



Litmag  
2025



**Memento Mori,**



**Memento Vivere.**







*Litmag's*

mission

is to nurture the creativity of the students, staff, and alumni of UMSL by providing a space to showcase the diverse literary and artistic talent on our campus.

We aim to provide an inclusive, professional and high-quality publication free of charge to UMSL and the local community.

**UMSL**  
University of Missouri–St. Louis

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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A huge shout-out to *Litmag's* Editor-in-Chief, Andrew Jacob Pashia. Moreso, this year's ALA Esmeralda Herrada-Flores for her expertise with compiling submissions and working with submitters!

And last but most certainly not least, thank you to all the authors and artists who contributed to this publication, as well as readers like you!

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*Dear reader,*

Welcome! I am so excited to introduce to you the 2025 edition of UMSL's *Litmag*. It was a privilege to serve as the Editor-in-Chief for this year's publication, and I would first like to acknowledge the diligent hard work of the *Litmag* staff. From the call for submissions to the printing of the journal, our team worked tirelessly to deliver a quality experience, one which *Litmag* always strives to provide. We all participated in a blind selection process of each piece presented in this issue, and were thus blinded by the passion and beauty of each piece and their artistic merit.

Our goal for this edition of *Litmag* was inspired by the magnificent, confusing phenomenon that is humanity. We envisioned an edition of *Litmag* that was full of love, life, strife, and grit; when you read this journal, we want you as the reader to be inspired by the energy within its pages, and we hope that it lights a fire inside you. The state of the world as we know it is confusing. We have struggled, fought, and some of us have died to preserve our quality of life, our honor, and our autonomy. There are those of us that are at risk of being erased. At risk of being silenced. But it is within publications such as *Litmag* where we find solace.

It is within art that we've found our purpose. We find like-minded individuals who see the world as we do, and who feel the exuberance of life as we do. To be human is to create, and to create is to live. So live. Take pen to paper, paint to canvas, camera to target, and stake your claim in this world, because the stories, art, and experiences we share through our creations can never be erased. They can never be silenced.

We are the change.

with honor,  
Andrew Jacob Pashia.  
*Editor-in-Chief*



2025



1 Univeristy Boulevard, St. Louis, Missouri, 63121

# *Catalyst*

n. something that initiates or speeds up a process or event  
without being consumed itself.



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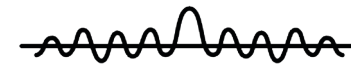
*Kate Watt, MFA*

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# CONTEST WINNERS

*Litmag* sponsors individual contests for best poetry, best prose, best multilingual writing and best artwork. Winners for the categories of poetry, prose, and art were determined by the lead editors using editorial staff voting scores. The multilingual winner was determined by the Department of Languages and Cultural Studies faculty.



### Art:

**Feeling Blue**

by BRENT MOSS

### Poetry:

**The Withering Clock**

by AMIRA MUSIC

### Prose:

**Michigan**

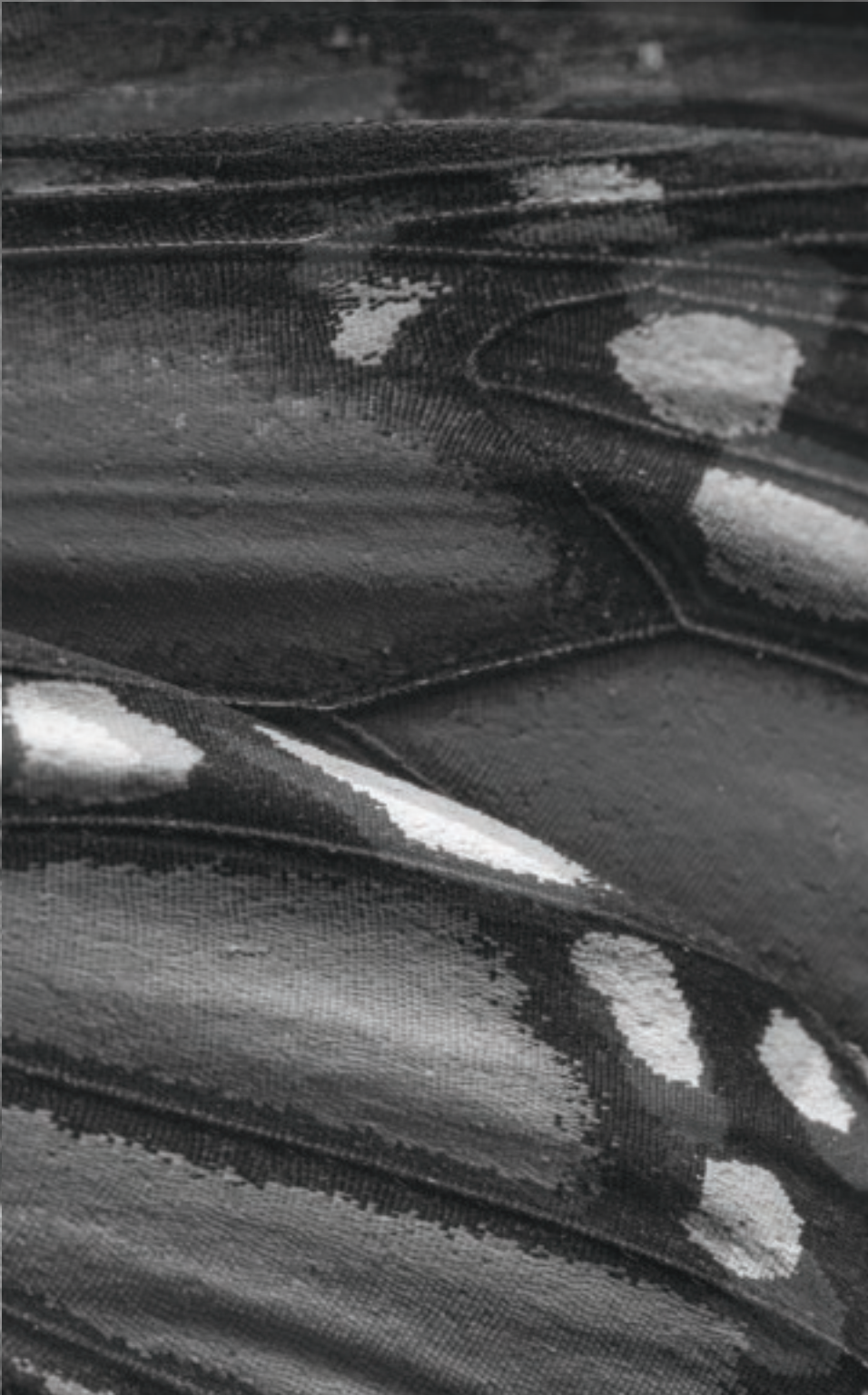
by CHELSEA BAIRD

### Multilingual Writing:

**Two Candles, One Flame**

by CLARA GUILHOT





## *Vivification*

1. Nicotine by Myles Thurman (Poetry)
2. The Procession by Jessica Wojcik (Poetry)
3. A Mother's Love by Hannah Edomwonyi (Art)
4. The Butterfly by Hannah Edomwonyi (Art)
5. Because of the Mosquitoes by Colleen Brewster (Fiction)
9. Lost, but Searching by Clara Guilhot (Poetry)
10. WITCH— by Leacher Kennedy (Poetry)
12. Renaissance by Jessica Wojcik (Poetry)
13. Chances by Mia Min (Art)
14. Rummage Sale by Jason Thomas Paro (Art)
15. The Withering Clock by Amira Music (Poetry)
17. Pieces by Meg Phillips (Fiction)
23. Love in Me by Clara Guilhot (Multilingual)
25. Rain-Soaked Road by Mia Min (Art)
26. Opencar by Matt Altis (Art)
27. life cycle by Abby Foust (Poetry)



## *Transformation*

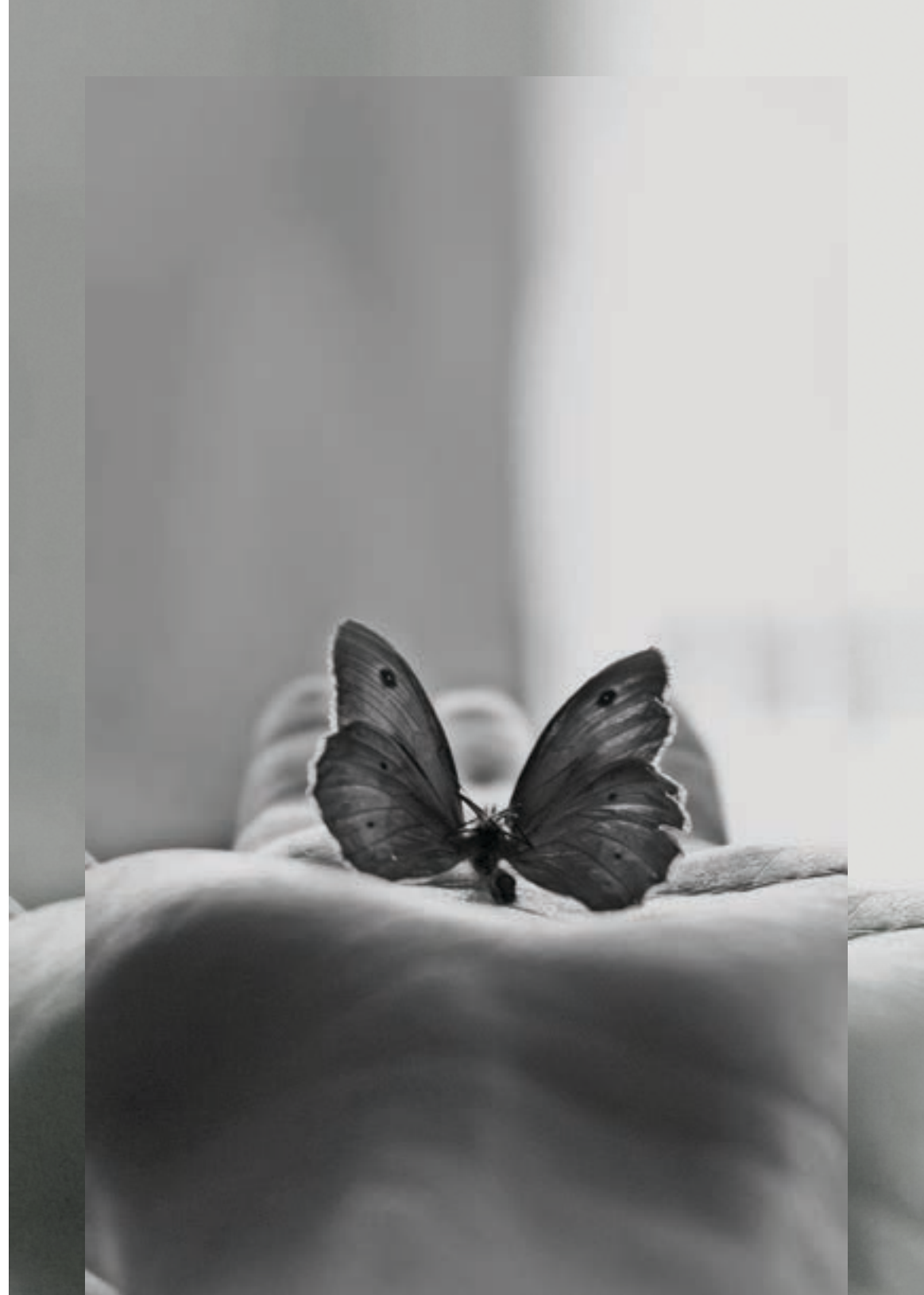
30. Mixtapes by Jessica Wojcik (Poetry)
33. Regal Rags by Brent Moss (Art)
34. Orage by Clara Guilhot (Art)
35. Meadow of Contemplation by Taylor Weintrop (Poetry)
36. Michigan by Chelsea Baird (Fiction)
46. Light the Way by Esmeralda Herrada-Flores (Poetry)
47. Thinking about Stabbing My Husband by Sarah Sutton (Fiction)
49. Dinner for One by Matt Altis (Art)
50. GPGP by Matt Altis (Art)
51. Axiom of Choice by Matt Kimbrell (Poetry)
52. Two Candles, One Flame by Clara Guilhot (Multilingual)
54. You Got Dedication, Kid by Sarah Sutton (Poetry)
55. SunKissed by Sarah Reimer (Art)
56. Untitled by Brandon V. (Art)
57. Crumb by Olivia Steely (Poetry)

# *Liberation*

- 60. Tips for Your First Shift at the In-Between Train Station by Anna Connoley (Fiction)
- 62. The Scales of Fairness by Amira Music (Poetry)
- 63. Identity by Andrew Jacob Pashia (Poetry)
- 65. Feeling Blue by Brent Moss (Art)
- 66. One Love by Brent Moss (Art)
- 67. 2 BAN america(n) by Kavion Norman (Poetry)
- 68. Song of Infinity by Sarah Sutton (Poetry)
- 72. Nonsense, Five Cents by Abby Foust (Poetry)
- 73. "I Was Expecting A Dove" by Sarah Reimer (Art)
- 74. Montpellier by Clara Guillhot (Art)
- 75. Courage, My Friend by Colleen Brewster (Fiction)
- 77. Love Me by Andrew Jacob Pashia (Poetry)
- 79. Kicked Habits, Bright Future by Jason Thomas Paro (Art)
- 80. Ivy Wall by Dana R. Pierson (Art)
- 81. Elder Weight by Amira Music (Poetry)
- 82. An Artist's Motivation by Anna Connoley (Poetry)

# *Ascension*

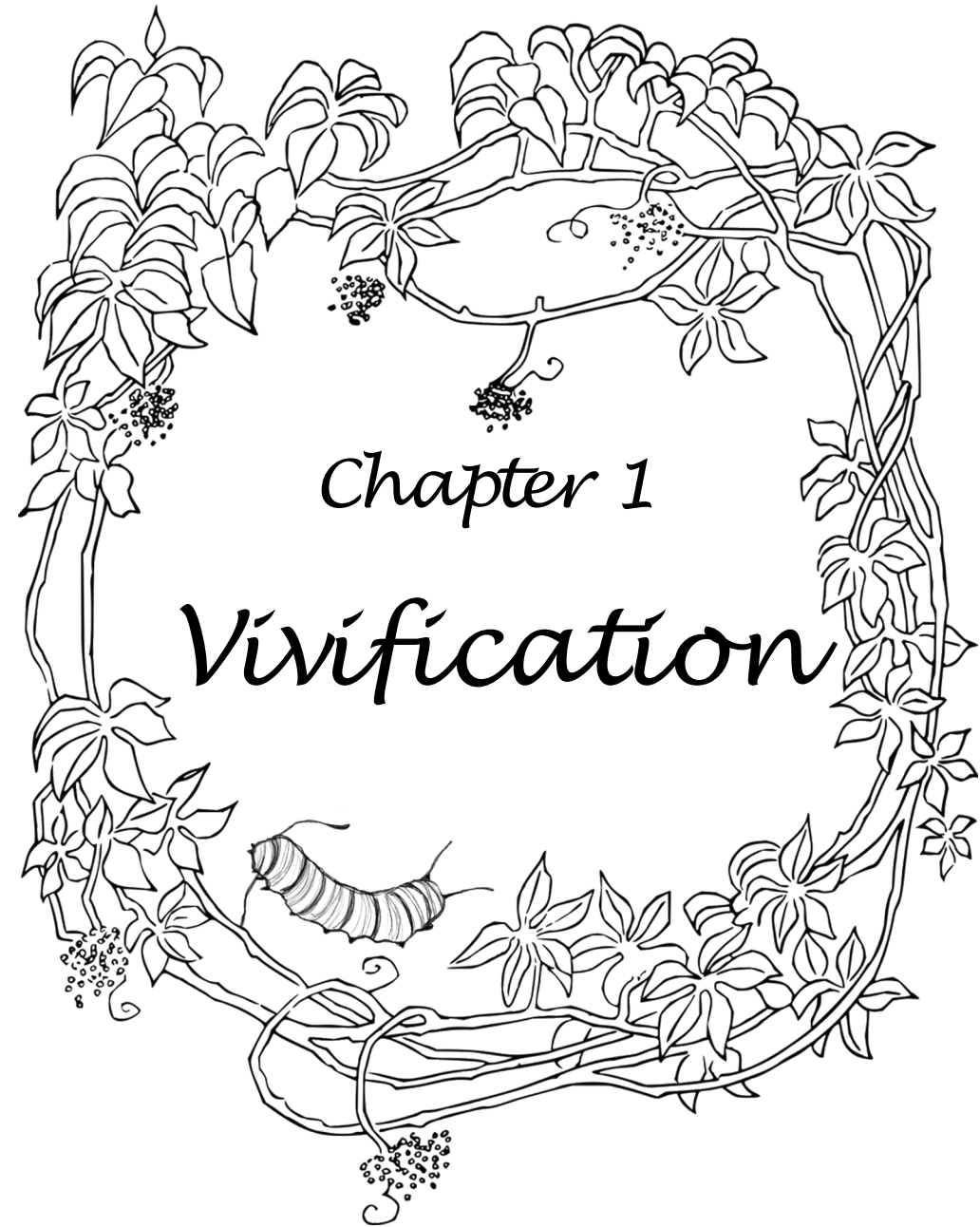
- 86. Storms of Sunshine by Amira Music (Nonfiction)
- 89. Wonderer by Anna Tisdale (Art)
- 90. Japanese Blossom by Heather Oatis (Art)
- 91. Needlepoint by Jessica Wojcik (Poetry)
- 92. June 24, 2022 by Emerald H. (Poetry)
- 93. This Long Road by Andrew Jacob Pashia (Poetry)
- 94. I Pledge Allegiance... by Anna Tisdale (Poetry)
- 95. When I Look the World in the Eye I Want More to Say Than an Apology by Danniella 'cat' Stacy (Art)
- 96. Home by Sarah Reimer (Art)
- 97. 1711 Maple Ridge by Kenzie Strickler (Fiction)
- 100. How to Write a How-To by Colleen Brewster (Nonfiction)
- 102. Street Art of Desire by Collin Barry-Kamp (Poetry)
- 103. A Light in the Dark by Jason Thomas Paro (Art)
- 104. Self-Reflection by Matt Altis (Art)
- 105. Mothers of Pearl by Abigail Hughes (Poetry)
- 106. The End by Andrew Jacob Pashia (Fiction)
- 112. Oda a la Cachaça by Alex Balogh (Multilingual)

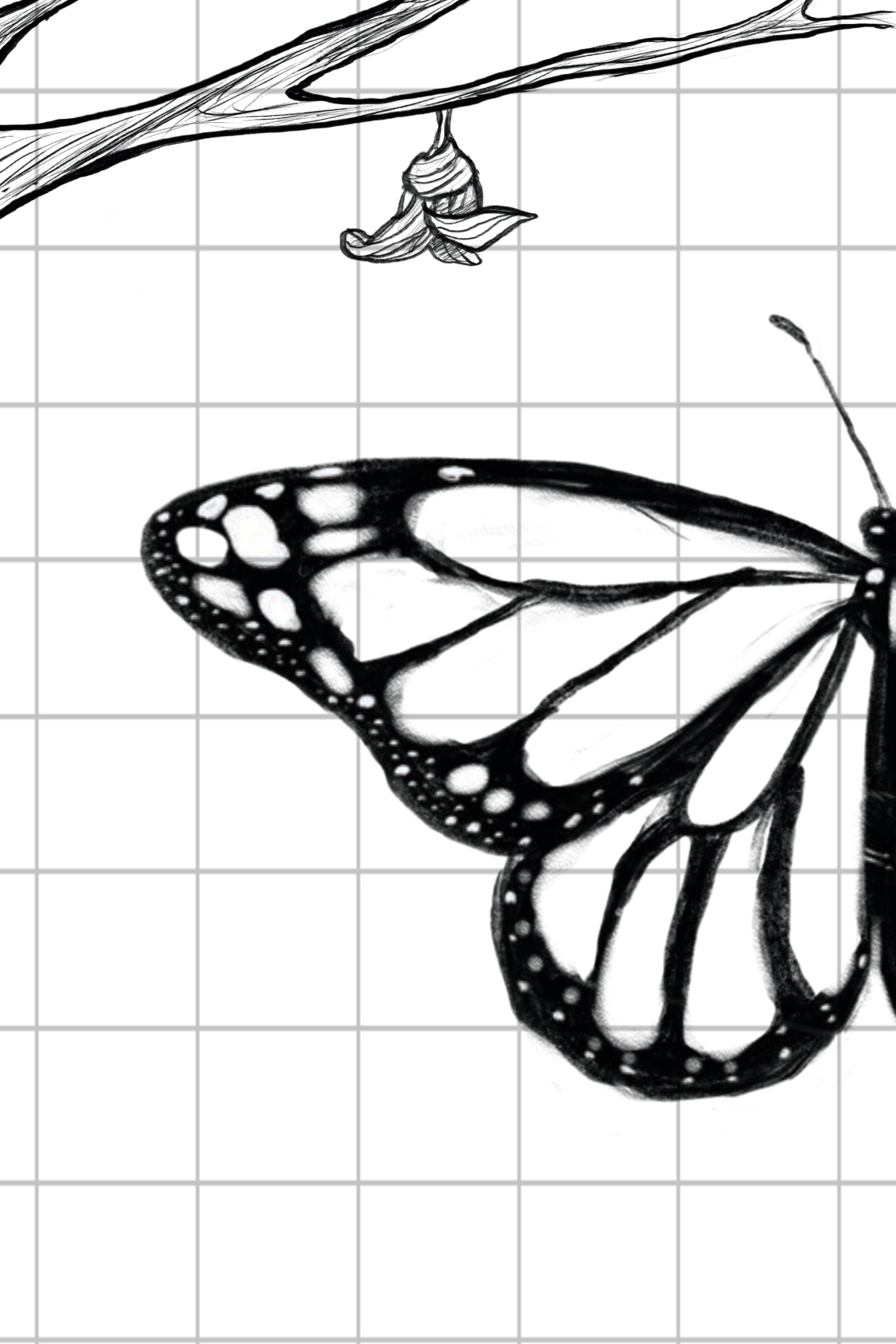




You can't go back and change  
the beginning,  
but you can start  
where you are and change  
the ending.

- C.S. Lewis





# *Nicotine*

by Myles Thurman

I chose to inhale every time  
The scent, the high, it all drew me in, begging for my lips to get closer  
I inhaled slowly, savoring every breath  
Savoring the smoke that filled my lungs  
Savoring every moment that I inhaled delicious death  
Knowing that in one moment  
After I stopped breathing

After the high finally faded away  
A runaway train I could never quite catch  
My lungs would scream, from pain or want, I was never sure  
The smoky tendrils woven through my heart  
I needed it  
I was soothed by it  
I felt my lungs expand, the ache dulled, death by a thousand cuts  
A mirror of truth, a honey-covered lie

I inhaled every ounce of that sweet nicotine  
Reaching for her gray curls  
Letting them wrap around my neck, for her to be my noose.  
She loved me, she said, she craved me the same.  
I would gladly let her destroy me, if it meant the high would last.  
Just one more moment, I pleaded as she faded  
The air replacing her, the fog dissipating.

Her leaving cut into my tongue, candied glass  
Flavored death, I wonder which one she would choose  
The fire is my coffin, the smoke my muse

Sweet, sweet nicotine, how could I refuse?



# *The Procession*

by Jessica Wojcik

fog piles heavy on  
changing trees and  
making their beauty hang  
so low we could touch the wet leaves  
if we wanted

this dewy autumn is  
the early tears of a  
grieving mother;  
red sprays on willows  
are spreading bloodstains

she watches her labor  
go cold in her soil  
every year  
and she dresses her children  
for their funerals;  
one last burst of color  
before gray sets in.

# *A Mother's Love*

by Hannah Edomwonyi



*Oil on Canvas*



# *The Butterfly*

by Hannah Edomwonyi



*Pencil and Watercolor*

# *Because of the Mosquitoes*

by Colleen Brewster

Anna sat in her best dress, her legs dangling off the uncomfortable seat, kicking gently inches above the ground. She didn't like her best dress. It was stiff and itchy and the skirt poofed too much. But Aunt Marilyn said she had to wear it.

She looked around the room at the adults. They all looked serious. Some of them looked sad. On the table next to her sat Mama's scrapbook. Why was the book here? It was important to Mama; she flipped through it almost every night but never let Anna look at it.

Anna twisted in her seat, lifted the heavy black book, and set it on her lap. The frayed edges caught in the lace of her skirt, and she reached forward to unsnag them. The book was heavy on her legs, a crushing weight. But she didn't mind. She opened the book and slowly turned the thick, plastic-wrapped pages.

On the black pages, old newspaper cuttings were stuck in behind the clear plastic. Anna was disappointed. Mama had helped her make a scrapbook of all their fun times, and they had used cut-out flowers and stickers to decorate the pages around the photos of themselves at parks or picnics.

They hadn't had a picnic in years. Mama said there were too many bugs out during the day. And there were a lot of bugs. Anna remembered the last time she snuck out, the clouds of little flying bugs—Mama called them gnats—were so thick, they almost formed a wall. They got into Anna's eyes and nose and mouth and even in her ears. Mama had to pour water into Anna's ears, and she cried and screamed as the bugs inside buzzed and vibrated, slower and slower until they were finally still. She wanted Mama to get them out, but Mama said she would have to wait for them to come out with her ear wax. And they did; little broken bug bodies and tiny wings and legs.

Anna shuddered and flipped the book back to the first page. She could read pretty well; Mama had taught her herself. She studied the words on the yellowed newspaper carefully. The first one was dated February 22, 2022. Anna liked how it was all twos. She knew the year now was 2032. This newspaper was ten



years old. Older than she was.

She studied the big bold printing, struggling over the difficult words. “Medical break-through! Virus prevents mosquitoes from reproducing.” In smaller words, the newspaper said, “Scientists say virus is specific to the Anopheles, the mosquito responsible for transmitting malaria to humans. The virus is expected to save thousands of lives a year.” More, smaller words followed, but she didn’t feel like reading them all.

She didn’t know what malaria was. She had never seen a mosquito, but when she asked Mama why they couldn’t go outside during the day anymore, Mama would say there were too many bugs, and when Anna asked why, sometimes Mama would say, “Because of the mosquitoes.”

Anna read the second newspaper, on the opposite page. It was dated September 1, 2022. “Malaria-mosquito virus spreading!” The big words said, then underneath, “After the Culex mosquito populations—the mosquitoes known to carry West Nile—have crashed in recent months, scientists discovered the virus released to control the malaria-carrying Anopheles mosquito has migrated to the Culex species.”

Anna frowned. Wasn’t the Nile a river somewhere? Was the West Nile near it? But how did the mosquitoes carry the river? She turned the page, slightly annoyed. The newspapers didn’t make sense, but she didn’t want to ask one of the adults. If they saw her with Mama’s scrapbook, they would probably take it away.

The next one had a date of April 3, 2023. “Bat, bird, and insect populations affected. The natural predators of mosquitoes have struggled in the past year since the virus, originally used to control the Anopheles mosquito that carries malaria, has spread to all other mosquito species. Large numbers of bats, birds, and even other insects are dying, scientists say from starvation.”

Anna knew what birds were. She had heard of bats, but never seen them. But she and Mama kept bird feeders, and liked to sit inside during the day when there were too many bugs outside and count the birds that came up to eat seeds and give them names and make up stories about them. “This is Mr. Cardinal. He works at the bird school and teaches all the little birds how to read bird books.”

She looked at the next newspaper. It was cut out from a bigger page, and

there was no date. The big words said, “Op-ed: Lack of biodiversity a worthwhile price for disease eradication.”

She didn’t bother to try to guess what an “op-ed” was, but she recognized price and disease.

She turned the page again. This one had a date of June 9, 2025. Anna was born “April 1, 2025,” she recited to herself silently. Mama always said she was the best April Fool’s joke she ever had. The big words on this newspaper said, “Insect populations exploding. Gnats, flies, and other pests are multiplying out of control after the large die-off of natural predators.”

Anna stared at the word “gnat.” She remembered Mama telling her the bugs were spelled funny, like guh-nat. “Multiplying out of control.” She could multiply in her head. Mama taught her the times table, even though “it had gone out of fashion.” She knew five times five was twenty-five and six times six was thirty-six and seven times seven was...she frowned, thinking. When the number didn’t come to her after a moment, she shrugged her shoulders.

Flipping boredly through the pages, Anna looked at the last article. It had the date “August 3, 2031.” That was just last fall. “Strange disease spreading in Africa. Pandemic fears realized!” The big, bold words said. Cold ran through her. She knew the word disease, and fear. “Scientists diagnose the new disease as a mutated, deadly form of malaria, that spreads through fleas.”

She remembered recently Mama had bought a lot of powders and sprays. On their bottles, they had pictures of little bugs with a big red circle around them and a red line running through them. When she had asked Mama what these were for, Mama said they were for fleas.

The following day, their pet cat Snowflake disappeared. Mama said Snowflake had to go take care of his family. When Anna, sobbing, asked why he couldn’t bring his family here, Mama got angry. “Because of the damn mosquitoes!” Anna had never heard mama say a bad word before. Then she was sorry, and explained that Snowflake’s family lived on a big, huge farm, and they were much happier there, he and Mrs. Snowflake and their three little babies. Anna asked what their names were, and Mama paused, then said, “Princess, Spot, and Snowflake Jr.”

A few months after Snowflake left to take care of his family, Anna woke

with an itchy spot on her leg. When Mama saw it, she looked so scared it frightened Anna. Then the next day, Anna started to feel sick. Her body ached, and she felt hot and cold at the same time. Mama called the doctor, and they sent some medicine to the house. But then Mama got sick, too. Anna was so sick, she couldn't remember much of what happened, until she woke up in the hospital a few weeks ago, and Aunt Marilyn was sitting with her.

Anna asked for Mama, but Aunt Marilyn just looked sad and said Mama was too sick to come visit her. Anna got better, and Aunt Marilyn took her home. Not to *her* home, but to Aunt Marilyn's home. All of her stuff was there, though, but it all smelled weird, like someone had sprayed something on all of it.

And now Anna sat in Aunt Marilyn's living room, in the uncomfortable seat, in her best, scratchiest dress, as the adults all around her looked sad and serious. Aunt Marilyn had cried that morning when she told Anna that her Mama wasn't coming home. But Anna didn't cry. She closed Mama's scrapbook and stared at its cover.

Forty-nine. That's what seven times seven was.

# Lost, but Searching

by Clara Guilhot

Some days, the weight of the world is too much,  
like it's pressing down, and I can't breathe.  
I look for a place where the noise fades,  
where my thoughts are quiet,  
where I can be myself without being broken.

But the world keeps spinning,  
moving so fast,  
and I feel stuck,  
like I'm falling behind,  
searching for a hand that understands,  
someone who will see me,  
not as a puzzle to fix,  
but as someone to hold.

I've been everywhere,  
looking for that space—  
a corner where I fit,  
where I'm not invisible,  
where I'm not just a shadow,  
but a person who matters.

Sometimes, the silence is louder than the crowd,  
and I wonder if I'll ever find a place  
where my heart doesn't ache  
from all the unspoken words,  
from all the things I can't explain.

But I keep searching,  
even when the world feels so far away.  
Maybe one day,  
I'll find where I belong,  
a place where love isn't a question,  
where understanding isn't too much to ask.







# WITCH—

by Le'cher Kennedy

You will just wear your curls,  
And I will be forced to wear my braids.  
I will tug  
And tug  
And

T  
U  
G

Until there is nothing left.  
And I will hate myself.  
You will cut your hair, for  
There is nothing that can truly alter  
Your beauty. You will not care.  
I notice every untrimmed facial hair  
And mustache shadow that runs longer than five o'clock.  
I cannot focus on wearing  
Just my curls.  
“It is just hair,” you say.

You are interesting—talented, even,  
And I waver as a jack-of-all-trades.  
My passion is never what I insist  
It may be. Every work is  
All consuming yet unfathomable  
To be finished.  
You make the boring seem

So fascinating.

I could give you a piece of paper  
And you would turn it into a dove,  
Representing everything you are:  
A bird heeding love. White and pure  
And every synonym that I cannot pronounce.  
You probably can. You can work  
*Magic.*

You will take up every space in  
Every  
Room,  
And I can only try to exist.  
Their eyes stay on you, not a  
Single creak taking attention away from  
You. I easily disappear in your shadow; no one  
Knows I am there.  
You charm everyone so effortlessly.  
Cast another spell. I know you will.

You say that I can be just like you—  
That there are no true differences between  
Us two. That in another universe,  
I am your total reflection.  
What does that mean?  
Why are you doing this to me?  
I am not dumb.  
You are the extraordinary.

Why has no one hung you yet?

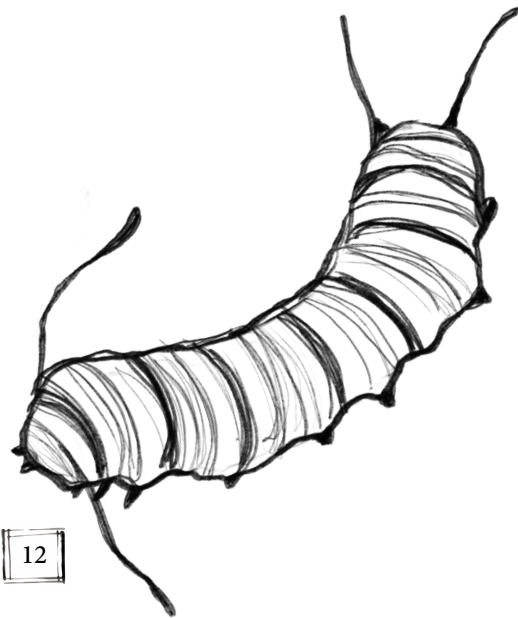
# *Renaissance*

*by Jessica Wojcik*

is anyone here a doctor?  
'cause I sure could use one,  
but not for bones,  
or chakras,  
or mind

I want an atomic doctor.  
I want a doctor who can make me  
one long stretch of ocean,  
or can rearrange me  
put me on top of a mountain  
basking in the mother, sun  
or make me the mother, sun  
can transform me into a feeling,  
that shining morning glory,  
love itself

I want to be shaped and pulled,  
to be rebuilt  
until I can do no harm,  
until I am inspiration  
itself



# *Chances*

*by Mia Min*



*Photograph*



## Rummage Sale

by Jason Thomas Paro



Pen and Ink, Colored Pencil

## The Withering Clock

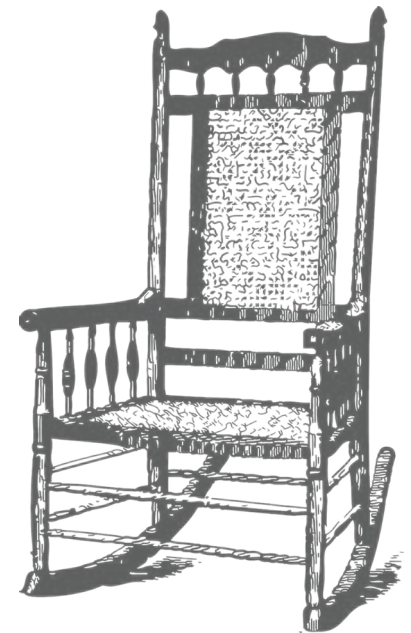
by Amira Music

She sits in the frightening chair,  
a throne of weary bones and laundry—  
its lazy arms cradle her,  
hold her still, quiet,  
like the ghost of a song  
humming just beneath the noise.

Outside, the obnoxious sky grins,  
all furious blue,  
sparkling with a kind of joy she hasn't felt in years.

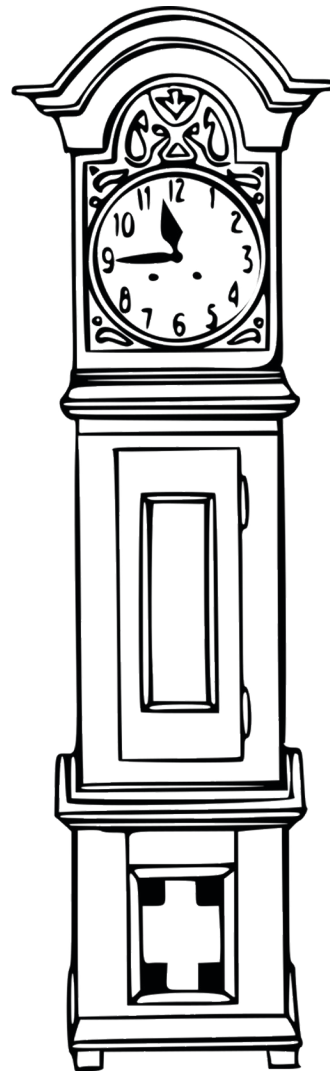
Her eyes linger on the wedding ring,  
its stone too polished,  
its weight once a promise,  
now a glinting artifact—  
a superfluous reminder  
of the woman she used to be.  
The woman who packed a silent suitcase  
brimming with dreams,  
who carried a soft flame behind her ribs,  
before the years turned her into this.

She was a flower once,  
bold, blooming without apology,  
but now she is a wilted forest,  
a place where nothing grows.  
Her roots are tangled—  
in chores and dinners,  
in scraped knees and bedtime stories  
half-remembered,  
in *the withering clock*  
that ticks its fragile, hollow beat.



Yet, somewhere in the shadow of her reflection,  
the familiar flame flickers still,  
trembling like a secret.

But when she looks in the mirror's quiet truth,  
she sees only a mother,  
a wife,  
a woman who has forgotten  
how to rise in the furious thunder,  
how to scream her own name.



## Pieces

by Meg Phillips

From birth to death, the human brain does a bang-up job of filtering reality. The incoming stimulus from our eyes, ears and other senses is processed at lightning speed—that is to say, a few milliseconds. However, it's worth noting those milliseconds mean our perception of the world lags, ever-so-briefly, behind reality. What we think of as “now” is really the quite-recent past.

Drew Mullins had read this somewhere, or maybe he'd heard it on NPR. He was vague on the details. Vagueness was something of a theme in his life, for reasons that eluded him. He was puzzled when other people answered questions like “how do you feel?”—or, more bewilderingly, as they moved through life with purpose. Like that lady-doc who'd recently stitched up his lip. The anesthetic had blessedly kicked in, giving him mush-mouth, so she'd kept up both sides of the conversation as she worked.

“Today marks my fifteenth year in the ER,” she'd said happily. He must have looked quizzical, for she'd continued: “Yeah, I've known this was my calling since age five.” This was downright baffling to Drew, who drifted from job to job with large intervals in between. Perhaps that consciousness lag had something to do with it. Maybe reality came in faster, sharper, for the doctor and other *together* people.

These thoughts were running mushily through Drew's mind as he slunk low in his city bus seat. The mush trickled away as the bus approached a restaurant, and he pulled the cord, standing up to exit. The vehicle stopped at the curb, doors opening in front of a banner with lurid red and blue letters: RE-ELECT DREW MULLINS! He glanced up and down the sidewalk, hopped from the bus and hurried to the restaurant door.

He swung it open and stepped quickly inside, where he was met with a bored-looking hostess. Her boredom dropped away when she saw the fading bruise on his cheekbone. “Name?” she asked, eyeing him up and down.

Drew blinked and looked around, noting TV screens and kitsch on the walls. Not the sort of place he'd expect an invite list. *Why here?* he wondered. *Budget issues? Poor planning?* Neither seemed likely. *A favor for political bed-fellows?* Yes, that seemed more—

“Your name, sir?” repeated the hostess. She was looking at him strangely, but



this was nothing new and he was unfazed.

"I'm Drew Mullins."

She smiled humorlessly. "Ok, but really. I can't let you in if you're not on the list."

He sighed and glanced at the clipboard in her hand. He'd always been good at reading upside down. Generally, the skill gained him useless information, like the grocery needs of shoppers across the bus aisle. But every so often, it paid off. Every so often, it led to a plan.

Tonight was something in between. He chose a name at random. "Felix Day."

The hostess stepped aside, gesturing toward the back. "Welcome, Mr. Day. Our event room is down that hall, do you see the door there? Just before the restrooms."

He nodded and headed toward the door, stepping just inside. The room was larger than he'd expected; a good-sized crowd mingled amidst piped-in jazz music with cocktail tables scattered throughout. Near the middle was the woman he needed. Sixty-something, improbably blonde, surrounded by campaigners and well-wishers. He started toward her. "The restaurant is Benjamin's," she was saying, "and he asked if we could—"

Her eyes fell on him. "Hello, Drew," she said.

"Hey, Mom," he replied.

With furtive glances at Drew's yellowing bruises, Mrs. Mullins's lackeys drifted awkwardly away. She eyeballed him. "Why are you here? You're not on the list."

"It's a party for Drew Mullins."

"*This* Drew Mullins." She tapped her own chest. "*Mayor* Drew Mullins."

"I'm not the woman who gave her own name to her son. Her *son*, Ma. I can't even go by Junior." Was that true, he suddenly wondered? Maybe he should Google it.

"So what do you want?"

"I want—" he paused and frowned. He'd come to ask for money. He was emphatically not vague about that. For a change, he never had been vague about the money—and, in fact, had discovered (to his dismay, but also to his wonder) that owing fifty thousand dollars to a loan shark has a way of crystallizing one's thought process. Mainly, his thought process went like this:

*Shit!*

*Where am I gonna get that much money??*

*Shit!*

... et cetera.

Which is why he was surprised to hear the next words out of his mouth: "Why can't I feel love?"

She raised an eyebrow. "Of what?"

"Huh?"

"Why can't I feel of' what?"

"Not 'of, Ma, *love*. Why can't I feel love?"

"You always mumble. I keep telling you." She frowned. "Is this about Myra? Did she leave you?"

"It's Mia. And no."

"You're a terrible liar."

"I'm a good liar." He'd always considered this to be true. His money-making plans often relied on his ability to, if not lie, at least misrepresent the facts.

She huffed. "Please. You're completely transparent. When you lie, you twitch: anyone can see it. Why do you think your schemes always fail?"

"I don't have schemes."

"See? You twitched."

Drew clenched his fists in annoyance.

"So Myra left," his mother said. "This is why you need a steady job. I keep telling you."

"*Mia*," he said, "doesn't care about that."

She waited for a moment. "No twitch? Hm. Well, it's a rare woman who doesn't care that your career's in the toilet. You hang onto that one."

"Come off it, Ma, I just told you she left me!"

"I believe *I* told *you* that." Mrs. Mullins was wearing her most satisfied smirk, one that Drew wished was less familiar. He'd seen it on a semi-regular basis since early childhood, spreading across her face each time she'd verbally bested him. Throughout these contests, she'd apparently felt no unfairness over being the adult. She'd happily kept at it as he grew, enjoying his consternation over the fact that he never could seem to win. If Drew had ever gone to therapy—something that occasionally drifted across his consciousness but always drifted out again—no doubt this tendency of his mothers would have come up. Every man, he thought, needs an occasional victory.

Mia hadn't smirked, not ever, not even when she'd left. Even then, she had

wanted not to best him, but to help him understand. “It’s not that I don’t love you,” she’d said. “I love you.”

“I know,” he’d replied.

She’d shaken her head. “But you don’t know,” she had said mournfully. “I tell you, but you don’t feel it. I mean really *feel* it.”

“I do,” he’d said, but it hadn’t been true. “I love you,” he’d said, which might not have been true either. He wondered now if he’d twitched when speaking—but even if he hadn’t, Mia was astute. It was one of her most attractive qualities. That, and a kind heart, and a truly fine ass.

“You want to love me,” Mia had told him. This much was true. “I wish it was enough,” she’d said. And she’d walked out the door.

He had watched her truly fine ass as she left, and for the first time in days, his loan-shark panic had receded, replaced by a feeling he couldn’t put his finger on. A more emotionally-savvy man might have termed it “regret,” but even un-named, the feeling had kept his panic at bay for that entire evening and part of the next morning. Then the fear had rolled back in, causing him to pace jerkily around his apartment until he’d found a plan: asking his mother for the cash.

He had left right away to see her. He’d been on his way to the bus stop, mentally running through platitudes about family bonds, when two men had grabbed him and pulled him into a nearby alley. At first, Drew hadn’t had much time to think. If he had, he might have reflected that his timing was seldom good, and more often very bad. But instead, the event had begun with impressions: the first man, small and wiry, bore a face that reminded Drew of a ferret. Had Ferret-face been alone, Drew might have felt up to defending himself, but the second man, giant-like, had towered over them both. Drew, sweating and unnerved, had looked up at the giant’s scowl—and in that instant, his thoughts had come rolling back in and he’d vividly recalled the fact that *now* is the quite-recent past. *Maybe it’s already over*, he’d thought wildly—a notion that had proved unhelpful when the giant’s fists had landed in the next, technically-not-present moment.

“That’s from Benny,” the ferret-faced man had told him, and then Drew had dragged himself to the ER with a badly-split lip and one eye swollen shut.

He’d holed up for a week in his apartment. As a result, the eye was now re-opened—though looking at his mother’s smug face in that moment, he half-wished his vision was less clear. He swallowed his frustration. “Listen,” he began. “I’m in a bit of a

fix.” Her expression turned to something like pity, which was somehow worse than the smirk. Annoyed, he let his gaze drift around the room as he spoke: “I was wondering if—”

Abruptly, his words choked in his mouth. Standing in the crowd, not three tables away, was the ferret-faced man. He looked as out-of-place as Drew felt, but was gamely giving it his all. “Nice to meet ya,” Drew heard him tell a campaigner, who watched affronted as Ferret-face gulped down wine, then wiped his lips on his sleeve. “I’m Felix Day. I’m in plastics.” His gaze slid slyly in Drew’s direction. He winked.

Alarmed, Drew snapped his head from side to side, searching for the giant man whose fists had made such an impression. Thankfully, the giant was nowhere to be seen. “Quick, Ma,” he whispered. “Is there a back door?”

“Can you stay focused for one minute?” she demanded. “If you have something to ask, you should stick with it.”

“Ma, the back door!”

“Make your case, then make the ask. No tangents. That’s Fundraising One-Oh-One.”

“Where’s the door?” Drew repeated urgently. He could see Ferret-face heading in his direction. “The door!” whispered Drew again.

“Down the hall, by the restrooms,” said Mrs. Mullins, too loudly for his liking. “Shhh,” he hissed, slipping quickly away, but she called after him as if she hadn’t heard: “You never stick to anything, that’s your problem. I keep telling you.”

If she had further advice to offer, it was lost as he ducked out the event room door and lunged toward the restrooms. An EXIT sign glowed at the hallway’s end, beckoning like a green light, and he sprinted toward it. He briefly wondered if an emergency exit alarm would sound, but he slammed the door open and was met with blessed silence. *Oh, thank God*, he thought, as he stumbled into an alley, turned toward the street, and ran. *Maybe I’ll make it. Maybe I can—*

An imposing figure loomed before him, and his *maybes* scattered like birds. The giant man was blocking his escape to the street. In one hand, he held an iron pipe. *He’s holding it at his side*, Drew thought, frozen for a long moment. *So it’s just for show, right? ... Right???* he repeated to himself, a bit pathetically, and waited for his body to unfreeze. Mercifully, his limbs unlocked; instantly he swiveled, ready to run back into the restaurant. But there, emerging from the back door, was Ferret-face. He must have heard Mrs. Mullins’s directions. Or maybe, Drew chastised himself, he was boringly



easy to predict. His heart sank. He could hear heavy footfalls behind him and knew he was trapped. He studied the ferret-faced man, trying to gather his thoughts. There must be something he could say to this man, something that would change things. If only he could find the right—

Suddenly, it hit him. It struck with a jolt, and he knew just what to say. He knew it from the depth of his being, with a certainty like never before. He regarded the ferret-faced man in wonder, seeing in his thin features a newly-glimpsed nobility—sensing in the man’s deepest heart a world of hopes, a galaxy of dreams ... many discarded and despaired-of, but that didn’t matter; in fact, it somehow made this astonishing creature even more worthy of the intense feeling that now washed over Drew in warm, nourishing waves.

“I love you,” he said.

This man did not love him back—Drew knew that—but it didn’t matter, he realized now, because Mia did love him, and he could feel it, and he could feel his love for her in return. He could even (miracle of miracles) perceive his love for his mother, and hers for him. The ecstasy of it buoyed him. “I love you, man,” Drew repeated. “I really love you.” With newfound clarity, he realized his words were in fact not words, but thoughts. His ability to speak seemed to have dropped away. But this also didn’t matter, because he knew: *Love is the whole thing*. His vagueness had dropped away, too, and he remembered there was more—recalled how he’d read, years ago, a random Twitter post: *Love is the whole thing, and we are only pieces*. He’d read this one Tuesday, a February day, while drinking coffee, he remembered. The coffee had been deep brown, rich, a sheen on top—perfect coffee, he thought now, though he hadn’t savored it at the time. How much he’d missed! He gazed at the sparkling air. Somehow, he knew he would miss nothing more. From here on out, he’d be part of it all.

Milliseconds later, the ferret-faced man’s brain completed its filtering. Within his visual cortex, he processed the image of an iron pipe striking Drew’s head. He watched Drew buckle, lifeless, and pressed his thin lips together.

“You always hit too hard,” he told the giant man. “I keep telling you.” He shook his head. “Benny’s gonna be pissed.”

“Oops,” said the giant.

## L’amour en Moi

by Clara Guilhot

J’ai cherché l’amour dans leurs yeux,  
Dans de doux mots, des mots trompeurs.  
Je pensais qu’ils pouvaient me l’offrir,  
Que sans eux, je ne pourrais pas vivre.

Je m’accrochais, peur de tomber,  
Essayant fort, sans trouver.  
Peu importe ce que je faisais,  
L’amour semblait loin, caché.

Mais l’amour n’était pas en quelqu’un,  
Ni dans ses gestes, ni dans ses mots.  
Il était en moi, calme et fort,  
Là, en moi, depuis toujours.

Maintenant, je vois l’amour au ciel,  
Dans mon cœur, dans ma lumière.  
Je n’ai pas besoin d’un autre pour briller—  
L’amour est là, en moi, entier.

## *Love in Me*

*Translated from French by the Author*

I look for love in someone's eyes,  
In soft words and pretty lies.  
I thought that love was theirs to give,  
That, without them, I couldn't live.

I held on tight, afraid to lose,  
Trying hard but still confused.  
No matter what, it wasn't right—  
Love felt far, out of sight.

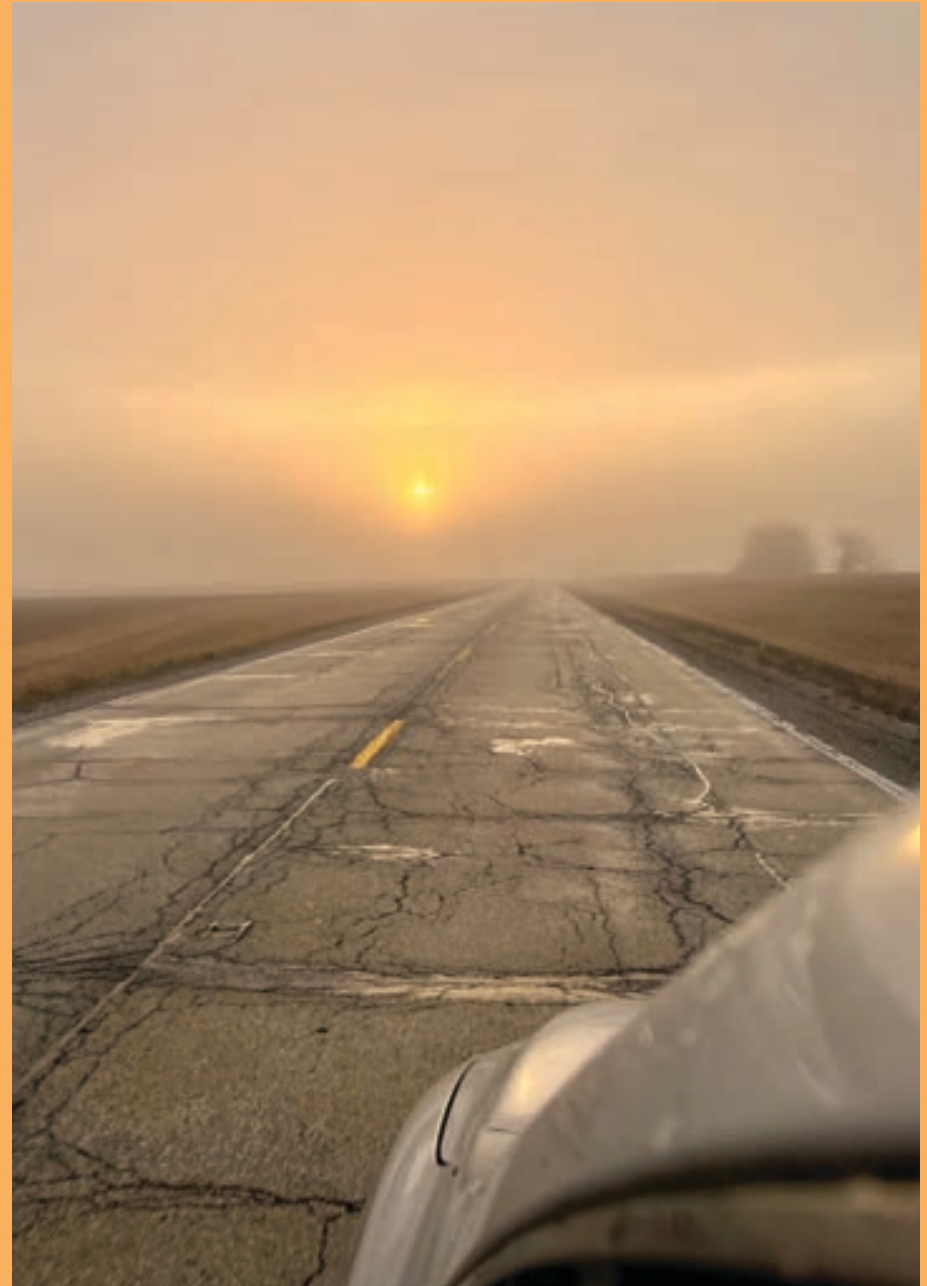
But love was not in someone new,  
Not in the things they said or do.  
It was in me, quiet and strong,  
There inside me all along.

Now I see love in the sky,  
In my own heart, in my own light.  
I don't need someone else to be—  
Love is here, inside of me.



## *Rain-Soaked Road*

*by Mia Min*



*Photograph*



## *Opencar*

by Matt Altis



*Photograph*

## *life cycle*

by Abby Foust


moments become  
memories become  
monuments become  
ruins.

ruins become  
myths become  
museums.

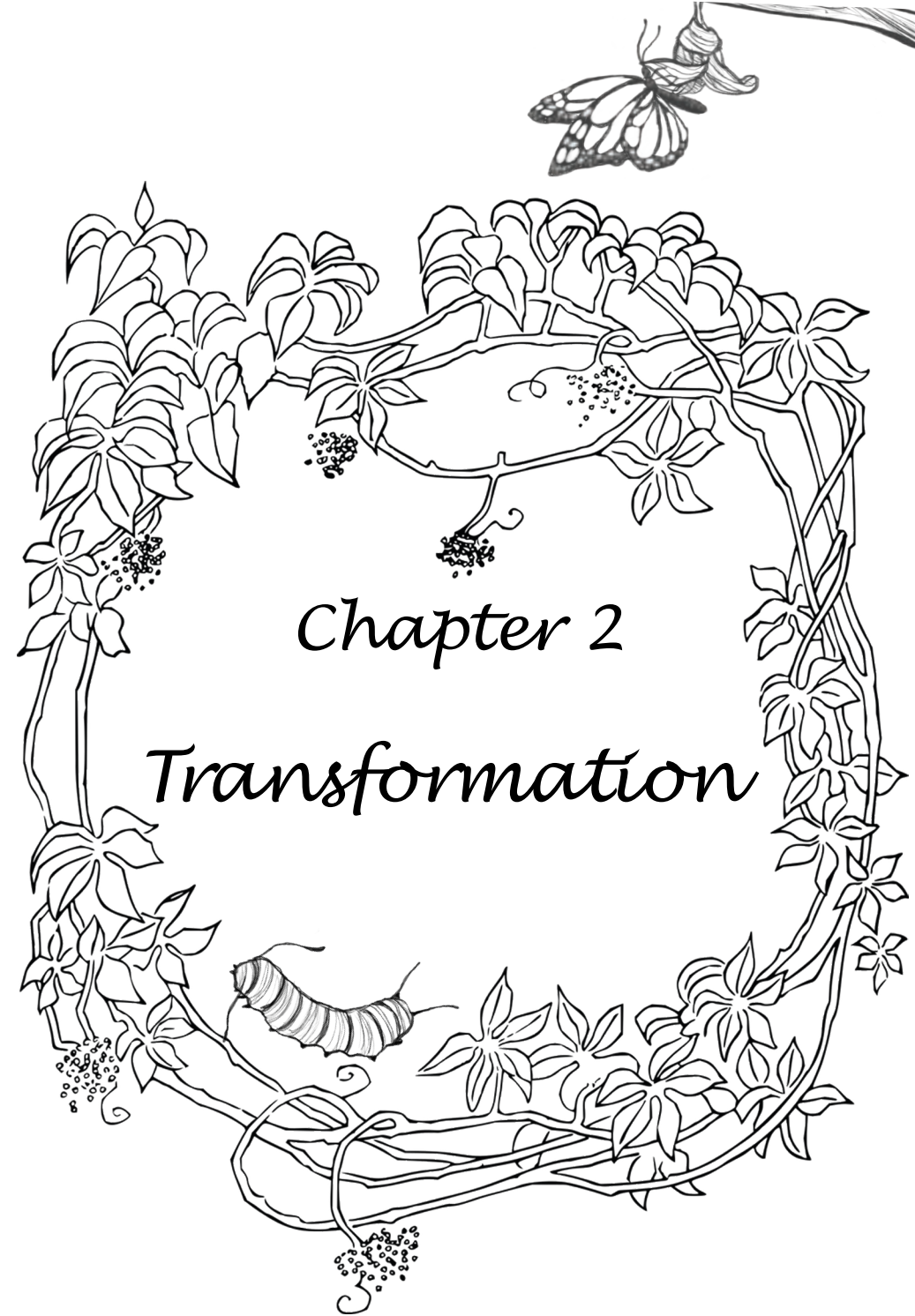
museums become  
moments become  
memories  
become monuments  
become ruins  
become myths







Change is scary,  
but change is  
growth.





# Mixtapes

by Jessica Wojcik

when I tried to tell you  
about life before you,  
I played it like an orchestra—  
big swells and crashes,  
a melody that changes hands throughout,  
melancholic sobs and  
bursts of unexpected laughter,  
tension and release

when you tried to tell me  
about life before me,  
you played it like a woman  
with an acoustic guitar,  
her broken voice writing  
years of forgotten memories,  
lovers that shattered,  
friends you wouldn't know  
how to speak to anymore,  
every clear shining note  
a different chapter

the music we make now is  
experimental.  
sometimes it's pain,  
sometimes anxiety, anger,  
but most of the time it's  
home;  
and that's when we sing  
and our creaky voices are suspended



in thick air,  
and my thumbs bleed from picking,  
and you dance like a whirling dervish  
so fast I can't see where your legs start  
and your arms end.

at the end of the concert I ask you  
if we can do it again  
tomorrow.  
and you always tell me  
yes.





*Regal Rags*  
by Brent Moss



*Acrylic on Canvas*



## *Orage*

by Clara Guilhot



*Photograph*

## *Meadow of Contemplation*

by Taylor Weintrop

I wonder if the dandelion knows  
it's full of longing

I've been watching them grow  
and die and grow

pillowy head of seeds scattering  
youthful reveries like stardust shimmering

persistent in their growth, the heart remembers  
what the brain forgoes

despite so many calling them weeds  
they live their whole lives providing

for the birds, butterflies, and bees  
not to mention the seeking hands of lovers

plucking to find something worth  
every heartbreak's hopeful dream

# Michigan

by Chelsea Baird

We've lived in Michigan my entire life, where it is so cold in the winters that going outside for thirty seconds without a jacket leaves you with a cold down to the center of your core, one that won't go away even after you shake and shiver under your blankets for hours in the house where your mother won't turn on the heat.

"Do you still live with your mother?" the therapist asks me. She does not lean forward. I shake my head. "She's dead."

"I'm sorry for your loss," she says. "How long ago?"

"Three years. Give or take."

The therapist is covered by Medicaid and recommended by my friend Julia, who has been in therapy for years, something that comes up condescendingly during family gatherings and parties and arguments with her boyfriends.

"You should go," she'd said, time and time again since the day it happened. And, really, for long before that—since *she* started going, which was around the time my mother's legs began to swell.

I brushed her off. Time and time again. I didn't need someone to tell me how to feel. I didn't have time to go, not with my job, not with Sarah, not with my mother. I didn't have time to stop and look down. When you're standing at the top of a cliff, looking down just makes you dizzy.

But Julia is always healing, so she says, and always talking about healing. Healing is the answer, she says. We have to heal. I still don't really know what she means. I called the office thirty-eight months after my mother died.

"How old was she?"

"Seventy-two."

Seventy-two years is almost twenty-five times three. Three young adult lives can fit into seventy-two. Seventy-two-year-olds are supposed to be able to walk. They're supposed to be able to play tennis in the sunshine; to be able to play with their grandchildren. At sixty-two my mother could not limp across a room without stopping to hack and wheeze. At seventy-two she laid on a white bed in a

hospital with a set of tubes down her throat, melting into the smell of bleach.

At twenty-two, she moved us into the house we lived in for most of my young life, which was by a small brown river. It was just her and Brandon—my brother—and me, the baby. The house was mostly falling apart. The wood on the outside was white and peeling and always a little wet, even on the hottest summer days. You could always hear cars passing on the highway bridge over the river. You could always see gray plumes billowing out from the factories. If you didn't look too hard, they were like chimneys, and you could imagine there were huge brick fireplaces below them around which some other family could sit and laugh and smile.

I tell the therapist about this, even though she doesn't ask. I feel my face turning red as I speak. She does not move. At home, Dennis will be asleep still, and Sarah might be there, making him breakfast for when he wakes at lunch. When I get back she will hand me the plate silently, passing off another burden. Or, she is at work, and I will get home and he will be trying to lift himself out of bed alone, which the doctors told him specifically not to do for another week, and I will lay him back down as gently as I can. Later, *I'll* go to work, and I will sit and answer phone calls while exhaustion starts to press into the back of my eyelids until I drive home in the dark, cranking the volume on the radio until it keeps me awake. I can picture it all as I speak, at least until she interrupts me to ask:

"So you were poor, growing up."

The bluntness of it throws me off guard. I nod and look at my feet. I don't correct her phrasing—*growing up*.

Dennis fractured a bone in his leg last week at work. He can't cook or clean or stand by himself yet. There is still no word from the clinic about the wheelchair he needs. The warehouse will not give us money; he was standing where he wasn't supposed to be. *He's lucky we're keeping him on at all*, his boss said over the phone.

We only got married five years ago. I was the one who wouldn't commit, even after Sarah was born and the family wouldn't stop raising their eyebrows at Christmas. "I don't get it," my brother said. It was summer, almost thirty years ago now, and I had one of those rare seconds to breathe. This was back when Sarah was



just a toddler. Brandon and I were high on the rotting couch outside our uncle's house, looking up at the moon. "Just get married. Aren't there, like, benefits?"

I looked at him and we howled with laughter. We were loud enough that Frankie started banging on his window from inside, which only made us laugh harder.

Brandon was invited to the wedding. He said he would come.

"When did your mother start getting sick?"

I shrug, then shake my head. "She—there wasn't really a start. She was always kinda sick."

"What do you mean, *always*?"

"I mean, she had asthma all her life. It turned into COPD when she was forty-five or so. The bad knees started when I was *young* young, so she was, what, thirty? Then there were the bad hips, then the back. When the heart stuff started—it was just another thing."

I feel my own heart beating through the thick and crumbly sensation in my chest. The wedding was just before the leg-swelling, which was just before she went to the hospital for the first time and they told her that something was deeply wrong. She walked me down the aisle slowly and with great effort.

"I've been wondering if they'd ever get married," she said during her speech. "I thought she might follow in my footsteps."

I clutched Dennis's hand.

My father didn't abandon us, as is the usual assumption; my mother abandoned him, with us in tow. I know nothing about him except for what my brother told me, and he was only two when we knew him.

"He was a dick," he would say. I asked him incessantly when I was freshly a teenager, clawing at the edges of what I knew about myself. "I remember yelling." I doubt, now, that he remembers anything. We were just filling in the gaps. The gaps on their own didn't imply that our father would have been a good one.

I asked my mother about him for the last time when she was in the hospital. It was one of her final lucid days. I had just been fired for absence despite my boss telling me to take as much time as I needed. A week later he would call me back and give me my job back, after someone else quit, and I would cry harder

than I did at the funeral.

"Oh, he wasn't that bad," she said. Her voice was a rasp at that point, barely hissing around the tubes in her mouth. "I just couldn't raise a family with that man." This clarified nothing. It was all I got.

"When did the *heart stuff* start?"

I shift in my chair. "Well, we don't know exactly. She ignored it for a long time, but ... five years ago is when it got bad."

"How did that affect you?"

"I'm not the one who's dead."

"I know that. How did your life change when she got sick?"

"I just said she didn't get sick. She was sick when I was a kid. She was sick when I was an adult."

She sighs. "Are you misunderstanding me on purpose?"

My brother was the first one she called, for some reason. How would he have helped? His personal pharmacy was never exactly medical.

Julia was the one to call me, after Brandon called her because I wasn't speaking to him. *You need to go see your mom*, she said. *I think you need to take her to the hospital*. I clenched the steering wheel tight on the way over. *You need to go see your mom*. Only I ever went to see her at all, and here I was, hearing from three sources down that there was a problem; here I was, being lightly scolded by my best friend for not doing enough. Julia would never have said it outright. I could hear it in her voice.

"I'm not misunderstanding you," I say. "You're mis-speaking."

"Okay," the therapist says.

Her life had been small even before that first hospital visit, the one she barely let me take her to because she didn't trust the clinical smell.

"People die in hospitals," she'd said as I hauled her out to the car. Dennis was waiting for me to bring it home; he would end up having to get a ride from the neighbor that worked nearby. "They also get their lives saved," I replied. I shut the passenger door.

"Last time I went to a hospital was when Frankie had a heart attack."

I sighed. "Frankie is fine now, isn't he?"

She clutched her seatbelt away from her chest. "They sent him a bill, you know. A big one."

"Let's not think about that right now."

"I had a friend that went to the hospital and she just kept getting sicker. They killed her in there."

"Mom."

"I'm not staying overnight. I don't care what they say."

"Mom—"

"Don't let them put an IV in me. I don't like that. Don't—"

"*Mom*. Stop it."

She was silent. Only a few years before she would have told me not to talk to her like that. It never occurred to her that I was an adult until I was in my forties. She never apologized. The thick whistle of her breathing filled the car.

"Sorry," she said.

I paid fifteen dollars for parking. We walked painfully slow through the garage and across the building, stopping to read the signs that pointed to a million different wings, neither of us saying a word. Nurses ushered us into a room as soon as she told the receptionist what was wrong. Her face grew whiter the more people fluttered around her, all with downturned lips shut tight between their peppering questions. They approached with a needle for the IV. For all her talk in the car, she said nothing; just hissed quietly as it pierced her skin.

*Congestive Heart Failure*. This was the diagnosis. She clutched my hand when the doctor told us; I shrunk away.

"You'll need to get on ACE inhibitors. Diet, too, that might need to change. You can't have too much sodium. More vegetables, fruits, that kind of thing. The nurse will take your pharmacy information. We're gonna keep you for a few hours just for observation. If things go south we'll keep you overnight. But you're gonna need to pick up the scripts as soon as you get out, okay? They should be covered. Mostly. Daughter—what's your name? Beth? Okay, Beth, can you promise me you'll get her to the pharmacy right away?"

I nodded slowly. My face was deep red. The IV made a slow, soft dripping sound. The monitors she was hooked up to beeped.

"I don't mean to scare you," he said. He was young, but with the glasses of an older man. He peered over them at my mother. "But this is serious."

We didn't stay the night, but it was still ten before they let us leave. They'd moved us to a room with a window overlooking a parking lot that was gray until it went dark. She stared outside. We were silent for a long time.

"I don't have anyone," she said. Her voice was unnaturally quiet.

"That's not true, Mom."

She shook her head. "No, it is." Her eyes didn't move from the window; I followed her gaze into the darkening sky. "I don't have friends, not really. Sheila calls sometimes. It's not like I can go see her. I can't go anywhere. I can barely walk to the store and back. Everything hurts, all the goddamn time. I gave everything to your brother and you, and now I see you once a week. And I haven't *seen* Brandon in years, now. He'll be dead on the street any day now."

"I'm sure he'll be fine," I replied, and my voice broke. She turned to me.

"Don't say that," she said. "Don't say that." Her eyes closed. "I did all that work. All that work. What did it ever get me? An empty account and a heart that won't work." *We give you money*, I wanted to say. *At least you're still alive. What did you ever do for us anyway?* The therapist is sitting, pen in hand, waiting for me to break and fill the silence. What I do not tell her is this: My mother was not good to me. At least when I was a child, she wasn't. She was a product of her time; a proud missionary of corporal punishment. We did not grow up in a house filled with laughter and love. That is the simple way to say it.

"Maybe now I'll stop flinching when you try to hug me," my brother said at the funeral. I haven't seen him since. We were standing with Dennis and Sarah, who turned to stare when he said it. "What? She didn't tell you Mom hits?"

I hadn't, in fact. Dennis tried to ask me about it later that night, over the kitchen sink. I scrubbed at a pot and would not meet his eyes. It's not like his parents didn't. It's not like I hadn't been tempted, as a mother myself.

"So," the therapist says, after a drawn-out silence. "You changed your schedule to be here. We should talk about something."

My mother never smoked. I thought about this while I drove her to the hospital, over and over again. I thought about it while I listened to her wheezing



grow louder; while I watched the skin grow thin and tight around her bones. All of her friends did. All of her coworkers at restaurants and bars and hotels did. She never even tried it. I asked her why, once, as a teenager, when my brother had just started to pilfer the cigarettes we smoked by the river at night from the gas station up the street.

She just shrugged. “I don’t know,” she said. “Guess I just never wanted to.” My mother never smoked, but you could smell the smog inside that house, the one she lived in all her life. I can smell it in our house now. I lay beside Dennis at night and breathe it in, and if I think hard enough I can feel it coat the insides of my mouth and nose and throat. In the next room, Sarah breathes it in too. She’s been breathing it in since she was a baby, just like me. The chimneys still billow into the sky. The highways minutes from our door still hack and cough, full of screeching tires that doggedly carry exhaust pipes and people like us, driving to work, going home, taking ailing mothers to the hospitals that will eventually become their deathbeds. In the last two months she was confused. We had been in and out of the hospital already, so much so that I thought we couldn’t possibly go more, until she proved me wrong again. It was practically every week. Brandon never came, at least not while I was there. My mother told me he came to see her once. I didn’t trust that she’d know him if she saw him.

“This happened with David’s mom, too,” Julie told me. David was her most recent boyfriend. She twisted the fabric of her shirt in her hand before she spoke again. “Near the end.” It hadn’t happened to *her* mother. Her mother was eighty and still walked three miles a day. She’d married the owner of a car dealership in her fifties, and Julie had gone to Thanksgivings in a sprawling suburban mansion ever since. We went with her the year after my mother died. I watched her mother bustle around the kitchen, half-limping but lugging heavy ceramic dishes. One of her great-grandchildren came up to her and she leaned down to tuck a strand of hair behind her ear.

The previous November, I came home from work to find my door flung open, despite the fact that it was the middle of the night and freezing cold. My mother had moved in with us a few months before. She slept in Dennis’s and my bedroom while we took a mattress on the living room floor, keeping the couch

pushed up onto the wall.

“Wake up,” I said. “Dennis. Wake up.”

We found her after a terrible, hours-long forty-five minutes. She was two blocks away, among someone’s front-yard bushes, murmuring and shaking. She hadn’t worn a coat. That was all I could tell people later—at the hospital, once she was hooked up to another IV, none of us knowing yet the pneumonia that would be the final blow was already circling her system, with nurses asking me over and over again *what happened*; on the phone with Julie, and then Brandon, crying, barely believing he’d picked up; in the therapist’s office now, mouth moving in spite of itself. She says something back to me. I don’t hear it.

“There’s a lot of things,” she said. It was three days before she died, and I was sitting with Brandon and Sarah by her bed, wired on shitty hospital coffee and the adrenaline of not sleeping. “I wish I’d done a lot of things.”

I’d never been good at this. I always let Dennis comfort Sarah when she was small and constantly grieving something we couldn’t see. She resents me a little for it. I can tell in the way she looks at me sometimes; how she still turns away to hide her tears. I don’t know what stopped me from being that kind of mother. From saying: *Hey, now, it’s okay*, and rubbing her back in little circles. I get this pressure that sits on my chest and freezes me in place. Always have.

I sat and watched my mother speak. It was Brandon who took her hand, murmured something I couldn’t hear.

“I want to go home. I want to go home.” She was vacillating between whispers and mumbles and moans. “I never went to California. I always wanted to go to California.” We were all quiet. Then, suddenly and forcefully, she sat up.

“I love you. Both of you. I’m so proud of you.” Her eyes had gone wide. “Please, come home.” Brandon and I looked at each other, two pairs of brows softening in disbelief. She slid back down into her mass of pillows.

A few minutes later she was back to sleeping fitfully. Seventy-two hours later she was coding, which is the medical term for dead, and then officially pronounced dead, which is the clerical term for dead. A better daughter would have spread her ashes in California. I keep my half on top of a cupboard.

In the therapist’s office, I reach into my bag for a tissue and brush up

against my inhaler, which is nearly empty.

I hated her. I did. The last years of her life were supposed to be freeing, and I loved her so much that I couldn't bear to see them stolen away. But I hated her. I hate myself for taking care of her, after everything. I hate myself for not doing enough for her.

I realize I have said this part out loud only when the therapist replies.

"It sounds like you have a lot to process about her death. Your family in general, too. But I want you to know that you are not to blame. Okay?" I nod. "It sounds like you did everything you could for her, and for a lot of people, for a long time."

My eyes burn a little at the edges. "Okay," I say. She smiles a little sadly; it feels condescending.

"Well, that's our time for today," she says. "That was a productive first session." I nod again, slowly, before I stand. "My receptionist can get you scheduled for next week." I don't tell her that I'm not sure I'll come back. I bypass the receptionist and tell myself that I'll call if I want to schedule another appointment.

I text Dennis and Sarah as I walk slowly out to the car. *Do we need anything? Yeah, can you stop and get Tylenol.* I've been slower, lately. My chest gets tight and my heart beats fast. I slip easily on the ice beneath my feet. In seven years, I'll retire, or at least I'm supposed to be able to, according to the government. I'll be sixty-five. Seven years younger than my mother was when she died. The car makes a groaning sound as I put it in reverse, reaching a hand over the passenger headrest. It's half as old as me. I can see the age on my face, in my thickening body. I can feel it in the aches and pains and little weaknesses. Other people can see it, too. Other people can feel it. I know they can. I can no longer be mistaken for someone beautiful. Strangers no longer smile or look me a little too long in the eyes. They smile like the therapist smiles. *You poor thing.* I see my younger face on Sarah's and want to slap it off, though I don't. She is still beautiful. Her feet touch solid ground. The car swings back out of its spot and the tires squeal.

Will Dennis and I play tennis in the sunshine? I could buy rackets with the Tylenol; we could practice once his leg heals, if either of us could still run, or jump, or risk throwing out a shoulder. The investment is not worth the risk. My

blinker clicks as I turn to leave; no one else is around. Worse than Sarah's face is my mother's. I see it in the mirror. I glance over my shoulder to merge and in the distance, through the window, I see the dark clouds billowing above the highway bridge—for a minute, I think I can feel the smog in my throat, the way I can when I'm trying to sleep. I let myself blink for a second longer than I should, breathing in deep. Trying to, at least. My lungs whine and shudder. I take another breath, hands loose on the wheel. With my eyes closed I watch myself walk through the years to come in painful concentric circles around a room that looks like my mother's. It is just me in the room, no Brandon or Sarah or Dennis, and in it I wheeze and hunch and drag myself towards nothing, over and over again, tied to the ground by the black and red of a heart that can no longer beat relentlessly into the night.





# Light the Way

by Esmeralda Herrada-Flores

I  
Don't  
Know.  
Oh  
I  
Can't tell  
Where to go.  
I've a stick  
With a flame  
Yet no glow.  
Lend a light  
Send my sign  
Fix my sight.  
These hands  
Cold as coal  
Keeps ahold  
This handle of  
Silvery hope  
Guide me now  
Strike a match and strike it fast. Oh I fear  
I shed a tear stumbling around. I've  
Melt the wax, warm Lost  
Over my skin My  
Drip Way  
Drop Just  
Drip Tell  
Drop Me  
Don't Where  
Ahead. Stop. To Ahead.  
Sun streaks peak. Burning this dread. Nowhere to look but

# Thinking about Stabbing My Husband

by Sarah Sutton

Every weekday at twenty to five, he parks in the garage, walks through the kitchen, drops his keys and wallet in the bowl on the table, then takes his shoes off and stacks them, right on top of left, on the shoe rack in the living room. He kisses me hello, then returns to the kitchen to make himself dinner. At five o'clock on the dot, he feeds the cat. He eats his dinner sitting on the couch in the living room, pushing whatever chaos I left on the coffee table gently to the side to make room for his plate.

Once a month, usually on a Tuesday, I stand in the kitchen while he eats. I stare at the dark cherry-colored knife block on the counter—is it made of cherry wood? He would know, but I never ask him. The angled cube sits next to the refrigerator, pushed as close to the wall as can be. Eight knives are embedded in the block. The seven steak knives have worn black handles, the steel of the blade wiggles loosely on two. The eighth steak knife in the set fell apart and was discarded years ago. And so, the eighth knife slot, the one in the bottom right corner, holds my favorite paring knife—a small knife inherited from my mother's kitchen, with a handle of light-colored wood that blends seamlessly into my hand. My mother had taught me to core strawberries with the knife, the juices sliding along the three-inch long blade and forever staining the wood faintly pink.

I stare at that knife handle and think about my husband. He is a white man from an upper middle-class family in Middle America. He went to good schools, has a good job, the perfect family, no true health problems—he doesn't even wear glasses. He is exactly six foot tall and never gets angry. He is my staid and steady reason and rock. He needs a small stab wound in his life. Not hard—just a light stabbing, maybe in the leg or the arm, no gaping wounds requiring immediate medical attention. Just a quick jab, and we move on.

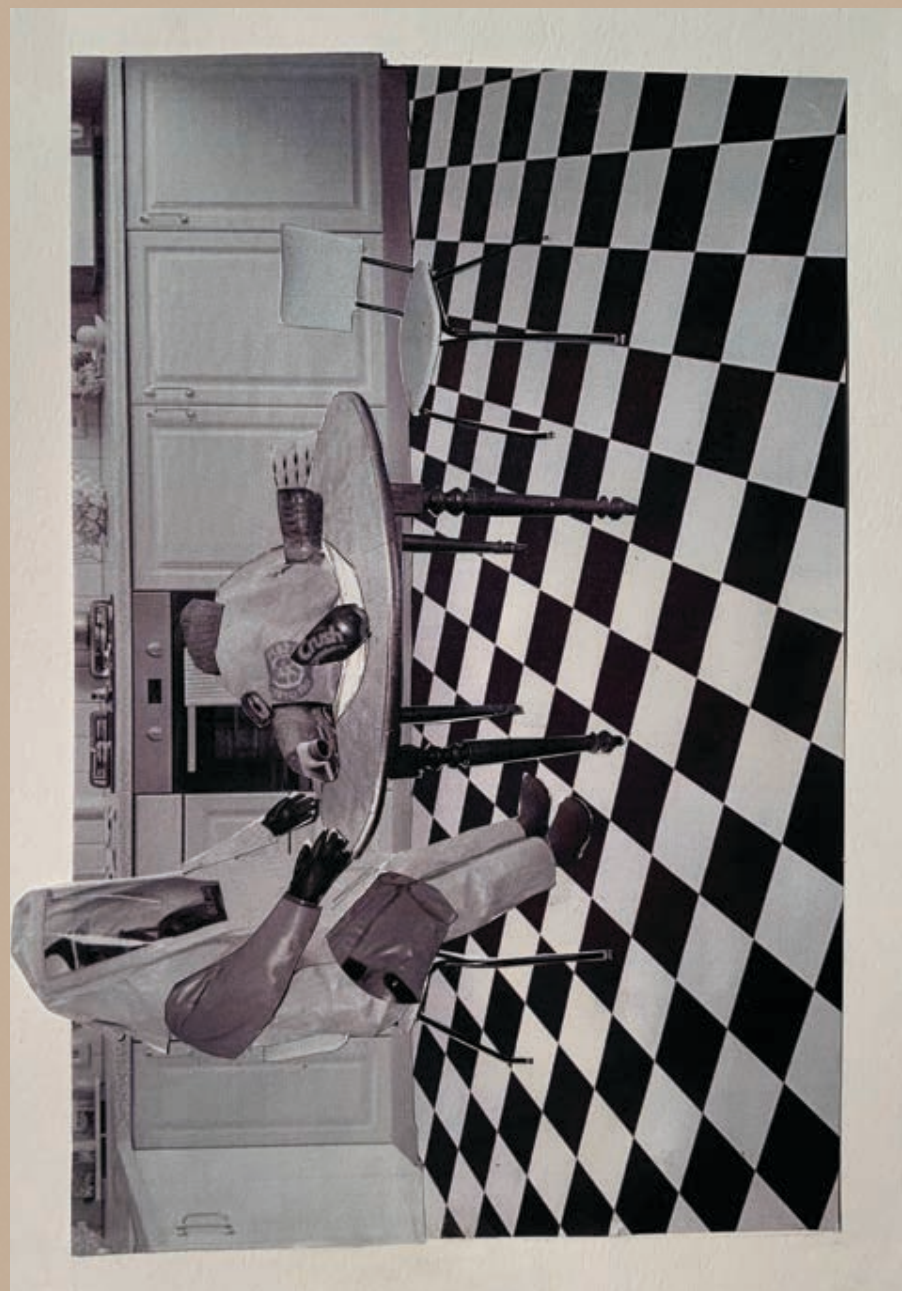
Once a month, I think this. I stare at the pink-tinged handle on my paring knife and say to myself that it would be for his own good. A character-building scar. And every month, he finishes his dinner, carries his plate to the

dishwasher, and kisses my cheek as he passes. He'll say, "Have I told you today that I love you?" or "What is the strangest thing you googled today?" or "What was something today that made you laugh?" and the paring knife fades into the knife block, the knife block into the counter, and the counter into the kitchen, as I turn to him and smile.



## *Dinner for One*

by Matt Altis



*Collage*



## *GPGP*

by Matt Altis



*Collage*

## *Axiom of Choice*

by Matt Kimbrell

I spend most days  
trying to remember how to solve  
long division,  
the algorithmic merging of two into one,  
a lesson I first learned in Mrs. Erby's fifth-grade class  
when a girl offered me  
a heart-shaped Valentine  
on which she had written, "please don't tell anyone,"  
as if to underscore the first law of metaphysics:  
when someone offers you a heart, protect it.

Of course, I am talking about  
what happens when two bodies entangle over time,  
which is more collaboration than calculation,  
for even the most complicated problems remain insoluble  
unless someone makes a choice.

## Deux Bougies, Une Flamme

by Clara Guilhot

On soufflait nos bougies ensemble,  
Deux flammes vives, une âme qui tremble.  
On riait si fort que le temps s'arrêtait,  
Heureux des petits riens qu'on partageait.

Blagues légères, éclats dans les yeux,  
Dansant sous un ciel lumineux.  
La vie était simple, mais si belle,  
Chaque instant semblait éternel.

Puis un jour, le vent s'est levé,  
Ton rire s'est tu, tes mains ont lâché.  
Plus de blagues, plus de souhaits,  
Juste un vide que je ne peux combler.

Mais quand je ris aux larmes, sans fin,  
Ou que je poursuis les étoiles, si lointain,  
Je te sens, là, tout près de moi,  
Une chaleur, une voix, un éclat de joie.

On soufflait nos bougies ensemble,  
Et même si tu es parti loin,  
Ta flamme brille encore en moi,  
Car je suis, et serai toujours, toi.

## Two Candles, One Flame

Translated from French by the Author

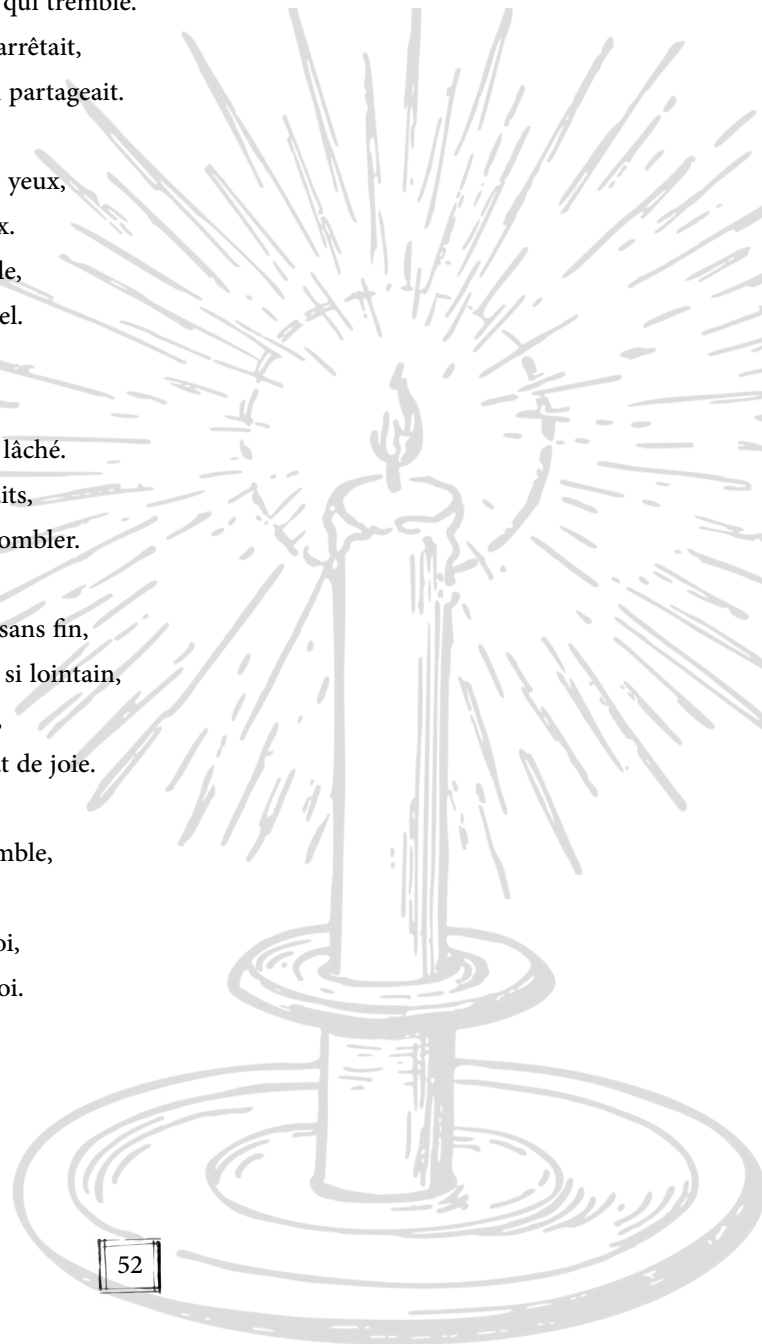
We blew out candles side by side,  
two bright flames, one heart, one light.  
Laughed so loud the world stood still,  
finding joy in simple thrills.

Silly jokes and twinkling eyes,  
dancing under open skies.  
Life was small but full and bright,  
every moment felt so right.

Then one day, the world grew cold,  
your laughter stopped; your hands let go.  
No more jokes, no birthday wish,  
just an emptiness I cannot fix.

But when I laugh until I cry,  
or chase the stars across the sky,  
I feel you there, not far, but near—  
a voice, a warmth, a love so clear.

We blew out candles side by side,  
and though you left, your flame won't die.  
It burns in me, through all I do,  
because I am, and always be, you.





# *You Got Dedication, Kid*

by Sarah Sutton

You fight sleep like it will destroy you  
Eyes held open wide in defiance  
I hold you close and warmly whisper  
“Go to sleep, little man, I beg you”  
But no, sleep is the enemy  
Who knows what could happen  
In the world without you awake?  
You cannot miss a moment  
You pull your head from my chest  
And bellow in frustration  
Tears eke from your reluctant eyes  
And tired confusion tugs at your cheeks  
Sleep is for the weak  
I carry you in circles around the room  
Finally, your eyes close and with a whimper  
Your breathing slows and steadies  
I look around at the chaos  
You left when awake  
Every toy on the ground  
And I set you down  
Spontaneous silence shatters sound  
The instant we lose contact  
You’re wide awake again  
And I marvel in misery  
At your unwavering devotion to vigilance



# *SunKissed*

by Sarah Reimer



*Photograph*

## Untitled

by Brandon V.



Oil on Canvas

## Crumb

by Olivia Steely

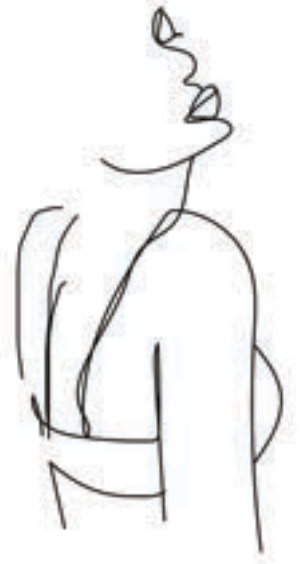
I have to stop  
Accepting breadcrumbs from people  
Who give entire slices of bread to others  
But not to me because they know  
They can get away with it.

That afternoon, in particular, I picked my cuticle  
too far down on my pinky.  
The finger next to it points to 11 o'clock after the second joint,  
and I hadn't noticed that before.  
It makes me laugh a little, and I forget.

But now I'm thinking about it again, and my next thought  
is not rushing to me like it usually does.  
The open breeze, tire screeches, and distant music  
that's where I am now, and it warms me.  
I am grateful, but I'm thinking about my pinky again.

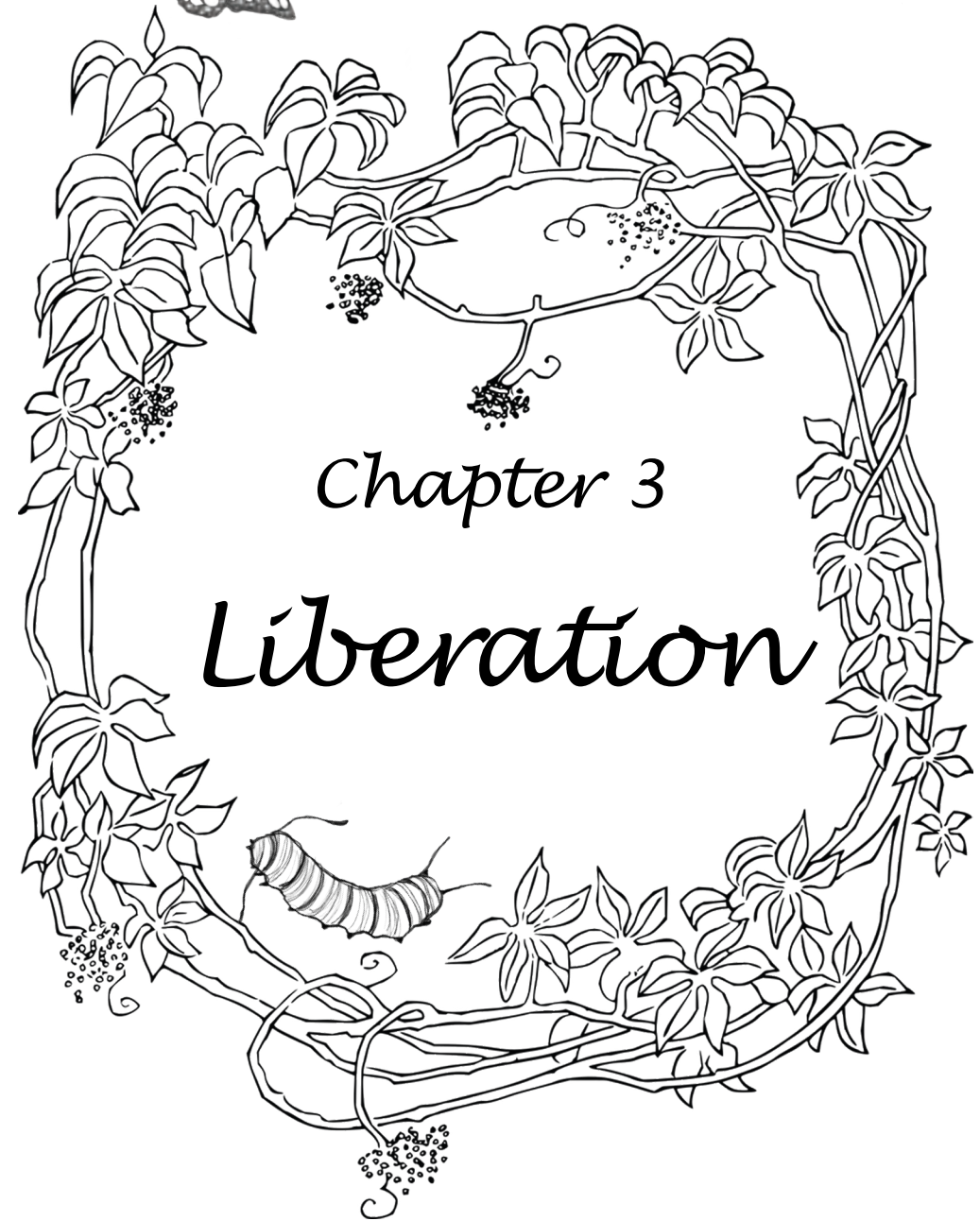
I told you to please just like me. To really just like me.  
*Admire me.*  
Study the cracks.  
Crease the folds.  
But with a swift urgency.

All I asked for was a cushion when I fall.  
But bitterness evaporates with time. And I swore to you  
I wouldn't tell. But tempers have appetites  
and chewing too much blunts the teeth.  
I choose to starve.





No matter how hard  
the past is,  
you can always  
begin again.



*Chapter 3*  
*Liberation*

# Tips for Your First Shift at the In-Between Train Station

by Anna Connoley

Hey, thanks for taking this job off my hands! I really do appreciate it. You probably won't fully understand how much until someone does the same for you, but I've compiled this list for you anyway. After all, if someone helps you out, pay it forward. That's what the last guy did for me. The tips below will make your shift as smooth and efficient as possible, which trust me, you're going to want.

1. Don't ask why it's called the In-Between Train Station.
2. Don't worry about the security checkpoint, you'll still have all your blood if you make it through.
3. Have a list of excuses ready if your family asks where you work now. I left my list in the drawer on the left, anything you find useful is up for grabs.
4. They probably told you what the keys on the hook lead to—disregard that. Except for the 7th key. That one works.
5. Don't ask why it's called the In-Between Train Station.
6. If someone pukes getting off the flying train and asks you to clean it up, don't. They don't pay you enough for that.
7. An old woman will arrive at the station at 2:47 AM. She will not have enough money to pay the fare. Let her in anyway. She will then board an unscheduled train at 3:02 AM. DO NOT ATTEMPT TO TURN HER AWAY UNDER ANY CIRCUMSTANCES.
8. Don't ask why it's called the In-Between Train Station.
9. Don't spend too much time trying to figure out the time loops. Just know they won't pay you overtime and make your peace with that.
10. All sentient vultures do have to pay the carrion fee. If they give you too much trouble with this, don't hesitate to call Stephanie. She knows how to deal with them, and after the pocket watch incident a few years ago, she can't sleep anymore anyway, so she won't mind you calling.

11. Don't eat food on shift. It's not worth it.
12. Seriously, *do not ask why it's called the In-Between Train Station*.
13. If the ominous man in the trench coat shows up and stands under the flickering lamp light again, ask him why he hasn't paid me back.
14. If you have any questions, please don't contact me. This is the best advice I know how to give you, some of this you're going to have to figure out on your own.

Good luck! If you're anything like me, you'll be too desperate to quit. But after you weasel your way out of the third curse, they stop threatening your pets, and applying for other jobs gets a lot easier. Hang in there!

Oh, and one last thing. Keep an eye on the clock by your desk, and make sure to sneak out every day to watch the celestial shifting of the planets. It's a sight to see, you won't ever want to miss it.





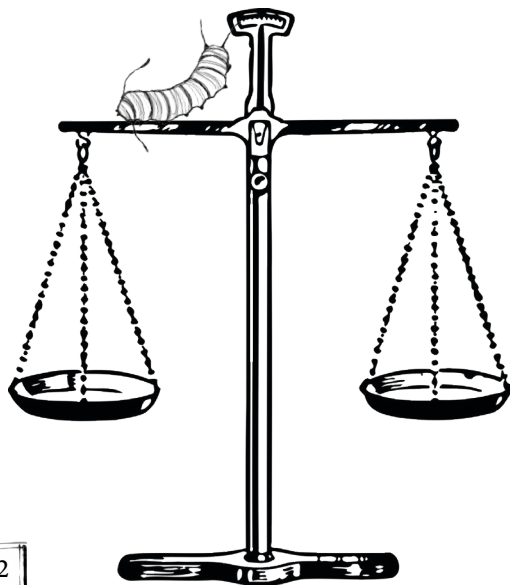
# *The Scales of Fairness*

by Amira Music

The scales tip, never balanced for long.  
I stand, palms open,  
waiting for the weight  
to settle, to find its place,  
to feel the evenness  
of justice, steady and sure.

But justice dances—  
light on one side, heavy on the other,  
forever shifting,  
never still.  
It flirts with symmetry,  
whispers of fairness,  
then slips away like smoke.

I wonder,  
if fairness is a coin,  
flipped endlessly in the air—  
one side polished, the other worn thin—  
and we're just  
the hands reaching,  
hoping,  
for once,  
that it lands face up.



# *Identity*

by Andrew Jacob Pashia

Too many years had been spent looking at my reflection.  
Watching  
Staring  
Waiting  
To understand the thing gazing back at me.  
But I could only understand my eyes.

Dull emerald gems rimmed with rust  
Spinning like a loading dial  
Trying to recognize what they see.  
I know what; it's my flesh and blood  
But it feels like a prison.

I'd gotten 20 to life.

I was stuck inside a body that wasn't my own  
With a face that didn't match the contour of my cheekbones.  
Skin, too soft.  
Jaw, too round.  
Self, too strange.

Round hips where they should be slim  
A chest too big  
A waist too cinched  
An ass too big to fit into my jeans.  
That body was a lie I did not craft  
It was bestowed to me as a gift  
I could not return but one I found  
I could change.

I trimmed the hair, coaxed the beard  
Grew the muscles, bound the chest  
I poked and prodded  
Massaged and nursed it  
Until this body became something  
I could recognize  
Instead of just my eyes.

## *Feeling Blue*

by Brent Moss



*Acrylic on Canvas*



## One Love

by Brent Moss



Acrylic on Canvas

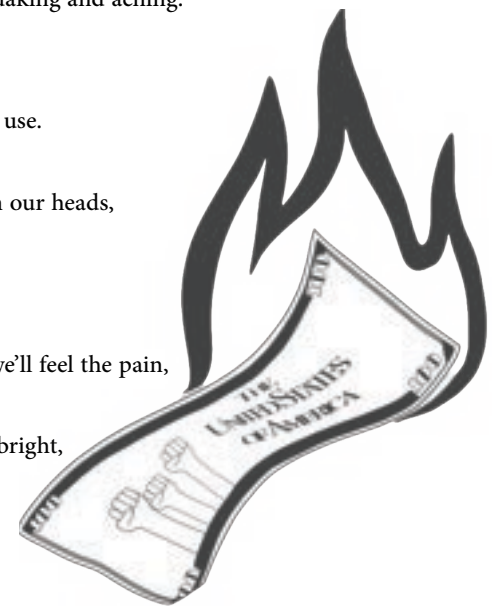
## 2 BAN america(n)

by Kavion Norman

I think we block our own blessings.  
I think the crescent moon has a glare to its presence.  
Bespoken hypotheticals, the ones of the present,  
My past is in a foot race as if I'm a servant.  
I'm learning the lessons about our blackness and roots,  
Am I a victim to you?  
Cause I couldn't afford the comfort of private schools and Benz's?  
I won't mince my words, or change the lenses they come in,  
It's only fit.  
My history won't fit the dream you all call American,  
A mere glimpse inside my can will shatter your—"I can do things"—  
Through Christ I'm a prophet,  
Yet to you I'm nonprofit,  
And to them I'm a lost cause, it seems I should forfeit.  
Another anomaly, in a system that's broken,  
The more we speak, the more we awaken the quaking and aching.  
Am I a ghost to the ruse?  
I've been abused and used,  
Feel I should cut things loose, so that I'm of no use.  
A mirror ... shows my broken spirit,  
My country doesn't care about the limits put on our heads,  
Everybody's got a dream but no dollar to spare,  
Retire now or die later, see if we dare to care,  
Intuition doesn't do much good,  
If you reach below, he'll blow your brains and we'll feel the pain,  
Now can we stop with that poor man's dream?  
Seems like we won't gleam till that light shines bright,  
we're not even of white complexities,  
that's just the complex city we live in.

eternally,

D.J.F.



# *Song of Infinity*

by Sarah Sutton

1

I sit on the beach and watch the waves, listening to their crash.

I sit and watch the crabs scurry to and fro,

Avoiding the small children that chase them laughing.

The little feet send vibrations through the sand,

Shockwaves that get smaller and smaller but never die.

My children are young for eternity.

The echo of their laughter never truly ends,

The echo of their sandcastles and small perfect footprints,

The echo of their tired bodies curled and pressed up against my side.

I carry them in my arms and still hear laughter in their snoring sighs.

My mother follows behind, collecting the buckets and shovels and shoes.

At times my children feel an extension of my own breath

A portion of my soul severed and reconstituted in another form.

Did my mother feel the same?

Do all mothers live their lives as a continuation of one soul?

We are at once the mothers from before the advent of civilization

And the mothers long after civilization has been destroyed and forgotten.

2

I have listened to the stories of the old woman on the farm.

I have listened to her tell me of the droughts and the floods.

I have listened to the old men suck their teeth and disagree.

I have listened to the dogs as they harumph and settle nearer to creaking knees.

I have listened to the wind as it whistles through the screen on the storm door.

I have listened to the wheat rustling with secrets in the field.

I have listened to the young man whisper in my ear.

I have listened to the woman, white before her time, scream warnings with her eyes.

I have listened to my name echo on countless lips across generations.

I have listened and let them fill me until I am bursting with the stories and words and sounds of others.

Who can say what is true and what is true and what is true?

3

I exist ad infinitum, ad absurdum—adsum.

I breathe in and am satisfied, breathe out and am restless.

A wave of potential energy crests and falls continually within me.

They say we walk in the ruins of giants from ages past

But I stand under six feet and walk upon the grass in my short boots.

Others have bent this flora beneath them and others will again.

How tall will I be in the stories of my grandchildren's children?

When they pass out of living memory, how tall will I stand?

There is no difference between tomorrow and yesterday.

They are equally as unknowable and unreachable as the shafts of light through the trees.

They are as untouchable as the mind and soul of another human being.

4

I believe there are many ways to glimpse the infinite.

A smile, a touch of hands, a breath caught in the chest,

A series of slow blinks that unify and elucidate.

I believe in nature and I believe in humanity.

I believe in the indestructible nature of the human soul.

I believe in beginnings and ends and I believe in continuations.

Nothing new exists under the sun.



I am driven by novelty and originality.

I believe to be broken is to die and yet we crack and tarnish with maturity.

We are defined by the stories we leave behind.

But nothing new exists under the sun.

Divinity is found in the softness of a cat's ear,

The hiccup of a newborn baby, the distance between two clouds,

The time spent at a traffic light, the first fall of snow in the new year,

And the way your hand fits into mine.

5

A baby is fascinated with the bubbles that explode from a kitchen sink.

Iridescent shades of pink, purple, and blue, the bubbles float and fade with a  
sweep of my hand.

I wonder as I watch her face what will fascinate her next,

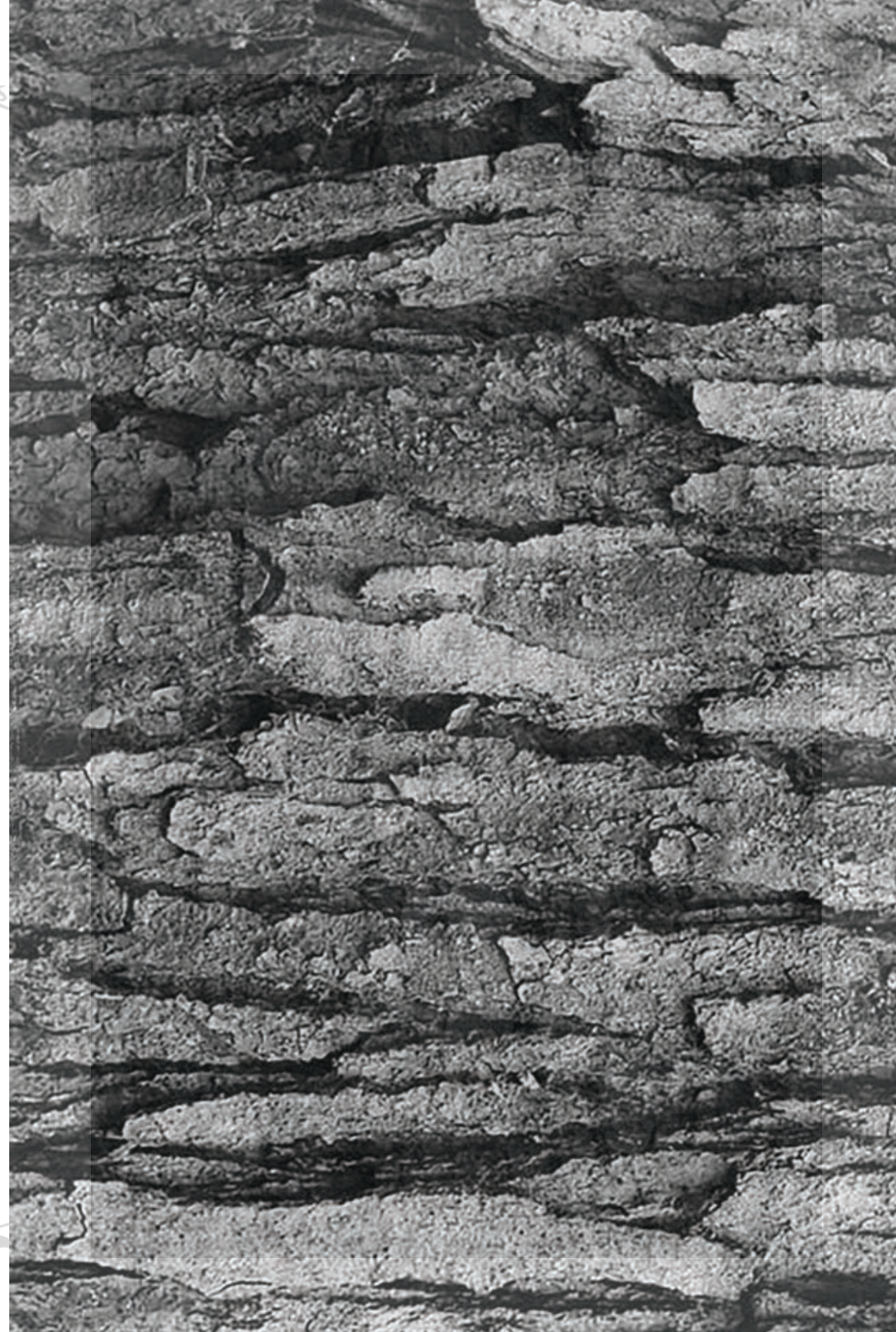
Encountering the world in constant awe and admiration.

There is nothing new under the sun, but we can choose to see it so.

Possibilities, histories, stories, people, breathing, wanting,

A vast expanse of being that I inhabit and you and you and me.

We are the echoes of echoes that make their own echoes for eternity.







## Nonsense, Five Cents

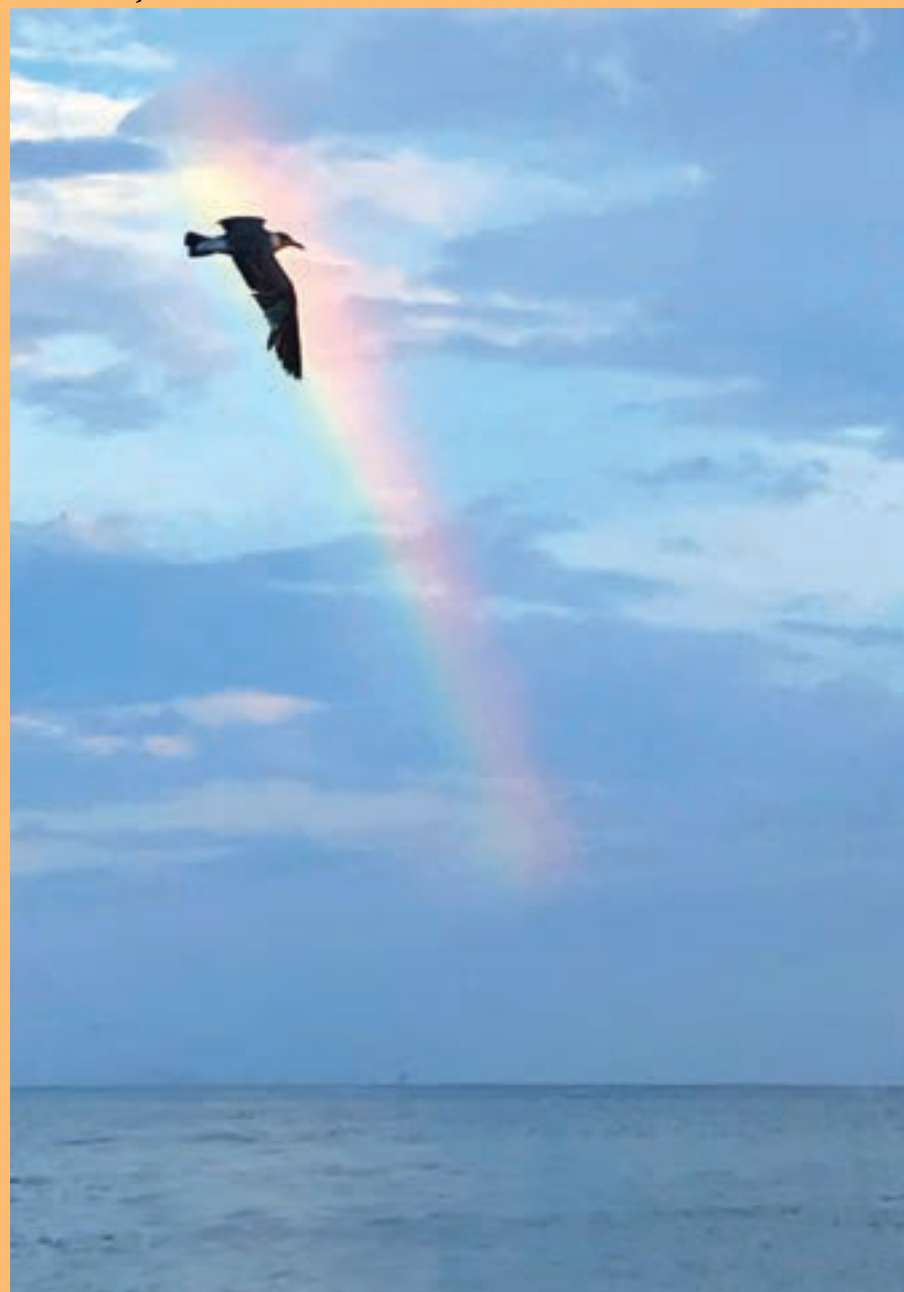
by Abby Foust

If I had a minute for every nickel,  
Then—  
Wait, no, that's not how the saying goes  
(Let me have a redo)  
If I had a nickel for every minute,  
Then I'd have enough nickels to last me until  
I run out of nickels  
Wait, no  
If I had a minute for every nickel  
(We'll try this one again)  
Then I would have enough minutes  
(So far, so good)  
To last me until I run out of time  
And nickels.  
(Wait—)  
Nickels, dimes,  
(Where is this even going?)  
Minutes, times—  
(I'm giving up)  
If I had one for every one of the other  
And the other for every one of the one  
I think I'd have a lot of fun;  
Would you?  
(Probably not)  
Because  
If you got a nickel for all the times  
That I ran out of rhymes,  
And a minute for every moment  
Of your time that I wasted with  
Nonsense poems and incomplete sayings, well then,  
Here, just have another one.



## "I Was Expecting A Dove"

by Sarah Reimer



*Photograph*



## Montpellier

by Clara Guilhot



Photograph

## Courage, My Friend

by Colleen Brewster

Everyone thinks Courage sounds tough. When you hear their voice on the phone, they sound deep and gruff, with a slight drawl like a Texan lumberjack. Are there even lumberjacks in Texas? If there were, Courage would sound like one. Or maybe like a biker, big, hairy, powerful. A biker is probably a better comparison, especially one of those bikers who carries his tiny little Chihuahua dog with him on his rides. And the dog has on pink frilly clothes and little rhinestone-studded goggles, as it rides strapped to the big hairy biker's chest.

But Courage doesn't look like a biker, or even a Texan lumberjack, if there is such a thing. I'm not sure where their deep voice comes from in their slender frame—it must travel all the way down to their toes and back up again to get the resonance of a barrel-chested biker or a Texan lumberjack, if there were ... okay, you get the drift.

Courage leans against the wall and smiles at me. Their soft gray eyes are large—not too large, so that they're distracting, but just large enough for you to notice them and say, "Wow, they have pretty eyes." Courage is slender, I already mentioned that, but they have broad shoulders that contrast sharply with the long oval of their face and their pointed chin. They cross their arms across their chest, partly covering the faint bulges there. Are they breasts, or pecs? I'm not sure, and it doesn't matter, anyway.

People often pick fights with Courage because they don't look the way others think they should. Courage doesn't back down from a fight; sometimes they win, sometimes they lose, but they always emerge with a triumphant smile, even if it is a bit bloody, or their eye is swollen shut.

But one thing Courage doesn't do is look for trouble. They're not foolhardy; they know when something is stupid, too stupid to risk life or limb for. Take their motorcycle, for example. Yeah, ironically enough, Courage actually is a biker. Just not the big, hairy, barrel-chested type. They do have a similar bike, though, a big, powerful Harley with two saddlebags and room for someone to sit behind

them. Courage loves the freedom of the road, but they're smart about it. When I ask why they didn't get a bike that was more their size (it really is quite funny seeing slender Courage pushing a bike that weighs three times as much as they do) like one of those crotch rockets, Courage wrinkles their long slender nose at me.

"Do you know how dangerous those are?" They ask. "Yeah," I answer, "but you're Courage." "Exactly," they say, as they swing their leg over the Harley and sit down, picking their helmet up from where it hangs on the handlebar. "I'm not Stupidity."

## Love Me

by Andrew Jacob Pashia

If you fall in love with me  
Then there are some things you must know  
I talk in my sleep  
And I'm sorry if you wake up unrested because of it.  
I worry constantly  
And if you don't speak to me, my mind will assume the worst.  
I may talk all of the time or not at all  
But still I hope you'll love me regardless  
Even though I fear that you don't.  
I'm messy sometimes  
I forget to do the dishes or start the laundry  
Or pick up clothes and books from my bedroom floor  
But I'll never forget your birthday  
Because frankly it matters to me more.  
There will be days when I can't get out of bed  
When I'll refuse to shower with soap or brush my teeth  
But I hope you'll love me anyways  
Because I know I'll love you  
In the worst times  
Because I am yours  
And I hope you'll still be mine.

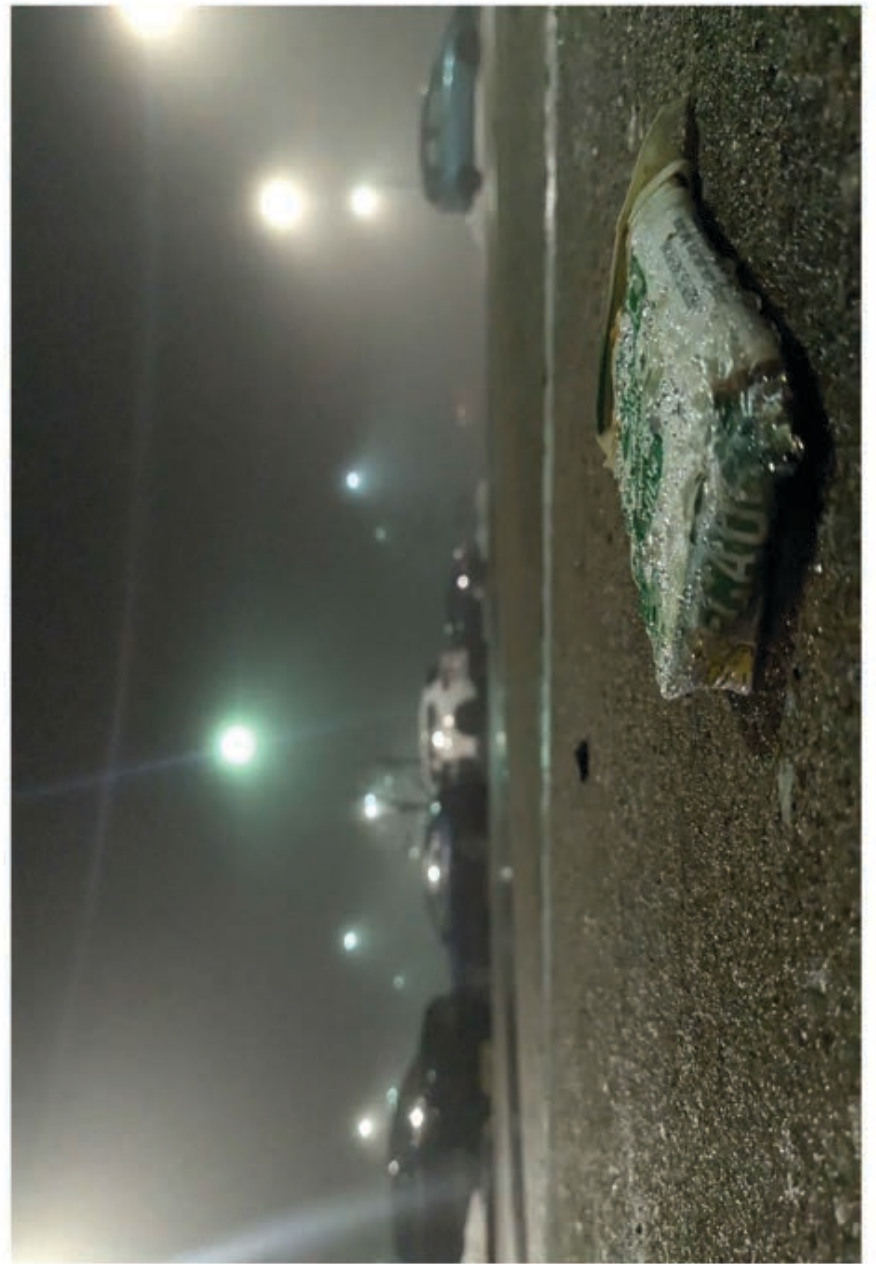




Be  
the  
light  
in  
your  
own  
story.

## *Kicked Habits, Bright Future*

by Jason Thomas Paro



*Photograph*



## *Ivy Wall*

by Dana R. Pierson



*Photograph*

## *Elder Weight*

by Amira Music

I carry the echo of every first mistake,  
a map etched in stones, whispered through hollow halls.  
They say, "Set the course," but the lines twist,  
spiraling paths only I tread.

They armored me young,  
but the weight was never less than iron—  
bruised shoulders,  
a heart crushed beneath the press of family creeds.

I am the keeper of half-sewn dreams,  
a relic of promises  
never made for me.

When they call, I answer,  
always there—  
but who will bear the echoes  
when I am gone?

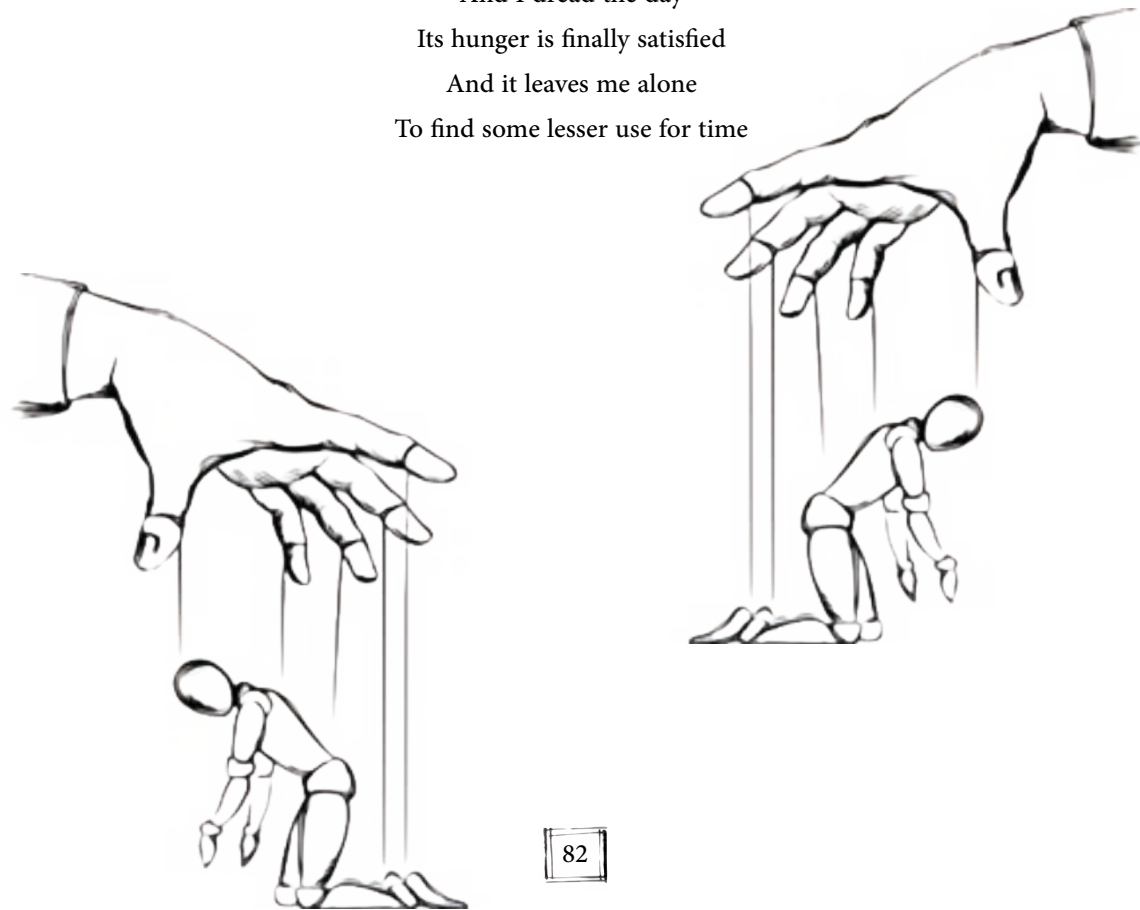




# *An Artist's Motivation*

by Anna Connoley

I feel the need in my chest  
A straining, desperate, hungry thing  
It is not vicious or angry  
For it does not want destruction  
It tries to shout its name  
And it comes out many different ways  
Though none leave it satisfied  
But rather than despise its hunger  
I take care to feed it  
We are friends, this thing and I  
And I dread the day  
Its hunger is finally satisfied  
And it leaves me alone  
To find some lesser use for time



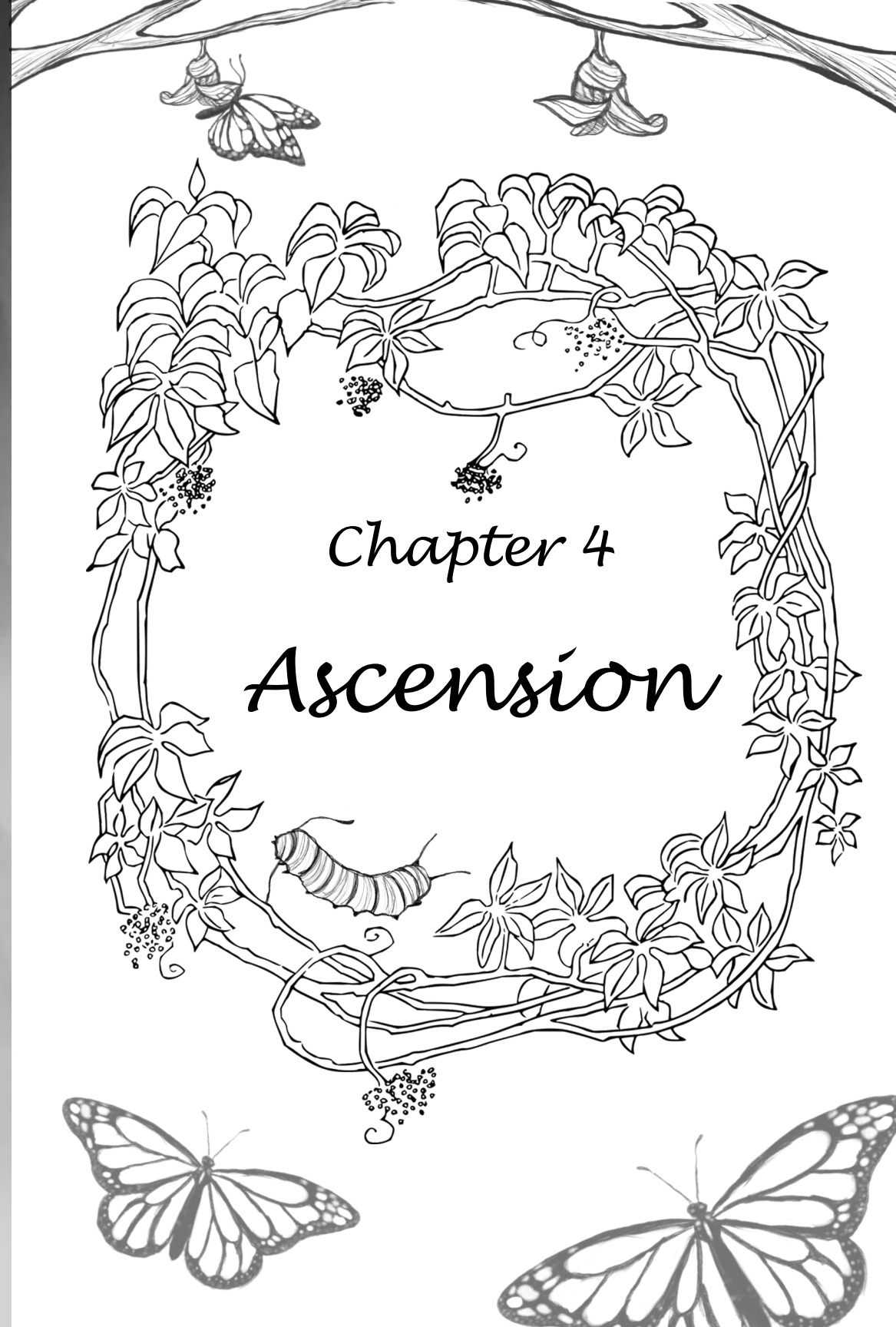


If nothing ever changed,  
there'd be no  
butterflies.



## *Chapter 4*

# *Ascension*





# Storms of Sunshine

by Amira Music

Life often feels like a storm—wild, unpredictable, and, at times, terrifying. If I trace the past ten years of my life, I see how I've been caught in one storm after another, each one more overwhelming than the last. At certain moments, it felt like the gusting winds would sweep me away, or the pounding rain would never let up. But as the storms eventually passed, I began to see the sunlight break through the clouds. What started as chaos has transformed into something I can look back on with gratitude.

In high school, things seemed simple. In high school, my world seemed steady. I had a plan: succeed in school, build a bright future, and navigate life with purpose. I worked hard, stayed focused and, like any eager student, expected clear skies ahead. But life doesn't follow our plans, and as soon as I thought I had everything under control, the storm clouds began to gather.

The first gust came unexpectedly when I fell in love. It felt exciting and beautiful, but like the sudden rush of wind before a storm, it was unsettling. My world tilted. Everything I thought I knew about myself and my future suddenly felt less certain. Love wasn't part of the script I had written for myself, and I struggled to adjust. Still, I wasn't ready for the downpour that was coming.

When I found out I was pregnant, the storm broke open. The weight of the news crashed over me, and I was drenched in fear—in doubt. How was I supposed to handle this? Would I be a good mother? I was still so young, so unprepared for what was ahead. I had imagined my future in one way, and suddenly, it felt like that future was slipping away, washed out by the overwhelming reality of my situation.

The fear was paralyzing. It felt like being caught in a storm so intense I couldn't see a way out. The wind whipped around me, each gust representing a new worry, a new uncertainty. The rain fell harder, and the noise of it drowned out the calm, steady voice of reason I had once relied on. I was lost, unsure of which way to go, and every time I thought I had found my footing, another gust of wind knocked me off balance. It was all too much, the pressure was unbearable, and I

didn't know if I would make it through.

Pregnancy brought its own set of challenges—physical, emotional, and mental. Each day felt like battling relentless winds and crashing waves. My body changing inside and out was just one of the tumultuous things I was going through. The thunder crashed louder, shaking my sense of stability, while the lightning of uncertainty struck over and over. Every day felt like a battle against the wind and rain, and I was terrified I wouldn't survive the storm.

Motherhood brought its own unique challenges. I was navigating new waters, unfamiliar with the responsibilities and pressures that came with raising a child. Sleepless nights were a ceaseless deluge, and exhaustion pressed down like an unyielding current. Self-doubt swirled around me, and there were moments when I was certain the storm would never end. But slowly, almost imperceptibly, something began to shift.

The rain started to let up. The winds calmed. The flashes of lightning grew less frequent. I realized I had been learning how to weather the storm all along. I had discovered strength in myself that I didn't know existed. I had found the will to keep going, even when the storm was at its fiercest.

That realization marked a turning point. The storm was no longer something to fear; it was something I could survive—something I could grow through. Each gust of wind had taught me how to stand firm, and every drop of rain had shown me how to adapt. The storm wasn't breaking me; it was reshaping me.

Now, as I sit here, ten years later, reflecting on the journey I've been on, I see that the storm was never really about tearing me down—it was about reshaping me, forcing me to grow in ways I never would have otherwise. The chaos of those years, the unpredictability and fear, was necessary for me to become who I am today.

After the clouds cleared and the storm finally passed, I found myself standing in a place I never thought I'd be—this creative writing class. It's funny how life works. If someone had told me ten years ago that I'd be here now, I wouldn't have believed them. But that's the beauty of storms—they don't just destroy, they also create. They make room for something new, something unexpected.

The thunder of self-doubt is now just a distant memory. The fear of losing

control has been replaced by a sense of peace. The wind that once pushed me off course has revealed paths I wouldn't have found otherwise. And the rain that threatened to drown me has nourished something deep within me—a passion for storytelling, for writing, for sharing my truth.

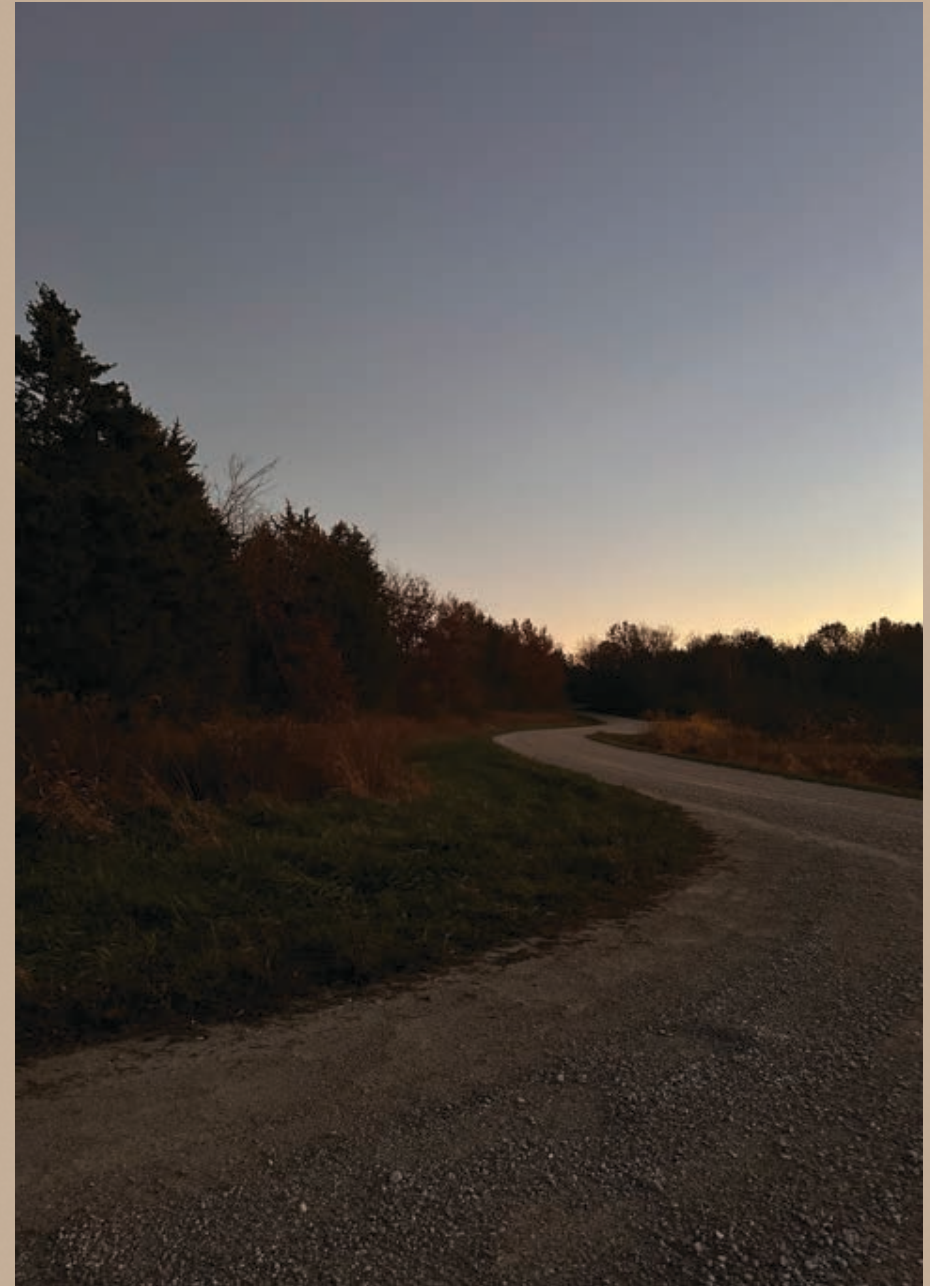
The storm that once terrified me is now part of who I am. The rain and wind didn't wash me away; they revealed new layers of who I am. The lightning illuminated the parts of myself I hadn't seen before—the strength, the resilience, the creativity. And as I continue to write, I'm reminded that every storm, no matter how fierce, has its end.

Looking back, I realize that the storm wasn't a detour—it was the journey itself. It brought me here, to this moment, to this newfound sense of purpose. As the sunlight breaks through the clouds, I'm grateful for every moment that led me here, even the ones that felt impossible to survive.

I know there will be more storms ahead. Life is unpredictable, and the winds will always come. But now, I face them with a different mindset. I no longer see storms as something to fear, but as something to embrace. After all, it was the storm that gave me this life—an unexpected, beautiful life filled with sunshine.

## Wonderer

by Anna Tisdale



*Photograph*



## Japanese Blossom

by Heather Oatis



Acrylic on Canvas

## Needlepoint

by Jessica Wojcik

they used to teach us  
how to sew  
in home ec  
but you learned before me  
and when I came to you  
all fraying hems and ripped seams  
you told me there's no such thing  
as labor, between us

and when I tore myself open  
in front of you  
just to see if you would stitch  
my weeping fabric

and when I saw your name  
embroidered on my arms like you were  
proud of this kind of work  
like we were something intentional

and you ask me to prove I am unlovable  
and how can I if you love me everyday?



June 24, 2022

by Emerald H.

Dear women of the United States,

We regret to inform you that, due to our personal beliefs, you will not be able to receive medical care if you are pregnant because we value the life of a fetus more than yours. Even if that fetus is nonviable, embedded in your fallopian tube, you are miscarrying, you have been raped, or you are suffering from severe life-threatening preeclampsia. This still stands even though the United States possesses the highest maternal mortality rate of any high-income country. Although we have asked men about their stance on mandatory vasectomies at certain ages, we have determined that it is simply wrong to tell them what to do with their bodies. But due to our beliefs, we have every right to tell you. Have you considered keeping your legs closed instead?

With respect,

**Men** who should not be telling women what to do with their bodies and are endangering their lives

**Our lives are not political weaponry.**

*This Long Road*

by Andrew Jacob Pashia

This gravel road is harsh  
Unforgiving to us travelers  
Its dust and rocks  
Spit like fire into our eyes  
The tread of mechanical wheels  
Tearing it apart in protest  
Of the long haul;  
But it is pitiless and vicious,  
These bitter sharp stones  
Bite like bullets against our skin,  
Marking tallies of their sins  
Against us who wish only  
To tread lightly and pass;  
But there are no passes given  
Along this long and lonely road,  
For we pedal in quiet flocks  
Like birds surrendering to the earth  
Under our own steps;  
We are the ones that trample ourselves,  
This road with its splintering stones  
And suffocating smoke  
Kills us as we lumber along  
To our desolate marble tombs.



# *I Pledge Allegiance...*

by Anna Tisdale

I pledge no allegiance to the flag,  
to a flag that holds more rights than me—

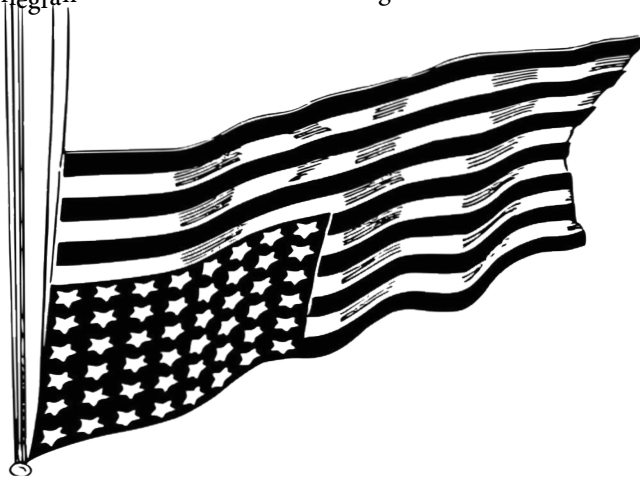
Inanimate object versus mortal.

of the divided states of America.  
And to the oligarchy for which we crumble;  
as the rich, white men stand tall.  
One nation under dictatorship and ultimate censorship.  
Where the Almighty outranks state—

Church versus state.

Extreme classification within racism, sexism, homophobia, and creedism...  
With no liberty, no bodily autonomy.  
And justice to the cis, white, authoritarian males.

I give no allegiance to the nation that no longer—*has it ever?*—values me.



# *When I Look the World in the Eye I Want More to Say Than an Apology*

by: Danniella 'cat' Stacy



*Hard Pastel and Indian Ink Water*



# Home

by Sarah Reimer



Chalk Pastels

# 1711 Maple Ridge

by Kenzie Strickler



I imagine the day I can finally stand there. I imagine that I can only stare at the house and the keys in my hand ...

*Home.* I squeeze the keys. *My home.* I inhale and the chilly spring morning air brings me back to earth for a moment. “Home.” I exhale the word.

I follow the paved path up to the front door, formerly lined with the most gorgeous plants, now withered and faded away. The matching red paint on the porch railing and the front door is chipping and faded like the petals of a dying rose. I open the screen door and touch the handle on the front door. The key suddenly feels like the weight of the world in my hand.

I will myself to put it in the lock with shaking hands, willing God, the universe, *anyone* who will listen for this to not be a dream, oh please don’t let this be a dream—*click*. The lock slides out of place and the handle turns.

This house ... I never imagined I’d be able to see inside it again. This house ... their house. It’s not theirs anymore. They’ve been gone for so long.

I see straight through the front walkway to the sunroom. I remember painting in that room. Watching birds the whole time, Great-Grandpa would point them out and tell me what they were called. I wish I remembered them.

I run my hands along the walls as I go right through the hallway. I look at the floors where the fuzzy carpets used to be. I pass the bathroom, the ugly pink toilet and tub long gone. I see the bedroom I used to curl up in. I can almost feel that quilt with the geometric cats stitched into it. I can almost smell it. But I don’t. They’re gone. This house. It’s not their house.

The kitchen looks the same. Just ... less vintage, I would say. I look through the window in the breakfast nook out to the lonely stump where the massive maple tree once stood. Through the eyes of a child, I always thought that tree had a face in it. The knots and holes smiling at me.

The dining room feels empty without the large table, feels sad without her books, and feels barren without his pictures.

The backyard looks the same through the big windows. I can see the old



koi pond. I'm relieved it's still there. I see them, the fish, swirling around in the water, vibrant oranges and whites. They looked like fire there in the water. He built that pond, my grandpa did. I think that was one of the saddest parts of giving up this house. That pond. I never found out what happened to the fish. I hope they were loved. I hope they were cared for.

I move through the living room, remembering the hours I spent reading nursery rhymes on the floor, sitting with my great-grandma on the couch, singing along to *The Backyardigans*. I see the figurines lining the shelves behind the TV ... although they are all long gone. Sold in garage sales or divvied up by the family.

The basement looks ... finished. Nothing like the empty half-finished rooms my cousins and I used to run circles in. The pool table is still there. I pick up the cue ball and roll it into the set, knocking the balls around.

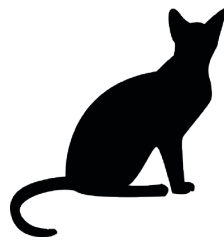
The bathroom is no longer beach-themed. The fun shells and starfish are gone. The sandy wallpaper was long torn away. But I still reach into my pocket and pull out the dolphin. It looks lonely on the shelf now.

For the first time, I cry. I cry for the home that raised me. The house where my life was built. The people who built it. Their essence is gone. I don't think I'll ever be able to put it back. All I can do now is call this house my *home*.



# How to Write a How-To

by Colleen Brewster



First off, you gotta write a title. Or at least, part of one. “How to...” You can leave it at that for now. Go back to the header and put in your name and page number if you so desire. Now you decide what you want to write. Open a new file, or get a fresh piece of paper, and brainstorm. Write out a list of ideas you could write about. Choose one, and start writing. Simple as that.

Let’s try “How to Take Care of My Cats.” You could write a funny little story, like it’s a guide for a pet sitter, detailing out your cats’ quirks and antics. You could write about how your void boy Boople got his funny name: it came from how he would “boop” the blankets when he wanted to snuggle under them. You could write about your tawny tabby ChiChi, how her name originally came from “Chicken Nugget”—that’s what you get for letting your nephews name your cat—and how you recently learned “chichi” is a Spanish colloquialism for certain female body parts (and it varies depending on which form of Spanish you’re speaking). You could write about how ChiChi has the largest vocabulary you have ever heard in a cat, how she has a variety of meows, chirps, grumbles, whines, and even howls. And, of course, how she only howls at three in the morning when she wants you to get up. You could write about how ChiChi always has to yell at you when you sneeze; even if she’s upstairs sleeping. How, if you sneeze, a few seconds later, you’ll hear a *thump* on the floor upstairs, a *mrrrr*, then, as she trots down the stair, the grumble-that’s-building-to-a-yell bounces with each step.

*Mrr-rr-rrrr-rrrr-rrrrr!* And how, when she gets to the bottom of the stairs and runs over to you, she glares at you with a *meow-oww-oww-owww!*

Those are all good things you could write about. If your reader is a cat person, they would likely enjoy it. But perhaps you run out of ideas, or get stuck on a thought. Perhaps you wrote a few sentences, maybe a paragraph, maybe two. That’s okay. You can choose a different subject. Just look at your brainstorming list. What else would be fun to write about? “How to Kill Houseplants?”

Well, that’s pretty easy. It may not take up a whole page. You could write how there are two good ways to kill houseplants. The first is to forget about them

entirely. The second is to forget that you *didn’t* forget about them and water them twice. Houseplants are pretty finicky. You can write that the good news is, since you have cats, you can’t keep most houseplants anyway. Except for spider plants. You do have one scraggly spider plant. You don’t water it, because that’s your husband’s job. It’s his job because you kept forgetting to water it, and then you would water it after he did. So you just let him take care of it. Besides, it’s up on the window shelf above the sink, and you can’t really reach it anyway. It’s up there because if it was down lower, ChiChi would have killed it already. That gives you another idea.

“How to Turn Your Cat into a Druggie.” You could write about how spider plants can be a “mild hallucinogenic” for cats. You could write about the first time ChiChi ate a spider plant, and how you thought she was dying. How she walked unevenly down the hallway and how she stopped, legs splayed apart and stared wide-eyed at you, head swaying side to side. How you realized she had gotten into the room that had the plant, and how you expected her to begin convulsing, as her symptoms resembled those in the cat you lost long ago, who had died from anti-freeze poisoning. You could write how you frantically searched your phone, and saw the words: “mildly hallucinogenic,” and how you looked up from your phone, back to your cat whose pupils were dilated, you realized, not from dying, but from seeing dancing unicorns over your shoulder. Or maybe dancing mice...what do cats hallucinate about? You could write how you imagined cats hallucinate rainbow birds and mice in tutus. You could write how that first trip has turned into a lifelong addiction for ChiChi, and how you have to regulate her “doses,” giving her just enough for her cravings, but how you can’t let her have free access to the plant, because she would chew it down to a stump if you did.

All right, so now you have enough material for a “How to” essay. All you have to do is come up with an ending. It doesn’t have to be too clever, but it needs to tie the essay together. Just a couple sentences will do the trick. And, for heaven’s sake, don’t forget to save your work as you go, and especially at the end. Cats are notorious for walking on keyboards and kkkkkkkkkkkkkllllllvvvvvvvv///

////////////////////





## *Street Art of Desire*

by Collin Barry-Kamp

Graffiti lettering that resembles the thorns placed on Jesus's head.

Or the barbed wire that once caged Anne Frank's heart.

Before you go,  
write your number down on my wrist.

It might seem strange,  
but it's a hell of a start.



## *A Light in the Dark*

by Jason Thomas Paro



*Photograph*



# Self-Reflection

by Matt Altis



Graphite, Charcoal, and Ink

# Mothers of Pearl

by Abigail Hughes

Hooked into the mouth of the world.  
Slickened with sea-salted earth and fish guts.  
I'll stand. Small as I am.  
Smiling big. With teeth.  
In this place as is. As was going to be.  
Within a foregone conclusion

All lined up and sinking deep  
Into the sand where our old friends sleep.  
We're see-through and simple.  
Like pearls formed behind the tongue.

When there are foreign objects like these  
Our bodies' natural response is to take all its stomach  
contents. And use them to form a hard shell.  
So mine does too.  
Calcified into white on white.  
Until a single pale plastic bead is coughed up.  
One more for the collection.  
To be strung up into friendship bracelets.

And oh world.  
If I was such a natural thing as this.  
As I'd promised to be  
In long form apologies to you and yours.  
Well. We'd be good I guess.  
All the damage undone. Oil unspilled.  
World unended and then begun again.





# The End

by Andrew Jacob Pashia



“So, this is it then, huh?” the man inquired, listlessly toying with his napkin as he refused to meet the woman’s gaze; he could feel her eyes burning holes in his forehead. All he could do was trace his fingers over the ridges of the napkin’s fabric that laid beside his plate, flattening the creases, and refolding them repetitively, the folds comforting the restless tremor in his hand. There wasn’t anything he wanted more than to keep himself busy with useless tasks so that he didn’t have to be present in that moment’s conversation. He kept his ears trained to anything that could distract him: the rumble of a city bus driving by; a dog barking as its owner walked it down the sidewalk; the gentle strumming of a woman’s guitar in tune with her harmonic voice as she played for change on the corner. Something. Anything.

“You know this is how it has to be, Charlie. It’s not working...” the woman trailed off, eyebrows scrunched as she looked at him with pity. She didn’t want to hurt him. If only he would look at her, then he would see in her face that this was hurting her too. All she could do was twiddle her thumbs under the table and chew the inside of her cheek, looking him up and down. ‘*Look at me!*’ she wanted to scream; that would get his attention, or a kick to the shin or a hand-slap on the webbed metal table. It would be useless though, she knew. When he wanted an escape, he wouldn’t come back unless he chose to.

Charlie flinched softly at her words; his lips pursed as he fought against the knot forming in his throat, and he swallowed hard to dissolve it. Turning away from her, he trained his eyes on the woman with the guitar. He noted her flowy, floral patterned bell bottoms, the spandex material clinging tightly to her legs. She wore a brown boot whose leather was scuffed and unkempt. There were flowers pinned neatly into the curled updo atop her head, and there were small face-framing pieces pulled down over her ears. Deep brown freckles dotted the bridge of her nose and the top of her cheeks, just barely hiding the flush of red from the summer heat. There seemed to be a glimmer coating her lips, sparkling brightly as she sang, mouth forming around every word like the song was permanently

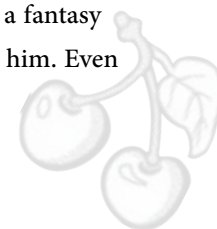
engraved on her lips. Charlie stared at them briefly, mesmerized, and thought about how closely the woman’s lips resembled *hers*.

“Do you remember the night we met, Bev?” Charlie was rigid like a statue, eyes fixed on the woman as he played the memory over in his head. They’d been out with their respective friend groups at the same Diner, completely oblivious of each other. It was late, close to 1 a.m., and both groups had been out to The District for a concert downtown. Bev was standing at the counter, elbows planted on the reflective metal as she looked at the ice cream menu. She bobbed back and forth on her black boot-clad feet, her patterned silk bell-bottoms brushing the linoleum floor. She ordered a mint-chocolate-chip shake with extra whipped cream, and Charlie came out of the bathroom a minute later.

Bev grabbed her wallet and paid, sipping her shake as she hummed happily. Charlie pulled out his phone as he walked by, and as he was looking down, bumped into her, and made her blow bubbles into the shake. Blobs of whipped cream flew up and onto her face, droplets catching on her lashes, nose, and top lip. They gasped in unison, and Charlie touched her shoulder with one hand, eyes wide as he apologized profusely. She insisted it was fine and began wiping the mess off her face. When she went to wipe her mouth, she looked up at him and froze. Later she’d tell him he had the most beautiful eyes she’d ever seen, and he’d say the same about her lips, his eyes having followed her finger as she wiped them clean.

“Yes, I remember.” Bev looked down sheepishly, a small hue of pink budding across her face. Not a day went by that she didn’t remember how they’d met. Every good day that they had together, and especially every bad one, she thought about that moment and used it to remind herself why she was there and why she was grateful to have him. Their electricity was unmatched, and their chemistry even more so. They were like magnets, and no matter what distance or obstacle that lay between them, they’d always reunite with a clash. But it often resulted in destruction.

Bev sighed, clasping her hands together above the table to lean her head on them. Why did he insist on torturing her? He must know that this wasn’t productive or healthy to reminisce on. Charlie always seemed to live in a fantasy world where he could run away from every challenge that arose against him. Even



now, that didn't seem to have changed. "Charlie, we shouldn't be talking about that—"

"Why not?" He cut her off, suddenly whipping his head around to face her. Her jaw dropped and she stuttered, not sure what to say.

"I just ... like we, this isn't ... we can't do this anymore," she insisted, eyes wide and sparkling with the threat of tears. "I can't just ... *be* with you knowing that it causes me pain, okay? I can't do it anymore." Bev stared at him, forcing herself not to look away from his intense gaze.

Charlie swallowed the bile in his throat, anxiety and fear churning in his stomach, nauseating him. It would be a lie if he said he was surprised by this, but similarly he was surprised she didn't want to try just a little bit longer. They'd gone through so much, too much, to just *quit*.

"We can get through this, Bev, I ... I know we can." Reaching his hand out across the table, he tried to take a gentle hold of her arms, but she pulled away as if she'd been shocked by a live wire. Her retreat shook him, and a tingle rose back up to his jaw as if she'd just kicked him in the stomach. Was this truly all that was left? They were just meant to sit across from each other one last time and make an amicable agreement never to see, speak, or think about each other ever again? The mere idea of it made his head spin, and he had to lean back in his chair and brace himself against the table. He could hear Bev starting to speak, but he couldn't make out the words she was saying. A shrill ringing erupted in his ears, and he looked around helplessly for another distraction; a noise or person, anything as he clenched his jaw to keep from sobbing.

There were trickles of people traveling up and down the street, soaking up the last rays of the evening light. The owner of the dog that walked by earlier passed them again, and the dog didn't bark this time. It followed sluggishly behind its owner, tail wagging slowly behind as they tiredly trudged home. It made him think of the time that he and Bev took their dogs through the park two years ago in the Fall, and they didn't realize that a festival was being held there. They ended up walking through the throng of patrons, stopping at craft booths, food vendors, and merchandise tents. Their dogs were given bones to munch on, and when they'd all gotten tired, they laid out on a patch of grass away from the festival's hub,

sighing and stretching out under the sun, soaking in the last of its silky rays. It was warm but comfortable with plenty of shade from the overhanging trees. Bev was curled under his arm with her face buried in his chest, and he remembered the feeling of her exhalation tickling his skin through the fabric of his shirt.

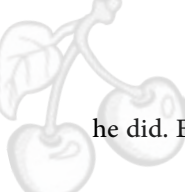
This time, a tear did escape, rolling down his cheek to his chin before falling onto his chest, staining the spot where she'd always lay. Almost immediately, he wiped the tear away, but it was quickly replaced by several more. Shutting his eyes, Charlie held his breath, a rising pressure bubbling in his chest as he forced himself to stop crying. Bev looked on in distress, the sight of him crying causing her heart to twist in her chest. When was the last time she had seen him cry? Was it at his grand-dad's funeral last year, or at that movie they went to see the year before? She racked her brain for several moments but couldn't remember the last time she'd seen him cry; she couldn't place a memory anywhere within the past year or two at least. It had been so long, and she'd grown to wonder if it was because he'd stopped caring. He rarely showed her care, especially in recent months. Aside from some gentle love and occasional acts of service, all he gave her was anger. *Fury*. When she needed reassurance, asked where he was, asked him to drink a little less, she was met with fire. Now, all he seemed to her was scorched earth.

"Charlie, I'm sorry—"

"No!" he gasped, hand lifting to clutch his mouth. Nodding his head, Charlie blinked his eyes until he dried out the tears. Taking a deep breath, he set his hands on his knees. "Don't you dare apologize."

Bev was confused. All he did more than half of the time was ask for an apology. If she hurt his feelings, or did something he thought was out of line, she had to apologize. There was growth within him once, what seemed like a lifetime ago. It was after he got sober for the second time, and she remembered what preceded it with torturous clarity. He often found something to be mad at, or someone, because he couldn't deal with the darkness inside of him. His first victim was usually himself. One night after an intense argument, he changed his clothes, grabbed his keys, and fled. He later said that on the way to the bar, he started praying to God, begging him to show that he was there, and that he was real, and cared. But nothing happened. So, he took that as a sign that it didn't matter what





he did. Either way, he'd always be alone.

After the night was done, he woke up with no memory of what he did. The last thing he remembered was lying face down on the bar while he cried, according to him. Bev never fully believed that he'd let any tears fall. When she picked him up from the bar, she was in awe at how he was still walking and talking, fueled by hate, rage, and anguish. For four hours he screamed, cursed, broke, and threw things, and would be quelled by intermittent periods of gentle words and regret until darkness took hold of him again. That next morning, he begged her to leave him. 'It's unforgivable,' he said, telling her that he wasn't worthy of forgiveness. It was his responsibility to hold himself accountable and to fix himself. She didn't listen, and because of that he vowed to change. He failed and told her to leave again, and again she didn't. Now she wished she had.

"I..." Charlie started, trailing off as he looked at the ground, lip trembling as tears rolled down his face. "I hurt you ... I hurt *you*." He turned to her, red and glassy with regret, and the sight of him made Bev lean back in surprise. Charlie matched her movements, pressing his back against the rise of his chair and thumbed the metal webbing of the table, scraping the peeling black paint with his thumbnail. "I know I've done ... terrible things, and I've said terrible things. I've hurt you beyond repair, I know that."

Bev moved forward, mouth opening to speak in negation. She knew she wasn't innocent in all of this. She accused him, tested him, lied to him just to see if he cared. There weren't many days where he hadn't shown up for her, even if he was angry at her. They'd always figured it out; made promises that they knew they couldn't keep, promises of change and redemption. They always said they'd be better for each other. But it turned out that love just wasn't enough.

As she started to speak, Charlie held up his hand to stop her. A tremor ran through his fingers, and he lowered his hand slowly back onto the table. "I know this is it, Bev. I should've saved you from the pain sooner. Every time I left it was for you. I know you saw it as an excuse, and maybe it was, so that I didn't have to face everything I'd done ... but I didn't want to keep hurting you. The love of your life would never do that to you. I know it's not working. Really, I don't think it's ever worked. And I must live with that." He met her eyes again, both mirroring



the other's agony.

"I won't do that to you anymore. You don't have to worry about that ever again. I promise." As Bev stared into his eyes, she knew that this time he meant it. He was going to keep his promise no matter how terribly it hurt him, and for a moment she doubted herself. It was true that he said he always left to help her heal. He believed that she was better off without him, and while there was some merit to that, she couldn't help but remember how he'd been in the beginning. They were always smiling and laughing together. Everything was easy when they were with each other; it was like breathing, they didn't even think about it, they just did it.

Bev was pulled from her thoughts as she heard the scrape of a chair against concrete. Charlie had risen from the table and grabbed his bag, slinging it over his shoulder. She wanted to get up and stop him. She wanted to take everything back, grab ahold of his face and kiss him. As she watched him turn away, and give her one last look over his shoulder, she wished desperately for things to be different.

"Goodbye, Bev. I have always loved you, and I will always love you, forever and a day." With that, he turned away and walked away from the table, not bothering with the crosswalk light and simply crossed the street, looking down at the ground. He stepped twice on each slab of concrete, careful not to step on the cracks. He always did that. Bev watched him leave, and she felt her heart twist inside her chest and a lump form in her throat. She gasped in a breath of air and sobbed, tears streaming freely down her face. Her shoulders shook with her cries, and she hunched forward, wishing she could fold into herself and disappear like a dying star. It should never have been like this. They should've gotten better. They should've healed each other and healed themselves *for* each other. But as her sobs settled into a quiet weep, she felt a clarity befall her soul. She knew, deep down, that despite the wistful and intense love between them, that they never would've made it to the end.

# Oda A La Cachaça

by Alex Balogh

Líquido claro  
líquido puro  
Líquido fuerte  
que trae tanto loco amor  
como pesar

Dulce en la lengua  
como azúcar  
Encantadora divertida  
caprichosa y deliciosa  
como un beso inesperado

Hielo y limón  
no toman nada de ti  
Suavesón pero mordiente  
meloso pero penetrante

Levantemos una copa  
—y quizás una copa más  
a aquéllos que  
no están aquí ahora  
sus almas nunca olvidadas

O cachaça—  
siempre ardiente y agri dulce  
Tu vives en algún lugar intermedio  
entre los cielos infinitos  
y la tierra mojada



# Ode to Cachaça

Translated from Spanish by the Author

Clear liquid  
pure liquid  
Strong liquid  
that brings crazy love  
as much as sorrow

Sweet on the tongue  
like sugar  
Enchanting diversion  
capricious & delicious  
like an unexpected kiss

Ice & lime  
take nothing from you  
Smooth but biting  
honeyed but penetrating

Let us lift a glass  
—& maybe one more  
to those who  
are no longer here  
their spirits never forgotten

O cachaça—  
ever burning & bittersweet  
You reside somewhere between  
the infinite skies  
& the wet earth





# Authors and Artists

## Biographies



Somewhere in rural Missouri, a person named **MATT ALTIS** exists. He is an artist who is exploring new avenues of creative expression. Interested in surrealism, his work depicts haunting yet familiar imagery. Truthfully, his artistic goals have yet to be fully realized, and current boundaries are transient. Additionally, Matt has no idea what he is doing. Simply put, that is why he is attending UMSL. Sincerely, he looks forward to discovering where his art belongs.

**CHELSEA BAIRD** is in their last year at UMSL, majoring in English. They are thrilled to be included in the 2025 edition of *Litmag* and hope you enjoy their work. After graduating, they hope to someday move on to an MFA program and become a professional writer (fingers crossed!). Chelsea also enjoys art, tennis, and is publishing a newsletter on Substack called “for the birds.” They want to thank their friends, family, and cat Pepsi.

**ALEX BALOGH** ate Belgian waffles in Belgium, drank Bitburger beer in Bitburg, played “Sourdough Mountain” on a banjo in a Kentucky holler, walked across Burnside Bridge in the rain, travelled to Colombia to research a master’s thesis on language acquisition (he learned how not to learn), and is now formally studying Spanish at UMSL.

**COLLIN BARRY-KAMP** did not provide a biography.

**COLLEEN BREWSTER** is an elder millennial who has been writing for as long as she can remember. She loves stories—both imaginary and true—and decided to go back to college to pursue a degree in history, focusing on her passion for St. Louis. She met her husband online in 2020 through another passion, Stargate. She lives with him and their two cats, ChiChi and Boople, in St. Louis’s Bevo neighborhood.

**ANNA CONNOLEY** is a recent UMSL alumni and graduated with a bachelor’s in English in August 2024. Despite this, they are still full of hope and creativity, and are grateful for the opportunity to present some of their work in this book. They hope you enjoy what you find!

**HANNAH EDOMWONYI** did not provide a biography.



**ABBY FOUST** is a senior in accounting and plans to go to law school after graduating with her bachelor’s degree. Thus, she needs to conserve as much of her remaining brain power as possible—and will not be expending any of it to write a better bio than this.

**CLARA GUILHOT** is a French exchange student from Lyon, graduating in spring 2025 with a master’s in international business. She dreams of working in the book industry—ideally around here. A lover of art, she’s always snapping photos of everything (often trailing behind her friends, much to their patience’s test!). This year, she’s sharing her poetry for the first time through *Litmag 2025*! An introvert at heart, she loves discovering new things and meeting new people.

**EMERALD H.** is a 2024 UMSL graduate who studied psychology and criminology. During her academic career, Emerald was involved in UMSL Jazz Band, Triton Sound, and UMSL Orchestra. When she was not participating in those activities, she spent her time playing with her pets or writing poetry. Her poem “June 24, 2022” is a challenge to the actions of *Roe v. Wade* being overturned and the intrusion of personal beliefs into decisions over bodily autonomy.

**ESMERALDA HERRADA-FLORES** did not provide a biography.

**ABIGAIL HUGHES** is a freshman at UMSL, who is majoring in mass communications. She self-publishes her poems and prose-writing in the homemade magazine “Wax Museum” and does write-ups on gross movies in “Brain Damage.” She’s working in as many artistic mediums as possible, with the express purpose of creating time capsules for herself and star vehicles for all her friends.

**LEA’CHER KENNEDY** is a current undergraduate student at UMSL, pursuing an English degree with a personal emphasis in creative writing. As of now, the future is unclear for her, yet she hopes to find an everyday career in writing for a popular newspaper, magazine or

creative publication. In the end, Leacher aspires to be an author, a novel or poetry collection being her first personal published work.

**MATT KIMBRELL** would like to apologize to all of the mathematicians in the world for his poetic rendering of the “Axiom of Choice.” This poem emerged from a beguiling conversation with a computer science major that left him thinking that math and poetry are much closer than they appear.

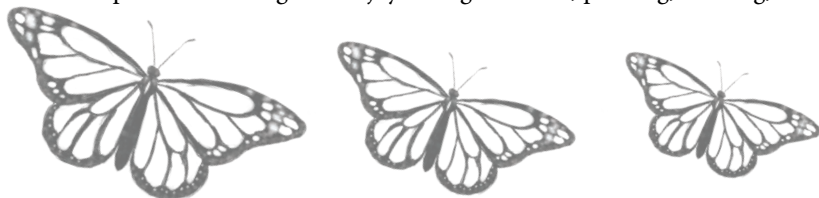
From the grasslands of China, **MIA MIN** uses her gifts and talents to bring glory to God in all she does. Mia loves—wholeheartedly.

**BRENT MOSS** is a passionate Bahamian artist and Pierre Laclède Honors College student who works primarily with acrylics and colored pencils. He focuses on portraiture and the human figure, with a notable high school series celebrating Black women in diverse environments and elements. His work has been exhibited and sold in the Bahamas. Now pursuing business studies, Brent aims to merge his creative talents with corporate ambitions, striving to make an impact both artistically and professionally.

**AMIRA MUSIC** is an English major at UMSL with a passion for storytelling. They explore fantasy, personal essays, and poetry, always dreaming up new worlds. When not writing, they love spending time with their kiddos and husband, planning their next adventure, and posting TikTok videos about their favorite books and movies.

**KAVION NORMAN** is a poet, student leader, Air Force veteran, and US Air Force ROTC cadet at UMSL, studying computer science with plans to commission. He’s part of the Pierre Laclède Honors College, a University Program Board Chair, secretary for the Associated Black Collegians, and a Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Scholar. His poetry, often styled as letters, reflects personal experiences with family, friendship, and growth.

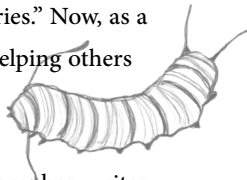
**HEATHER OATIS** is a St. Louisian living with her husband, children, and dog. Receiving her bachelor’s degree in education from UMSL, she worked as a middle school teacher for 7 years. Taking a break from education to care for her children, she also took some time to work on her art and created several commissions. She is currently pursuing a master’s in education with an emphasis in reading. She enjoys being outdoors, painting, running, and reading.



**JASON THOMAS PARO** is an artist from Saint Paul, Missouri. In 2023, he graduated from Saint Charles Community College after earning a general associate’s and working with Professor Brian Smith. He is enrolled at UMSL for a bachelor’s in fine arts with a certification in art education. He plans on teaching high school for a few years, then earning a master’s in fine art with the intent of teaching college.

**ANDREW JACOB PASHIA** is a previously published author who is pursuing a bachelor’s in secondary English education with a certificate in creative writing. He has had a love for creative writing ever since he was a child and is happy to see his dreams finally coming to fruition.

**MEG PHILLIPS** has previously won the Jackie White National Children’s Playwriting Contest as well as the international screenwriting competition “Missouri Stories.” Now, as a graduate student in clinical mental health counseling, she looks forward to helping others change their own stories for the better.



**DANA R. PIERSON** is a senior English major here at UMSL. She is a photographer, writer, cat mom, thrift shopper, and avid lover of baby pigs. Yes, pigs. Oink oink!

**SARAH REIMER** is a double major at UMSL studying studio art and graphic design. She transferred to UMSL after receiving an associate’s in art at College of Lake County. She has a deep curiosity for different mediums and wants to explore them all. She is immensely grateful for her mother for always encouraging her to pursue the arts.

**DANNIELLA ‘cat’ STACY** is a super senior, studio arts major via English literature, who loves cats and making cat art. She will be seeking a publisher for her first novel, “A Band of Misprints,” summer 2025.

While **OLIVIA STEELY** is a teacher, student, mother, and friend, she self-identifies the most as a writer. A student of life, Olivia aims to connect emotions with fragments of time. Born and raised in a small-town, she has resided the last several years in St. Louis, where she currently calls home.

**KENZIE STRICKLER** is a psychology student at UMSL. In their free time they love to observe and write about the world around them, knit, and play Dungeons and Dragons. They enjoy being a storyteller.



**SARAH SUTTON** is a senior, graduating with a BA in English and a certificate in creative writing. Sarah decided in her thirties to finish the degree she'd started and stopped multiple times. The pieces published here are proof she *can* actually finish things if she puts her mind to it, despite evidence to the contrary. She lives in St. Charles with her beloved husband, who she promises she doesn't want to stab ... much.

**MYLES THURMAN** is an English student here at UMSL with a passion for creative writing and short stories. They are currently finishing up their junior year, and hope to be a published author one day.

**ANNA TISDALE** is a current sophomore double majoring in English and secondary education with an English emphasis. She also is working towards Honors and Professional Writing Certificates with the possible minor in intercultural competence. She loves reading and writing; her dyslexia will not be stopping her! But, fair warning, she loves being the most sarcastic person in the room.

**BRANDON V.** did not provide a biography.

**TAYLOR WEINTROP** is an UMSL alum who holds both a BA and MA in English and adores the work, quality, and mission of *Litmag*. She currently works full-time in the Washington University Advancement office on the Regional and Special Events team, but keeps her love for writing close by continuing to submit pieces to journals and is working toward creating a Substack to keep her composition skills sharp (stay tuned).

**JESSICA WOJCIK** is a St. Louis-based poet and educator, originally from Utica, New York. She has a passion for literature about love, loss, and class struggles. She is currently working on creating her own collection of poetry and can be found online on Instagram at @woundwriter.



**Top Row:** Sydney Stevens, Andrew Jacob Pashia, Clara Guilhot, Sarah Sutton-Brames, Lucy Adolphson, Neil Stimmel, Francisco Vidales.

**Bottom Row:** Anna Tisdale, Bella Lancaster, Kimberly Henrickson, Esmeralda Herrada-Flores.



# GET INVOLVED

English 4895: Editing *Litmag* is offered every fall as part of the English Department's Writing Certificate Program. For students interested in creative writing, professional editing, and publishing, this class provides an internship-like experience that can also be used as a capstone for the certificates. Supervised by a faculty advisor, students in these courses are able to take charge and experience the full scope of creating *Litmag*, from fundraising, solicitation, marketing and promotions, copy editing, document and graphic design, distribution, and publicity. Spring internships may also be available by contacting Kate Watt at [katewatt@umsl.edu](mailto:katewatt@umsl.edu) or Jeanne Allison at [allisonjea@umsl.edu](mailto:allisonjea@umsl.edu).

We welcome you to become part of the next group of editors to continue exploring the creation and publication of our campus' artistic expression!



## GET PUBLISHED

poetry 🌿 fiction 🌿 creative nonfiction 🌿 art 🌿 multilingual

- Submissions open to all UMSL students, faculty, staff, and alumni.
- Submit up to 5 works in each category listed above.
- Multiple category submissions welcomed.
- Only original works will be considered; no previously published works accepted.
- Images of artwork are required to be in jpeg format with 300 dpi or greater.
- Submitters' names are not disclosed during review.







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thank you in advance!



## *Irish Studies*

The Smurfit-Stone Corporation Endowed Professorship in Irish Studies, at the University of Missouri–St. Louis offers a variety of programs for campus and community audiences including public lectures on Irish culture, literature, history and politics, and performances of Irish music and dance.

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## Classes in Irish Studies

UMSL offers courses in Irish and Irish-American Studies. For more information about Irish Studies, please contact:

**Dr. Eamonn Wall**

*Smurfit-Stone Endowed Professor in Irish Studies*

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## COLOPHON:



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that were created by UMSL graphic design students in

SP-ST\_ART-3305-001 Graphic Design II, taught by Elizabeth Buchta in the spring semester of 2024. This magazine was designed to represent the boundless perseverance and complexity of humanity. It was crafted to be purposefully adventurous, earthy, and a safe, vibrant space.



Change will not come if we wait for  
some other person or some other time.



We are the ones we've been waiting for.

We are the change that we seek.

- Barack Obama



**Remember you must die,**



**remember to live.**





# Contributors

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