

A Journal of Art,
Literature & Culture

The Quatrain

Volume 4: Spring 2020

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The Quatrain is managed by students at Louisiana Tech University and advised by faculty from the College of Liberal Arts. The journal is housed in George T. Madison Hall, where undergraduates collect, assess, and edit submissions from student writers and artists.

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From the Dean



As I write this introduction, higher education, like many other institutions, is facing an unprecedented crisis due to the spread of COVID-19. Life has changed, as it did after 9/11. People now worry about the safety of the community and the foundations of our civil life. Severe restrictions have been placed on human interaction: in classrooms, restaurants, movie theaters, museums, all gatherings of people of fifty (or possibly ten) or more. The basics of human life—food, shelter,

warmth—are no longer a given but a continuing source of anxiety. What the long-term effect will be is still unclear. We may become even more isolated and fragmented than ever before with the underpinnings of civilization no longer available; or, perhaps, in the face of such global angst, we will pull together and create a better, more caring world.

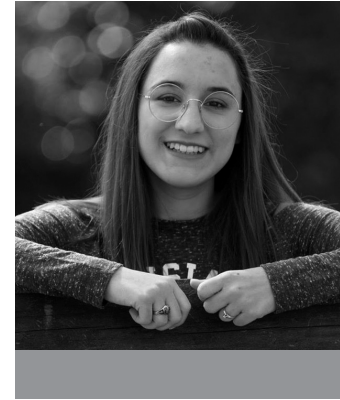
These pieces for the fourth issue of *The Quatrain*, all by students at Louisiana Tech, were composed prior to the crisis. But the writing and illustrations address issues and values that will be sorely tested in the days ahead: love, kindness, understanding, faith, and family. The first piece by Addison Lindsay, “*We’re Not Really Strangers*,” offers a foundation for the themes that will be explored in the volume: “Out of all the infinite realities, we could find ourselves...we have somehow found our reality here in the midst of seven billion humans walking on the same ground on which we walk.” A photograph that appears on page 72, by Ana Balestrazzi, ambiguously entitled “*from ‘Life,’*” captures a still moment, depicting a tenebrous landscape. The image also suggests a fit question to what we have read, and seen, and experienced in the intervening pages. For what we wonder, as we conclude this issue, is whether the vivid disc above the landscape, providing the only light to the world below, is the image of a setting or a rising sun?

Donald P. Kaczvinsky

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Donald J. Kaczvinsky". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, sweeping 'D' and 'K'.

Donald Kaczvinsky
Dean, College of Liberal Arts
Louisiana Tech University

Letter from the Editor



When I was first asked to be a part of this literary journal, I wasn't quite sure what I was getting myself into. There were countless hours of responding to emails, bothering my wonderful roommate to proofread responses, and creating spreadsheet after spreadsheet to keep the submissions, biographies, and edits organized. It was stressful at times, but once I got the hang of things, it became something I looked forward to working on.

It was important to those of us on the editorial board that *The Quatrain* provided a safe space for students to express themselves through their work. We carried this ideal with us as we put this volume together and hope that we can continue to uphold this standard. We want to extend our deepest appreciation and gratitude to the Dean of the College of Liberal Arts, Don Kaczvinsky. Without him, *The Quatrain* would not be possible.

I want to thank my fellow editors for helping to make this volume a reality, Anna Kelley and Dr. Erin Singer for guiding us through this process, and my friends Delaney and David for proofreading my emails and letting me talk things out with them. I would also like to thank the contributors, for it is with their incredible works that we were able to put together such a wonderful publication.

I hope that this literary journal sparks a fire in the hearts of many to create, and to be unafraid to express themselves through their creations. This was, and will continue to be, our goal. Please enjoy Volume 4 of *The Quatrain*.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Katelyn Swanson". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, looping 'S'.

Katelyn Swanson
Editor-in-Chief

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We're Not Really Strangers

by Addison Lindsay

We're not really strangers:

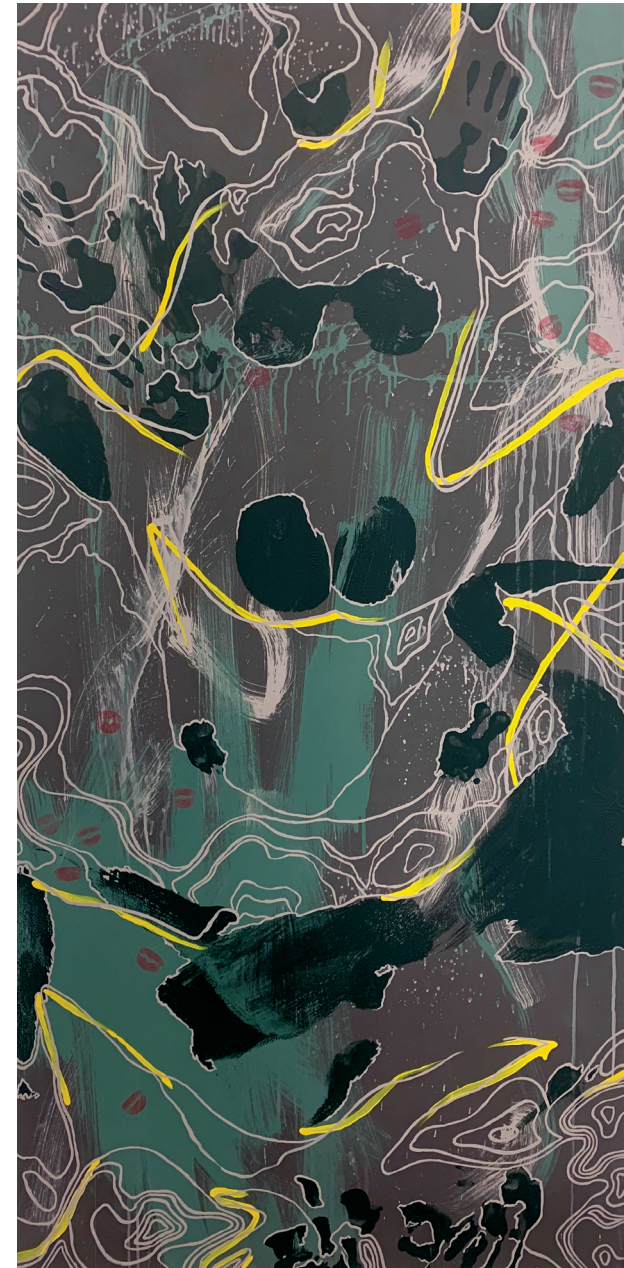
Behind the facade of the outer shells of our beings...the masks, the underdeveloped opinions, the ruthless language that just serves as a cover for something painful in the souls of our own spirits, our revolving personas of defense...lies the core of our humanity all too often ridged between the barricade of our vulnerability and heightened strength. Maybe beneath all of the mechanisms we have used against the cruelty and evolution of life lies our inner truths that connect us like strings to the ground of the same universe. Maybe we are all a part of a collective and divine experience simply due to the fact that we are all moving to the rhythm of the same world in the same spiritual existence in the billions of galaxies that make up the world in which we find ourselves. Out of all the infinite realities, we could find ourselves... we have somehow found our reality here in the midst of seven billion humans walking on the same ground on which we walk. We find ourselves in the mirrored image of another through the quite ordinary, yet beautifully miraculous, pleasures of life. Laughter and dancing, the heart of empathy that connects us as one, the things that set our hearts on fire through the lens of passion and delight and fury, the way our eyes sparkle as we talk about the things we love, how we cry in sorrow and dance in joy and grieve in change, how we connect the movement of our bodies to the feelings waiting to be unlocked, how we feel alive in the receiving and giving of love, how our beings seem to connect over mutual loves and pleasures, how we sip our coffee and eat our toast and put one leg at a time into our jeans and how we somehow find common ground in the everyday quirks that make us imperfect perfected humans that belong to each other. Perhaps we really are more alike than we are different...In the feelings we mutually share beyond our diverse experiences, in our need for love and relationship and acceptance, in the need for air and water and food for the simple reason of survival, for the fact that we all look

up at the same sky and find ourselves in the same spiritual realm as one another. We are all intricate and dreamed up human beings with various experiences and stories and loves and relations and beliefs and complicated lives, yet fabricated and designed with the same underlying universal truths that bring us to a place of being "one." We're all just tapping into our own realities of Heaven and we are all unified by being small vessels in a much bigger story.

Perhaps we aren't really strangers...maybe we are much more than that.



The Little Things
Sherpatrick Washington



Kisses on the Subject
Evelyn Hinjosa



Why Must I Remain In Shadows

Kayla O'Neal

My god

by Sadie Seilhan

my god is not the same
as their god

my god holds pressure on the soldier's gunshot wound
my god is the teacher who gives the hungry kid an extra snack
my god is fighting for clean water in flint
my god is holding a syrian refugee's hand
my god just talked someone out of taking their own life

my god is the only person i can look in the eyes some days

their god watches from the altar
their god picks up the tithes
their god makes sure their clothes are ironed on sunday
their god hands them a list of excuses to spit hatred and rage
in the faces of innocents
their god instills morals through fear of burning

their god says that i am a sinner for loving

my god is not the same
as their god

my god loves
their god scares

I've come to hate the stars...

by Grace Miholic

I've come to hate the stars
Because they only spell out your name
During nights of cold embraces
When you said you hated dreaming
But told me I should follow mine
That you'd watch with envy just below the clouds
And I would float, but never fully satisfied
Always wondering 'what if I woke up'
But staying in my slumber because my clouds were just
so comfy



A Different Perspective

Stevie Iseral

Neon Spirit

by Tyler Nelson

Neon is a young delinquent with a unique way of getting away with things. However, as of late, he's finding that it's a slippery slope. The further he goes, the more he loses touch with reality.

A strong scent begins to seep into my nostrils. Something must be breaking my concentration. Aside from us, there's no noise. No one else is around either, which is why I chose this street corner. But for some reason...It's Duke.

"Can you calm down?" I hiss at him. His bad nerves were spreading to me, distracting me.

"Sorry, man." He takes a deep breath.

One of the other two—I think his name is Bryce—makes an exaggerated sigh and covers his nose. "You said that stuff wasn't gonna smell. But here we are, smelling it."

"We aren't supposed to. If I can concentrate, that is." I mutter that last part under my breath.

"Wrap it up already. I'm bored. And it's trash anyway."

I review my work. It definitely isn't bad. I put too much effort into it for that. "I'm almost done. We can go smoke in a minute, addict." Bryce frowns, bothered by what I said. He never told me he wanted to smoke. I set down the paint in my hand and grab another color to add the finishing touches. Or I try. Either it's being rushed by someone I hardly know or Duke's anxiety creeping back up on me, but powerful paint fumes flow through my windpipe and I have a coughing fit.

When I can breathe again, I snap, "I told you to calm down! No one's going to catch us."

"I'm sorry! My mama's been crazy, man. They said 'Cause she's got a baby in the oven."

A baby in the oven. "Duke, I don't think that's what they said."

"Whatever. If she finds out I'm not at school, I'm bottled water packaging."

Travis, who's been at the wall spraying on a smiley face, turns around. "You're...what?"

I chuckle, stealing my focus and continuing my work. "She's still at that plant, Duke?" I ask absent-mindedly.

"Yeah. She was gonna quit but they gave her a promotion or something."

"Mmm."

The last thing is to add another highlight to the edge of the 'n.' No one is coming yet. At this time of day, this block is pretty much dead. To my right, Travis gives his smiley face spiky teeth. Behind me, Bryce nudges Duke and points at my back. There's this ugly grin on his face. He shakes a can of paint and sprays something on me, but I pretend not to notice.

When I'm done with my 'n,' I drop my can in my bag. "This jacket's expensive," I say. Whatever he drew, I take my hand and wipe it off of my back leaving behind spotless fabric. He isn't so amused anymore; just confused. My hoodie is fine. No harm no foul, right? Except he didn't know I could do that. "I have a better place for it." Our eyes lock as I wipe the paint from my hand down the front of his shirt.

Duke, in Duke's fashion, feels the tension and tries to break it. "It is cold this morning. He just thought you could use a coat." In another situation I'd have laughed.

Bryce flares his nostrils. "Ay, don't touch me," he grunts, shoving me back into the wall. In that instant, I hear a can clatter on the ground beside me. Before Travis can lunge at him, I grab his wrist. There's no time to fight. Someone is finally coming.

I motion to Duke and he steps towards us past Bryce, who's stupefied. "Man, what the..." He looks up down and all around, but we're nowhere in sight. Finally, he grabs a can and goes to my drawing on the wall. He has to finish this painting.

"Hey!" Calls the patrolman who just rounded the corner.

"Huh?" Bryce lets go of the can. "No. I wasn't...It was him. They were right here." Normally, someone like him would run, but he's too confused because he wasn't so guilty a second ago. I can hardly keep from laughing.

"It's okay, big guy." The cop takes him by the arm. "You don't have to plead insanity. You're only going to the station, not prison. You're lucky you're young. Vandalism is serious."

"It wasn't me, though."

"There's nobody else here, kid." The patrolman drags Bryce off to wherever he left his car along with all my paint. We listen for the sound of him driving away.

Duke chortles once the coast is clear. "Those worms on your head wiggle when you do that stuff."

"You could have hidden him too, right?" Travis asks. I nod.

"Neon, you shouldn't mess with him like that. I heard he has a gun," Duke warns.

"So? What's he gonna do, shoot me?"

"Yeah. Nobody realizes shooting people is bad until they have a gun at someone's forehead. That's what my mama says.

"I do. You do. I'll be fine. He can't be *that* stupid." Oddly, what matters to me more is whether he was right about my painting. I think they call it throw-up. "So, what do you think, Travis?"

"You should be careful who you pick fights with. Dude is huge, and you're so small."

First of all, no one told him to try and fight back. Second of all, "I was talking about the...throw-up."

He scrunches his nose. "Throw-up? Where? ...Oh,That. It's good, I guess. How are they supposed to tell you did it?" I assume that last part is sarcasm. It's just my name written in bombastic letters with neon paint. It isn't art, but then again, I'm not an artist.

...

The Sun is low in the sky when I darken my own doorstep. I split from Duke and Travis a while ago and spent the rest of the time by myself. It was boring. At one point, I thought about going back to school, but sneaking onto the campus wasn't worth the effort.

I'm reaching for my key when the door unlocks and opens in front of me. A blast of pure anger blows over me like a gust of wind. Its source is Aunt Blythe. "Were you hanging around with them crusty inner-city kids again?!"

I wince. "I—

"Don't lie, cause I know you weren't at school." She stands fuming while she waits for an answer. I give her a little bit because she's prone to interrupting when she's like this.

"Who said—

"I told your stupid ass if you skipped school again you were sleeping in the shed. Now, I asked you a question."

...

There's only one way to handle this. "I was hanging out with those crusty inner-city kids."

She relaxes and softens her words. "Oh...okay. Good."

"And I did skip school. Being there makes me sick. But not as sick as you make me." She smiles and nods. "And I'm not sleeping in the shed. I'm not sure what's dumber; the fact that you thought of that, or that you thought I would do it."

"Of course not, babe."

I smile back at her. "Can I come inside? It's cold out here, you dumb cow." She moves aside so I could enter the foyer. My footsteps echo throughout the empty halls. "Who told you I wasn't at school?"

"Some little girl called here for you. Her name was some exotic crap. She said you got an assignment together."

"An assignment? ...Oh, right."

I have an assignment for my chemistry class. I forgot who my partner was and was ignoring her and the work for two weeks. And she was keen on letting me know it. I called her back after Blythe nagged me about it. I couldn't argue back much or else she'd remember she was supposed to be mad at me.

Her name is Gila. I had to finagle it out of her without giving away that I forgot it. She didn't consider it fair if I got credit and she did all the work, so she called. Had to pull out a phone book of all things. The plan is for her to come over tomorrow afternoon so we can work on it. I was honest with her; I didn't feel like moving this weekend, so she offered to.

Now, I'm sitting in my room watching my parents do busy work throughout the house. Mom is in the kitchen cooking food I'm never gonna eat. She looks much too small to be alone in such a big room. The food smells delicious though. Dad's in his office scrubbing a wine stain out of the carpet. He looks anxious to get back to his computer. It must be important.

The doorbell rings and Mom answers the door to Gila. I had forgotten what she looked like. Earlier today I was wondering—trying to remember. She's cute. At least enough for me to put on some deodorant.

While I scramble to do that, I observe her and Mom's interaction. Mom's being hospitable and kind as usual, yet Gila's shrinking back. She didn't seem so shy on the phone. I wonder what she's thinking...*I shouldn't do that*. Instead, I start to go over to them;

however, when I get to my bedroom door, I realize I'm nervous. I don't usually talk to girls.

"Neon, your friend from school is here!" Mom calls. Her voice is deep and resonant. It sort of compels me forward. I meet Gila on the stairwell. Mom had sent her up and gone back to cooking.

She grins at me. "Wassup, bro?"

Wassup bro? "Absolutely nothing." I jerk my head towards my room and lead the way. "What about you?"

"I was at practice."

"Are you a cheerleader?" She's small and perky, so I give it a guess.

"Yeah. It's lame. We have a short week, so we have to practice this weekend too."

"I'd say it sounds fun..." I let her into my room. "...but it doesn't." She has a bunch of stuff with her. Materials for the project. "Just set those down on the desk. And you can sit—"

She plops down at the desk. Her weirdly gigantic braid dangles well past the seat of the chair.

"Anywhere."

I have her run the details by me, making no attempt to hide how lost I was. Strangely, she's really patient. I thought smart, preppy kids didn't like working with lazies like me. We have to make a model of and write a paper on some organic compound.

Light conversation helps the time go by. My recent foray into "street art" enters the mix along with my skateboarding, her cheerleading, birthdays, and other stuff. I have a stereo system in here, so I let her play music off her phone. There's a lot of stuff in a foreign language. She skips those.

"I don't see you at school a lot," she tells me.

"Probably because I'm never there. Ahaha."

She doesn't laugh with me. "Must be a Gemini thing," she mumbles disapprovingly.

Hours pass and we're making good headway. She's gluing foam balls to sticks, and I'm lying on my bed looking for sources on my laptop. She must be more comfortable once we've talked a while. After looking over her shoulder at the door, she says, "Your mom is nice. She's a little pushy, but nice."

"That's the way she is. I hope she didn't bug you or anything."

"Well...There was something. It kind of threw me off."

"I guess she is a little strange. She eats her pizza crust-first."

"No, it's not that. I don't think she likes me."

"Oh? Why do you say that?"

"It's like she was being fake nice to me. Artificial, y'know?"
I glance at her. "Maybe I smell bad."

Without meaning to, I pause the music.

"Did I say something?" She asks.

"No. My bad." The music resumes. We work a little more and wrap up for the day. When her ride comes, she leaves me to ponder. No one's ever called my mom fake before. Not the crusty street kids, not Aunt Blythe, or anyone. She's always real with people.

I saw her in the hall before my first class on Monday and was reminded of it. Fake, huh? Why did she think that? Rather than ask her about it, I'll get the answer directly. I don't know what class she has, so I go to mine and scan the building for her. I find her across the campus in her own class playing with her braid and chatting with some other girl. I'm about to delve into her mind before she freezes and looks around the room as though she knows I'm there, or at least that *something* is there.

"What's wrong?" Her friend asks.

This surprises Gila, like she forgot she was having a conversation. "Nothing. I thought I heard something." Now, I'm super curious. Who is Gila really?

Inside, her mind is incredibly alien, but human, nonetheless.

She's worried about the presence she felt. It's closer now than before. She isn't aware that it's me. In fact, she wonders if it's a ghost. She asks Who are you? This question doesn't come directly from her brain. It originates from some other place.

How can you tell I'm here?

It's just something I can do. I can feel you there.

Really? That explains it. What does that 'feel' like?

It varies depending on the individual. You feel very dull and gray, like you're a bit removed from this world. She pauses. You're also very familiar.

I've been made! *Uh...look, a train!* I mentally shout.

A train? She's imagining a train all of a sudden. *Why?*

By the time she asks, both my consciousness and the train have made our strategic exit. I'm back in my classroom and there's a worksheet in front of me that wasn't there before. Wow. She can do...whatever it is she does, and I'm psychic. It should at the very least give us something to discuss.

It doesn't though. In chemistry, she tells me she'll handle the rest of the project herself, and I can go home. I disregard it as an opportunity to fool around after school. Later, I try and call her and ask if she finished our assignment without any trouble. She doesn't answer. Instead she messages me.

It reads, "I can't talk. But I'm done with everything." It's punctuated with a smile emoji.

Gradually, I try more and more to get her attention. It's not even romantic. She was refreshing to be with somehow, but right when I felt it, it started slipping away. Soon, she only turns away when she sees me. Maybe she doesn't like me.

Loneliness starts to creep up on me. I blink and it's no longer cold and leaves cover the trees once again. My birthday is in a couple of weeks and I'm honestly too bored to care. I do have friends at school, I could maybe do something with them for once.

Not that it matters anyway. Blythe probably wouldn't let me celebrate. I've been skipping more often and whenever she caught me, she was more upset. At least until I calmed her down. Eventually, she didn't react anymore. Though she couldn't hide her disdain for me completely.

Imagine if she knew the company I've recently been keeping when I wasn't at home. To be honest, she could probably smell it on me. The reason it's been lonely is because I haven't seen Travis or Duke in a while. So to kill time and fill the gap, I found some dudes around the skate park. They're shady and I don't enjoy their company, but I can smoke for free with them.

The school week just ended, and I awake Saturday morning to an empty house. Craving activity, I go out looking for something to do. After a train, I end up in the city where Travis's apartment is. It wasn't intentional. Probably out of habit. I was just wandering and found myself here. Maybe I'll run into him. I saw or heard less and less of him and Duke as the season waned. Then not at all. Whatever our issue was, it came to a head when we were last together.

I was with them after a bad morning. The first warm morning all year. I woke up angry and stayed that way all day. We were loitering in front of a corner store shooting dice. I'd had a string of bad rolls and the latest wasn't any better. That's when Duke made one too many bad jokes.

He accentuated my misfortune with something stupid like, "Dang, Neon. Looks like there's some trouble in paradise." He sounded so proud of his garbage pun, too.

"Oh my God, will you shut up! That doesn't even make sense, you moron."

Travis stirred. "Chill out, it's just a joke." He told me. I got mad and told Duke to shut up all the time. I still don't understand why I had to "chill out" then.

I grimaced at him. "You chill out. Tell me what to do again."

He wasn't one to back down from a dare. "Chill out, you speed bump. 'Fore I take your phone and put it on a high shelf."

That did it. I shoved him in the shoulder. Not that it meant much to him; he hardly even moved. Meanwhile, his push back knocked me to the pavement. I didn't want to be outdone, so from where I was, I closed my eyes and threw him a few feet backward. He landed on his side.

I casually advanced on him with my hands resting on my head to assert dominance and held him in place as he tried to stand. I could feel him struggling against me. In the end, it wasn't a fair fight. He realized this and surrendered.

"Let me go," he said. I obliged and offered a hand to him. He swatted it away and got up himself. "Duke. I'm going. Come on"

I didn't mean to make him that mad. "Hey, you don't have to leave."

"Shut up." He spat at me. Duke, who'd been uncharacteristically uninvolved during our tussle, brushed past me and started away with Travis.

"Stop." I demanded. And they did. "What's wrong with you guys? It isn't that serious."

They mulled it over. It wasn't that bad, was it? They can't even remember what they were mad about. The more they tried to recall it, the less they could recall. Like a dream.

We hung out the rest of the day as though nothing happened. Apparently, they remembered after that because I haven't seen them

since. If I did, I would reassure them that nothing is wrong, and that they're overreacting.

I'm being silly. If Travis wanted to see me, he'd do it like he always did. There's nothing for me here. Thankfully, the block is a little busy this morning with people going to work and such. I'm able to hail a cab going by and go to the market square. I don't feel like skating or anything, but I figure buying things could entertain me.

During the ride I scan for a good place to start. The driver is about to turn a corner when I spot the front of a pet store. Out of the blue, I want a dog. I pay the driver to wait for me and hop out.

Hours later, I'm sitting in a park sharing a gaze with an astute puppy. The guy in the store called him a "Eurasier." I was told their store specialized in breeding dogs, so I took his word for it. I'm not old enough to buy a dog by myself, though curiously, they didn't sell a dog to me. They sold one to a six-and-a-half-foot airplane pilot wanting to surprise his daughter. The dog is adorable—I wouldn't let anyone hear me call him that—and the idea of having him excites me. Inspired by the way he's sitting on the ground next to me, I decided to name him Sphynx. Your name is Sphynx, I tell him. Dogs don't speak, not with words, but with an impulse to which I'm met with a primal form of acknowledgment. It's weird.

He periodically wants to bark at or jump on people who walk by, but I urge him not to. He's really rowdy if I let him loose, which reminds me of Blythe. As mad as she is at me, there's no way she's letting me keep this thing. I shake my head. It would be fine. I have to keep him; he already has a name.

I spend the rest of the day playing with him. I don't want to go home and deal with Aunt Blythe. Once it gets dark, I'm too tired to care anymore. I get on another train heading back. Sphynx sits in my lap on the way. Luckily, no one bothers me that he's out in the open. It's nice to hold this small, warm, pulsating creature against me.

Aunt Blythe must be in the kitchen cooking because I smell food when I fling open the door. I have to do it hands free because I'm burdened with my skateboard, a dog in a container, and all of its

related dog things. I never get the chance to choose whether I want to sneak him in or rip the bandage off now because Sphynx yips, loudly announcing his arrival.

"What in the name of..." I hear from deep within the house followed by oncoming footsteps. Blythe peeks from behind a corner brandishing a spatula out in front her for potential danger. "What that?"

I sigh. "A dog."

She reveals herself fully. "Who's dog? Cause I know it ain't yours."

"He is mine. I bought him." I carry all the stuff I'm holding to the sitting room and plop it on a table. Except Sphynx. I set him on the ground and let him out. "His name is Sphynx."

"Since when do they let kids buy animals? H-How much did that cost?"

"Does it matter? He's here now."

"Neon, you can't have a dog. You can't even go to school. How are you gonna magically produce the responsibility to take care of that?"

"The difference is that I actually want to take care of him. Come on. He's handsome."

"He could be a movie star. You aren't keeping him."

"Yes I am," I demand.

Blythe relents for a second and then shakes her head. "I'm not doing this again."

"Doing what again?"

"You *know* what." As she's going to say something else, Blythe looks down and shrieks. "My ring!" She hustles behind me toward the coffee table.

"Your ring?" I look in time to see Sphynx swallowing Blythe's old ring. If I knew that was a hazard, I'd have kept hold of him. "Why isn't it on your finger?"

Blythe has her hands on her head in a panic. "I took it off while I was in here earlier so I could make food." She briefly glances at me and her face brightens. "What are you waiting for? Get it out of him!"

I hadn't thought of that. "C'mere, Sphynx," I command, and he hops into my arms. I close my eyes and telepathically search deep in his body. I can kind of feel the ring squeezing through into his stomach. "Aha!" I try to pull it backward and am immediately resisted by his esophagus. Sphynx starts making a weird heaving sound. It might hurt, so I stop.

Blythe is hysterical; repeatedly telling me to get it out. "That was my mother's ring, Neon," she cries. It's only stressing me out.

There is another way. If I can't pull the ring out by itself, I can make him puke it up. I upset the fluid in his stomach. The acid roils and churns against its fleshy prison walls and out it comes. All over the floor. The ring splashes into the vomit.

Blythe swipes it and is relieved. She considers the puke on the floor before putting her hand over her eyes. "I can't. I'm tired. We can talk about this in the morning."

"There's nothing to talk about."

She throws her head back and then gives me a defeated stare. "Oh my God, Neon...don't. Please."

Too late. "Go to bed, Auntie. Having a dog is a great idea."

"You're right, babe. I wasn't thinking it through." With that, she shuffles off to bed.

In the morning while I'm in the kitchen pouring cereal, I notice the voicemail light on the old landline is blinking. I press a button to play them. The first one is nonsense, which I skip.

The next is Aunt Blythe...

"Neon. It's really hard to say this but I can't look after you anymore. I don't know how much more I can take mentally. I'm constantly watching you do things that I know neither me nor your parents would approve of yet am unable to do anything about it. The smoking, the skipping, the insults...I'm losing my mind.

Even when I'm not around you it's like I'm witnessing things that don't actually happen. I swear I even saw my..." Her words get caught. After she clears her throat she continues. "I need therapy, so I'm tagging in your cousin Chris. You always got along with him, right? I'm sorry I couldn't tell you this directly. I didn't want you doing whatever it is you do to stop me. And I really didn't want to face the rejection if you didn't try. Chris should be there in a couple of weeks. Before your birthday. For now, don't kill that dog. I love—

Dumbfounded, I turn off the message and rush to her room. Her bags are gone along with her clothes. She can't have left. There's no way. I was just talking to her.

I call her back, but she doesn't answer. I try again. And again. And again. Nothing. Aren't adults supposed to put up with kids' non-sense? What would Dad think? She just abandoned me? Then had the nerve to say, "I love you." I think she did anyway.

What now? I'm kind of hurt that she left. If I knew, I could have convinced her it was fine. I spend the rest of the day desperately trying to call her and give up when I catch myself calling my mom. There's nothing to do. She's gone for now, surprising that it is. This must have been weighing on her for a while.

The next day, I debate whether to go to school. If I skip again, I'll just prove Blythe's point. Not to mention it's almost the end of the school year and the exams are coming. I have to go. I get dressed and am almost out the door before I hear a yip.

Uh-oh. I can't leave him alone. But it didn't sit right with me to stay home. How much do puppies need to eat a day? According to the internet, it's three. If I pour three bowls I could potentially

make him only eat them at specific intervals. Or if I do one big bowl, he'll eat what he needs when he needs it. I prefer the latter idea.

What about when it goes through him? "Here, Sphynx!" I call. He comes running. Once I fill his bowl of food, I kneel and place a hand on his head, trying my best to influence him when to eat. He seems to get it.

I sit and rub his head for a bit. "Oh Sphynx, why did you go for her ring?" I ask him. He stares back at me vapidly. There's a sliding door in the kitchen leading out into the garden. It's walled off, but that's good. There's also no grass for him to dig underneath. Unfortunately, that meant he could only go in the plants or on the cobblestone. That's all right. I crack the door wide enough for him to go through. Then I do the same thing to him I did with the food, except with the door and the pooping.

Satisfied with the bandage solution, I commute to school beneath an overcast sky. Nothing notable happens all day until I get to chemistry. While we're reading chapters in the textbook, I notice the teacher's actually making the answer key to the test on his computer.

"Well, isn't that convenient?" I say to myself before hopping on the opportunity to see what he's seeing.

The first thing that jumps out at me is that the test isn't multiple choice, drastically reducing the difficulty for me if I don't cheat. The next thing is that the questions and their answers are arbitrary, not necessarily the main idea stuff one would expect. They could be on the smallest of random details. If I did study, I would need to pour over every little thing. I couldn't have been luckier. Anything I missed he has to "double-check" to make sure he typed correctly. All the while, I'm copying it down.

When class is over, Gila is in front of me in the hallway. Before I can stop myself, I call her. "Hey."

She turns. "Oh...hi?"

"How have you been?"

"Peachy."

"Same," I lie. "Are you ready for your exams?"

"For the most part. You?"

"Nope. But I have the answer key for chemistry. He was making it when we were in class." I show it to her in my notebook.

"How'd you..." She trails off. She must already have a clue.

"It was easy. Hey, if you're not against cheating we can ace this thing together. Let's go over them together." I wave the notebook at her.

"I have to go to class."

"Later. After school."

"I have practice."

I swallow. This is so pathetic. She's drawing me in. Even when I've been angry at her all this time.

A second goes by as she looks me up and down. Something in her expression changes before she responds. "I could use a break. I'll be by after I'm done today." She goes to class.

It's bittersweet. On one hand I'm happy to be with her. On the other, she could have just asked for the notebook. Now she's spending time with me because I wouldn't let her tell me no. It was just one project. Why do I want her company?

School lets out and I leave the building wondering how to blow the hour and a half I have until Gila is finished. I could go home and wait. Or I could go get high. The second choice is much less boring.

In the usual spot, somewhat underneath a highway, I see the

usual loiterers: A tatted up gentleman in a wifebeater named Will, a dropout named Rod—I think it was short for something—and a burly, light skinned fellow with eyebrow slits and height to spare named Kenzo. I came upon such fascinating company after I helped them get their basketball from stuck on a rim on the nearby court. After that, I ended up smoking with them.

None of them were very interesting. I usually poked fun at them by cracking jokes at their expense and seeing if any of them would catch on. Will was usually savvy. Thankfully, Rod wasn't because he was always deathly serious. And violent.

Kenzo nudges Will as he spots me approaching. "What's up?" he calls.

I shrug, "I'm bored for now." When I get closer, they all dap me off. Kenzo is overly rough with his. "What are we doing today, friends? Discussing the city's shifting political climate?"

Rod scoffs.

Will chuckles and throws a glance at Kenzo. "No. Just chilling."

"Mind rolling one? I don't have a lot of time." I motion with my hands what I mean.

Rod scoffs again.

Will's attention is diverted behind me. "Waiting on him." He points. Turning around I see none other than Bryce for the first time in months.

"You guys know each other? Small world."

"Nigga, small what?"

"He's my cousin." Kenzo pipes up.

"Mmm." I hold out my hand to Bryce. "I know we didn't end on the best of terms the last time we saw each other."

He takes it and does whatever weird ritual he does. "It's cool man."

It doesn't look cool. Not on his face. Always having to show people what they need to see or tell them what they need to hear gets tiresome. And then they won't even do the same when I have something I need to hear. "Out with it," I snap, and he can no longer resist the truth.

"I don't like you, freak." I hear the shock behind me as they all stir. The atmosphere turns stale.

This gives me pause, but I'm not surprised. Everyone, including Bryce, quickly forgets he said that, but I look on him a little more apprehensively.

"I don't see you around here that often." Kenzo says.

Bryce answers for me. "I told you, he lives out in the country. On some money shit."

Kenzo nods with approval and moves to the park table a few feet away with Will. Bryce follows with his bag. There Kenzo ground up the plant and rolled it up. The first time, I was nervous about them doing this out in the open. That was before I realized the cops around here would probably sit and smoke with you.

After a few rounds, they haven't passed it to me once. They're definitely making a point of some kind. I've kept quiet about it until now.

"Yo." I make a "gimme" gesture.

Rod has the blunt. "Oh. You want..." He goes to pass it to me but pulls it away when I reach for it. "I hate freeloaders. And I didn't see you put up anything for this." He drags the "s" out into a hiss.

"I have money if you want me to pitch in."

"Pitch in," he mocks. "We been known you had money." He wastefully tosses the blunt. And stands. "Run them pockets. Capital One." Will and Kenzo are on either side of him saying nothing. I didn't

see Bryce leave, but he's gone. I guess this was planned.

I can't say I'm surprised. I stand up as well. "No."

"You should change your mind." He says lifting his shirt above his waste. The gleam of something metal shines in my eye. I slowly start to back away, but Kenzo gets in the way. His midsection fills my view as he closes in.

Running isn't an option. This is hard to do, so I can only do it on one person at a time. I can't really focus well on who I target; there's a crowd and I don't know the person's specific mental geometry. I want to aim it at Rod since he's the one with the Ruger, but disappointment hits me as Will falls to the ground unconscious. Rod is shaken.

Quickly I throw him a few meters away to create distance and incapacitate him. Next is Kenzo, who's shocked at what's happening, but comes to his senses. He's entirely too close. I want to look him in the eye, but his chest is blocking most of the view. Whatever his next move is he can't make it. I'm locking him in place. Concern starts to overtake his imposing demeanor as he becomes aware of this.

He stumbles backward when I release him. He's very confused. Unfortunately, I underestimate how quickly he can recover. Before I can retaliate, he raps me on the forehead and sends me to the ground. "What was that?" He growls at me.

I caress the skin where he hit me. "What? You mean this?" I hoist him into the air, and he scrambles his feet to find footing that's far gone from him. The road isn't too overloaded with traffic where the cars can't go fast, nor is it too empty that the cars are too far in between. Perfect. Getting to my feet, I hover Kenzo over the street when there's not enough time for the next car coming to stop.

Kenzo shouts in fear and squeezes his eyes shut. At the last second, I yank him to the sidewalk. Right as I do, I'm tackled and brought to the ground again by Rod. He pulls his fist back to punch me, but freezes. Then a scream erupts from his mouth. He feels agonizing

pain in his left forearm. I broke it. Tucking it against himself, he scrambles backward. He can't think rationally. He can't think of anything but the pain.

In actuality, his arm is unharmed. Suggesting to him that it wasn't would scare him off of me and stop any further advances. Will is unconscious and since Kenzo was already long gone, that means I'm the victor. Everything turned out alright. I deescalated it. It's fine. But I do feel a dull pain in my side as I'm going home. I press the spot with my fingers. Nothing is wrong with it. I didn't even get hit there.

On the train back home, I get a message from Gila telling me she's through with practice. We arrive at my place at the same time. I wave to whoever is in the driver seat of the car and I kick up my board to rush in and check on Sphynx.

He comes running when I open the door. The food bowl is empty, and the garden is smelly. He behaved well.

Gila enters the kitchen and gasps. "You have a dog?" She outstretches her arms to Sphynx. He doesn't react. She nevertheless maintains her position. There seems to be some unspoken communication going on between them. He finally jumps into her arms.

It took me hours at the park the other day to get him to come to me. And I was using telepathy to speed up the process. "How did you do that?"

She rocks him against her body. "I resonated with him. What's his name?"

"Sphynx."

"Okay. Get down, Sphynx." He immediately hops to the floor. Whenever I've told him what to do, he hasn't listened unless I forced him. I'm a little jealous.

"So, you want to study for chemistry now?" I ask her.

"Oh! I forgot. Yes."

We work in the living room on the couch. Gila makes note cards and we quiz ourselves. Our banter is more animated than last time and I catch myself laughing more than usual. The pain in my side hasn't subsided. Actually, is it getting worse? Speaking is getting harder like I'm too weak to spare the air. The next bout of laughter sets the room spinning.

"Neon, are you okay?" I hear Gila ask. She sounds like she's underwater. The last thing I hear is her subdued scream as my head falls forward onto the couch cushion. And the last thing I see is a quickly growing red blotch on the upholstery.

Light shines brightly through the window. All is quiet as I take in my surroundings. All besides a periodic beep. I'm in a hospital room. I move my arm—there's a drip attached to it.

There are wires coming off of me as well. They're connected to a heart monitor... A nurse was here to enlighten me on a few things. She left soon after.

Footsteps approach and in comes a doctor and a police officer. "Good morning, you freak of nature," the doctor says.

"Um. Good morning." I reply. "Why exactly am I here again? Or, where am I in the first place?"

"Sunset General. And did the nurse not tell you? You got shot! You've been zonked for like a day."

The nurse did say that. I just needed to hear it again. "When?"

The officer speaks up. "That's what we're trying to figure out." He takes a seat beside the bed. "This has got to be the weirdest case I've dealt with. Check it out. So we get a call that there's been a gunshot. This person didn't see. Only heard. We sort of triangulate the spot where the gun was fired—detective stuff, you wouldn't get it—and find blood on the ground. But only little drips. People around say they only saw a street fight, with some druggie nonsense sprinkled in about guys floating and stuff.

I'm starting to think we're at the wrong place and the gun was

fired somewhere else when you come in. There's a call in another precinct about you. I find out you meet the description of one the guys at the scene and you have a gunshot wound. Unless your friend isn't letting on everything she knows, you got shot before you got home. Now, I can call this case shut when you tell me how you got thirty miles away after taking a bullet without bleeding out and who you were fighting with."

"I didn't get shot though. I got into a fight, but I was fine after."

"Um. Okay. D-Did you get shot after that or..."

"I never got shot! Wouldn't I be in pain?"

The doctor chimes in. "That's morphine. You definitely got shot. You think we just opened a hole in you and stitched it up for fun?"

I groan. How? I was fine. I remember up until I got home. No one would shoot me there. Index cards appear in my head. I was studying for my test with Gila. Then nothing. Before that, I spanked Kenzo, Rod, and Will. Rod had a gun. But he never used it. I got out unscathed. I was fine. Wasn't I?

"I fought with someone named Rod and two others." After giving the officer a description, he's off. I can't answer his other question because I don't recall being shot. He'd be back later for more questions. When he's gone, fatigue sets in. It's as if I only regained consciousness to see what was going on.

My dreams are filled with scenarios of Aunt Blythe, Travis, and Duke. They hate me in every one of them. I can't imagine why. There's a lot of yelling and cursing, but no one ever seems to want a resolution like I do. It feels unfair. Sphynx appears next. He doesn't react when I say anything to him.

Then comes Gila. She's in an indistinct location focused on a...gray blob thing. She calls it a husk. It's gross to her, and it makes her not want to be near it. But it's withering away, and she wants to help it as well.

"Why is your mom fake?" She asks it.

"Because that's my resolution," it answers. In dreams, I occasionally fill the shoes of people or things other than me but end up being me one way or another. In this case, I could be either Gila or the husk. Or an invisible third party. "They died here. My parents." The husk explains.

Gila nods. "You won't meet the same fate."

Suddenly I'm back in the hospital room. No. This one is different. It's dark outside and I'm no longer on a drip or a heart monitor. I don't remember moving. A nurse says I've been in and out of consciousness all day. When I ask him why I'm so tired, he tells me it's probably stress and that I can go once Aunt Blythe gets here. That's tomorrow.

I turn over in the bed towards the window. The door opens and closes, which must be the nurse leaving. Then I hear footsteps and sit up. There's a person—a small woman. A visitor? She seems indistinguishable, but I concentrate on her and the features come into focus.

"Mom?" It's her. Before my very eyes. I don't feel like I'm dreaming, but I must be. I'm not projecting her there either. Not deliberately. "How are you here?"

To my right, someone speaks. "I thought it would be good for you to see her. For closure." It's Gila.

"Is this some kind of illusion? Did you know she's dead? You've met her."

"You told me. And suddenly it all made sense"

I still can't believe what I'm seeing. That is, until Mom clasps my cheeks with her hands. She isn't solid, but not completely intangible either. She feels warm. Like a fire. This was exactly what it used to feel like. And when I examine her face, I'm certain it's not a dream because no mental image I've made of her could ever capture her with this level of accuracy. Hot tears well in my eyes. I'm ashamed I ever even tried.

"Can you leave us alone?" I ask Gila.

"No. I'm her medium. She's here through me and she'll speak through me."

"Is she saying anything?"

"She's been screaming at me to tell you she and Dad love you." Dad. Where is he?

"I love you too!" I scream back. She jumps. What else should I tell her? I don't know.

"She's asking what's wrong."

I smirk. She always used to listen to my problems when I was younger. In fact, her and dad would make me tell them. "I don't know what to do. I thought I could use whatever this is that I can use, and fix things, and it would be fine. But nothing is fine. Auntie Blythe isn't fine. I'm not fine." Mom leans on the bed and embraces me.

"She says it *will* be okay. You'll find other ways to fix things."

"Thanks for believing in me."

"Neon, as touching as this is, I can't keep this connection up for long." Gila says. "I have to break it soon."

"Wait! Not yet." My heart races. "Is she saying anything now?"

"She is."

"What?"

"She said to go to school."

She's starting to feel less substantial. I hug her fiery mass tighter and utter one last "I love you" before she dissipates entirely, and I'm left alone with tears streaking my face. I used to think saying I love you was corny. But it's different when you can't say it anymore.

Gila wipes at her eyes. "She said 'I love you too.'" I grab her and pull her into an embrace as well.

"Thank you. Even if I didn't need that, thank you." She feels just like my mother did. I hold her at arm's length. "You aren't really here?"

She sniffs. "It's after visiting hours."

"How did you do this?"

"I went to their resting spot and asked nicely." She's being facetious, but she assures me it's true.

I think about what Mom said. That I'd find other ways to fix things. Could I really? I wipe my eyes too. "Months ago, you told me I was dull and gray."

"When you tried to invade my mind. Yes."

"How am I now?"

Gila squints at me. "I'm starting to see some color in there."



Walking Through Chengdu

by Mark Eastwood

Walking with friends through Chengdu at night.
In an alley the silhouette of a young couple osculating.
Unusual—China is not America.
Closer, and I see they are not kissing; her head is in
 his chest.
Closer, and I hear her speaking in the dismal language
 known to all humans.
They are behind us, and Nathan speaks:
"She was crying."

The Cup of Coffee Next to Me Makes Me Feel Idle

by Wenona Jonker

Those were the neglected days, neglected weeks, neglected
summers, of hours that felt at once too quick and uncomfortably
slow. I lived them with a cup of coffee on the table beside me and
a pencil in my hand that would only occasionally spill onto the
page. For every sentence there was a quick hour of busy stillness,
too full of quick thoughts to overflow into anything meaningful.
Intentions never actualized by inspiration—inspiration never
bigger than the moment it took to take a sip of coffee and put a
pencil to the page. I wish I could say that the stillness was full but
I was too afraid to let it be full, or rather empty (stillness is usually
fullest when it is (empty)). I was too afraid to attend the day.
So I busied myself with other people's business.

The chair next to me has been occupied by three different cups of
coffee: a white mocha, a cold brew, and a decaf latte.
Why decaf? It isn't late—oh wait. It's been four hours. Quick hours
that move too slowly for me to notice that they're moving at all.

I feel guilt about the idleness.
That's what it is—
not stillness.

Evenings at my parents' home could be still. They have all the
potential to be still. The windows in my bedroom face east.

Theirs is not the dynamic light of the late evening west
Theirs is not the golden waves of high tide crashing through
the living room
Theirs is the tide rolling out,
a still pond, warm pink water
flowing through the trees between our house

and the next,
over windowsills,
over the sandy riverbed blanket on my bed,
turning to blue
Blue like the music from the record

playing in the living room,
crackling with dim stars...

This is where the moments are longest: when I can see the
old, yellow light reflected off the steeple of First Baptist
through the trees, like a mirror at the end of a hallway. When
the clouds float across the blue stillness, silent ships.

This is where the moments go too fast: when I try to use my
page to soak up the late evening sun.

I feel sorry for the late evening light. I think I exploit her in my
writing. She is the only place I feel still; she is where he
walked with me after all.

But "light like water" has been done before.

And my coffee is cold.



The Wedding

by Hannah Jones

The sun shines on a gathering of family and friends in front of a small gazebo. Threats of rain had prompted uneasy smiles that morning, but the clouds dissipated without a drop to dampen the festivities of the afternoon. White chairs were set in even rows of eight, the pale-yellow runner was laid along the aisle, small bouquets of yellow tulips were tied upon the edges of the rows of chairs, the small stereo was tested and set with its brief accompaniment playlist, all as the sun continued peeking up from behind the askew wooden cross mounted atop the rustic structure of weathered wood and chipped white paint to illuminate the small clearing.

Behind the door to the adjoining chapel, round tables and chairs were set up, decorated with glass marbles and more tulip arrangements, a rectangular table set at the front for those of special significance. A table for serving food held burners and serving utensils, with plates and eating utensils stacked at one end. (The tables and chairs would then be cleared, and the stereo brought from outside for the dancing after eating.) Though a minor mistake had been made regarding the address of delivery for the caterers, one phone call assured the party of freshly grilled chicken and chopped salad on its way to arrive at the moment of need.

In a back room, a lady and her entourage prepared themselves in giddy excitement while the males mulled about with nothing to do but compare work horrors and laughs as the clock continued its steady ticking. A renegade young lady of three years nearly ripped her delicate dress as she escaped the confines of fabrics and hairspray in the tiny makeshift dressing room. Thwarted by a soon-to-be uncle of much larger stride who scooped her up with expert precision and an accompanying tickle, she let out a giggle, the dress remaining unharmed and in one piece. Her mother then averted further disturbances from her and her older sister of five years with the important task of counting the tulip petals in their baskets. No amount of unexpected obstacles were unmet as the

clock hands neared their inevitable clasp of each other at high noon. Ten children stand before the gazebo. Seven young women, three young men. All are wearing some shade of yellow or green. Five stand to either side of the preacher and the groom. The five to the right, four girls and one boy, belong to the groom. The others to the bride. Two young girls (including the prior renegade) are held by their father on the front row, attempting to squirm as he holds them close under the hot sun. Beads of sweat form and fall from the preacher's balding head. What had promised to be a cool day of cloud cover from the storms of the day before is proving to be more heated than anticipated. The entrance of the bride, the shared vows, the exit of all attendants—the ceremony cannot be over fast enough.

Such is the thought of the young lady standing next to the best man. Mere feet away from the metaphorical altar, she has the privilege of watching each bead of sweat condense slowly, accumulate into a malleable round mass, pause to hang on a silver hair before leaning forward to reconnect with and slide down the moist cheek and over the double chin, finally becoming absorbed in the white cotton of the preacher's collar. One particular drop pauses in the crease of his eye. He blinks, forcing the drop from its resting point and propelling it along its path down the side of his face. Like the first tear the young woman ever saw fall from her father's eye.

I had arrived home from my after-school coffee shop job early when Dad called. He was not there, however. No, he was at the hospital. With my mama. She'd been T-boned driving to the grocery store for that night's dinner, the oncoming truck smashing into the driver's side door—part of the truck's headlight cover had to be pulled from the side of her head. (The kid said he didn't see the red light—even though the light had been red long enough for the car in the adjacent lane to stop.) Gone in an instant. Meeting Dad at the hospital a few minutes later, he wouldn't look at me. He could barely choke out what had happened. I just stood there. Then I leaned into Dad for a hug, a strong embrace—he would whisper reassurances in my ear—"It'll all be okay...we can make it...we just have to stick together"—and hold me tight, stand tall for me. But his arms draped loosely around me. I felt my hair moisten with his

tears. He shook, unable to speak anything, only gasp, "she's gone.. she's gone..." as his weight settled on my shoulders.

Returning home, he shut himself in his room, leaving the weighty task of telling my siblings to me. Only emerging from his grotto to insist upon the closed casket service and immediate burial, my father locked himself within his own prison of memories and grief. But it was understandable—he had just lost his wife, after all—stolen away after years of pain and joy. I whispered this into the ears of my little sisters as they dried their cheeks on my shoulder each night. He would be alright, just as they would, I promised. Mama would want us to be strong for him. To be the little woman she had trained us to be.

Now, with the utterance of two words, another woman will become the woman of his house. Bitterness jerks the young woman from her memory. For the better, most likely. That one only leads to more tears anyway. Her soon-to-be step-brother grunts and tugs at his bright yellow bowtie. Poor little guy. At eight years, he doesn't have a say in much of anything, much less whether or not he must wear a bowtie that cuts off airflow into his white long-sleeved button-down. Who decided on a long-sleeved button-down for a summer day anyway? There is even a darkening of the white fabric around his neck. If he didn't have a crew cut, his blonde hair would be plastered to his forehead—much like the current state of his sister's bangs. No amount of hairspray could hold her beautifully thick blonde hair from her face, and now her golden mantle lies heavily upon her neck. The other two sisters had been smarter—their hair is pulled back from their faces and positioned in braided twists and buns, held securely off of their necks. If their mother does not enter the scene soon, however, their impeccable make-up may begin to develop streaks.

The stereo shifts its tune at last. All gazes shift to the aged wooden doors of the chapel as they open wide. A young man stands at the entrance with a woman dressed in pure white.

He escorted her slowly between the few rows of family and friends as the stereo drones on with its recorded orchestra playing "The

Wedding March" assertively across the clearing. The young woman gazes past the pair to the chapel doors. Doors she recognizes from the twenty-five-year-old picture that hung above her mother's baby grand in the front room of her father's house. How she used to study that image. An image of her beginnings—the day of her parents' wedding—with the familiar faces of her parents not yet worn by the sudden death of her mother's parents or the loss of her father's job or the unexpected announcement of her uncle's stage four cancer. So much joy in the expressions of these young lovers, ready to take on the world together, promising before God and man to cling to one another, to serve one another, to love one another, till death should them part. As of yesterday, however, the picture now rests, preserved in layers of bubble wrap, sandwiched between old family photos of generations past, all hidden away in the dusty attic.

The bride is passed along to her groom, her escort taking his place at the end of her lined entourage. Her smile is modest, almost shy. But her eyes never leave her groom. Her attendants show even greater enthusiasm, the girls on their toes with wide grins stretching their bright pink lips and the boys nearly bouncing up and down—or perhaps that is simply an impatience to escape the heat.

Seating everyone with a sweeping gesture of his hand, the preacher begins to speak. "Welcome to the union of not just two people, but two families..."

More like three families. For the mother- and sister-in-law of the groom sat upon the last row of white chairs.

"In the wake of our tragedy, God provides a new joy, a new peace, a new love..."

To replace the old. New children, new woman, new house, new pets—all added upon the completion of a single dialogue.

"And so, before all of your family and friends gathered here today..."

Well, not *all*. But then, if all of the family were here, this whole shindig wouldn't even be happening.

"Do you promise to love and cherish her, in sickness and in health, through all trials and joys that meet you in this life..."

What if he had prayed harder? God does miracles. He should have prayed harder. More. Maybe he didn't believe. Why didn't he do something? Did he even love her?

"I do."

Nothing. He doesn't listen. Doesn't hear his own daughter crying out. Pleading for a moment. Telling him—screaming inside—that she's not okay. She's not ready.

"Now, do you promise to love and support him, in sickness and in health, as you encounter every trial and celebrate each joy..."

My mama was one of the strongest women I have ever known. She actually met my dad while powerlifting in college. She was never big or buff—rather, she was quite petite. But her small stature only hid her immense strength. God knew she'd need it for hauling around two children under three with one on the way. And for all of the field days and mission trips and caretaking of extended family along with her own. He knew she'd need to be durable and hardy to encourage the athleticism of her sons as her husband traveled for work, to move about the massive furniture necessary in a household of eight as she maintained the clean, but welcome, atmosphere of a hearty home, to lift countless loads of laundry consisting of the many uniforms, play clothes, and suitcases of collared button-downs, khaki pants and black socks accumulated by the end of the week. God knew she had to be strong.

My mama had to bury her first born—her baby girl. Barely past girlhood herself and required to wear black for her little angel from Heaven. She had to stand in the next room, waiting on her husband, and as he rushed through the sliding doors, wait for him to come, so he wouldn't see her legs shake, so he wouldn't see her fall until he was right there with her. Look into his anxious eyes—those forest green eyes that reminded her daily of the wooded glen in which she grew up—and tell him that his baby was gone. His

little girl. She had to go home and feed their other baby, to clean the house, do the laundry. And love the four little ones provided in the wake of the storm. God gave her a reason to be strong.

Only months later, my mama had to once again don her black dress for her father. She had been her daddy's little girl, a Christmas present from God in '58 in celebration of her parents' first anniversary. The bond had only grown over the many years of difficulty and success. So, it was only natural as that bond was ripped apart by even the most temporary of divisions—death—that the untethered end dropped to the ground, beginning to unravel ever slowly as children, a husband, neighbors, friends, family, acquaintances tugged strands of her in various directions. The storm began anew, and yet she remained steady in the eye. Because God knew she had to be strong.

I wish I had that strength. Maybe God didn't realize I'd need it, too. He forgot to look ahead and see that my story would be just as hard. That I would need that supernatural strength and faith and hope to get through. And I can't borrow from my mama anymore. She's not here to show me how—like she did with sweeping the kitchen, gathering every last dust bunny hiding beneath the small side table next to the front door.

Round tables are crowded with family and friends. Her family surrounding one table, his around another, various friends are scattered about, distant relatives sit off in one corner. All of the children line the rectangular head table on either side of the bride and groom. But the proper placement of the two descending lines of children about their parent has dissolved into a free-for-all scramble, his and hers alternating regardless of rank or heritage.

Sitting next to her younger brother, the young lady sipped her punch. The sharp tartness clung to the back of her throat. She kept sipping as the feeling faded. Laughter erupted at the opposite end of the table, breaking her absorbed attention from the fabric yellow tulips sprouting from a glass of green marbles gracing the center of the table.

"And that's when Bobby realized we were moving!" The room

was captivated by the young storyteller standing next to the newlyweds. He raised his plastic cup of punch in a toast. "To mom and the love of her life; and to cardboard boxes meant for moving and not play-forts!"

Laughter and cheers rose with countless cups of punch. No one noticed when one cup did not reach the lips of its bearer.

"Let's turn up the music for the first dance!" Someone called from the back.

"Moosik! Moosik!" squealed the youngest occupant of the room to the delight of the others.

The young men shifted the round tables against the wall and lined the small clearing with leftover chairs for the less nimble of feet. Having put away his toasting glass, the storyteller transitioned into his volunteer DJ role, selecting a song from his phone.

The husband stood from his seat and offered his hand to his wife. Upon her ready acceptance, he escorted her to the center of the onlookers, stepping into the beat of the music with the confidence of one well-versed in dancing.

The summer before kindergarten. The last time I saw Dad dance with my mama. They waltzed about the backyard to the music of my sister's and my "oohs" and "awws," holding each other as close as they could without crushing my baby brother in my mama's stomach. She was as round as the watermelons we ate every week that summer. Her cheeks as red and her thumbs as green from all of her gardening. She loved being outside. Gently nursing the ground with water, trimming away unwanted weeds and thistles, guiding the vibrant petals toward the sun, plucking ripe fruit and vegetables from their stems (often sharing the first fruits with my sister and me). She rarely sighed in frustration when she found us standing atop the tomato vines or snow peas, holding up the least ripe from the bunch for her to see. Well, if she did, she managed to hide it from us back then. Instead, her approving smile as she lifted us from the dilapidated plants distracted us from the damage we had caused.

We often scampered off to a different portion of her gardens. Especially the flowerbeds. Compared to the green peas and green vines and green beans and green onions and green lettuce, the hot pink petunias, little purple lilacs, romantic red roses, and dancing daylilies were far more radiant characters. My sister always went straight for the daisies. They were simple and white. And were the only flower she could remember the name of: her little white "D-Zs."

Mine was the forget-me-nots. My family always thought it was because my favorite color was blue. But the real reason was that they reminded me of my mama's eyes. She had these multi-colored eyes with rings that melted from one color to another. From this bright cobalt that nearly dominated the other colors—most people said she had blue eyes—to a nearly imperceptible ring of yellow, to the final, tiny ring of green, like the stems extending from the yellow and blue petals. Most people missed those other colors. I didn't.



65 Singing Roses

Francesca Weis

The Elephant in the Room

by Darrien Hertzler

There's an elephant in the room.
 It's very large, and hard to get around,
 But it's possible to squeeze by with a
 "How are you?" and "I'm fine."
 Plus, the thousand other ways
 You can check on me without bringing it up.
 Yes, we all know she was murdered at five.
 Yes, we know her dad and stepmom did it.
 However, it seems taboo to mention it, so
 We talk about work, school. Weather, and anything
 Anything but the elephant in the room.
 We all know it's there, and
 We all think about it as we talk.
 It never goes away;
 Just gets bigger and bigger.
 It's so large it hurts us all.
 Don't bring it up to her family though
 For that could be their last straw.
 You know, the one that broke the camel's back.
 Don't talk about the elephant in the room
 We might all lose it.
 Say her name repeatedly though, and
 Talk about her wonderful, though short life.
 Maybe talk about her death just a little
 It might make room
 Room to grow, but
 If we don't talk about the elephant
 I feel like I am alone with
 Just the room and its elephant
 Because it's like being smothered.
 The event happened in 2011
 It's now 2018
 The elephant makes my heart
 Feel as if it cannot beat.
 For I miss her dearly
 For two days before the murder
 We curled her hair,
 And did her makeup;
 Standing in my grandmother's bathroom.
 I remember my teacher saying it was fake,
 But I remember the pain
 Of losing such a beautiful soul,
 So please always talk about
 The elephant in the room.

A Letter to My Mother

by Stanley Whyte, Jr.

Yea I know it seems like I keep letting you down but trust
me I'm trying
This become a man stuff is new to me and if I'm
disappointing you I'm sorry
I realized that I haven't been serving God with my
schooling and God
has told me it has to change
I have not been working the way God wants me to and
that's why school
isn't going the way we know it can go
I'm sorry
But believe me I'm trying
You don't have to believe me or put your trust in me but
trust in God
As much as it hurts seeing your son fail class after
class God is
feeling that pain with you
He's changing me and it's not an overnight thing but
believe in Him and
trust His plan and believe me it will work
I hate disappointing you and I really hate disappointing God
He created me for so much more
But the only way this will work is through Him
I'm sorry and I am trying even though it may not seem like it





Eyes See Asterisms

Nick Hobbs



Nature Floodgates

Hannah Fulton

Dungeons and Dunces

by Devon Armer

Act I Scene 1

Setting: Deep underground in a dark and dank dungeon. The room shows several skeletons scattered around a central dais on which sits a stone tablet.

At Rise: The trio of heroes enter the chamber from a door on the left taking in the scene before them. They are crouched low and staying quiet. EVANDRA leads the group in with a dagger out, cautiously.

(Characters freeze while THE GAME MASTER speaks)

THE GAME MASTER

Creeping forward cautiously into the chamber, our group of heroes are met with a macabre display. Skeletons litter the floor around a dais of carved stone, upon which rests a circular stone tablet. At the far side of the room lay a large stone door with a circular impression at its center. It seems our heroes have encountered their first obstacle. (EVANDRA, a slim, fair-skinned elf in dark clothing steps forward cautiously inspecting the room before turning to her companions)

EVANDRA

Okay guys we've done this sort of thing before. Looks like we need to use this odd stone tablet to open the way forward. I don't like the look of those skeletons, the dais must be trapped.

(Once more the characters freeze in position as
THE GAME MASTER speaks)

THE GAME MASTER

Evandra Greenleaf, the young elven thief with an eye for gold and a mind for planning. As the undisputed brains of the group, there's not a lock in the world that can repel her nor a trap that escapes her keen eye.

(THORDREN, A short stocky dwarf with a long-braided beard appraises the room nervously)

THORDREN

(Speaking in a thick accent)

I doon't like this one-bit Evandra, me danger alarm is goin oof somethin fierce. Maybe we'd be better ta jus leave it be an try ta find another way past.

(Once more the characters freeze)

THE GAME MASTER

The stout dwarven figure of Thordren Stoneborn says with concern. Cleric that he is, Thordren, serves as the group's moral center as well as the healer, bringing his comrades back from the brink of death time and again. While not the bravest warrior around there's no denying that this old dwarf is the heart and soul of-

(THE GAME MASTER is cut off by the powerful voice of ARAYA,
a strong, dark-skinned human woman in heavy armor)

ARAYA

Well what are we waiting around for? We know the drill by now. Evandra, you check for traps and steal the tablet thing, me and Thordren will make sure nothing jumps on you. (EVANDRA and THORDREN nod and mutter in agreement.)

(THE GAME MASTER sighs heavily)

THE GAME MASTER

Araya Strongblade says, a paladin of the church, Araya is strong in both body and spirit. The fearless leader of the group, Araya's unshakable spirit and powerful sword arm have never yet failed to lead her companions to victo-

(THE GAME MASTER is again cut off by ARAYA)

ARAYA

You heard me, right? Hop to it, we got a lot more of this cave to search if we want to find that dragon that's been terrorizing the village.

(EVANDRA steps forward toward the dais inspecting it carefully while THORDREN draws his axe and keeps watch with ARAYA)

EVANDRA

Alright, alright, no need to get snippy. I've got this.

(All freeze)

THE GAME MASTER

(Notably irritated)

Approaching the dais cautiously, Evandra pulls forth her thieves' tools to check for traps. The dice shall determine her fate.

(The sound of a dice rolling can be heard. The audience is shown a paper with the number five on it.)

Unfortunately, Evandra fails to notice the delicate mechanism upon which the tablet sat. Satisfied that her search turned up no danger she snatches the tablet from its-

(Araya grabs Evandra's hand as she reaches for the tablet.)

ARAYA

Wait, what are you doing? You can clearly see that's a pressure plate.

EVANDRA

(Sounding confused)

Yeah... huh. I don't know why I did that; it's like I was just compelled to. Thanks, Araya.

THE GAME MASTER

You can't just-

(he clears his throat in frustration)

Luckily for EVANDRA it seems her companion managed to stop her just before tragedy befell them all. Deciding not to tempt fate further the group-

ARAYA

(Handing EVANDRA a rock from the ground)

Here, just put this rock on top of it, that should balance it out. These things aren't exactly precise, so long as the plate stays down it'll be fine.

THE GAME MASTER

Decides instead to tempt fate and mess with the dangerous trap. Being as careful as possible Evandra attempts to slip the tablet free while replacing it with the heavy stone.

(Dice are heard once more. The audience is shown a ten)

Still rattled from her previous near failure as well as her companion Araya's surprisingly detailed knowledge of traps...Evandra still cannot meet the required number to disarm the-

(EVANDRA slips the tablet off, nothing happens.)

EVANDRA

Hey you were right. These old traps don't have to be precisely weighted after all.

THE GAME MASTER

Yes of course. That sure is lucky for Evandra and her companions since that trap would have KILLED YOU ALL!

THORDREN

Le's git a move on, lass. Somethin about this room is givin me a bad feelin. There's a bitterness in the air.

THE GAME MASTER

Bitterness? You smug-

ARAYA

Some things always giving you a bad feeling, old man.

(The three place the tablet into the door which opens. They exit the stage together)

(There is a moment pause)

THE GAME MASTER
(Sighing in frustration)

And so, deeper into the darkness they delve, unaware of the danger that awaited them farther down. For deep within this cave lay the great red dragon, Voarmodal!

(End Scene)

Act I
Scene 2

Setting: A much larger stone chamber filled with piles of gold. In the center of the room lay VOARMODAL, a huge red scaled dragon.

At Rise: The three heroes enter the chamber, weapons drawn. VOARMODAL lies before them snoring loudly.

THE GAME MASTER

Stealing forth into the chamber our heroes freeze in shock, as before them lies the vast sleeping body of Voarmodal, the scourge of the north. The sight of the beast surrounded by mountains of stolen gold is almost overwhelm-

ARAYA

It's a lot smaller than I was expecting.

THE GAME MASTER

What? No, it's not. The dragon before you is-

ARAYA

It kinda looks like a dude in a costume. You guys see that, right?

THE GAME MASTER

(Very frustrated.)

THE DRAGON BEFORE YOU IS HUGE AND TERRIFYING AND DOES NOT IN ANY WAY RESEMBLE A MAN IN A COSTUME!

EVANDRA

We should kill it while it's sleeping.

THORDREN

Ay, lass, best not to wake it. Araya, you got tha strongest arm ere. Give the scaly bastard a good whack.

THE GAME MASTER

NO! Listen you can't just... Fine. Fine Araya walks forward toward the beast in her heavy clanking armor. A difficult task considering it's a HUGE SCARY DRAGON! Lets just see what the dice have to say about it.

(The sound of dice is heard. The audience is shown a golden number twenty.)

-and she rolls a critical success. You've got to be kidding me. Fine. Araya clanks over in her heavy armor even though she shouldn't be able to do that I'll allow it because I follow rules and respect the way this is supposed to work.
(He huffs in frustration as ARAYA walks over to the dragon.)

THE GAME MASTER

The beast lays quiet before you, his neck clearly visible for the blow. Raising her mighty blade, Araya strikes down at the creature. Rolling to hit...

(More dice rolls heard. The audience is shown a number one.)

HA! A critical failure. That's what you get! In her rush to deliberately break the rules, Araya's sword slams into the ground beside the beast, waking it from-

ARAYA

(Looking up at the sky.)

Wait, what? It's asleep, how could I possibly miss?

THE GAME MASTER

Are you...talking to me? You can't talk to me, you don't know I exist. As I was saying.

ARAYA/THE GAME MASTER

I just think it's dumb that anyone could miss that attack. I've been doing this for... Araya misses the dragon and it wakes up roaring in anger!

(VOARMODAL leaps up and roars. Araya stabs him. VOARMODAL yelps and whimpers, pulling away from Araya sadly.)

THE GAME MASTER

NO! YOU CAN'T JUST STAB HIM! THERE'S A SPECIFIC SET OF RULES ONE MUST FOLLOW WHEN-

(He groans in frustration.)

THORDREN

AY, ITS AWAKE, LE'S KILL EM!

(Dragon roars halfheartedly, looks confused. EVANDRA and THORDREN rush at it, pausing when THE GAME MASTER speaks.)

THE GAME MASTER

STOP! Everyone just stop! This is my story and I make the rules. The dragon wakes up and roars, it is NOT stabbed, it DOES lash out at Araya, biting her. Roll to hit...

(Dice are heard. Audience sees another one)

Are you kidding me...

EVANDRA

You know I must agree that it's dumb Araya missed that.

THORDREN

Ay, me as well.

(VOARMODAL shrugs and mutters in agreement.)

THE GAME MASTER

VOARMODAL, DON'T AGREE WITH THEM THEY'RE TRYING TO KILL YOU! As for you three, you all do realize you're about to die? It's a dragon! You should be terrified! Voarmodal bite Araya.

(VOARMODAL steps toward ARAYA who holds her sword up stopping him. VOARMODAL looks up and whines. Everyone stands around in a circle confused.)

THE GAME MASTER

(Sounding defeated.)

I just wanted to tell an epic tale about heroes risking their lives to help others. You can't just not... Actions have consequences. This dragon is going to kill all of you and there's nothing you can do to-

(VOARMODAL clears his throat.)

VOARMODAL

Actually, I'm a vegetarian.

(There is a long pause.)

THE GAME MASTER

You're... WHAT! Fine. Fine! I didn't need to tell a story. It's not like I wanted to entertain anyone anyway. You did it, you managed to peacefully ensure the dragon won't harm anyone else. Now get out of my dungeon.

(Heroes walk off stage left chatting. VOARMODAL off right.
Fade to black.)

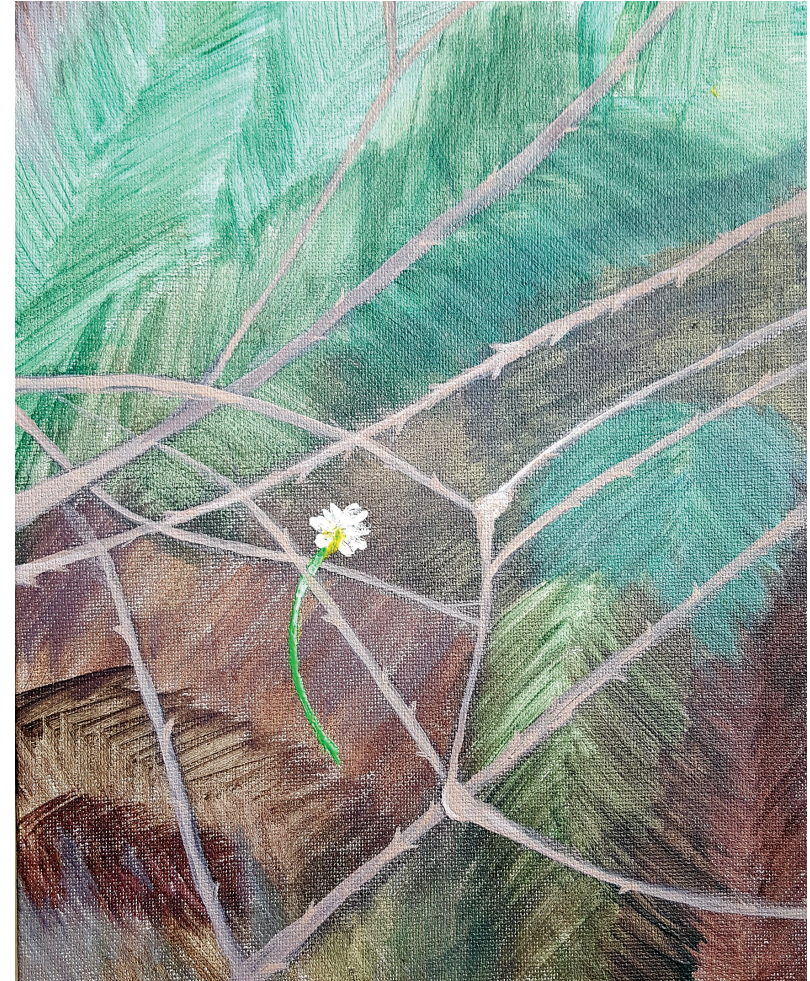
ARAYA

Hey what's down this way?

THE GAME MASTER

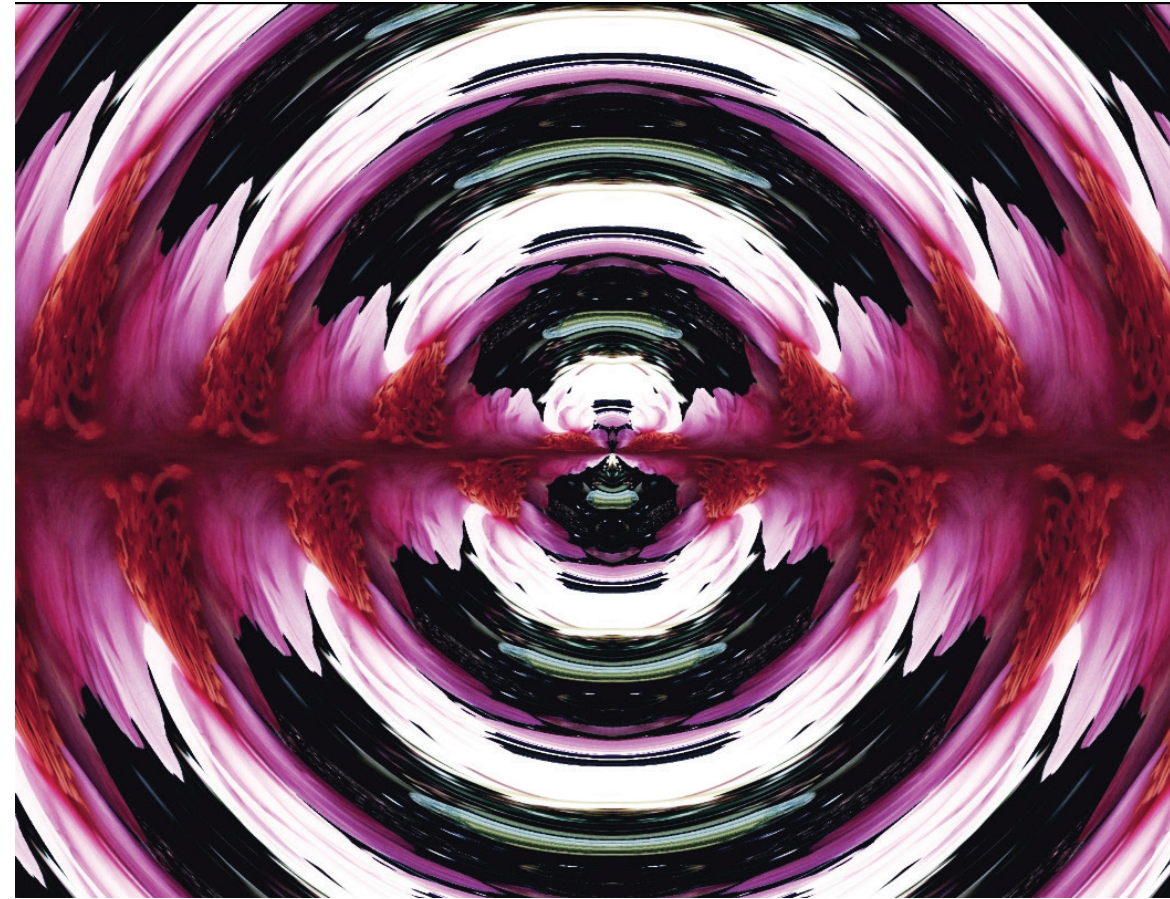
OUT!

(End)





Vida
Kayla O'Neal



Blooming Billows
Sherpatrick Washington



from "Life"
Ana Balestrazzi

Listen

by Kristyn Hardy

You ask,
"But why?"
You say,
"It's better."

But I ask,
"Better how?"
I say,
"Shh. *Listen.*"

Hear the wind
As it echoes down the alley.
The same wind
That rang through
Cleopatra's lungs.
The same wind
That plucks a seed and creates
A garden thousands of miles away.
The same wind
That lives in
You today.

"Shh. *Listen.*"

Smell the rain
That falls to the pavement.
The same rain
That carved the
Grand Canyon.
The same rain
That churns within
The fiercest hurricanes.
The same rain
That slides across
Your lashes.

"Shh. *Listen.*"

See the moon
As it illuminates the bleak night.
The same moon
That directs the
Tides to its will.

The same moon
That holds a
Myth in its hand.
The same moon
That shines in
Your eyes.

"Shh. *Listen.*"
Watch your laughter
As it bounces through the room.
The same laughter
That burns through icy hearts
Like a wildfire through forests.
The same laughter
That eases the pain
In your loved one's eyes.
The same laughter
That reverberates within
Your chest.

"Shh. *Listen.*"
Feel the rise in your voice
As it talks of things you love.
The same rise
Whose crescendo resembles
That of the mightiest waves.
The same rise
That speaks of
Glories yet to come.
The same rise
That ebbs and flows inside
Your throat.

"Shh. *Listen.*"
Embrace it.
All of it.
Embrace your life's wind
As it carries you
Closer to your dreams.
Embrace your body's rain
And the hurricanes you leave
In the wake of your path.
Embrace your eyes' moon
As it reveals all that
Most would leave behind.
Embrace your laughter
And the way

It shines in the lives around you.
Embrace your voice
And the destiny it holds
To charge and change the world.
If only you will let it.
Embrace it.
Every inch of it.
Because, darling,
You are a force of nature.
And the world needs your chaos.

"Shh. *Listen.*"



Elvis Presley
Aubrey Smith

People

by Jolee Rogers

People
Will walk in
And will walk out.
They can do it when one least expects it
Or when one thinks another is toxic.

People
Can say the dumbest things,
But they know better.
They will continue this until someone is hurt
And then, it is no longer fun.

People
Will mind their manners,
But they still disrespect others
For the sake
Of their livelihood.

People
Can call others trash,
And judge them behind their back,
So they can feel better
When they feel small.

People
Can be happy
But they fake it
When they needed
But refuse to think of anything else.

People
May be a disappointment to others,
But they know that it is not their
Or the best they can provide
So they can let others win.

People
Will claim they are not like this
They would use an excuse
When they can fix the situation
But they know what is a lie.

Downfall

by Donovan Robbins

I have gotten farther than anyone
I crushed everyone that got in my way
I have done everything that can be done
So why must I suffer here where I lay

Why is no one here to stand at my side
Why is no one here in my time of need
Even with my powerful sense of pride
I simply cannot help but desperately plead

The pain grows as my last moments draw near
I thought I could fight until my last breath
But I am paralyzed by this great fear
I am paralyzed by the fear of death

Reaching out, I plead to the gods above
Hoping that they will give me my life back
I realize I do not deserve their love
As my whole world finally fades to black

And now....

Plunging into this perilous abyss
I contemplate what will become of me
My wonderful life of delightful bliss
Will now be swallowed by this Red Sea

What have I done to deserve such a fate
What justifies this treacherous downfall
These are questions that I must contemplate.
For no one is here to answer my call.

I reach for the dwindling light above

Hoping that salvation will come my way
I hope for nothing but safety and love
Sadly, I know that I am here to stay

The light has vanished, replaced with red gates
And now, nothing but agony awaits.

the hunt

by Sadie Seilhan

my mother's womb held me tight until the day i burst
from her and i had been running ever since.

i was in search of the face of a lion upon the body of an eagle,
the broken honor of a knight's treacherous sword, the time
clock on the sun's lifespan, and how to cure a god's envy.

i ran over broken glass and burning coals and
swam in the blood of righteous men.

i prayed to empty skies to find impossible
answers and complete my hopeless quest.

my eyes burned with the fatigue of a thousand insomniacs
right as i concluded i must be suffering the same fate as
Sisyphus when suddenly

you drove a fistful of strawberry seeds and dancing
fingertips into the cavity of my chest so that now the
rushing of my spinal fluid whispers your name.

[that's why i shiver when i hear it]

you pressed pause on my endless searching and pointed
out the blood on my fists and the splinters in my skin.

the hunt needn't be a fight, love
you breathed.

lessons of patience by watching the colors change
through a bedroom window, how to savor melodies
in empty parking lots; you were good to me.

echoes of gold-dipped memories fill our tomb; scenes
of honey-doused wings around a bag of trembling
bones unsure of which direction is north.

i learned to sink my hands into the dirt and understand how to
find home, to smell the change in the seasons and listen to the
harmonies of my mortal footsteps next to Michael's mighty tread.

you made me realize that life is not a battle at which i must
grit my teeth until my gums bleed, rather it is memorizing
the lunar phases and eating blackberries when it is full
and knowing life moves according to my terms.



Lucid Dreaming

Stevie Iseral

Saint Allie

by Hannah Lail

No. You're right. I mean,
you're right—*kind of*.
It's big this thing and kind of unclear
like that tattoo you got of a baseball glove
cause you always cry at Catcher in the Rye
and you blacked out so you don't remember getting it
but you never thought—sightly as it is—to say goodbye
so you laughed and said you can't be a phony you
gotta commit.
Well your gaffe is engraved on your skin but mine's
on my mind
and that's exactly where I'll leave it lay because I'd never
share it not with a rock or dog or friend to remind
me of how brave I was to overcome such a great endeavor.
So you're right I should commit but I don't think getting
a bad tattoo
is the same as seeing your broken brother had
followed through.

Man With the Yellow Hat

by Addison Lindsay

We're all just lonely travelers, searching through a
world of unknown to find a sense of Home.

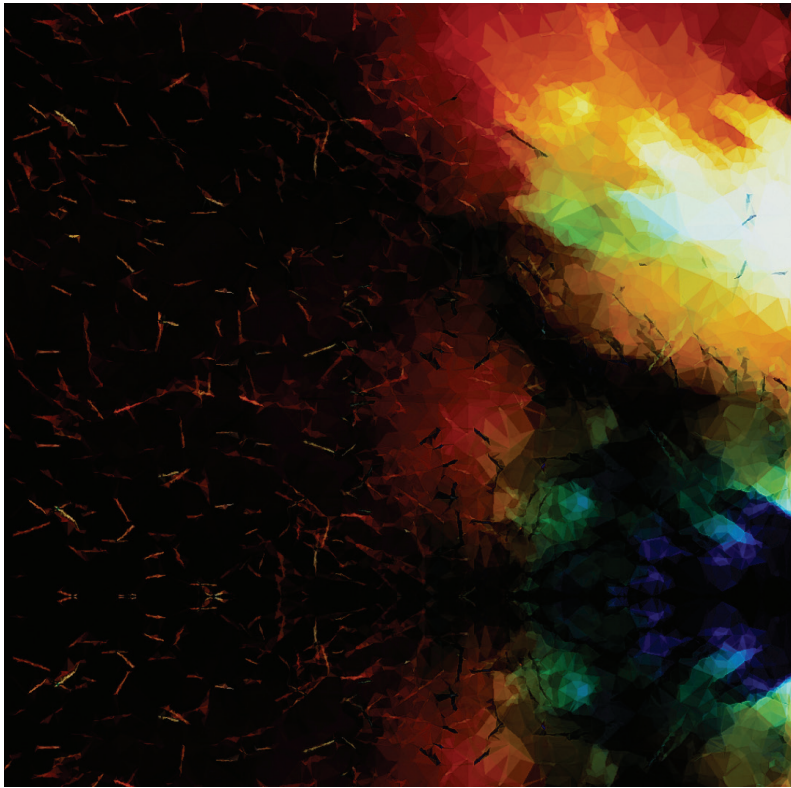
We all make up a beautiful and collectively diverse experience,
tears and laughs and pain and joy all seem to find their way
into our hearts no matter the path it takes to get there.

We all get to share in whispers of the Divine, we all find our
mirrored selves in mutual loves and pleasures, in the shared
passing smile that we politely exchange to another, in a spark that
ignites from a simple shared interest of a favorite ice cream flavor
or movie...perhaps we feel great comfort in knowing we aren't
as alone or as different as sometimes we perceive that we are?

You, man over there on the crowded street, wearing a yellow hat
and remotely staring off into the distance...aloof and fixated on
something that seems to spin the wheels of whatever you are
thinking just a little more...is that hat you are wearing a gift from
someone you love? Is that coffee you're holding your favorite flavor?
Is it one you order often? What did you have for breakfast this
morning? What is behind those distant and glossy eyes of yours?

I walk the streets and these intricate and complex human
beings are just a short sentence observation that will forever
be. The man with the yellow hat. The girl with blonde hair. The
guy singing a pretty song off the street. The familiar smile of a
stranger as I walk past her without so much as a quick glance.

How beautiful, yet ruthlessly unfair it sometimes is to just be
known as a passing thought that holds no context or backstory...
just a mere 3-second unconscious judgment that will never be able
to tell the true, underlying, hidden story. I may not know you more
than the man with the yellow hat, the girl with the blonde hair,
the guy singing a pretty song off the street, the familiar smile of a
friendly stranger...but you stay with me. We belong together. We
are connected by the ground of this same universe, in this same
existence out of seven billion people where we somehow had the
privilege of connecting over a passing smile or just the simple
observation of a yellow hat. May we always look for the essence of
our mirrored selves in the miracle of the familiarity of a stranger.



Combustion and Sparks
Sherpatrick Washington



Morgan
Morgan McCullin

The Goddess of Air

by Abby Semien

She was the first to grant me a patience, a grace that I
had never had the privilege to know.

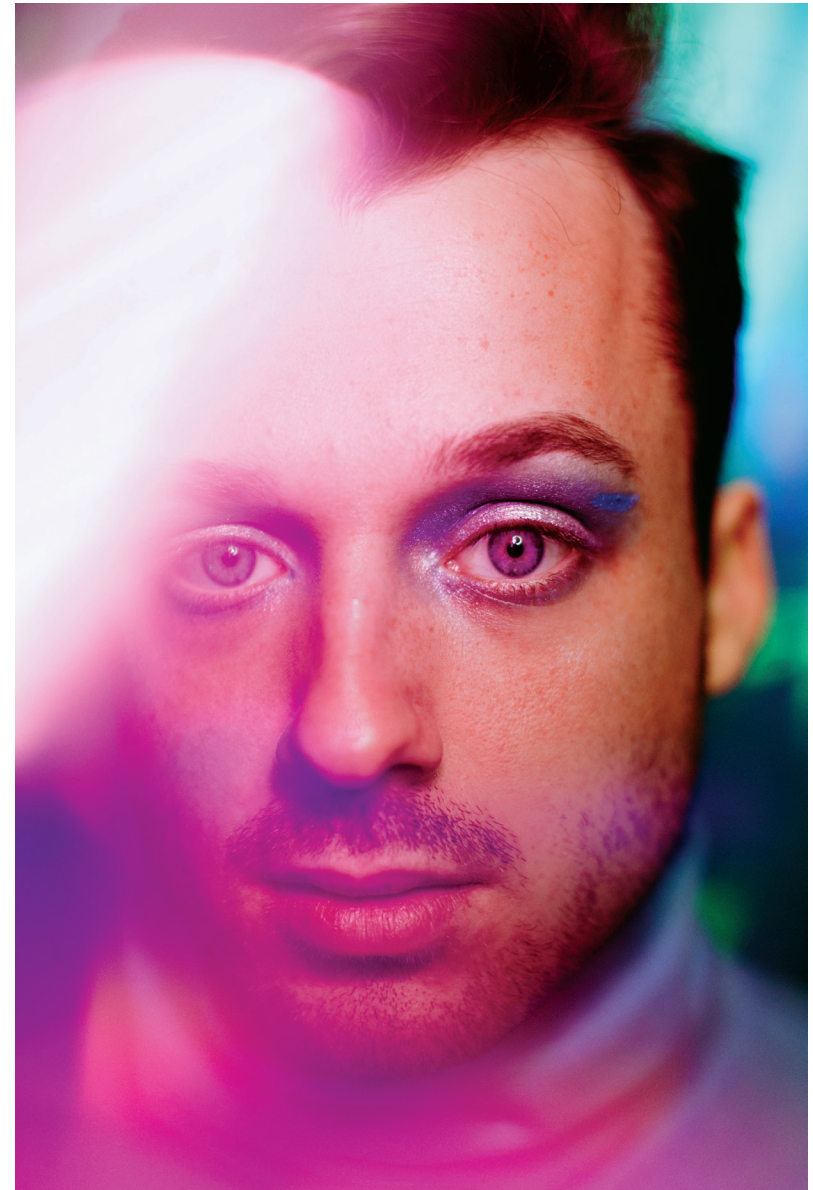
Wrapped in comfort while feeling the freedom of wind.

She bared herself to me,

Recounting stories without shame even though it cost her
the ringing in her ears of echoes and asked me for
nothing in return.

I uncloaked myself to her, a relief of letting out a
long-held breath,

And she breathed into me the assurance that I could find
a way to heal.



Man's Laughter or Manslaughter?

by Darrien Hertzler

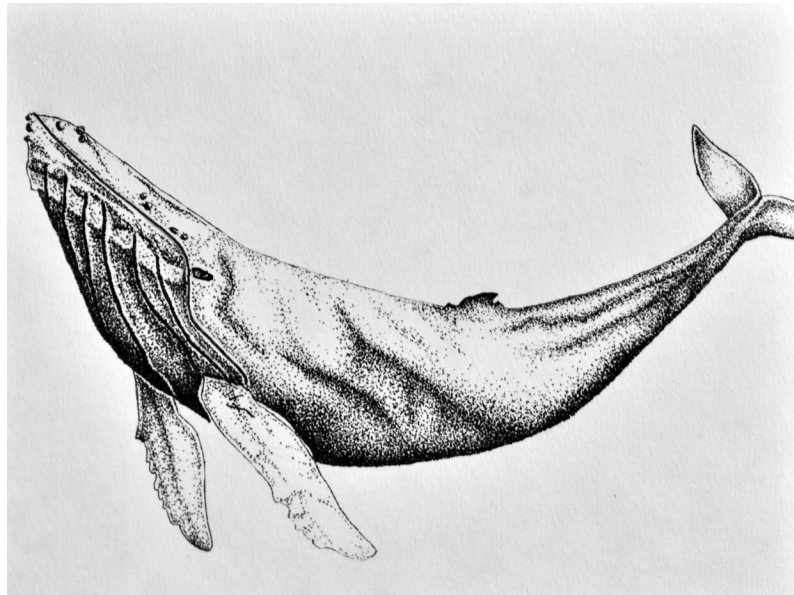
A Poem of all the times he Laughed at me

I was conceived and man laughed,
 Trying to find a way to make this problem
 Go away, and man did not succeed
 I was born and man laughed.
 I could not breathe,
 My skin was purple,
 And they were hoping I wouldn't make it,
 Yet here I am today.
 I could not eat, and man laughed at me.
 My body rejected the milk from the one who birthed me
 And notice I didn't call her mother
 Because she never was.
 I got hip dysplasia and man laughed at me;
 The bones of my tiny body not in place.
 Why couldn't you just keep my legs in their brace?
 I became a sister of three and man laughed.
 I was not a good example,
 So do not pay attention to me!
 I caused a divorce and man laughed at me.
 He was never around, and
 She worked all year round.
 I was abused at nine and man laughed at me.
 "She's so terrible; her own parents hate her."
 "Yeah, one beats her and the other mistreats her."
 They all say as they keep laughing at me.
 I was kissed on the hand and man laughed at me.
 "She's never going to be with a man
 Because she will marry a woman."
 But I didn't understand until 2019.
 I was raped and man laughed at me.
 "She is telling lies," they all said, and
 Nobody ever believed her. They stood and gawked as I
 shrunk down

I felt the pain of a thousand knives as they joked and laughed.
 I had rumors spread and man laughed at me.
 Like what the fuck? I'm not even there!
 Hell, even my supposed family laughed
 Thinking it was fucking hilarious.
 I tried killing myself and man laughed at me.
 "It's all for show, I mean she laughs and smiles every day,"
 They would say, not knowing I would cry every night.
 They didn't know I slept with a knife well hidden under
 my pillow.

I fell in love with a woman and man laughed at me.
 This time I was not phased because I was immune.
 I pulled her close as I whispered "I love You,"
 And she proposed I kissed her dainty lips.
 Man's laughter almost ended me,
 But now I form my hand into a fist and held it high.
 Then I slowly raised my middle finger
 to flip off the world.
 All man has ever done is laugh at me.
 Woman, on the other hand, has loved me.
 I love a woman who holds my heart and is my other part.
 1 thousand miles away, I cannot wait until the day I hold her
 in my arms.

I do not trust man since they've always laughed at me.
 With her I can conquer the world
 With the love of my life
 Who will someday become my wife!



Whale Spotted

Jody Johnson

Ordinal Linguistic Personification

by Andrea Smith

Number One is in her early sixties.

She married number Two, but she is older by five years.

One and Two adopted ten years ago. Her name is Three.

She has auburn hair; They have grey.

Four lives down the street.

Three walks with him to the middle school together. They have been friends since Three moved there.

Four has a crush on high school freshman, Five.

Five dyed her hair black like her older sister, Ten.

Ten plays the drums for Shotgun Turkey and smokes weed in the school parking lot with the teachers.

The older kids, Seven, Eight, and Nine, pretend to like Five so they can get close to Ten. They talk about the way Five walks, behind her back.

Ten doesn't care, though, not since she started dating Twelve.

Twelve's little brother Six has a crush on Seven.

Five is jealous.

Four is jealous because Five is jealous.

He has always liked her.

He has dibs, had it since they were two.

The high school principal, Thirty-Nine, waits for the days she can move to Redding and raise alpacas.

Her brother, Twenty-Nine, lives there with his
wife, Twenty-One.

They're expecting a baby soon.

Thirty-Nine had given up her baby that she had with the
preacher's youngest son, Eighteen,
thirteen years ago.

She has never seen Eighteen since.

His daddy moved them out of the state the summer the girl
was born.

Eighteen died in a car crash, months later, after sneaking out
to visit her, or at least that's what
the woman on the phone said.

There was not an obituary.

Chora

by Wenona Jonker

In the moments before a storm
Of air holding its breath
Of agitated trees that whisper
Quietly to soil restless for drink
Whispers of hopes
When we balance between expecting and expected
And feel it build with atmospheric pressure
Potential energy
And then like a deep
Breath out
All at once emptied
The smell of hot, wet ground
Of sky and earth
There to breathe
And to help us breathe
If we plant our feet
Like trees with inky leaves
Wet with promises

I wonder if there is a whole life
Caught up
In the moment before rain
In letting sky and earth
Be pregnant with us
Or if a poem
Is nothing but the middle space
Between expecting and expected
Through which all passes
But nothing is retained
Prior to birth
After language
If we live not merely hoping
And having hopes answered

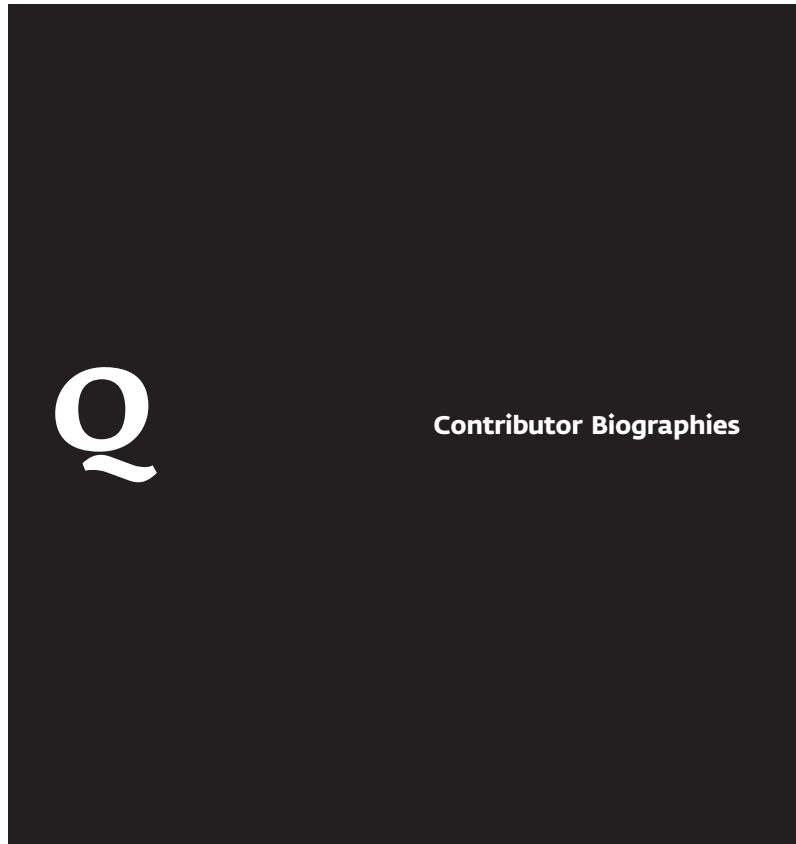
But always inhaling
Always exhaling



Eye See You
Maddie Dearman



from "Life"
Ana Balestrazzi



Devon Armer is a junior pre-med biology student at Louisiana Tech University with a writing hobby. He submitted "Dungeons and Dunces" as part of a creative writing class assignment and with the encouragement of his professor.

Ana Balestrazzi is originally from Venezuela. She is a freshman at Louisiana Tech University studying political science. She takes pictures as a hobby, and was inspired by her father, a photographer. Her father graduated from Louisiana Tech University with a major in geography and minor in photography. Her pictures were inspired by beautiful things she found as she travelled.

Maddie Dearman is a senior at Louisiana Tech University, double majoring in graphic design and studio art. The culmination of her work centers around love, and is a platform she uses to proclaim the mystery of the kingdom of God. As a new follower of Jesus, her work also serves as a personal testimony and is an open invitation for others to join her along the journey to discover divine wisdom, great wonders, and unimaginable mysteries, and to love God by loving others. To see Maddie's entire portfolio and/or to read her blog, visit maddiedearman.com

Mark Eastwood is a student at Louisiana Tech University studying English. He likes potatoes.

Hannah Fulton is an MFA candidate in the School of Design at Louisiana Tech University, with a concentration in studio art. She earned her BFA in graphic communications with a minor in photography at Northwestern State University. Her work has been published in *LoosenArt Magazine*, *Creative Quarterly*, and *Photographer's Forum*.

Kristyn Hardy is a first year student at Louisiana Tech University studying English. Her goal is to one day become a published author. She is from a small town in Arkansas and was raised in a family that emphasizes creativity above all else. Kristyn hopes that her piece embodies this ideal.

Darrien Hertzler was born in Augusta, Maine as the first child of two military parents who are now divorced, so she has lived in several places. Most of her poetry is usually about her fiancée and the troubles they face in a long-distance relationship. She also writes about other events from her life in which she has experienced abuse, violence, addictions, and unacceptance.

She tries her best not to censor or sugarcoat her world because she feels that it makes it less realistic and less likely to speak to people.

Evelyn Hinjosa is a junior studio art major at Louisiana Tech University who enjoys playing with color and abstraction. She grew up in a family of artists, so expression through art was something that she learned pretty early on in her childhood. Evelyn spends equal amounts of time researching concepts and painting or acting on instinct when it comes to her work.

Nick Hobbs currently works and resides in Ruston, Louisiana where he is pursuing his BFA at Louisiana Tech University. Nick makes art as a way of staying in touch with the ineffable. He was introduced to the quiet mystery of the universe through astronomy, a hobby he devoted most of his weekends to in high school, and tries his hardest to seek out that feeling where he can.

Stevie Iseral is a junior majoring in interdisciplinary studies, with concentrations in photography, sociology, and marketing. She became interested in photography her freshman year of high school and started her own photography business the summer after her junior year. Stevie loves photography because it allows her to showcase the beauty of life through her lens.

Jody Johnson is in her third year at Louisiana Tech University as a mechanical engineering student. In all the free time that she can manage to get, she creates drawings using either ink, pencil, or colored pencil. It has been a passion of Jody's since she was about fourteen years old and she believes that art, science, and math closely coincide, as she has learned so much from studying the things that she tries to capture on paper.

Hannah Jones is a senior English major at Louisiana Tech University with a minor in philosophy. Ever since her childhood she has had a love for literature and creative writing, especially working out the puzzle of expressing herself through the infinite arrangement of words and punctuation.

Wenona Jonker is a student at Louisiana Tech University where she is studying English with a concentration in literature and a minor in plant science. She is not a poet nor does she have a particularly "green thumb," but she loves both words and plants and would like to know them better.

Hannah Lail attended the University of North Carolina in Asheville, where she worked with Wiley Cash, author of the Southern novel *A Land More Kind Than Home*, on her creative writing thesis. She graduated in 2017 with a BA in English and an intensive in creative writing, and is planning to graduate from Louisiana Tech University with an MA in Literature.

Malori Laporte is from Baton Rouge, Louisiana, currently participating in an internship with a campus ministry, Chi Alpha Christian Fellowship. She has always considered herself as creative, and uses art as a stress reliever. Malori really enjoyed creating something so meaningful. She also has a passion for helping and encouraging people.

Addison Lindsay is a first-year student at Louisiana Tech University majoring in psychology with a minor in sociology. She enjoys all things coffee, Enneagram, people, writing, music, podcasts, and unlikely friendships, as she likes to call them. Addison loves exploring the depths and color of life and stringing together beautiful words to embody the essence of something. She hopes it is said of her that she loves and welcomes people into any space well.

Kaitlin Maloy is a studio art MFA candidate at Louisiana Tech University where she also earned her undergraduate degree in biology. She specializes in digital paintings that communicate scientific concepts.

Morgan Jeanette McCullin is an MFA candidate in studio art at Louisiana Tech University where she earned her BFA in 2018. McCullin has interned as a portrait painter's assistant and as a conservationist restoring paintings from a museum's permanent collection. As an oil painter, McCullin's personal work incorporates art history, politics, feminism, and humor to address life for young women in the American South.

Grace Miholic is a freshman at Louisiana Tech University. She's been writing poetry since she was in the seventh grade, and is passionate about it. She hopes to one day publish her own poetry book, but until then she has a poetry account on Instagram: [g.sinclairwrites](#).

Tyler Nelson is a student at Louisiana Tech University. He likes to write.

Kayla O'Neal is an MFA candidate in studio art with an emphasis in drawing and illustration at Louisiana Tech University. She earned her BFA in Game, Animation, and Simulation Design from Southern Arkansas University in Magnolia. After completing her undergraduate degree, O'Neal interned as a photographer through the Disney College Program. Her photographs have been exhibited in several galleries, including the LoosenArts Gallery in Rome, Italy. *TeenInk*, *Emergence*, and *The Friend* magazines have published O'Neal's writings. She is currently writing and illustrating *Noor*, a children's book featuring characters with chronic illnesses. O'Neal is a storyteller passionate about creating worlds through writing and image making.

Donovan Robbins is currently a junior attending Louisiana Tech University and majoring in computer information systems. Even though his major doesn't directly deal with writing, he still has a strong interest in poetry. Donovan simply enjoys writing for fun and sharing his works with other people who can appreciate poetry.

Jolee Rogers was born in Marrero, Louisiana. She moved to Franklinton, Louisiana around second grade. She graduated from Franklinton High School and is currently studying graphic art at Louisiana Tech University. She grew up with a mother, a father, two siblings, and her grandmother. She normally keeps to herself and is only talkative when she feels that she is in a comfortable environment. When Jolee first started writing, she did it to release her stress and anxiety. She has been encouraged to continue to write for future novels and poetry books.

Sadie Seilhan is a freshman at Louisiana Tech University studying Spanish. She loves to write, and hopes to minor in English. She aspires to be a professional translator when she finishes school. Sadie loves language and art, nature and photography, and food and culture.

Abby Semien is a 22-year-old senior at Louisiana Tech University working on a BA in psychology. Her goal is to get an MA and become a clinical counselor. She has always wanted to help other people, although she struggles with dealing with her own emotions. Poetry is a fantastic outlet for Abby to

communicate her messages and thoughts, clear her head, and create something beautiful.

Andrea Smith is a junior at Louisiana Tech University. She enjoys pursuing fleeting moments of sadness, long walks on the beach, theme parks, and mojitos. Her favorite hobby is professionally petting dogs. One day, she would like to be a published author or a mob boss; she isn't picky.

Aubrey Smith is currently an accounting major at Louisiana Tech University, and is also a member of the cheer team. She loves to create works of art in her spare time, and it is by far her favorite hobby. Painting is her happy place, and she is so glad she gets to share her artwork with others.

Sherpatrick Washington is an architecture student at Louisiana Tech University. In elementary school, she began drawing cartoon characters such as Spongebob, Mickey Mouse, and Scooby-Doo. She experimented with still life, which also enhanced her analog drawing skills. She took art classes until she reached high school, when it would no longer fit into her schedule, then began experimenting with PicsArt and digital art.

Francesca Weis is a junior at Louisiana Tech University double majoring in biology and chemistry. As a hopeful future physician, an artistic mindset will be immensely advantageous to her. It serves as both a tool and an escape, filling in the gaps that the other leaves behind. Without art, she wouldn't know relaxation; she wouldn't have developed study tactics such as sketching diagrams of the body, drawing pathways of a protein, or mapping out the mechanism of a chemical reaction; Nor would Francesca be who she is today.

Stanley Whyte, Jr. is an undergraduate student at Louisiana Tech University. One of his friends mentioned to him that they should start a mixtape. His friend was serious, and Stanley realized that he didn't want to do a bad job on his own mixtape. From that day forward, Stanley was serious about writing poetry.

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