyes open, near-blinded by a human Jewel.
He smiles (I fear no shadow of death)
and leans down with a sweet caress
for my starved flesh.

I had been far too long wandering, thirsty and alone...
Sighing, I let the God-man cradle me
Home.

Night Shift

MOLLY MARR, M.S. IN GENERAL PSYCHOLOGY, 2021

I'm alive when the roots are growing, the
crickets are crying and the owl produces its pellet.

I'm awake when the wind is whining
down into the hush of a breeze
and the house creaks a haunting melody.

I'm moving
when the snores of the old open the eyes of the young
and babies are sucking their thumbs.

I'm breathing when the sirens whirl by in the dark
calling for chest compressions; ribs crack,
the heart massaged by masked hands.

I'm there when the dead die and are carted away
to the silver vault where only those dressed
in gray may enter.

I'm walking and talking and laughing while
the rest of my world is napping
and ignoring the charting of the moon.

Amateur astronomer,
night-walker,
mortician –

I could be all of these, but really
and truly

I only can tell you

I walk the living, sleeping corridors of time.

House of a Mind

HELEN I. BROWER, B.A. IN DIGITAL FILM WITH AN EMPHASIS IN
SCREENWRITING, 2020

I was wrong.
I knew it. You knew it.
I apologized. You forgave.
Cuddled me against your chest. Said every word was done. Settled in the dust.
Forgotten. We won't think on it again.
And you didn't. But I did.

I thought runs in the carpet of my house of a mind. Cleaned every inch of it. Even under the stove. Behind the fridge. Yet it lingered, like the smell of burnt scrambled eggs. Or over boiled eggs. Or just eggs.

And so I reset. Called you. Spoke to you. Laughed with you. Smiled with you.
It wasn't you. It was me.
Me and my spotless house of a mind that brought up the stench of a petty argument in my favorite place in the city.

I decided to go. To go in and clear the air of my house. With sage or a candle. I vowed to sit and relax in my haven. One of two in this city, but this one serves beer. It's a pub. A quirky pub. A new pub. A trendy pub. A, *we just call it a pub because we're British*, pub.

I entered. Saw the spot we spoke. My house curdled. Became a haunted mansion playing memory ghosts that made my eyes prick.
I chose my second favorite spot. A window seat that delightfully hides *that* spot. The one that harbors a memory. An unpleasant one.

A second hour passed. I munched food that made me ill. Food so good my body craved it. Even as my house of a mind condemned it. Twisted the club sandwich in my stomach like trying to pull the rug from under me.

This is my place. My favorite place. But I feel like an intruder. Not from the people. The ones who serve my favorite beer. The ones who ask if I want it? The pint of Neck Oil IPA? And I cringe. I order Coke.

My mouth is dry with the urge to throw up. Throw up the memory. I would not enjoy beer, not even Neck Oil. Not with my house of mind throwing the furniture out the windows. Even the grand piano. It's sharp and unbearable.
I sit in my second favorite spot. Chew on fries. Drink cola. Pretend I'm okay.
I'm not.

You forgave me. With cuddles. smiles. laughs. Better memories.
But my house of a mind. The one tearing down the wallpaper. The one ruining four days worth of rooms because of that argument. Like mold threatening in the air vents.

But I can't seem to bury the incident deep in the decaying dirt.
Not because I was hurt, not because I was right in the argument. But because I was wrong. And my words stung. Words fueled by Neck Oil. Lapped out to hit you.
But you forgave me. And I couldn't.
I couldn't forgive me.
And now I sit in my favorite place. Surrounded by self hate. Like my house of a mind waiting to be bulldozed down.

But I will sit here.
You forgave. So I will try to forgive myself.
And stamp out thought matches in every room. Matches. That tell me I don't deserve your love. That I signed over any rights to your kindness the minute my tongue formed those words. I will douse water over those invasive thoughts itching. Itching to burn. Itching to betray my fragile house of a mind.
And I will call you tonight. To hear you laugh. smile. And let you love me.
Because you do. And I love you.

I knew it. You knew it.



Leave Fast or Stay Forever

**ROBERT RUSS, B.A. IN ADVERTISING AND GRAPHIC DESIGN, WITH A MINOR
IN WEB DESIGN, 2021**

Decisions

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

Cutting the stems
off of strawberries
that will be put

onto ice cream. The small
knife, easy to fumble with,
holds steady in cracked and dry

hands. Love has no place
in this house. Nor does hatred.
Everything was placed into

neutral, nothing was happening
inside of this life. And a decision
was made, in a manner of speaking.

Fate was made into use. And these
strawberries, bleeding onto the
cutting board. The stems cut

and thrown into the trash.
And soon these strawberries
will be cut once more, into

smaller and smaller slices.
Set atop of cold ice cream,
drizzled with chocolate syrup.

This was the life. It was
me slicing strawberries and fate sitting
in the dining room, waiting

for me to make my decision.

Mystical Intercession

CHARYSE ALLEN, B.A. IN ENGLISH-PROFESSIONAL WRITING, 2020

The room was biting cold. Even though the seats were plush and soft, the cream-colored walls were decorated in calm, happy art; even the entrance door handle was warm bronze, pretty, welcoming. You would think they would raise the temperature, help everyone inside to feel better...warmer about what they were about to do.

An unwelcome shiver racked through me. Cindy shook next to me, as if she were also shivering. The urge to wrap my arms around her had to be suppressed. It appeared as though the room, the building itself, knew what went on within and rebelled against it. The smell was something else, a scent I could not describe, one that filled me with dread and despondency. A scent I would never forget for as long as I lived. A heavy perfume, like a strong-smelling vanilla candle, hung in the air as if to mask the dreadful odor beneath.

Not everyone was there for the same reason. No. But the ones there for the same reason as Cindy were easy to spot. Each of them worked to avoid eye contact with each other or anyone else in the room, exactly as Cindy was doing. The only indicator that told me she was still feeling, still *thinking*, was her fingers twined with mine. With every passing moment, they gripped mine tighter and tighter.

Moments.

We only had moments.

Five minutes.

They would call her back, talk to her for maybe a minute, have her take the pill, and send her on her way with her “care package.” They guaranteed the process would only take five minutes, as if that were comforting to their patients. In all actuality, it was their process; they wanted people in and out and to move onto the next. It was a cold process, as cold as the building it occurred within.

While Cindy and the others in the room were secluded in their thoughts and nothing beyond, I was free to observe. The petite girl sitting across from us had short black hair, her skin light and speckled with freckles. She stared at her hands in her lap while she picked at her nails.

A little boy, fair, freckled skin, black hair, filled my mind. He was on a sidewalk, sitting on the ground with a scratched-up knee held in the air. Tears rolled down his red cheeks. He was three, maybe four. Then the girl sitting across from us was a part of the vision, squatting next to the boy, cradling him in her arms. His crying instantly halted when he glanced up at her, pure love and comfort filling his eyes.

I shook my head in an attempt to shake off the image, the despair it enticed within me. That sickly sweet scent clogged everything up, making it impossible

for me to clear my mind, to think straight. To our right sat a couple, both of them dirty blond, the guy holding the girl's hand, both of them staring straight forward at nothing. Or maybe something I couldn't see or fathom.

A little girl sitting at a large wooden table. A colorful, glittering party hat sat atop her dirty blonde, curly bob. The couple sitting to our right stood behind her, smiles in their eyes, hands on her shoulders, as she leaned forward to blow out the pink, number-2 candle. Instead of only air coming out of her puckered lips, saliva sprayed all over the small, purple cake, causing her parents to toss their heads back and laugh.

I flinched out of this picture, then continued scanning the room. Sitting along the wall to our left was one other girl, red hair, older, maybe in her late twenties. Tear tracks painted her cheeks, but she did not move, did not shake with sobs. Silent tears trailed down her face. I couldn't help her, couldn't help them, couldn't help Cindy. I could only sit and wait and bear this burden.

A couple stands, the older man with his arms wrapped around the woman, both looking down at the baby enveloped in the woman's arms. The redheaded woman sitting to our left watched them with tears still trailing down her cheeks, but the tears were not sad. The light in her eyes showed relief, certainty, peace.

These phantasmagorias flashed before my eyes in swift succession. A scream bubbled up my throat. I wanted to rant and rave, throw furniture around, bust the pretty pictures on the walls. These urges were suppressed, the scream swallowed. Cindy was the reason I was there. I would not condemn her, judge her, shun her, for the choice she was making. I would love her, hold her, support her, through every second of it. Even if it killed me. Even if it broke her. I would remain, an unwavering stronghold for my closest friend.

One final image—the image I dreaded seeing—filled my vision.

It was Cindy.

She sat up in a hospital bed, covered in a sheen of sweat, her arms wrapped around a tiny bundle that made adorable grunting and sucking noises while it sucked on its own hands. The most pertinent part of this image was Cindy's face. Lips curved up, head tilted to the side and back slightly, eyes closed. She wasn't beaming, she wasn't grinning; it could have passed for a smirk if you didn't know her. But I knew her, and I knew that look on her face was utter, untainted bliss; she was at peace.

My name was gasped, pulling me from this glorious, tragic image. My gaze first rested on our clasped hands. I had to school my features before I could look her in the eye. It wouldn't be fair to her if I looked at her with the hope and sadness that was in my heart, etched in my bones. When I finally met her gaze, it was her eyes that had me sucking in a sharp breath. I couldn't label it hope, because it wasn't quite that. It was resolve. It was peace. The same peace that had been in my vision of her with her unborn baby.

“Yes, Cindy?” I asked, because I didn’t know what else to say or do with my hands, my head, my heart.

Her brown eyes were huge saucers, brimming with tears, shifting back and forth. They searched for some answer within mine, one I hoped and prayed she would find. I wished I could somehow transplant those images I had seen into her mind, that I could show her what hope looked like. She blinked and bobbed her head once before whispering, “I think...I was thinking...I would like to find that man outside. That one...the one who said he could help.”

Then I was soaring.

But I needed to be tethered, needed to be grounded...for her. So I squeezed her hand and nodded once. “I’m with you for whatever you need,” I told her, not wanting to hope too much, but doing so anyway.

Together we got up. Together we left that frigid room, those pretty pictures, the too-sweet scent. Together we walked out without looking back. We stepped outside, the sun warming my skin instantly. After leaving somewhere so bleak, the bright light and warmth shocked my system. Cindy kept hold of my hand, her fingers gripping to the point of hurting now, but when I glanced sideways I only found stronger resolve in her gaze.

A small group of protesters stood outside the building, but just beyond them, the man who offered to help when we first approached that building stood tall, built, a little rough around the edges, but waiting for anyone who would listen, who would come to him for help. So, we went to him. It was as if the same divine intervention that took place inside gave him a nudge the moment his gaze snapped to Cindy’s. No sadness or remorse was found there, only the hope that I too felt.

He didn’t approach us but waited for us to reach him. Once we did, Cindy squeezed my hand again. I worked to clear the lump from my throat before asking, “Could you help us?”

He was nodding before I finished my question. With a hand held out toward the brick building across the street he said, “In that office there, ask for Sharon. She will help you.”

Cindy didn’t say a word, only nodded, before pulling me across the street with a stronger wave of determination. When I looked over my shoulder, the man had one open hand raised in the air, as if he were waving, but his head was tilted toward the sky, eyes full of wonder. When he met my gaze, I gave a small smile, allowing my gratitude and understanding to shine through.

I would paint this moment, Cindy and me walking away from that dreaded building with the blue sign, that man with his hand in the air, praising the Maker; *Mystical Intercession* is what it would be called.



A Self-Portrait

ANYA KELLER, B.A. IN ADVERTISING AND GRAPHIC DESIGN, 2023

Dissociation

MADDIE BRADSHAW, B.S. IN MECHANICAL ENGINEERING, 2020

The memory is a weight around my ankles, an unrelenting parasite of the past
Wind hums and every sound vibrates from inside my bones
I feel everything, and nothing
A numbness that consumes me until I am no longer there
Chewed lips bleed into a closed mouth, white skies tasting like dry cotton
Memory blurred, I ache
My entire body chilled from the toes up, I shake
Damn, I shake
The air is so still I shake to compensate
I am weak in the knees, I am weak
Heartless laughter of my past, my mind split with rage and trepidation
My mind moves where my body cannot
I fly into the whitened blue, away from conscience
I will leave this desolate place behind; I will move on to bright skies
And they will be blazing, full of strangers
I am a stranger to them, past faces blurred by time
Pain cannot reach me here
The memory is a passenger in my jet

Nine Lives

KASEY JO POOLEY, B.A. IN ENGLISH-PROFESSIONAL WRITING, WINTER 2019

I watch the barista clutch a steaming cup in her nervous hands as she tries to read the name written on what I assume is my cappuccino and microwaved sandwich. She moves hastily to a coworker, hands her the cup, and they both stare at it awkwardly. I emerge from my hiding spot and storm the counter.

“It’s pronounced Antiffany. There was a time when everyone here knew my first name and worshiped my last,” I huff impatiently. Last summer I ate all of my meals in this hotel’s dining room. Here I am again today, only this morning when I counted the dwindling change in my pocket, I decided I’d have to grab a cheap on-the-go option from the hotel café. While leaving the lobby, I try to ignore the whispers of “Did you hear about...” and “Is that *really* her?”

Outside, my breath billows like cigarette smoke from my lips. I hold my coffee close and shuffle around the corner to an alley beside the hotel. The darkness reeks of stale human wastefulness; pulling my scarf over my nose, I sit down on the curb. I take out the BLT sandwich and peel it from the wrapping, picking it apart with shaking hands, and remove the bacon.

“Breakfast, my loves,” I call, biting into my now LT. There are rustles throughout the alley; I watch the dumpster closest to me birth pair after pair of tiny feet. As they saunter on tip-toes to where I tossed the bacon, I reminisce on my own past lives. A time before the hotel meals, the empty bed, and the bills. A time when my purpose was found outside of garbage-filled dumpsters. I reach out to pet the nearest one and sigh, “Same time tomorrow?”

For My Mother

REBEKAH WEST, B.A. IN PSYCHOLOGY, 2021

My face is not my own.
It is a century in the making,
charged with the energy of a millennia.
In the mirror there are a thousand eyes in my green,
a thousand lies I don't mean, that don't belong to me.
Sometimes I feel more them than myself,
a ghost watching the world tick by.
I think it can be dangerous to forget
we are on borrowed time.
Someone once told me I have about 2 years of material left.
They didn't mean this, this ink and this paper.
They meant this person, this persona.
I think about that sometimes.
This idea we have that we can reinvent
something that has been in the making since God shaped the Earth in his hands,
since the first Father plucked a rib from Adam to meet his demands.
Should we remake all of that on a Friday whim,
a moment of coffee shop cognizance that we even *can* change?
So tell me if you can,
tell me if Eve ate the apple for such an easily interrupted plan.
It is true that I am beholden to no man,
but I am beholden to know man,
and I still bow to my God and
bear witness to my ghosts.
If Ruth stayed for nothing, then how cruel a fate,
but Ruth stayed for a savior, the sweetest of sacrifices the reward for her faith.
So if there is no intent in all the faces that make up mine,
then what is meant by waiting and creating all this time?
Sometimes it seems I could watch the entire world go by
and understand worse than I do now why people still ask
"Who am I?"
Entertain an accident, if you can,
buy the thought from a traveling con man,
try out a world where Job suffered his trials and came out a worse man.
So tell me, going back to where I began,

if I was not meant from the start to be what I am, why do they always look as though
they've seen a ghost,
my parent's high school friends?
How strange it must be to see yourself so perfectly reflected
in someone else.
How strange it is to be a memory
of someone you can never really know, lost some 30 years ago.
How strange, to have a face you can never own.

Random Thoughts Without Context (aka: Who Killed Jörmungandr?)

KATIE MOORE, B.A. IN ENGLISH FOR SECONDARY EDUCATION, 2021

For Bailey Nelson

I spent three hours tumbling down a rabbit hole,
and the man in the funny hat asked me a thousand questions
that I wish I could have answered.

But alas (at times)

I must spend those many hours just discerning
the words and learning—

as I try (desperately)

to see into the life of things.

Sometimes ideas ferment

and I'm made giddy by the promise of knowing—

until someone (a friend)

comes and taps me on the shoulder,

dismantling the structure

and tugging me out of wonderland,

out of my amusement park—

back to real life.

But I don't mind.

I'll simply ask her a question,

one that's been brewing for quite a long time.

Tell me—

explain all the interesting ways

that your thoughts

are different than mine.

Dinner with a Keystone Species

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

The table is set with *thank yous* and
my pleasures. It's good taste to
host something so fundamental,
vital, primal,
that's all.

A course of nuts and seeds and cured
meat, the carcass neatly disposed of
for the moment. Let me in
on the big secret and I'll offer you
a glass of water,
a line of thought you roamed three blocks
for the pleasure of having –

They say any given crow is as smart
as any given seven-year-old. Maybe,
after all these years scraping our feet against
the mud and crooking our necks
away from every mess we see or make,
smart is just something you fill the bird feeder with.
They dine at
our safe house,
a tangible response to questions like *Where does
everything go in the winter?* and *Isn't there something
I can do to be more hospitable?*

Only a certain kind of person looks for their answers at
the hardware store.

Crows are voracious, astutely composed. They meet
and love in quick succession, take care
of the chaos when they should and often
when they should not.

They eat their sandwich crusts like it's
a privilege.

A crow has lived, ostensibly – the integrity
of flying, of falling, of burrowing your toes in the dirt and
knowing with certainty what was here before you,
what will come directly after.



Shutter Speed

KEENAN KING, B.A. IN COMMUNICATIONS, 2021

buried.

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

I've lived eight
Years, adhering
To rules that try
To keep a
Shiny veneer
On a body that
Only appears to
Be alive
Stifling its
Cries by feeding
It lies, and
Starving the
Light in a little
Girl's eyes
I don't want
To die, without
Knowing how
It feels to be Free of the poison
I put in my mouth
Allowing myself
To exist in this
Giant round house
And not bury
Myself underground

Song of Myself: Self-Realization of My Own Life Struggles with a Debt to Walt Whitman

SETH TAYLOR PHILLIPS, M.A. IN COMMUNICATIONS, 2021

I love myself and contradict myself.
And what I believe in, you do not believe in—
But every breath in your lungs is as good to me, as it is to you. I accept you.

I grieved and belittled myself,
I feared the unknown and sobbed, watching my being become decimated.

My life, every cell in my body, formed who I am.
My well-being,
Born into a cruel place from where I had no one, no matter where I went.
I thought that it would always be the same.

Greed and Hatred are in schools, universities, and even workplaces.
Harassment. I suffered from everybody, but never gave up,
Unaccepted. I searched for the good in it all, but I forced my silence when it was brought up.
Truth: Dared to not say a word of what I truly am.

A child asked *Why me?* But not an answer was given.
An adult asked *Why me?* An answer was given:
“You are strong and have overcome so much. Please don’t give up.”
Maybe so. With God, I have overcome this lingering thought.

I HAVE come so far, and I am much stronger. My faith has risen, and I believe I know the way now.
What grew in me was my longing for acceptance, which was found.
I had always had my music, my cat, my spouse, and God.
That was all I needed all along...

I, now twenty-five years old,
Hope to exist in this world, equally.

And I escaped that horrid fate that seemed to be a nightmare: an eternal, fiery abyss.
It may be that I changed myself.
It may be that I pushed myself.
It may be that I never gave up, but, how could I? Even though I almost faced death, I
would never think it now. It was God.
My path is golden, but not everything is greener on the other side.
And here I am, with His arms wide open,
And there I shall stay, in theory, until He calls me home one day.

Green Eyes

MOLLY MARR, M.S. IN GENERAL PSYCHOLOGY, 2021

The little girl bent and lame left her footprints
in the sand. It all began with a tumble down the well,
dark and dry, leaning over moss-covered walls for
rose petals falling. A night gone cold, wax gone hard,
a mother stifles tears. It was a long walk down
the green pine road where she heard her daughter's cries.
Those green, green eyes. Mother and daughter, broken
inside and out, followed the mountains home. Damp hemp,
a wet dog they brought in. The craterless moon, a drop of light,
touched the smoke gone out. Her daughter, wrapped in rose petals,
but stinging from the thorn, saw heaven in her dreams—
royal courtesans slaying dragons, fighting in the storm. In the whistles
of waves she took her little hand and set her in the sand. The sea
vapor rising, bore a boat at dawn. By twilight the girl set out
to sea while her mother's song drowned the shale and shore.

Broken Glass

PAIGE WALKER, B.A. IN ENGLISH-PROFESSIONAL WRITING, 2022

Look at me.

Those scars that mar your inner thoughts,
Each deep jagged line resembling victories of another hero.
No, not a story to be covered by shame.

Be proud

Look at me.

Gaze into the face you've trained so well to walk through life with that
Absent minded look,
Screaming for the world to stop the tears you can't control...

Look at me.

I know you! I see your
Heart,
Your soul,
Your brokenness.

Look at me.

As far as you try to bury everything inside.

Look at me...

And know that you are worthy.

Because I don't regret the person I made you to be.

So,

Please.

Look at me.



Zenith

TANYA HODGE, B.A. IN ADVERTISING AND GRAPHIC DESIGN, 2021

Car Seat

RACHEL THOMPSON, B.A. IN ENGLISH-PROFESSIONAL WRITING, 2020

“Babe! You ready yet? We’re going to be late...again,” I yell while leaning against the front door. With no response, I sigh, and wander over to the bedroom of our small, but homey apartment in Gresham, Oregon. Pushing open the door reveals a goofy man tripping over his jeans as he attempts to pull them over his two left feet at the same time. “Whoa!” Falling onto the bed, my adorable husband looks up and says, “Hey, don’t scare me like that! You could have killed me!” I laugh knowing he could easily end up doing that to himself, by accident. “I hope our kids won’t get my clumsiness, but I really want them to have your smile.” He makes a goofy grin, “Heaven forbid they get this face!”

“Just hurry up already, you know how she gets when anyone is late,” I said. I can already imagine the Pastor’s wife, who also happens to be my godmother, sneer and her smart-ass response, “so nice of you to join us. What a shame we already started.” I picture myself slapping her, and with a flick of my hair, stomping off like they do in the movies, but sadly Jolene and her oh-so-perfect children are untouchable.

Once my husband is finally able to shove his butt in his jeans, he throws the donation bag in the trunk and we take off. I already know Jolene is going to throw a fit about how small our donations are, but we are only a paycheck away from homeless. I’d like to see her face if she ever had to worry about choosing between her next meal or her rent. But knowing Jolene, she’d somehow be able to make money appear out of thin air, pay all her bills, and still have some left over to get a French manicure. “By the grace of God,” she would proclaim, “He provides all things if you just believe.” Don’t get me wrong, I totally believe. I have known God ever since I can remember, but I also know, life is hard. There’s no way that woman can afford the things she buys and support her five spoiled rotten children on a Pastor’s income.

“Snap out of it, or she’ll know you’ve been thinking about her again,” James says gently. My poor husband was a witness to what went down the last time I had walked into church and scowled at Jolene. Let’s just say it wasn’t pretty. To distract myself, I cast my gaze out the window. I don’t know why I bother looking, there’s nothing to see but trash strewn about all over the streets. We’re halfway there, but James takes a sudden sharp turn. “Shortcut!” he says. Not sure that’s the greatest idea, but I keep silent. If he gets distracted, he’ll just get us more lost. This “short cut” he’s chosen is rough with crazy potholes and uneven asphalt that is making this road a nightmare. I’m slammed against the window as he tries to swerve another pothole.

“Maybe you should slow it down, your little old Kia can’t handle off-

roading.” I said.

“No way! She’s a classic, she can take it,” my husband says, grinning.

Yeah, right, as classic as baby food. An ‘09 Spectra isn’t anything special. I just hope we make it to the rummage sale in one piece. My eyes wander to the road again, and I notice what looks like a car seat blocking the way. Right as I spot the seat, James slams on the brakes.

“What’s it doing in the middle of the road?” he exclaims, “Can you go move it out of the way?”

I hop out of the car with the intention of throwing it off to the side, but upon further inspection, I realize it’s practically brand-new. Not even a scratch, just a few leaves blown into the navy-blue cloth seat. I look around the area searching for an owner, but there’s nothing around but old abandoned fields and farm equipment. There’s an overwhelming urgency to take the car seat and before I start to question it, I scoop up the seat and put it in the car.

“What’s going on?” my husband asks. “Why did you just put that thing in the car, isn’t it dirty?”

“I’m not sure,” I say, “But it looks like it’s never been used. I wonder how it got here.”

“Well, we could take it home with us.” He smiles. “We were planning on buying one of these eventually, right?”

“Yeah, you’re right. Okay, we’re way late, step on it!” I say, but get lost in thought.

I would love to keep the car seat, but why even bother? When the phone rang last week, any hopes I had of a family were destroyed and my heart cracked open like an egg. How will I ever be able to tell James? He’s so hopeful and talks of wanting children all the time. I’ve always thought he’d make such a wonderful father. Maybe, I should let him go...He deserves to be with someone who can give him the life he wants.

“See! I told you it was a shortcut,” he says, as we pull into the church parking lot drawing me out of my brooding. Good thing too; I didn’t need to be thinking about that right now. It breaks my fake smile. As expected, Jolene glares at us as she walks inside. Giving her a little wave but flipping her off with my other hand under my sleeve, I sigh. Maybe a little prayer will do me good while I’m here; maybe if God fixes me, I’ll never even have to tell James. It wouldn’t hurt to pray for some patience either, Lord help me.

James takes the meager donations out of the trunk and then takes my hand, giving a little squeeze. He’s not perfect, but it’s like he has a 6th sense: he somehow knows exactly when I need him. We walk inside the reception hall where there’s stained glass everywhere with pictures of the baby Jesus, and the Virgin Mary looking out over the tables filled with the collective junk of the church and check our

donations in with Jolene. I notice a fresh coat of polish on her nails. I try to hold my tongue, but obviously Jolene can't do the same, "I saw you had a car seat in the back. Are you two expecting?" Jolene asks, trying to fish out any new gossip she can use to back stab us later.

"Not yet," I say, as I smile politely, "but we want to."

"Well, you two are much too young anyways. Better to wait until you can actually afford them," she sneers as she takes our donations and moves to distribute them on the tables. I can hear her muttering to herself, "this is only worth a dollar... might as well throw this one out now...what a disgrace..."

"Hey, don't let her get to you," my husband whispers in my ear. He's such a blessing, but how do I explain that we'd be better off leaving the car seat here at the rummage sale? We have no use for it, might as well donate it, so it doesn't stay unused forever.

"Thanks. I'm going to go see if anyone needs my help." I tell my husband. I kiss his cheek and he gives my hand another squeeze before letting go. When he's not looking, I sneak into the sanctuary of the church. The lights are off which gives the room a creepy vibe. The figures in the stained-glass windows look like they are staring right at me and judging my soul. The light filtering in casts shadows all around, and I try to remind myself this is God's house, a holy place, and He will protect me from my demons.

I slowly walk to the altar, keeping my head down. I don't feel strong enough to look up. The cross seems to mock me, as if to say I'm not even worthy to look upon its replica. I lower to my knees in front of the altar and begin to pray. "Dear God, what can I even say? You already know my life, my struggles, my weaknesses. Please let me keep the car seat, oh God, I want it. Please...Just let me have a child." I remember my favorite line from a hymn and begin to sing it softly, "let my prayer be set before you like incense; may the lifting up of my hands be like the evening sacrifice." I repeat it over and over like a mantra.

I had become so entrapped in my agony I didn't notice someone had come into the sanctuary. "Nicole...? Are you ok?" James asks. "What are you doing in here?" He approaches me gently as if I am a wounded doe and he is afraid I'll bolt.

I hurriedly wipe my tears, not realizing I had let so many escape. "How long have you been there?" I ask, terrified he has found me out.

"Long enough..." He's finally standing in front of me and gets down on his knees. He has tears in his eyes, but takes me into his arms, and rocks me back and forth. I hear him whispering, "we'll get through this." I'm not sure who he's talking to, me or himself. I mumble into his chest, "it's just not fair. How can she get five kids, what did I do to not even deserve one?" He takes my face in his hands and tells me, "it's not your fault. Never think this is your fault. We will figure this out. I will love

you forever.”

Without having to say a word, he knows I’m ready to go home. I don’t want Jolene to see my tear streaked face and cause a scene. We walk quickly back to the reception hall, but before we leave, I see a young couple with a newborn in their arms. I overhear them asking a church member if there are any car seats for sale. My heart shatters because as much as I want to keep that car seat, I know I will never have a child sitting in it and fighting the buckles. I look up at my husband, he had seen them too. He wears a wishful smile, but his eyes are mourning.

“Should we...?” My husband asks softly. I just nod. Words are trapped in my throat, being strangled by lost dreams that won’t go down.

We walk up to the couple and introduce ourselves and tell them to follow us outside. We open the rear door of our car and show them the car seat. The couple begins to cry when we give it to them, and we watch them with blurred vision as they put it in their car and strap their precious baby girl in.

Sonnet: New Home

MACKENZIE REPPY, B.A. IN THEATRE AND DRAMA, 2022

The wind calls out my every need alone.
Be still my heart and dream of just a song.
My soul shall search to find myself a home,
But sleeps for it may feel like it's too long.

The petal falls across the open sky.
I yearn for it to grace my fingertip.
To hear its voice and sing a lullaby,
But it shall never reach my unloved grip.

I lay in fields of broken dreams so blue,
Just hoping for a light to guide my way,
When voices softly push me straight to you,
And gently lead me to another day.

My home in you can help erase my past,
And soundly I feel safe and loved at last.

House and Heart

JULIA ANNE JONES, B.A. IN ENGLISH-PROFESSIONAL WRITING, 2020

“Everything in place!”
I say,
Letting the dust trace
The lines
Of where all things once stood.

Learning how to squeak
Off dust.
Tracing calloused leaks
From rust,
Returning back to good.

Arthritis

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

In the kitchen where I
waited. Saw the sun rise from
my window and this made me
look at my hands

resting on the countertop. To
see them wrinkled,
decayed, made me sad
for a moment in my life;

made me angry at the time
that had left me. Listening
to the snow falling outside;
silent, yet so loud I found

the house shaking. And my
cat, pacing the floor, wanting
to be fed. I fed her, stroking
her back and her tail, high in

the air, tells me that she
loves me for this minute of
our lives. And I continued to
do this action until my hands

started to cramp and shooting
pains crept from my elbow
to each one of my fingers.
I leave her to wander amongst

my things, packed in boxes

in the living room. Last night,
I had my children help me
put these things into boxes.

My children say that this is
the best option for me. I will
be happier and my youth
was only hidden in the grief

I carry for Maryann. Her
candles sit in the box next
to my box of poetry I could
not bear to publish. I have

written much about her,
and every word I read now
stings me in my chest. I might
have a heart attack one of these

days. My cat will not understand
why I left, as I continue my
journey, finding the reason
as to why Maryann chose to leave

this snowy landscape. The dark
mornings with the creaking of
our house. The slow approach
of aging. Everything, coming to

a close in one way or another.



Thoughts

BIANCA COOK, B.A. IN PSYCHOLOGY, 2020

Gray Matter

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

It was a disease that attacked your mind,
That is how they explained it to a child.
“Disease” was not at all how I defined
The monster that claimed you; rampant, wild.
The beast was inclined to take small things first:
Your energy, drive and effort used up.
Months went by and, tragically, its thirst
Increased until it spilled from that sweet cup.
Your passions were seized, the substance of you
Smearred around like the paint of a child’s craft.
Phone calls were received as your mind withdrew,
Your confusing questions answered with laughs.
The monster took you; you faded away
But my memories of you would always stay.

Paper

TARA KING, B.A. IN ENGLISH-PROFESSIONAL WRITING, 2022

Poured out tears of black and blue,
Drip on my fingertips,
My eyes are burning.
I have read lines and red lines,
I am my letters.
Take my tongue, turn it to copper,
Taste my riches, that's my blood.

I am running after her,
Been running all my life.
Will pursuing her with silver
Make her be my wife?
If she's not what I hoped for,
Do I hold or keep her?
I am her provider.

Golden. Sometimes, I feel golden,
Finally, I have risen,
I am the sun!

-

Other suns rise, make me molten,
I drop back to the ground,
Foolish?
Being refined or being denied,
I am my letters.

Carry This

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

I woke up to her screaming in the bathroom. The sun was rising outside our window, casting hazy light full of pale blues, rosy pinks, and bruised purples on the strikingly different scene of my wife's colorless, tear streaked face and the blood pooling on the tile. My knees slid on the floor when I knelt beside her. There wasn't time to take her to the hospital before it happened. She knew as soon as the bleeding started that he would be stillborn. I touched our son's skin and felt his miniature features being engraved in my mind.

I took her to the doctor later that morning. She was in shock, I think. We had washed all the blood off. Her face was still colorless. I had brushed her hair and set out her clothes. Even at the doctor's office, she didn't cry. He explained in a gentle voice why our son had been born dead rather than alive, even though we were so close to his due date, and he was so healthy before. He followed this with the news that the miscarriage had irreparably damaged my wife's womb. I saw her throat tighten and color finally bloom on her cheeks and forehead like watercolor.

The next week felt like a stop-motion film. She boxed up our son's clothes. She threw toys into bags. She listed everything that should have been his on the internet, alongside fuzzy, dimly lit photos taken on the race-car rug in the nursery. None of the curtains had been opened since the morning of the miscarriage. My wife marched to the door constantly, handing pregnant women and new mothers boxes, barely glancing at the children in their arms or clinging to their legs. My attention always went to the bags under their eyes, earned from sleepless nights with their children. I envied them.

Time didn't slow for us. My wife returned to work quickly, creating a barrier between her and what had happened. She simply didn't give herself the time to feel what had happened. I let the time pass without resistance. I let it knock me down again and again, like waves grinding me down against the sand. I was desperately alone, barely leaving bed. The silent house was too much to face. I couldn't remember a time when it wasn't heavy with the weight of what we didn't have. Each morning, while my wife slept motionless, her back facing me, I would slip out of bed and walk to the bathroom. I would go to the window, and part the curtains, just a few inches, never enough for my wife to wake from the light that drifted in. In those pale blues, rosy pinks, and bruised purples, I saw our son's skin, the emotion that colored my wife's cheeks, and the endless stream of sleep deprived mothers on our doorstep and the bags beneath their eyes. Yes, the sunrise took me back into all those moments, but to feel everything at once, so strongly, was somewhat of a comfort. In that second, I knew I was feeling everything there was to feel, yet I wasn't crumbling. I could carry this.

The Doctor

'ASH VALENTE (ASHLEY VISCO)' B.A. IN ENGLISH FOR SECONDARY EDUCATION, 2021

Doc takes the heart out of your open chest
And digs into the flesh with a teaspoon,
Says, "Ah! Here's the problem," and puts a coarse
Bare hand in. "There a lot of brain tissue
Where your happy heart should be! Well – " He scrapes
And scoops it bit by bit, each like old, gray
Hamburger raw, taps all the excess off,
Hands you the ramekin and croons, "Penny
For your thoughts." You don't laugh on the table.
"Well, keep it," Doc sighs. "Use it for soup."

Logos

SAMUEL SPRAGUE, B.A. IN GOVERNMENT, 2020

Across the world is a raging storm,
while I am here watching waves drown calmly in a sea of sand.
Beyond my view peace, war, and prayer ring out in tragic harmony.
The universe gives voice to its pulsating hymn.
At once amid the water, sand, and the eyes that witness,
I gaze upon the grandest form.
With a single set of eyes, I have grasped the union of order and evil
hanging in the air between each breath,
filling every grain of sand.

Rainy Art Exhibit

SERENA VILLALPANDO, B.S. IN SOCIOLOGY, 2020

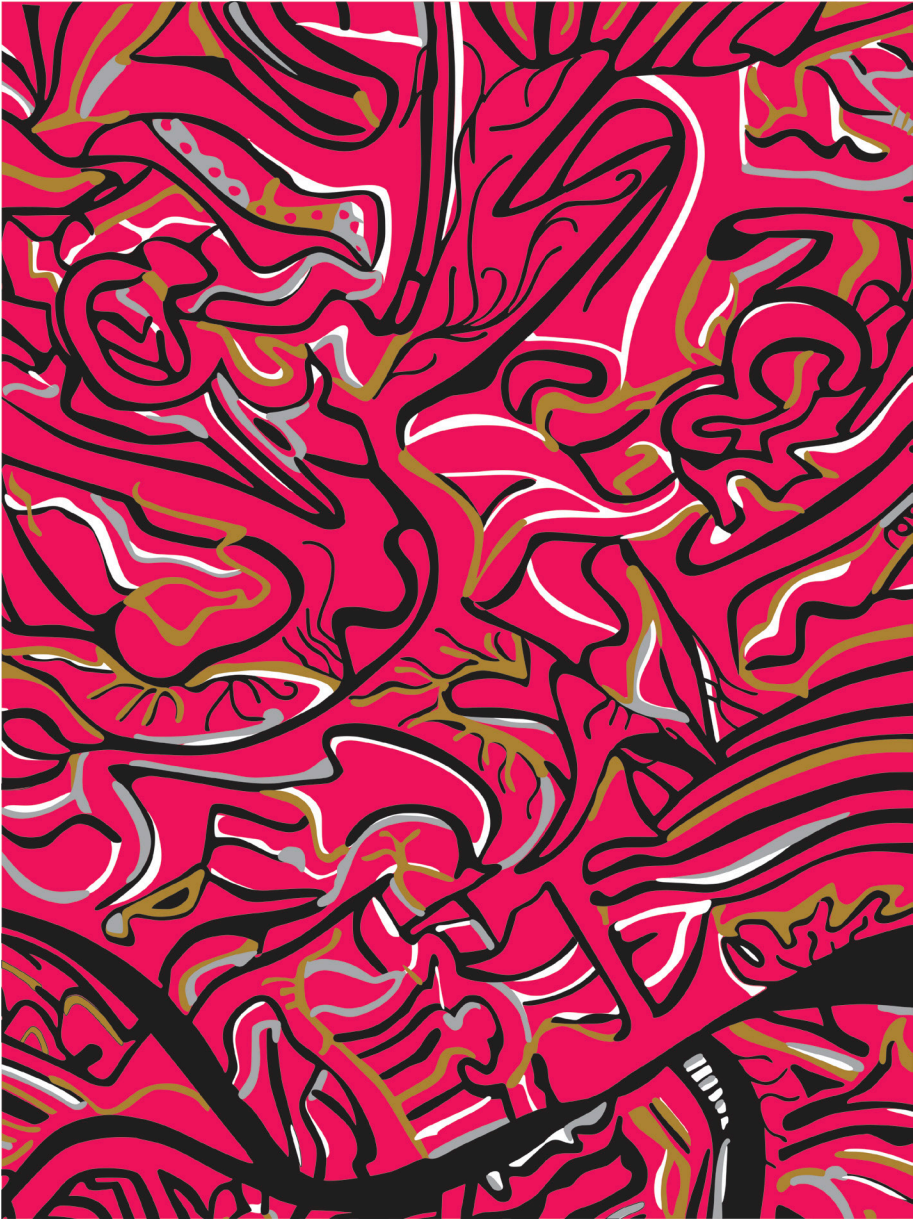
While lovers peacefully venture into a crowded museum under shared umbrellas,
I step in alone with a rain cloud above me,
Stumbling and noticeably drenched in sorrow.
The optimistic lovers look at me in despair,
Unable to empathize past their dry clothes and warm skin.
It seems as if I have created this illusive world where lovers are strategically placed
To laugh at my lonesomeness,
Fingers intertwined and adoration in their eyes,
Perfectly poised in a spiraling circle around me
Like one of those nightmares where you are naked
In a room full of laughing mouths and pointed fingers.
In this nightmare I have no choice but to stand there exposed,
Becoming the art they yearn to interpret,
Without any romance or wisdom to dress my bare frame.

You

EMILY CANTANI, M.S. IN CLINICAL MENTAL HEALTH, 2023

The clock ticks alarmingly out of place
Murderous upon the wall
Keeping track of the violent seconds I have lost tempo-
Screaming to its own beat
My brain bleeds a million colors, but only black and white show up on messy pages
somewhere in between all your hues
Keys cold, shaped to perfection, lines of history run through each string, my fingers
fit like puzzle pieces
The touch hits my branches- a shock to life and when chemicals cross and divide
I am changed
A transformation unseen, unmentioned and lost under bright lights
Mold me- I am clay
Bend me- I am free
I may twist and come undone in your embrace, but I will not snap or break
Take me under your wing and
I come out strong
The white is happiness, the black sadness... everything in between are memories
that I build with you and I dream you'll remember them too
Everyone who meets you tells their story of untold and exemplified journeys
Joy and anguish transport me to new heights, with you I shoot for the moon, land on
the stars
Your gravitational pull so strong I cannot resist
You insist on insisting that I find solace somewhere between the depths of your
deep 'A' and your brilliant 'C'
I meet you center, front and facing- we are at middle ground, parallel with you-a
monstrous beast, but yet a gentle lamb
In your presence, I am motivated to reach higher than a kite and dive deep to the
ocean floor to find it, find whatever it is that makes my heart stir and mesh with yours
Love, hatred, oppression, homage, all these things you can't hear but
Your maker-your expresser-your player- breathes them to into existence and for a
moment
you are alive
Swiftly running, waltzing at the most pompous of balls, walking into the unknown,
pausing in grace, trembling in fear, tremoring with the breaths of this earth, smiling
in the sight of beauty, consoling a grieving heart, intensifying in nature

Then, stopping for significance
It may be the end, but the beginning has just arrived
You are breathing, living-these are the moments when you take my breath away
There is life in your sound and boldness in your refinement, the biggest instrument
must create the biggest of sounds-It is just you and me
Your purpose is of value, of much precedence
And in this moment, I will make you proud... this is final, this is it, here I sit...and
may you shine above the rest- I'll do my best, put me to this test
My Dear Grand Piano



Music Lovers

**NNYLARI IRALYNN, M.S. IN CHRISTIAN COUNSELING OF SUBSTANCE USE
AND ADDICTIVE DISORDERS, 2021**

Smaller Hands in Small Hands

LEXY HERNANDEZ, B.S. IN PSYCHOLOGY, 2020

She loves roller coasters.
She loves to hate the feeling
In her stomach when she
Drops.
Did the feeling
Of me in your tummy
Fill you with the same
Beautiful terror?

Her children grow into friends
As her friends remain children,
Not yet ready to grow up
Like she did.

Freckles decorate her round face.
Her child will have none, but
There is no disputing that
She is hers.
Happy 19th birthday, miss.
It's a girl.
Toddlers treasure their baby dolls,
And I am her new favorite toy.

On her 21st birthday, she reaches for
A bottle—
Warm milk sloshes inside.
There will be no champagne tonight,
Nor any other.
She doesn't drink.

Adult teeth appear in my mouth
Faster than silver hair can
Sprout from her head.
I exchange cartoons and crayons for
Too much eyeshadow
And an attitude
While she grows into
Crisp suits and high heels that
Click with confidence.

The Corn Fields

MARANDA SMITH, B.A. IN ENGLISH-PROFESSIONAL WRITING, 2020

Some folks say there ain't nothing to worry about, that it's all just a bunch of hooey. But locals will tell you, whatever you do, don't go out into them corn fields. Not during the day, never at night, and never alone.

Throughout hist'ry people have taken cautionary tales with a grain salt, turned 'em into old wives' tales and fancy Halloween costumes. Something to be laughed about and not taken seriously, fading into oblivion. I'm here to tell you not to forget. Remember, tell your kids, your kid's kids, the neighbor's kids, and anyone you see near the corn, make sure they remember and pass it on, too. Cause the corn remembers and passes it along season after season as it has for eons.

The farms in nearby towns 'round here all do hay rides and pumpkin patches during fall festival season, some even do corn mazes so folks get the "experience" of getting lost in the corn without any risks, like going to a haunted house for a good scare. But the locals won't set up corn mazes, they won't encourage the kids to hit up the ones in the next town either. As a matter of fact, they daren't utter the words "corn maze" because they know the truth. They know what waits in them dry, feathery stalks. It is not a joke, or a game.

The townies' kids walk on the opposite side of the road to get as far away from the corn as they can. They could tell you about the time Jimmy from down the street was walking too close and suddenly got pulled in. He was never seen again. Oh, his parents and the sheriff looked. Even organized a town-wide volunteer search. That harvest, after the field had been plowed, they searched again, hoping for some sort of closure, I guess. Do you know what they found? Nothing. No body to bury, no missing red sneaker, just a lot of nothing.

That's another thing, don't think it's safe to walk in the field just cause it's been plowed and you can see from one side clear to the horizon. Walking through a dead, plowed field is like walking across a hallowed ground. A bone yard made of brittle stalks. There's actual bones there, too. Small animals, missing pets and the like. Every once in a while, a deer carcass might get caught in the combine but usually there ain't that much left to be a real nuisance.

Have you ever driven past a field that was six feet high the day before and suddenly completely barren? Just brown skeletons sticking up out of the ground. They plowed it in the middle of the night, underneath the full moon, with every light they could mount on the equipment. The full moon helps keep harvesters safe. During the day the high stalks make it seem like dusk, walking in the corn is like taking an evening stroll, well, an evening stroll you can't come back from. Watch the farmers. If

you ever wonder why they have to work in sections one day at a time, you'll realize it's 'cause they can't make themselves stay in the field any longer. Some days they may get quite a bit done, others it's just too dangerous to do more than a few passes. Nobody knows why. If there is a pattern to it, it ain't been figured out yet.

One time when we was just kids, we thought it would be fun to go play hide n' seek in the field. It was the end of summer, corn was still green, the lightning bugs hadn't even come out yet. We didn't know any better. We didn't think it would be that dangerous. The corn just stood there, beckoning to us to come play. Six of us went into the field and, that time, all six of us made it out again, but it was a close thing. The adults was inside after supper and hadn't noticed how quiet it was for a while. When they did, they tore out of the house after us. We heard 'em yelling and tried to get back out of that field lickety split, but my little brother had wandered further in than the rest of us. Kids is brave, but adults know better. Daddy didn't like having to go hunting through that corn for my brother, and when they came out, they didn't say nothing. Matter of fact, my brother didn't talk for two weeks after. Never did say what he saw in there or why it took Daddy close to two hours to find him.

As an adult, I look back to that time in the fields and think, if we only knew what we was getting ourselves into. I think that was the turning point. My brother's never been the same. I've never been the same. He coped in his own ways, I coped in mine. Control, the rigid-never-do-wrong-cuz-someone's-always-watchin kind of control and panicking when I lose any little bit of it doesn't seem like a very content way to go through life, but it keeps me safe and it keeps my family safe. I hope I never have to find out what happens if one of my kids were to go into the corn.

Every morning we stand on one side of the street waiting for the school bus, staring off into that empty corn field. None of the kids understand why I wouldn't let 'em go across the street and pick up the bright, colorful beachball sitting right next to the corn. I didn't have the heart to tell them that that wasn't a real beachball. That it was bait, just like when they put a wriggling worm on a hook and toss it into the creek. The shiny, primary colored plastic sphere was designed to get their attention and lure them closer. Close enough to snag on a line.

Some mornings the hunters are out there shooting at geese, I don't think they are very smart taking those dogs out there but what do I know. Maybe they have a talisman or something that keeps them safe. Maybe those are a special kind of dog. All's I know is you wouldn't catch me out there, and I wouldn't recommend it to anybody else either.

Driving to work, driving home from the grocery, I play my music and sing as loud as I can. The noise probably doesn't protect me any, but it sure makes me feel better. Feels like I'm not alone. The fog in the mornings and the icy car windows don't help with the loneliness, they are just an obstruction making the danger that much

more real.

Big cities have their problems. Crimes and murders and all kinds of bad news. People that live in those cities, that have never been out in the country will never really understand. That out here in the corn fields, there's just one problem. And we can't escape it. Scary stories tell of creatures that can move in the shadows or things that go bump in the night. A long two-lane highway, no street lights, no traffic or sirens, just eerie silence and on both sides corn seven feet high. Believe me, you go walking or driving alone through there and you're being watched. Might be one of *them*, might be more. You think getting to the end of the field is like reaching home base, you're wrong. 'Cause a hundred feet away there's another corn field. Just like the last, maybe angled differently or narrower, maybe not quite as tall, but the point is, it's there. And so is the thing that's been tracking you the whole time. Make it to the highway, get into town, you might just be okay.

So, take my little cautionary tale with a grain of salt. Take it with the whole margarita (that's what I do). But, whatever you do, don't go into the corn, don't go into that empty husk of a once fertile field, and no matter what, never ever forget.



A Monochrome City

PHOEBE A. DAVID, B.A. IN DIGITAL DESIGN, 2022

Earth Bound Eyes

MAKEILA HOFER, B.A. IN ENGLISH-PROFESSIONAL WRITING, WINTER 2019

Earth Bound eyes.

Hair that mimics the warm sunrise.

A quelling voice that summons the winds.

A heated frame layered in raying skin.

He rooted the ground with all His wisdom and strength.

He expanded all the lands to rest under His roof.

He swept opportunity and gave chances to every child of His own,
and He watched them swell and flourish until they were fully grown.

After Eden

LEXY HERNANDEZ, B.S. IN PSYCHOLOGY, 2020

They never watered each other enough.
Her soil choked the life out of him, and
He blocked the sunlight from her face.
They were wilting in front of each other
And pretended not to notice,
In the name of love,
In the name of staying together.
They would stroke each other's drooping leaves,
Promising to be better,
To try harder,
To provide the sustenance
They were never meant to give.

Have I Loved You Well

MORGAN HUFF, M.S. IN SOCIOLOGY, 2020

Have I loved you well
at all
has our pace piqued or piqued
going steady
constant, beautiful, mundane
or receding tide, whitewash, smells, shells

It's said to move forward, we must trod steps back
but we're not in linear motion
I wind in circles

Pretense, false tension...
I never arrive where I think I start
ruse, rouse, coupled

Have I not loved you well
Can I now?

The Tall One

ANNA LINDBLOM, B.A. IN ENGLISH-PROFESSIONAL WRITING, 2021

A lone hiker is standing in the deep shadow of the Tall One, the cool shade provided by Her unending peaks, a welcome reprieve from the everlasting day. The hiker looks up at Her jagged body and lets out a long shaky sigh. His breath feels like it's being forced out of his lungs by the weight of Her age, Her growth, the change She has overseen. He feels small under the weight of Her beauty.

A lone traveler had bent down and stuck his fist into the river that flowed beside him, into the cold so intense it ripped his strength away. He brought his unclenched hand up out of the water and inspected it, hoping for some sort of change. But despite the crippling chill, it looked the same as it always had; rough and calloused and ugly. He looked a moment longer before plunging it back in.

A lone wanderer was pressing forward through the rain, tall pines flanking his right and a sharp cliff pulling at his left as he pushed himself up the rocky trail. The rain had soaked him down to his bones, and his body screamed at him to turn back, to just stop, but he couldn't. Not yet. He had started something, and he felt an obligation to see it to an end, no matter what that end might be. So, he continued his ascent through the pines watching as the cliff grew steeper.

A lone man is laying at the feet of the Tall One. He takes a long breath in through his nose, the scent of fireweed and earth doing little to calm his pounding heart. He looks up at Her grandeur, Her solid body of black and white, of cold and harsh edges, of relentless growth and change, and he finally feels like he can let it all go. In the presence of such unstoppable power, who is he to try and keep up? Alone, he closes his eyes and lets himself drown in the shadow of something immeasurably greater than him.



A Promise Kept

JOSEPH B. KIGHT, M.S. IN PSYCHOLOGY, 2021

Season of Six Winters

ELIZABETH MILHOAN, B.S. IN BEHAVIORAL HEALTH SCIENCES, 2022

I have holy days and I have days that dissolve my being into
A cave that only the devil and I are allowed to occupy.
I feel the call of both my God and my depression and
I wish I could say the call from God felt stronger, but they are equal contenders.
Most days I feel like spit out bones and dry clay that can't be worked anymore. The
last thing I tried to mold myself into is how I dried up and I am so bent out of shape
that I can't even hold flowers to make the room lighter.
On days where I feel more malleable I hammer out some of the trauma.
I make big dents smaller. Today I could put one flower inside.
I do it slowly. The whole thing could break at any moment and if it did, I promise I
would just brush it into a dust pan and throw it out.
No need to patch something back up that had no function to begin with.
Absolute terror fills my body every time I go outside and I can't see the sun.
It requires 100% of my brain to keep moving in the right direction. Mother Teresa
keeps telling me to smile and it's days like these that I'm glad I don't believe in saints.
I wish being cynical paid the bills. I would have enough money left over to buy white
confetti and a music box, turn my home into a snow globe and pretend like I was
always bringing joy to someone looking at the snow fall while gentle melodies played.
I believe in God, I promise.
I talk to Jesus, I swear.
It's just this season of being in the valley of the shadows
has been six years long and the whole thing has felt like winter.
It takes a long time for an ice age to defrost.
Please do not kick me out of this sanctuary, I am trying to hear the voice of my
Shepherd, the one who can fully mold this clay and turn it into a vase.
The Light is going to come in soon.
Even valleys see the sun.

In Parting

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

Donald stood there on the tracks, his mouth slightly agape, his pale red lips the same shade as his cheeks; they tremble from the sudden flood of winter cutthroat winds through the station. Carmen stares sheepishly at the gray concrete, small snowflakes falling like tears around them. She stands there frozen in the breath of their silence as time slows around the two. She wonders if this whole thing is in vain, if love can last and outlast the many miles of two hearts parted.

Slowly her caramel eyes look up to meet Donald's glassy ones; they have always filled her with a sense of warmth, comfort, and answers for the unknown. Yet now in his puffy grey globes, there is nothing aside from a deafening cold, laced with a question.

Carmen adjusts her suitcase. It's a heavy worn thing she got from her father years ago, a gift during a parting much like this one. Too much like this one, one could argue. For reasons, she is yet to know. She wants to say something to break this frigid silence yet it grows crisper.

"Donald," she starts but is only cut short by the whistling sounds that slice through the air. Their time has run out, the bell sings a siren call that is sweet and deadly to their hearts' weep. What needs to be said should be spoken in these last moments. Only they don't speak. Not a word. They just move closer until they are connected by their shared desire, their desires for each other, for the known, for all to stay the same. Warmth spreads over them fighting off the winters' steady creep and the time official's last calls.

Overlooking this scene, even Death can sense the love that blossoms between these two. He smiles fondly at them, though his smile suddenly turns into a painful frown. He longs to say to the couple, do not leave one another. Please, change your fates. Yet, Death knows that fates are not their own to wield. Nor is it Death's to mold and shape, only to carry out. Besides, Death cannot be seen any more than he can be heard. Even if they could, this couple who share only moments with one another would never be bothered with immortal things. Carmen and Donald, Death murmured to himself, he would remember this moment in his grueling eternity. Lovers, after all, were his favorite pastime.

They lived in wonder. Lovers loved to think they could outlast Death. They enjoyed laughing with their heads back and only attempted to blossom at the thought of eternity. Only Death could live eternally, much to his torment and duty. He was saving these lovers from life everlasting. A short life resulted in love, while a long one led to the absence of it. Alas, watching these brief moments made for beautiful

pastime. Until, of course, like all moments, they cease.

This kiss would be etched in his mind even after he carried out his work; he would remember them. Not at their ends and he would likely forget their names as much as he could try to forge them but as time passes on, he will keep the image of them safer than any iron or steel: The two standing clutching each other, hoping for a future and attempting to seal it with a kiss. He smiled upon them, frowned with them, and with indifference he carried them off all the same.

The snow continued to fall around the two, white clumps hitchhiking on their coats. The wind whistling like a passerby, also in marvel at the two. The two hardly noticing the outside world. They didn't feel the cold air that reddened their cheeks and nipped at their noses, or the coals that salted the air and dark puffs that sizzled with hot smoke or the train that was roaring to life and edging them to part. They hardly heard the Usher's definitive last call.

Like most human things, it was not truly as timeless as it may appear. All things end. Death smiled. The couple parted, staring at each other for a blink of time in Death's eye. Carmen's blush crept up through her cheeks, and then finally in the way that humans take gigantic leaps, Donald took that leap. "I love you, Carmen. I love you more than my own life," he says without blinking. It's a fact to him in the same way the Earth is round, that he has two left feet when dancing. A fact, that the train is about to depart, and Carmen will be gone. The same way he thinks that it will get to its destination on time.

"Miss, you getting on?" The Usher looks at them, catching Carmen's eye, and taps his watch, their final warning, he means to say. It's meant to be a kindness. Death only thinks a mournful woe. How this man knows not how right he is. A better usher than Death. Her eyes melt as she holds his face in her hands, "I love you too, Donald." Carmen and Donald share one final kiss and break apart letting the chill of winter take hold of them again. Carmen runs past Death, a rich smile brightening her face. She gets onto the train and disappears from Donald.

Following her aboard, however begrudgingly he feels, it is time for Death to begin his work. So sad to rip such a brilliant smile from the world.

Just

RACHEL ESPOSITO, B.A IN ENGLISH-PROFESSIONAL WRITING AND B.A. IN
SCREENWRITING, 2021

Just
scramble
your eggs in the frying pan.
a pinch of salt,
some of that shredded cheese that might
be expired.

Just
shower.
let the water sting, boil, burn
you inside and out.
scrub the dead skin off.

Just
sit
in the front row of a lecture.
count each minute.
don't forget the homework.

Just
wear
the uniform with the itchy tag.
smile at the customer that
demanded the manager.

Just
drink
coffee at four pm.
know you need
to stay awake.

Just
stretch
before you start the workout.

you wouldn't want to
pull something.

Just
wash
your face.
the soap always gets
into your eyes.

Just
stand
beside your friends
and laugh at a joke.
the smile will fade.

Just
feel
the heat rise to your cheeks.
he sits next to you
but you never tell him anything.

Just
wake,
turn off the alarm.
skip the lecture
and go back to sleep.

Just
pause
and realise you haven't
been breathing
for years.

Just

stop.
stop walking
and see
how long you've been going.

Just
know
it seemed like
progress.
it was a wasteland.

Just
see
the path you still
have to follow.
the end is so far.

Just
wonder
why you're still
going.
why it's so hard.

Just
fall
to the floor.
the weight of everything
finally feels heavy.

Just
ignore
the guilt that says
each day
is easy.

Just
scream

at the voice
that tells you
this is everything.

Just
rage
against the idea that
not breathing
is the only way to live.

Just
force
yourself to stop
for once in your
pathetic life.

Just
face
the person you see
in the mirror.
she's not strong enough.

Just
wonder
where you need to
go from here,
if anywhere.

Just
fade
away until
there's nothing left
to remember.

Just
breathe.



Introspection

**ROBERT RUSS, B.A. IN ADVERTISING AND GRAPHIC DESIGN WITH A MINOR
IN WEB DESIGN, 2021**

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