

eleven40seven  
*tcu journal of the arts*

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**VOLUME 21.2**

“I write as if to save  
somebody's life.  
Probably **my own.**”

**CLARICE LISPECTOR**

# CONTENTS

Dear Icarus	7	Jonah Morgan
Come Winter	8	Lucia Martinez
A Seasonal Kind of Love	9	Hedaya Abdul Karim
Lifted	10	Sophia Nelson
Tranquilitas	12	Ailicec Valdez
Judith	13	Paige Murdock
Sevilla	16	Mia Vu
observed grace	17	Rose Hamouda
Real Perfection	18	Evan Vaslow
Anatomy	19	Samantha Shah
Wake Up	20	Sarah Seifried
Symphony of the Broken	33	Paige Murdock
The American Dream	34	Mia Vu
Silkworm Words	35	Trinity Sloan
Snub	36	Lucia Martinez
Deer Poem	37	Lauren Hathaway
Light in the Dark	38	Mari Pletta
Room Decor Still Life	39	Nalla Hussain
Pulchritudo	40	Ailicec Valdez
Wyoming	41	Dominic Gallegos
Drowned in His Waters	43	Rylee Page
Ceaseless Watcher	48	Cora Van Y
Things I Cannot Cure	51	Grace Schafhauser
The Hamburg Chicken	53	Jocelyn Leyva
The Door	54	Dominic Gallegos
Looking Up	56	Mari Pletta

Doodles	57	Kirstin Williams
In trusion	58	Abigail Smart
What do the birds eat on the rocks of the Trinity?	67	Sophia Nelson
how to save a life	68	Grace Schafhauser
What We Left Behind	71	Kaitlyn Whitehurst
Wings of Freedom	81	Jocelyn Leyva
writing an obituary in the nail salon	82	Grace Schafhauser
Reflections as a Reader of Imaginative Writing	84	Trinity Sloan

# Editor's Note

When I think to myself about the moments and things that inspire joy in myself and every community I am involved in, I think of the value of art and the depth and breadth that is birthed from creativity. That constant reflection and appraisal allows an element of wholeness and continuity that is centered at the heart of our work here at *eleven40seven*.

This semester could be described as anything but easy, from the brainstorming that preceded our publicity events, to our opening for submissions and the painstaking detail with which each piece was considered, the thoughts that were relayed and deliberated on, concluding with cuts (some of the most hurtful bits of the process) that refined the journal into what it is now: a symbolic masterpiece of the brilliance that lies in and amongst students here at TCU. Students who excel at art, cherish moments and truth, and do so with a loving vulnerability.

It would be remiss of me to acknowledge all that brilliance and fail to highlight that of the colleagues who worked alongside me on this. From Arianna who shadowed my role and worked to anchor me, to Grace whose insight and boldness is ever cherished; Katie who believed, truly and deeply, in the guidelines we set, and Audrey whose lightheartedness often dissolved moments of tension. Every minute with this group served to ground and stabilize me. And for that, I am thankful.

And to Dr. Carlson, who without her deep rooted confidence and belief in me, I probably (no, definitely) wouldn't be here in this role. Her tutelage means the world to me—and to the team, I'm sure.

And with that, it is my honor to present you with the Spring 2026 edition of *eleven40seven*. Enjoy!

— **Michael Ogbuagu**

# Dear Icarus

## Jonah Morgan

Do you remember, my son  
when you would watch the candles  
I would leave burning all night?  
the scars on your tiny fingertips  
you would hide but one night  
I saw it. Hands grasping for  
fire  
then darkness

Do you remember, little one,  
those days when words  
were hard between us  
silence sat like broken glass and  
you sat on the windowsill  
cheeks pressed to sun-warm glass  
eyes upward

As you flew, I remembered  
your seventh birthday  
the cake we made (just sweet bread) and how  
you refused to blow out the candle  
until wax rivers carved canyons  
into it, laughter in our bellies  
as we scavenged for the good bits

I do not want to talk about the rivers  
of wax where your wings used to be.

My son, now that the sea  
is your new home, know this:  
water also offers a type  
of flying.

Your father,

Daedalus

# **Come Winter**

Lucia Martinez



# **A Seasonal Kind of Love**

## **Hedaya Abdul Karim**

I loved you in colors  
In the spring, we were blushing pink  
fresh and ardent

Emerald in the summer,  
an effervescent champagne  
our joy short-lived

It was autumn that bruised,  
broke the fragile glass of my heart  
a metallic fall wine, maroon

Soaking and seeping through  
the white cloth of my affection  
staining like blood,

Rich and unforgiving  
By the end, we were shattered  
a chalky gray  
but blue when it all faded away

# Lifted

Sophia Nelson

My quads are weak—  
muscles sloppy and slow,  
quiver beneath the thud  
of the machine.

My legs give way.  
Plates slap each other, echoing  
into the children's ears upstairs,  
still awake,  
begging for it to end.

When joy rained down, I used to run  
into the arms of the father  
who threatened me.  
This time—  
this time—  
I will be praised,  
like the cross he lifted his love toward,  
into the yearning ears before him.

Yet after each service,  
I swallowed my tears,  
bracing myself against  
the thundering words  
that plucked me  
of all my pretty feathers.

I prayed over bell peppers and potstickers,  
for arms that would catch me mid-motion,  
for something to seal the cracks in the pavement  
left by my pastoral father's shaking fist.

Lifted

Now I take my bougie bubble bath—  
dreaming of you at my back,  
how you spun me through  
balloons falling around us  
into the new year.

As the scars deepen with time,  
you look at them with pride,  
and hold me fondly in faith  
that I outgrew what made them.

My thighs stick to the grey vinyl,  
the ceramic tub holds me, emptied—  
gently carry me off,  
and move me out with the water,

Watch me  
stumble towards you,  
muscles growing,  
just from standing near you.  
Shimmering with each drop of sweat,  
each flower left on my desk,  
I breathe in sweet belief

And slowly rest  
into you.

# Tranquilitas

Ailicec Valdez



**Judith**  
Paige Murdock

*Spring 2026  
Helen Hamilton  
Award Recipient*

Did you know that the crying never stops? When the sun rises over our stone prison, there are still sounds of pain. Wails of banshees echo the stone streets. Some religious folk slaughtered lambs to paint their doors with blood—a horrible waste of food. Now the streets reek of blood. None walk them. All shut behind doors, praying the angel of Death pass by. We have not eaten in days. Our stomachs crave.

Soldiers collapse on patrol. Others reside in their sleeping chambers and never wake. The men do nothing, as weak as women. They have slaughtered the animals. First the cows, then the pigs, goats, sheep, and lastly the horses. Do you know what they will kill next? How many more animals until we turn on ourselves?

My neighbor killed their dog. The husband threw their weak companion to the ground. He pinned the poor creature with his knee, taking a dagger to its throat. Their young boy watched from the doorway. He did not cry out. He did not cry when his father skinned his only friend in front of him. He did not cry when he aided in the preparation of the meal. He did not cry when he ate the dog. Only after he finished scuffing down his meat, did he break like glass. The young boy did not stop until the next night, when he grew too hungry to cry.

I became irate. Every passing day, it festered inside of me. I heard the stories of what you were doing beyond our city. I knew you feasted like kings. Your fat hands resting on your stomachs. Plump hands that couldn't swing a sword yet put this whole city on its knees when you decided to take our home. Your presence cut off the supply of food from the farms, cut off trade and rendered those inside caged animals ready for slaughter. You outnumbered our small military. And only a coward would watch a city starve.

You are not soldiers.

My husband died in war. He died out in the field with a sword in hand, he was a real soldier. I miss him every waking moment, but I am grateful he never saw this. He never heard the yelps

Paige Murdock

of the dogs, the constant cries of children, and your fat bellies slapping the city gates.

I wonder if he would have done something? I wonder if he could have?

None of the other men have lifted their heads from their shoulders. I walked past the uncaring men into the armory. Not many weapons rested there. The moonlight caught the reflection of a short sword, and guided me to it. Taking the leather hilt in hand, I stared into the metal blade and reflected back were my shrunken green eyes alight in flames.

I did not hide my stolen blade, swinging it over my back. The dark, shit-stained streets bowed to me. Those that noticed my march, leaned their decrepit heads out and weakly watched me leave. Joining me was another widow, her withered eyes enveloped in flames much like mine. Together we stood and searched the large exit gate that hadn't opened in months.

There was a smaller gate, hidden away behind the wall's bricks. My friend told an anemic guard of our plan. He snickered. We stood there. He laughed so hard, tears formed in his eyes. Then, he thanked us. Not for our fool's bravery, but just the thought of two widows sneaking into the enemy's camp. He showed us a way out. He knew that we would die.

Have you ever felt shame? All my life I was told that men were soldiers, men were brave. Now I laid eyes on a coward who laughed at the bravery of women.

What good are widows alive or dead?

Your soldiers sleep deep. All locked in their warm tents echoing cries of pleasure and drunk men's songs. We did not even need to sneak. It was so inviting. You were begging to be slaughtered. Only a fool needed to do it.

I have only heard the tales of you, Holofernes. My husband brought back war stories of your victories, of your defeats, of your

Judith

mighty men and your clever plans. To me, to the whole city, you were a god. So, to see you sleep was unholy.

We entered your tent—foreign silks wrapped the walls, a golden chest held your armor, and your sword lay feet away from the bed. You were unprepared. The only thing between the god that held our city under siege and the sword that swung over my shoulder was a few linen sheets.

Your head was begging to be chopped.

She held you down, but the deity woke up. Limbs thrashed out at whomever awaited in the darkness. You screamed. You yelled commands at men too drunk to hold a sword.

Was it funny when you saw my face? When you froze at the moment you saw your killers? The two mightiest men who sneaked past thousands of guards to get to you. You stopped struggling when you saw your killers to be women.

That's when I plugged my sword into the soft flesh of your neck. Blood sprayed from the gash. I pushed the vulgar liquid away from my dress. The dress was given to me by my husband, and I didn't want your cowardness on it.

It took a few swings to cut your head from your shoulders.  
And I stood there watching you roll away.

# Sevilla

## Mia Vu

Mi corazón,  
A piece of my heart  
Will always reside with you.  
Can you feel  
El compás del flamenco?  
It pumps through my veins  
Like the pasión de un matador.

The fragrance of orange trees  
And azahar  
That line your boulevards  
Waft through my dreams.  
If I'm lucky,  
It lingers—  
For just a moment.

My soul still remembers  
The caress of the Spanish Sun  
That left me tattoo kisses.  
Oh even the moonlight  
Feels different,  
No longer reflecting  
Along the spine of the Guadalquivir.

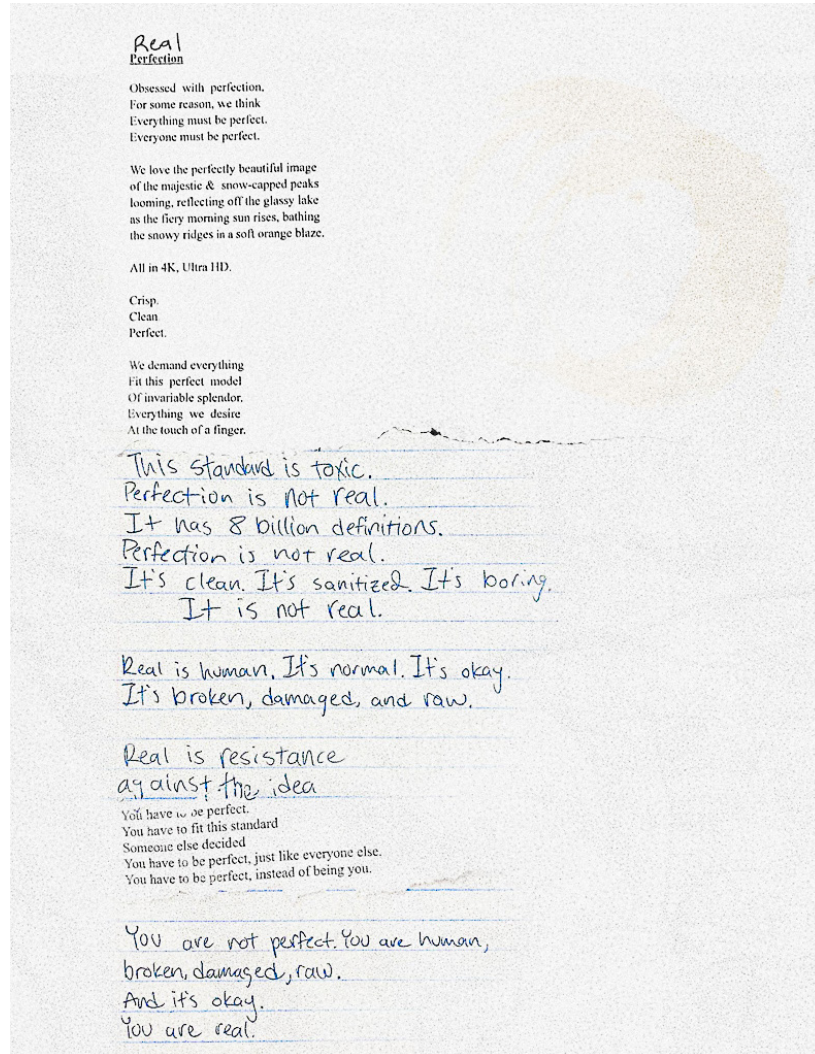
The trotting of  
Horses on cobblestones  
And el sabor of your sweet  
Tinto de Verano is beginning to wane.  
Querida,  
I may soon forget  
The sound of your voice.

**observed grace**  
Rose Hamouda



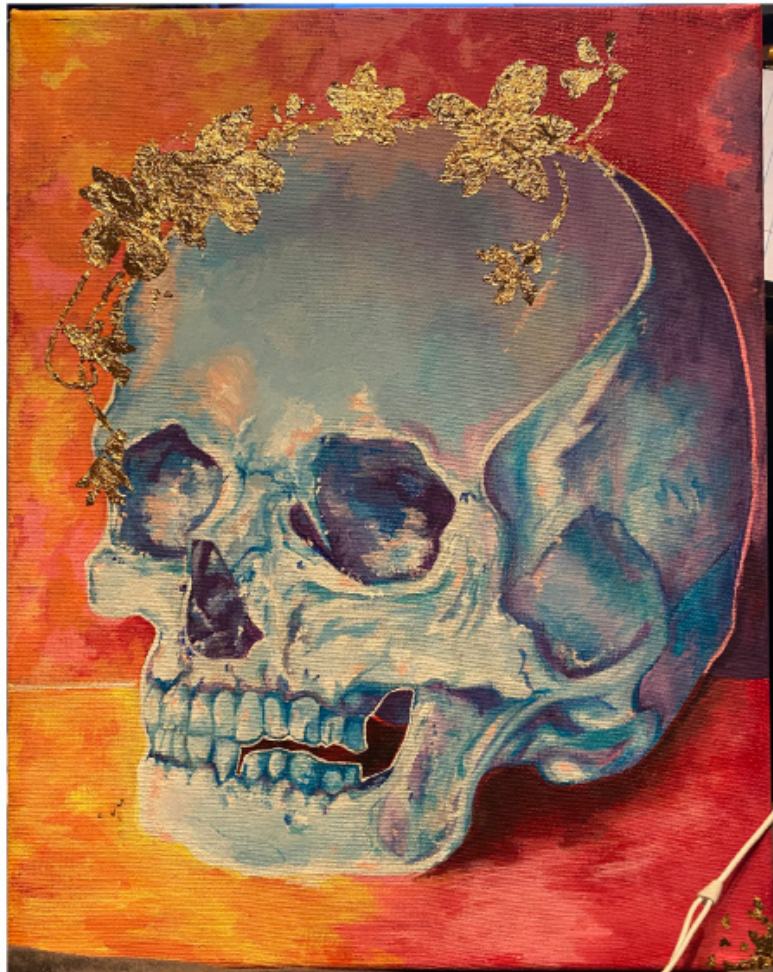
# Real Perfection

Evan Vaslow



# Anatomy

Samantha Shah



# Wake Up

## Sarah Seifried

INT. BEDROOM - TOBY'S APARTMENT - DAY

TOBY (male, 24) is asleep in his bed. Soft upbeat music plays. There's not much in the room but a bed and an empty nightstand. But then...

His eyes open.

With a swift motion, he gets out of bed, and the music becomes more upbeat. He seems content, innocent, and ignorant. Each step is peppy as he walks to the kitchen. He hums along to the song.

INT. KITCHEN - TOBY'S APARTMENT - CONTINUOUS

Toby continues humming to the song and walking on beat. Everything around him is a dull light gray. He takes out the singular bowl and spoon in his cupboard.

TOBY  
Good morning, bowl.

Moving over the fridge, he opens it. Empty. All but a single carton of "Denver Oaks" milk. He grabs it and moves on to the pantry. A single box of cereal called "L's and T's" rests in the pantry. He moves over to his small dining room table for one and pours the cereal in. Then the milk.

TOBY (CONT'D)  
Hello, cereal.

The television remote waits for him next to his place setting and he turns the TV on. There's no sofa in the small, cramped living room. Only a small box TV from a few decades ago.

The TV shows the morning news. The music dies down and we hear the TV clearer.

REPORTER 1  
(on TV)  
Big accident yesterday on the I-25.  
2 injured and one dead. Police say  
that a woman was driving a silver  
Ford Bronco when--

Toby changes the channel. This time it's a soap opera.

WOMAN 1  
(on TV)  
Oh Josie, please. You're my sister.  
I can't lose you.

Toby changes it again. Now, a football game.

## Wake Up

REPORTER 2

(on TV)

The Denver Broncos are up by 12,  
but can they hold on against the LA  
Rams?

TOBY

There has to be something good on.

One more change. This time it's an action movie, and the girl  
on screen physically fights another guy.

MELISSA

(on TV)

You don't get it! I trusted you!  
And you told him about it? Don't  
you understand what you've done?

An alarm from the analog clock in the kitchen dings.

TOBY

Ok, time for work.

In a swift movement, he turns the TV off, puts his dishes in  
the sink, grabs his keys, and heads out the door, still in  
his pjs.

The music resumes and we

CUT TO:

EXT. TOBY'S APARTMENT - CONTINUOUS

He exits the door of his apartment complex dressed in a suit  
and tie, ready for work. His hair is suddenly put together,  
and he's clean shaven.

He walks to the beat of the music and tilts his head as if  
humming it in his head.

His phone rings. Caller ID lists the number as "Her." Toby's  
smile breaks for a moment as he hesitates. However, he  
declines the call and returns to his cheerful mood.

He gets in his car (a Dodge RAM), starts it, and drives off.

INT. TOBY'S CAR - MOMENTS LATER

Now driving on the freeway, he listens to the radio, the same  
song from moments earlier.

Sarah Seifried

He hums along until it switches on its own. He looks down, confused.

REPORTER 1

(on radio)

Big accident yesterday on the I-25.

It switches.

WOMAN 1

(on radio)

You're my sister. I can't lose you.

Again.

REPORTER 2

(on radio)

Can they hold on against the LA Rams?

One more time.

MELISSA

(on radio)

Don't you understand what you've done?

The changing of the radio distracts him until he fully takes his eyes off the road. A Ford Dodge cuts off a large semi-truck as it switches lanes and it plows into Toby's RAM. We see the collision as we suddenly

CUT TO:

INT. BEDROOM - TOBY'S APARTMENT - EARLIER THAT MORNING

The soft music returns and Toby is fast asleep.

His eyes open wide.

In the same manner as earlier, the music becomes a little louder as he gets out of bed, still cheerful and content. He walks to the beat as he enters the kitchen, like he forgot all that happened before.

INT. KITCHEN - TOBY'S APARTMENT - CONTINUOUS

He repeats the same routine but we only get a simple snapshot of it.

Toby takes the singular bowl and spoon out of the cupboard.

## Wake Up

                  TOBY  
Morning, bowl.

He grabs the milk and cereal and pours them in one at a time.

                  TOBY (CONT'D)  
Hiya, cereal.

He eats his cereal in peace before he reaches to turn on the TV. We pull away from him, leaving the apartment, leaving the world.

MATCH CUT TO:

INT. ROOM 306 - DENVER OAKS HOSPITAL - EVENING

We slowly pull away from a man in a hospital bed -- Toby -- like we're coming out of his brain. He lies unconscious and still. NURSE MONICA (female, 30, registered nurse at Denver Oaks) opens the door of the room off camera and LAURA (female, 26, Toby's older sister) walks in with her husband MICHAEL (male, 27, newly married to Laura).

                  NURSE MONICA (O.C.)  
He's right in here.

                  LAURA  
Toby?

Laura rushes over to Toby, completely still, stuck in a coma. Michael stays by the door with Monica. Both are distraught but show it in their own ways.

                  MICHAEL  
Where did you find him?

                  NURSE MONICA  
EMTs brought him in from a car wreck on the I-25.

                  LAURA  
Toby?

Michael walks over to join Laura and puts a gentle hand on her shoulder.

                  NURSE MONICA  
Dr. Graziani says he's still recovering from the accident. He's been comatose since he arrived.

                  LAURA  
Come on, Toby, wake up.

Sarah Seifried

MICHAEL  
Sweetheart, I think...

LAURA  
No! He has to wake up.

MICHAEL  
(to NURSE MONICA)  
How long will he be like this?

NURSE MONICA  
There's no way to tell. Some patients gain consciousness in minutes. Yet, there are some patients who take... longer.

LAURA  
How much longer?

NURSE MONICA  
(stutters)  
The important thing is you guys are here. Patients are more likely to respond when loved ones are near.

LAURA  
(to TOBY)  
You have to wake up. You have to wake up. Please... you have to.

MICHAEL  
(quietly to NURSE MONICA)  
If you can just give us a moment.

Nurse Monica nods and exits the room, closing the door behind her.

MICHAEL (CONT'D)  
Laura, you heard the nurse. He just needs a little time.

LAURA  
You don't get it.

MICHAEL  
I know this is difficult.

LAURA  
No! You don't get it! I have to speak with him again.

Michael says nothing but wraps her in his arms as she sobs.

## Wake Up

LAURA (CONT'D)

That can't be our last conversation.

MICHAEL

You mean at dinner the other night?

LAURA

No, I called him this morning when he was leaving his apartment.

(beat)

I'll never get to fix what was said.

MICHAEL

We don't know that. We just have to wait.

Laura sighs and we transition to a montage of Laura and Michael's visits to the hospital.

BEGIN MONTAGE:

INT. ROOM 306 - DENVER OAKS HOSPITAL - NIGHT

Laura and Michael sit next to Toby and read him "The Golden Compass" by Phillip Pullman.

INT. ROOM 306 - DENVER OAKS HOSPITAL - DAY

Nurse Monica records his vitals. Laura works on her computer in a chair near Toby while Michael stands in the hallway taking a business phone call.

INT. ROOM 306 - DENVER OAKS HOSPITAL - EARLY MORNING

It's now fall and the leaves begin to turn red. Laura sips her coffee and holds Toby's hand.

INT. ROOM 306 - DENVER OAKS HOSPITAL - NIGHT

Laura and Michael come in after a long day's work and decorate the room with some pumpkin decor.

INT. ROOM 306 - DENVER OAKS HOSPITAL - EVENING

The leaves are falling and Michael puts a quilt over him while Laura prays at his side.

Sarah Seifried

END MONTAGE.

INT. ROOM 306 - DENVER OAKS HOSPITAL - DAY

It's now snowing, and the pumpkin decor is gone. Laura puts her scarf and jacket on the coat rack. Then, she sits next to Toby and opens up "The Golden Compass" once more, now towards the end of the novel. Michael brings coffee and sits next to her.

The nurse enters with her clipboard.

NURSE MONICA  
Merry Christmas Eve.

Laura stops reading and answers quietly...

LAURA  
Merry Christmas Eve.

NURSE MONICA  
It's nice that you're here for him on the holiday. I'm sure he appreciates it.

LAURA  
Do you really think he knows we're here?

NURSE MONICA  
I'm not sure. I'd like to think so. That's why I tell family members to talk to the patient, to read to them, just as you have.  
(shrugs)  
Can't hurt.

MICHAEL  
I wonder what's going on in that head.

NURSE MONICA  
I wish I could tell you for sure.

LAURA  
I read some studies that say coma patients relive their last moments before the incident. I hope he's not stuck like that.

MICHAEL  
I told you to stay off the internet.

Wake Up

NURSE MONICA

He's right. The truth is, no one really knows.

LAURA

What do you think happens?

NURSE MONICA

The human brain is complex. I think it's different for everyone in every situation. I know that's not helpful. But his situation hasn't changed in the last three months...

LAURA

You think he can't get out on his own?

NURSE MONICA

Just speculation. I don't think we can do all the work. It's ultimately up to him, but I think there are ways to help.

MICHAEL

Anything you've seen that's worked?

NURSE MONICA

Never the same thing twice.

Nurse Monica's pager goes off.

NURSE MONICA (CONT'D)

Another patient needs me. Sorry I can't be of more help. If you're not here when I get back, have a happy holiday.

MICHAEL

To you as well.

The nurse exits and Laura leans in to Toby.

LAURA

Toby if you can hear me, wake up. Wake up. Wake up--

Just as she lands her head on his chest, we abruptly...

CUT TO:

Sarah Seifried

INT. BEDROOM - TOBY'S APARTMENT - MORNING

Toby's eyes open wide in bed and he unfolds the covers in his cheerful way. He gets up and the nightstand is no longer empty. Now, there's a copy of "The Golden Compass" placed neatly on top. He doesn't seem to notice it.

EXT. TOBY'S APARTMENT - MOMENTS LATER

Dressed in a different color suit and tie than before but same style, he leaves the apartment building and walks to his truck. He receives another call from "Her" but frowns as he declines it once more. Returning to peacefulness, he gets inside his truck.

INT. TOBY'S CAR - CONTINUOUS

In the parking lot, he starts the car, but before he can pull away, there's a knock on the passenger's window.

MELISSA (female, 20, looks like she could be Toby's twin) stands outside the window. Toby hesitates, but she knocks again. He rolls down the passenger window.

TOBY

Yeah?

MELISSA

This is taking too long.

TOBY

Excuse me?

MELISSA

Toby, you have to wake up.

TOBY

Do I know you?

MELISSA

You have to wake up.

TOBY

Look, lady, I gotta get to work.

MELISSA

No, you have to listen to me.

He starts to roll up the window but she sticks her hand in and unlocks the car from the inside. She opens the door and gets in the car, closing it behind her.

## Wake Up

TOBY  
(skeptically)  
Ok... you're coming in... I can  
call the police for this.

MELISSA  
You'd call the police on your own  
consciousness?

TOBY  
(holding back laughter)  
What?

MELISSA  
You can't go to work. You'll get  
hurt.

TOBY  
Yeah as a physical therapist I face  
life or death every day.  
(beat)  
Can you go back a second? Did you  
call yourself my consciousness?

MELISSA  
Yes.

TOBY  
What does that even mean?

MELISSA  
It means... you're in a coma in the  
real world. This whole thing is  
just what your brain came up with  
to keep you from feeling the  
trauma. I'm here to get you to snap  
out of it.

TOBY  
Are you okay? Do you need me to  
drive you to a doctor or a  
therapist or someone?

MELISSA  
No, Toby. If I'm lying, then how do  
I know that you only have one bowl,  
one spoon, and only a single carton  
of milk in your fridge.

TOBY  
I'm a single man in my 20s. That's  
not that hard to guess.  
(MORE)

Sarah Seifried

TOBY (CONT'D)  
(checks the time on his  
dashboard)  
Look, I really gotta get going.

MELISSA  
Then drive. Let me show you  
something.

TOBY  
You're crazy.

MELISSA  
Drive.

TOBY  
Fine. But only because I'm dropping  
you off at the police station next  
to my office.

MELISSA  
We won't even make it there anyway.

TOBY  
We'll see.

Toby pulls out of the parking lot.

INT. TOBY'S CAR - MOMENTS LATER

Now on the freeway, Melissa looks over to Toby.

MELISSA  
In about one minute, you're going  
to get into an accident.

TOBY  
(sarcastically)  
Sure, I am.

MELISSA  
But first, the radio will change on  
its own. Have you even been paying  
attention to the warnings I've been  
giving you?

TOBY  
My radio hasn't become sentient, so  
I guess not.

MELISSA  
You're stuck in a loop, Toby! Your  
brain is having you relive the same  
weird morning over and over again.



Sarah Seifried

Except suddenly, Toby's right index finger taps the bed,  
lifting up and down.

Melissa has started to tear away at the coma's hold.

But no one is awake to see it.

THE END

# **Symphony of the Broken**

Paige Murdock

I was born to create  
art out of broken things.  
Sea glass washed ashore,  
shattered tea pots  
swept under the sink,  
ripped-out pages of books  
rearranged,  
cut up film.  
Remains of things,  
I can hear them sing,  
a symphony of the broken.

# The American Dream

Mia Vu

The land of the shackled.  
The home of the coward.  
Where it is a privilege  
To not work three jobs  
To put food on the table.  
How far we've fallen.  
To the point we persecute  
Our neighbors and  
Gather our pitchforks.  
"Leave!"  
We shout.  
"Go back to your own country!"  
We yell  
From our plot of  
Stolen land.  
What would your God say  
If he could see you now?  
I guess America's wet dream  
Is to gorge itself  
On the fruit of others' labor.

# Silkworm Words

## Trinity Sloan

There's this short story I read  
When I was 12 and just finding my words as a writer  
About silkworms and women  
And pain and *creating* and *becoming*

And here I am now, a decade later  
Pulling words from my chest  
Like the throb of a heartbeat made manifest  
Like the silkworm-women pulled thread  
from the pores in their fingertips

Sometimes the act of creating is a labor  
And it stings, it's hard,  
it leaves you breathless  
Sometimes, you tug and tug the thread out  
Only to find the color's gone wrong

And I'm at a loss for how to solve it right now

I am a spider creature  
weaving and unweaving my words  
Like a woman at a loom  
Unspooling, retrying, untying  
Progress is so hard won  
And there's only so much tension  
These sentences can take  
Before they lose their weight in my eyes

I need to let it breathe  
I need to let it go  
But how can I?

**Snub**  
Lucia Martinez



# Deer Poem

Lauren Hathaway

maybe i was never meant to be a human.  
in another life,  
i was a doe.  
bright-eyed with a twitchy tail,  
i frolicked through fields  
studded with mayberry or lilac.  
maybe i lived in a beautiful forest  
in upstate new york,  
but my curiosity and fear led to my demise.  
frozen in front of floodlights,  
my carcass fell to the asphalt.  
when you pass deer curled in on themselves  
on the sides of parkways framed by  
wildflowers,  
think of me.  
because i am there too.  
my soul is sodden with blood and tears shed for the ones frozen  
by fear,  
the ones who didn't know any better,  
the ones who i know but have never met.  
we are soul sisters,  
separated by some division of  
social time and space,  
but united by instinct and a  
paralyzing fear that strikes as  
incomprehensible devices of modern destruction  
hurdle towards our hearts.

# ***Light in the Dark***

Mari Pletta

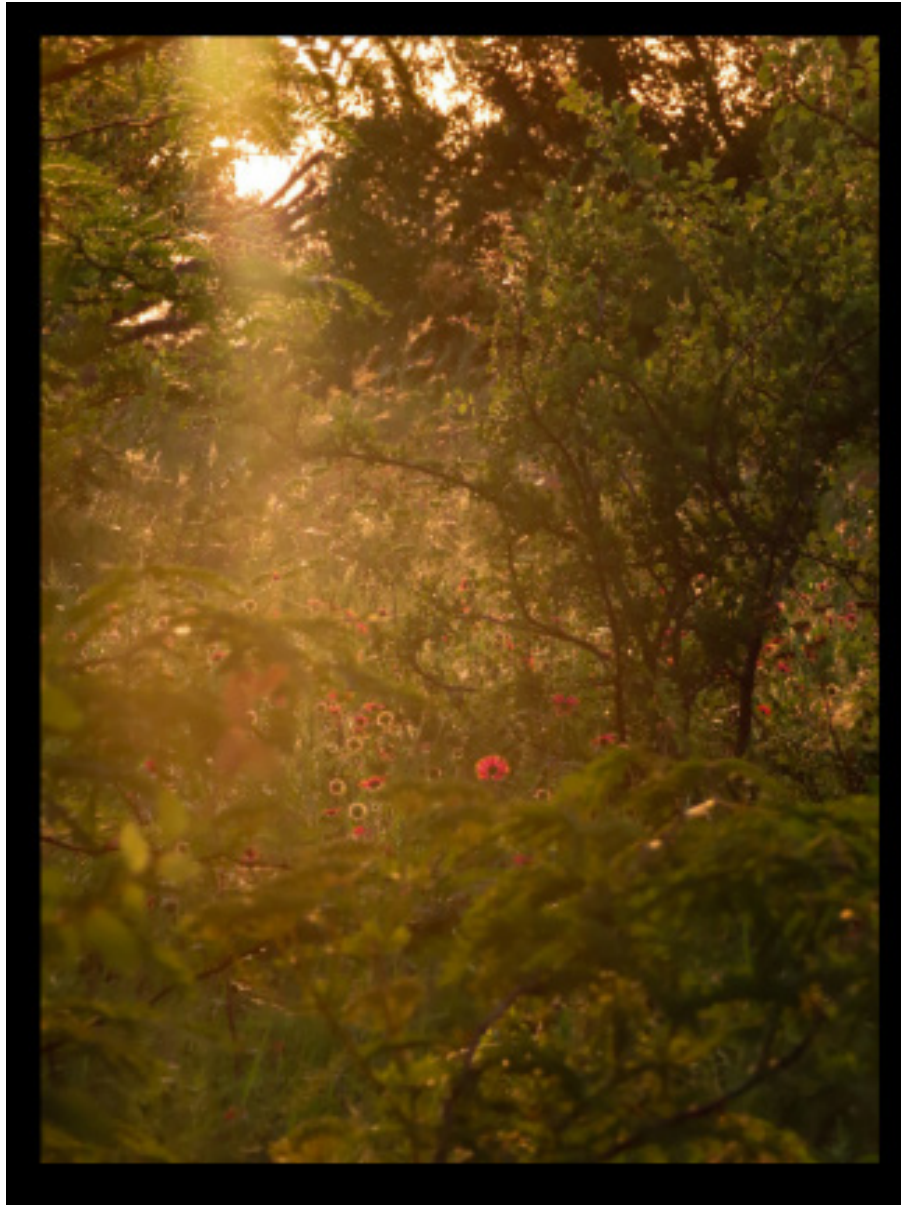


# Room Decor Still Life

Nalla Hussain



**Pulchritudo**  
Ailicec Valdez



# Wyoming

## Dominic Gallegos

My left eye wandered when I was four, small rebel in its socket,  
So the doctor snipped a muscle, pulled it taut, made it obey.

Now my right eye rules the world for me, dominant and steady,  
A small sacrifice to make the pair appear correct to those who look.

No one sees the stitch in my vision, the cost of straightness,  
Only the calm façade, the illusion of eyes that agree.

But hers—hers drift freely, one slipping from the other like a loose thread,  
Then falling back in place when she turns her head, small hush of symmetry.

No surgeon carved her gaze into obedience,  
Just the uncorrected truth of wandering sight drawing me in.

We meet in the bright lobby outside the Van Cliburn Concert Hall,  
Guests moving past us toward the ceremony for our new chancellor.

On tables throughout the lobby, congratulatory letters stand upright like diplomas,  
NYU's large violet seal rising above Harvard's smaller red stamp, each angled toward the room.

Her black hair spills to her scapula, catching the soft reflection off the windows,  
And her light skin tone gathers the glow along her cheeks and the bridge of her nose.

She looks at me when our eyes finally catch—drifting, and precise—  
And the low hum of arrivals folds into something distant and unimportant.

Her brown eyes wander in slow, certain arcs that return on their own time,  
And when she asks my name, her gaze slips sideways as if giving the moment room.

We guide students, staff, and delegates toward the entrance of the hall,  
Letting them move into the rising rows of seats waiting behind the doors.

Between groups, we linger near the tables lined with letters and their embossed seals,  
Watching sunlight stretch across the purple carpet and settle quietly around us.

In the corridor between the inner door and the outer entrance of the hall,  
Where the light narrows and softens, I begin to truly see her.

Dominic Gallegos

We talk in looping half-thoughts, her gaze wandering in delicate diagonals,  
Mine steady in their study of her, drawn closer without needing a name for it.

Eventually the guests begin drifting out in slow, polished currents,  
And I lead them toward the reception while she slips briefly into the crowd.

But she returns—quiet, sure—and together we help the last few leave,  
Letting the hall settle into stillness as the final footsteps fade.

Across the open lobby our small talk stretches into something nearly forming,  
Her Washington rain meeting my desert dryness in an easy, natural rhythm.

I tell her I've always wanted to move north, where winter feels like permission,  
And I say Wyoming like a truth stepping into its shape for the first time.

Her brown eyes warm at the word, following it toward imagined cold and distance,  
And she finds Wyoming's seal among the letters and says, I almost went there.

Choices wander like eyes do—circling until somewhere invites them to land,  
Though hers land on me less often than the quiet in my chest hopes they will.

Outside, early evening folds softly around us as we walk toward the steps,  
Our footsteps matching lightly in the cooling air above the plaza.

I offer her a simple goodbye, waiting for her gaze to return to mine,  
But her eye slips the opposite direction, and her goodbye drifts past me as she walks ahead.

# Drowned in His Waters

## Rylee Page

Estes Park, Colorado  
June 27th, 2022

There was this certain kind of coldness that emitted from the streams of Colorado. My family could've sworn that mountain was the closest thing we could get to heaven. From the rocks that carried the rushing pureness of water, to the whispers of the thousand trees that swayed in the summer wind, it was a world that I could escape for hours.

I never realized how much I loved the cold until I hiked the trails with my father- a silent man trapped in his own thoughts but spoke of harshness like the burning sun. It was within mountain breeze that the ancient wind carried messages of fatherly love that I so desperately hoped for.

We loved the cold. That was one thing we had in common.

It was on those family trips to Colorado that I prayed that we were father and daughter instead of relatives tied by blood.

When my father was my *dad*, blood wasn't considered when it came to my ignorance of his internal sickness.

I remember a time when we played dolls instead of judgement. When I would run free as a naked toddler in our backyard and kiss frogs in hopes of becoming a princess. We would go camping together in the forests by our home. And when the "monsters" crept underneath my bed, I would crawl into the sanctuary of their bedroom and curl up next to him and mom.

"Daddy will always protect you, sweetie. As long as I'm here, they won't come get you."

He would always say with little kisses on my forehead that lingered with the smell of *Bud Light* as the sweet coolness of the fan whirled me back to sleep.

As I got older, I would complain about his kisses because of his scratchy beard that would always peck my cheeks. He would then reluctantly shave his "*pokeys*" away to ease the demands of his daughter.

But I wasn't three anymore, I was fifteen on the roads of Colorado. That the realization of how his beard grew in a greying mess, untamed and *pokey*. Like the aspen trees that stabbed at the skies.

We drank from the water of *Alberta Falls* as it rushed with grand vigor down the arms of the mountain. Along the slippery rocks, there was still a “*Be careful*” that he would say to his little girl. Now not of warning, but of consideration.

Unlike the artificial waterfalls of waterparks from back home, *Alberta* was a beauty of water—a power that could be heard for miles as she flowed against the riverbeds. And just like when I was in those waterparks, I scrunched my body behind her and stared out the splashing window.

My father’s face would scruff with the sound of tourists passing by. For him, it ruined the silence and the quiet conversations we would have. And in his mind, it was a quick trigger between the enjoyment of a vacation, and a tiresome trek.

For he wasn’t in the waterfall with me. He couldn’t fit. He couldn’t scrunch his body like he once did. He didn’t *want* to fit in this peaceful puzzle behind the waterfall. Absent.

He was absent at Christmas when the Texan cold was a sticky feeling.

Absent during the days of work to provide for us.

Then becoming too exhausted to be present with his daughter, for that was the only gift she truly wanted.

His little girl demanded to spend time with her dad, but that little girl he wanted to protect, was now a woman—a complicated predicament for his masculinity.

An unexplainable pain for my innocence, but as I grew amongst his anger, I realized that his absence reflected his own invisible father. Now when I look at him through those waterfalls, I see the boy in those old photographs who suffered much more pain than I could’ve ever imagined.

As we crawled up the shoulders of mountain, the air grew thin, and the trails grew thinner. A drop to my right, walls of dirt on my left.

Drowned in His Waters

“Come on, we are almost there. One more break and we gotta keep moving.”

Keep moving. There was no time to look at the view on this hike. Push. Push. He kept pushing. Until I threw up. Until the air in my lungs exasperated into fits of wheezing—my body begging for air.

I was crawling behind my family now. *Pushing* so I wasn't behind him yet again.

The thunder rumbled in the distance as the sun faded away into a crisp summer shade. The air grew sweet with little droplets trickling down from the near heavens.

A greying array of sunshine.

Suddenly, the thunder began to roar. I jumped at the sound as I remember how the little girl hid behind her bedroom door.

Her ear glued to the wall as her little heart pitter-pattered to the sound of my father's rage. She loved the rain, but these storms rumbled the house and drowned her with a certain fear that would shake her into adolescence.

She would hear her mother, quiet and strong like the wind, that would blow against his raging tides of the man-child. After the storm died down, the wind would carry her to hotels for “girls' night.” Shielding her from the hurricane. She admired her for that as she carried the loveless marriage on her shoulders to provide a *steady* marriage for her child. Once beautifully loud with her tornados, now hushed down to breezes that were never meant for a soul like her.

The thunder died down to a complete silence. No bugs, no wind, not even a whisper. As the sky cleared, the sky lake shined with an icy blue that dazzled in the light. The final destination—*The Loch*. My father is there with my mother, sister, and grandmother. But my dad isn't there.

With the clearing came the reveal of his sickness to us. Like the water, the truth was clear after being fogged away with the excuse of “normalcy.” My family and I rested there for a bit and admired the view as we lived in the ignorance a little while. Blissfully unaware that this was the last trip with him.

A dead fish floated to the surface while I drank from the water. It was too late. I have long since took a huge gulp from its illusion of pureness and began to gag at the sight.

“Your father is just very sick, Rylee. I cannot tell you what he’s done. It’s just too horrible.”

The wind wept, still trying to shield me from the raging storm as I begged for her to tell me. It was two years later now. The same innocent summer but of a different time and different grief. My *dad* was dead and my *father* remained. A sickness so disgusting that the years of neglect all added together. A stranger once bonded together by blood and memories, now a mix of complicated bitterness and sympathy for this sick man.

“Did he hurt her?”

Tears pebbled her cheeks. A nod. A silence. A rumble in the ground. An outpour of shaking. Screaming. Mourning of a dead dad. Birth of a stranger that took my father’s place.

I couldn’t look at him. And for a while, I couldn’t shake the resemblance of how our faces were sculpted, our rage, our pain. It was all too similar. The way the same thunder pounded against my lover’s kindness. The aftermath of the storm. The shame.

Shame of the same blue eyes that stared back at me in the icy blue water. The blood of the fish. Bleeding. Contaminating the pureness. I jump in and swim to grab the fish as my family stayed on the shore. The coldness shocked my soul as I gathered puddles of blood in my palms and threw it astray. The blood and dirt only muddying the water with every desperate thrash. Every desperate try.

The water is black. My reflection is gone with the ripples. My cries whimper down into silence as I stand there in the cold. My

Drowned in His Waters

body getting used to the pain. I turn behind me to hear the sound of splashing. My family joins me, the filth darkening the water with every step. Holding me tenderly with a tantalizing warmth.

We stand there in equal silence as the water settles down to our reflections yet again. My face is his. A sight I once hated, but I look to my mother's reflection. The similarities were uncanny.

Our eyes were the same blue.

Our smiles. The same crooked tooth.

The way the wind sang through our wavy hair.

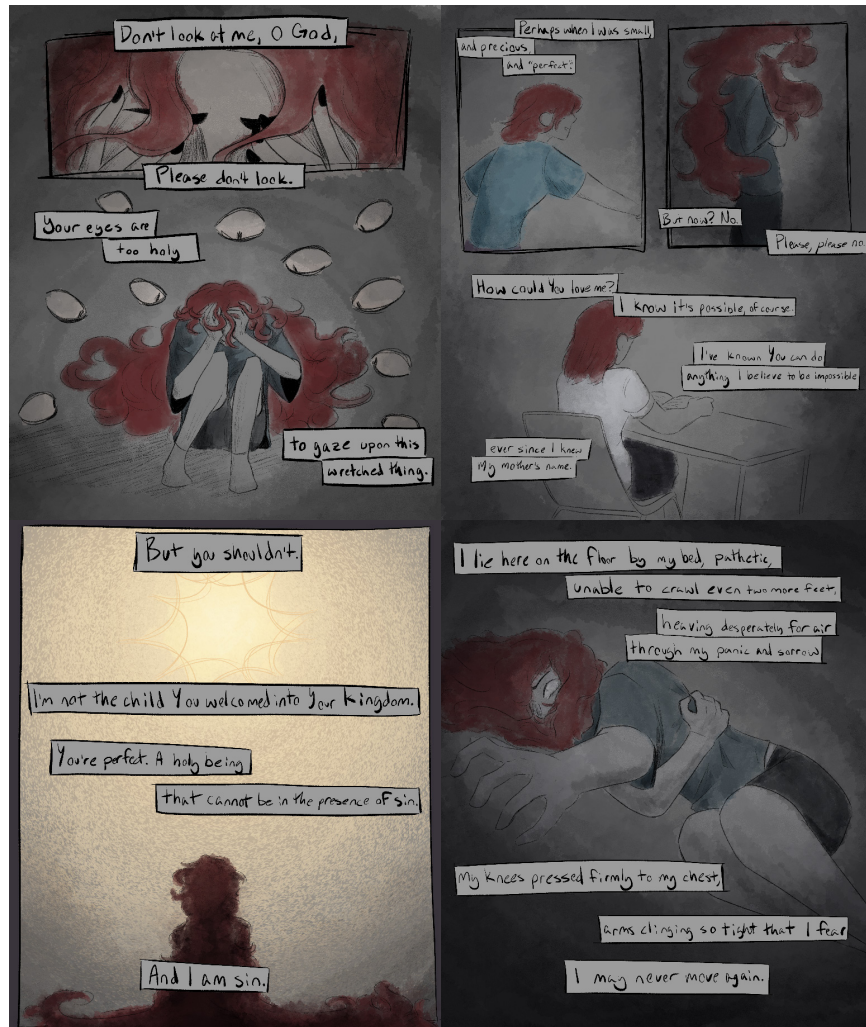
The years of love from the strongest women I never knew.

The wife and daughter hold each other in the pain as the sun illuminates their mourning faces.

Toppling over into the water and letting ourselves drown in his waters.

# Ceaseless Watcher

Cora Van Y



Ceaseless Watcher



Cora Van Y



# Things I Cannot Cure: for my Father

Grace Schafhauser

“Woah, Dad, look at that! I’ve never seen a plane that big before!”

“Look! Is that a U.F.O?!” I jerk my neck in the direction of my dad’s gesture. “What?!”

“Just kidding. I got you!”

“Look—two large ships out there on the horizon. It’s not often we see that here!”

The ships, much like us, sit silently side by side. They pass without much trouble, neither wanting to be in the way of the other. The smaller ship activates its horn briefly, finally acknowledging its boat counterpart as if to say, *Hey! We’re together in this vast, wet, lonely hell!*

So are we.

You ask me if I ever wonder where the boats and planes are going. I say yes. Of course I do. I ask you if you think anyone on the plane wonders if anyone on the ground is wondering about them.

“I haven’t thought about it that way.”

That’s funny. We typically think the same.

I guess it makes sense—you haven’t been on a plane in years. Still, thirty-four years ago, you found yourself on the way to your hopeful new life across the Atlantic Ocean. Sometimes I look at the planes and wonder if there are any twenty-year-olds up there, chasing their beginnings the way you once did. I also wonder if any of them are coming back from their new lives irreversibly wounded, the same way you did.

We talk very little about the aftermath of The Accident. Instead, we sit and watch the airplanes in silence and pretend to not be bothered by your painful destiny. I’ve never seen you angry—perhaps you’re

Grace Schafhauser

attempting to out-stoic the monster of fate so as to not be devoured by it.

It's too late for me, as I try to climb my way out of its belly. I'm clawing at its walls as guilt floods in, thick enough to drown me. I latch onto its esophagus and pry its snarling teeth open with the reconciliation that maybe since I'm a nurse I can reverse this suffering. *Right? If I cure a hundred other suffering people, will it make up for the fact that you suffer too?*

Freeing myself of fate's jaws, I understand at last: you don't need me to cure you—I never could, after all. I have held the hands of enough dying people to know that even the sincerest of convictions cannot subdue the inevitability of your earthly suffering.

And so, I sit. I sit in the rooms of the dying, though I know I cannot defeat mortality. If nothing else, we will face it together—softening its bite even if we cannot avoid its teeth.

I sit next to you, watching the airplanes and the boats and the birds and the clouds. I feel the breeze on my skin as the sun rests on our shoulders. You ask me if I ever wonder how the birds know where they migrated from. I don't know. Maybe in the same way that boats know where to dock and the planes know where to land: a program, a schedule. I like to think it's similar to how you knew to come back here and fall in love and have daughters despite it all. *Just a feeling that this is home, probably.*

"I heard they have magnets in their wings and it forces them back home."

"Really?!"

"Nope. Got you!"

# The Hamburg Chicken

Jocelyn Leyva



# The Door

Dominic Gallegos

My mind opens the door.  
I peek through the crack  
and see my brother lying  
on his twin-size mattress  
that sits on a queen-size frame.

His eyes are open,  
his lungs unmoving,  
his mouth slightly parted.  
Foam clings to the corners of his lips.  
His left hand bent, half-closed in a fist,  
as if gripping some last thread of a dream.  
His right arm rests by his side.

I whisper his name.  
He does not move.

The world slows.  
I step closer,  
slide my hands beneath his body,  
lift with all my strength—  
carrying him like a marble slab.  
I crouch, lay him gently  
on the carpeted floor,  
desperate to keep him whole,

Still, no movement.

I press my palms to his chest—  
Pop.  
Pop.  
Ribs give way.  
I keep going  
until my vision burns,  
tears warm my cheeks,  
snot strings from my nose.

The Door

I seal my lips to his—  
give everything I have,  
the last breath of my life.  
I repeat.  
I repeat.  
Pressing, pleading,  
until blood comes.  
Thin lines spill from his nostrils,  
tracing his mouth like rivers of rust.

He is gone.

Silence swells,  
rings through my skull—  
then: light.

Golden, endless, flooding.  
It pours into me,  
a purity that numbs,  
unthreads the self—  
opens the unseen,  
pulls me toward the infinite.

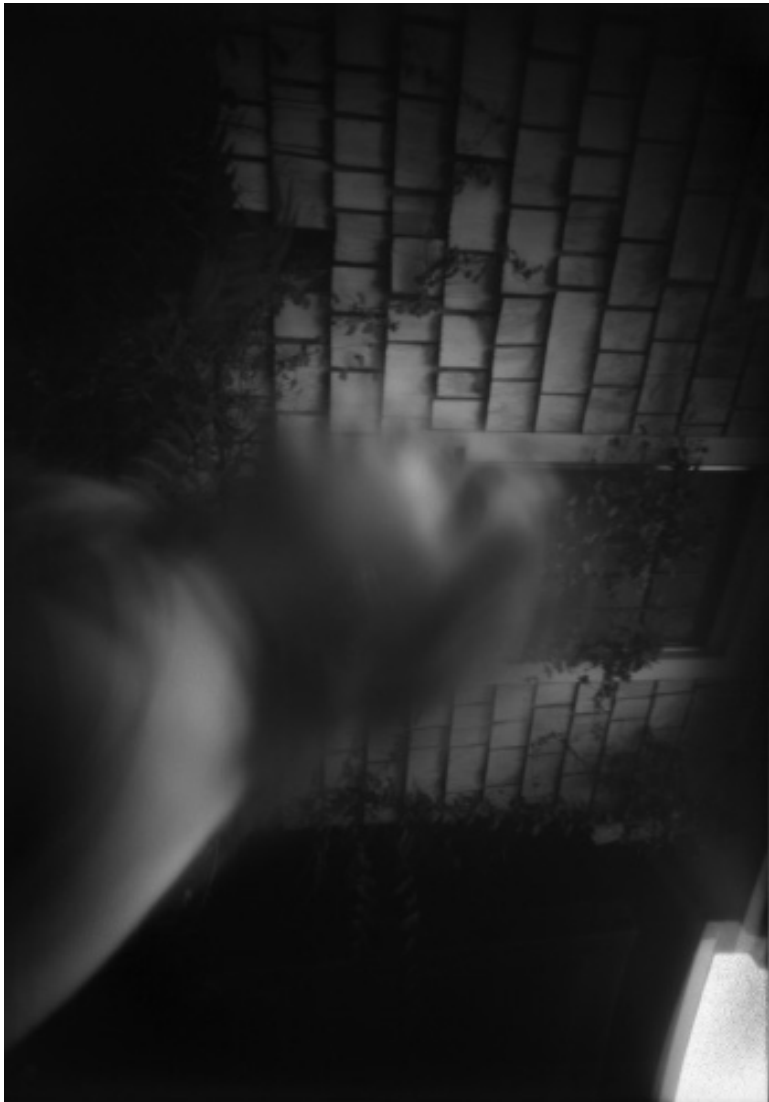
My mind becomes a blank canvas.  
Light paints across it—  
strokes of gold, of white,  
shapes I cannot name,  
forms I cannot hold.

I become hand and brush,  
canvas and door.  
Something within me paints.

My mind opens the door.

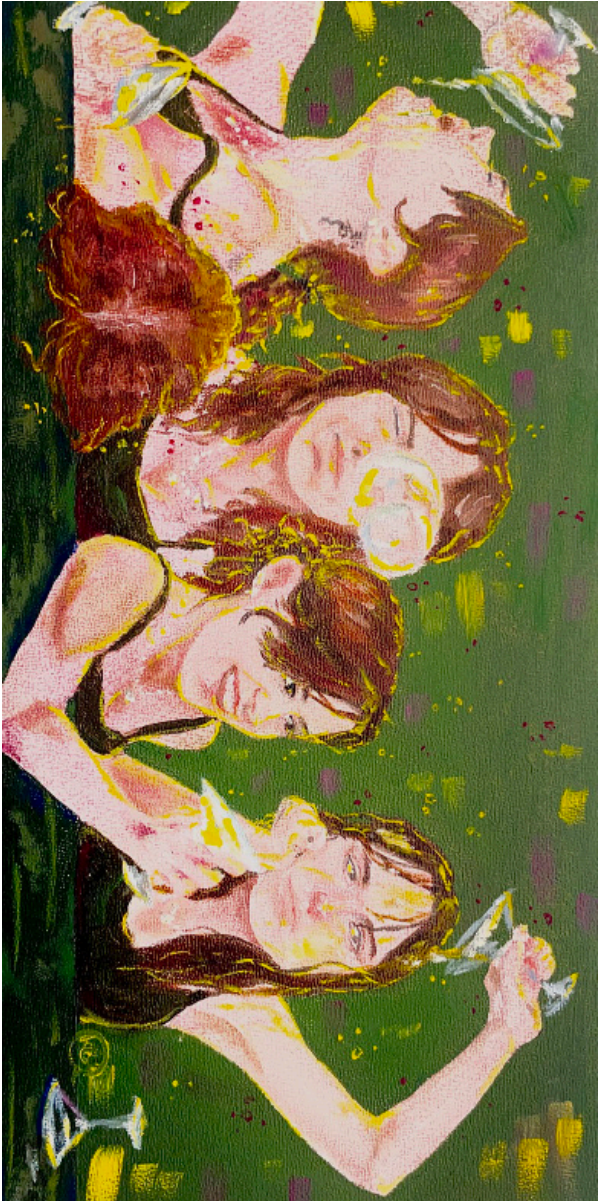
# Looking Up

Mari Pletta



# **Doodles**

Kirstin Williams



## In trusion

Abigail Smart

Her walls were white, but her mind splattered them with red and orange sprawling spirals. They buzzed, they crawled, a constant ocular migraine. Everything surrounding her was of blinding vivid color, moving like TV static.

When her world goes quiet, the council throws their decorations up. They hush her useless outside noises using deafening silence, while they jab at and bicker with one another, tearing the lobes of her brain apart. Their words are worthless. They spike her heart rate and demobilize her with confliction. The council lives in the attic, and they never come out, for if they were to come out, if she were to see them, they would be ridden upon sight. She hates them.

Their intentions are unclear. That's what really drives her mad. They give her advice, they warn her, they hurt her.

When they arrive, all she can do is lie on her bed and stare at the ceiling, and listen. They strap her down, blind her, and make her listen. They live inside her skull, in the organ that controls.

Her sanpaku eyes are so brown that they are black, slightly cut by her droopy eyelids. That's all they know about her, that's all they can see from the inside, her eyes. It's funny how malicious they are, the fact that they have access to her entire brain, but choose to focus on the eyes. It's like they line up and they bet on horses. *"How much bickering do we have to do before she snaps?"*

They were hushed when there was a knock on her door—a singular slam of the palm against the wood.

She immediately sat up, her eyes wide. The colors swirled manically, framing the door. Her breathing grew shallow, the silence lasting too long.

"Neola. Someone's at the front door."

She exhaled and swung her legs off her bed and walked to her closet. She stared at the jumbled-up hoodie on the floor.

*"Your room is a mess."*

Neola shook her head slightly and picked up her hoodie. Halfway into it, she heard a loud fidgeting across her room. She

paused, fear striking her chest. She heard the tired squeak of her window sliding open, so she ripped her head through the hole of her hood.

She stared at the open window blankly. Someone sat at the windowsill.

“You seriously leave your window open? In the middle of the night?”

A slight smile crept onto Neola’s face. “I like the crickets.”

The council isn’t around when Amy is. The colors, the buzzing, the bickering, it’s gone.

Neola met Amy a couple of weeks ago. They happened to end up together for an English project. Naturally, they waited until the night before to get it done.

Amy was still sitting in the window sill, the moonlight illuminating her dark brown hair. Her hair gel was still intact, curving the ends of her hair toward the sky. It was clear that she had attempted to remove her makeup, but the black was still stuck to her eyelids, slightly smeared. She wore a matching P.J. set, a black lacy tank, and shorts. Neola kind of hated how stereotypical she was, like she had just come off the set of a horror movie that cares too much for its aesthetics.

“Get a sound machine then.” She giggled and hopped off the window, looking around the room.

“Sorry, it’s a mess.”

“No, mine is worse. Trust me.”

Neola sat in this reassurance for a minute, staring at the floor. Her eyebrows screwed up, paired with a rather important thought, “Why the hell did you come through my window?”

“I was knocking on the door for ten minutes, and it’s cold outside.” She was blunt, shrugging off her breaking-and-entering conviction.

“I’m sorry my mom didn’t get the door. She never does...”

Amy flapped her hand and scoffed, still smiley. Amy came from noise, a house bustling with pans and laughter, and she carried

Abigail Smart

that brightness with her everywhere she went.

Neola spread all of the papers on the floor between them, and they both sat criss-cross. It was silent for a while, with an occasional favor asked of the other. She couldn't help but bask in the peace. Sit in it like a summer day where the rays of the sun hit your face *just* right.

She spaced out from her work for a minute and glanced at Amy, who was staring at her. Amy immediately looked down to avoid eye contact.

Neola's eyes slowly drifted back down, confusion beginning to flow through her brain.

"You seem like you write. Do you?" Amy's head rested on her hand, "You just don't talk a lot in class, and before we met, you sat alone."

She silently shook her head, staring at the papers on the ground. The moonlight made them glow slightly off-white; the words stood out more.

"Maybe you should take it up. I'm part of the leadership board of the writing club at our school."

Neola laughed nervously, shifting her weight, "I'm not good at writing."

"Well, it's not competitive or anything. It could do you some good, y'know? I- I just..." she started to trace the carpet with her finger, which stuttered from the friction, "I get worried about you, Neo. You're always in the back of my mind. I hear jerks talk behind your back all the time, but getting to know you recently has been cool. I really don't know where they get that stuff from..."

People do talk. It's never bothered Neola though, she doesn't see or hear them. The council is so loud, so distracting, that the criticism they give doesn't hold a coin to the criticism she gives herself. The people talk because they hate her actions. The council talks because they *hate* her.

"I know they talk. I don't care that much."

“Well, have you talked to your mom about it?”

Neola’s eyes shot up, her body tensed.

“No. No. No, I don’t talk to her. We don’t really talk that much,” she released the air built up in her lungs and plastered a smile on her face. “She’s busy.”

Amy sat there and stared for a minute. She was alert, and her eyes were reading.

“Neo, do you need help?”

“No. Can we just drop this conversation, please?”

Amy immediately looked back down at the work, shuffling through the papers again. She glued herself to her work, and she didn’t look back up.

Neola’s breathing grew shallow, panic shrinking her lungs, “I’m sorry. I’m sorry that was rude. I know you’re just trying to look out for me and stuff..”

Amy flung her hand forward again, this time paired with only a tight smile.

Neola couldn’t lose her. She couldn’t lose the silence.

“What kind of music do you listen to, Amy?”

Her eyes lit up, the smile slowly quivering into a bigger one. “Don’t get me started...” They held eye contact, giving her the green light. “Punk rock is my main go-to. I also really love metal and screamo, stuff like that... I dunno...”

Neola looked deep into her eyes, smiling and listening. Her heart swelled while she spoke. She could sense the passion that Amy was emitting, so she fed off of it, inhaling subtly.

Amy was giggling and bubbly again. “What kind of music do you listen to?”

The room was silent for a second. Neola tried to dive into her brain. She scanned from one side all the way to the other and found nothing. “I—don’t?” She never listened to music. She tried one time, but they’re too loud. They don’t like it.

Amy released a mortified gasp, “No! No metal? Country? Pop? Nothing?”

Abigail Smart

Neola's eyebrows were furrowed, like she was discovering all of this about herself in this exact moment, "I... I don't really care for music."

"Fair, I guess. What *do* you care for then?"

She sucked in her breath and looked up into Amy's green eyes, which sparkled with life and passion. "I don't really have the *time* to care for things."

Amy's head tilted, and she stuck her tongue in her cheek.

"Okay... How do you spend your time?"

"With really colorful silence."

There was a beat, before Amy let out a small airy laugh.

"I'm serious. My world is loud, and it's colorful and bright..."

Neola started to rub her hands on her legs, subtly rocking back and forth. She had to turn off her brain before it all started pouring out, like an overflowing sink.

Amy winced at the sudden change, "Do you... Daydream a lot? Or..."

Her brain had too much liberty with the absence of the council. Neola looked down at the ground and started to breathe rapidly. "...It's so fucking stressful and loud, I don't know how to get rid of them. I need them gone so bad!"

"Neola, are there people at school? I can help, I can report them for you anonymously-"

"No," her hand trembled, the air freezing, "Them."

Neola pressed her index finger against her temple.

Amy slightly shook her head, her breathing starting to quicken. She didn't know what to do or say, and she felt glued to the floor.

"Don't you see them? Doesn't your head taunt you?" She clenched her teeth, "Don't you want to just slam your hand through your skull and rip them out? They intrude, Amy! I want to rip them out and watch the colors splatter everywhere! I'll see how much they have to say then!"

Amy stood up abruptly, her eyebrows creased. She avoided eye contact with Neola, "I... I need to go."

“No, please don’t leave Amy! Please God, don’t ever leave!  
You save me from them. They don’t like you!”

“Just—to the bathroom.”

Neola’s eyes drifted smoothly, following every step Amy took toward the door. As soon as she shut it, the council exploded. The colors were so bright, her eyes felt like they were vibrating. Nothing took shape; it was all blurry. She held out her arms and stumbled around the room, knocking stuff over and crumpling the papers beneath her.

*“She thinks you’re crazy! You scared away your silence!”*

“Stop! Stop talking, you guys are so loud, it hurts!”

*“Go after her, she’s getting away!”*

“Shit! Where’s the door?!”

*“Shhhhh!”*

The council went silent, the door popping into her clouded, colorful vision.

“She needs help! Take her to the doctor or something!” It was Amy, muffled. Neola slowly walked over and pressed her ear against the wood, holding her breath to hear every word. People don’t talk to her mother; they are scared of her.

“Last time I got a doctor, she didn’t do shit. Waste of my money’s what it was.”

There was silence. Neola’s head started to spin; her stomach started to turn.

“I’ll show you she’s fine. Warner, get in here.”

Neola froze; her heart stopped.

*“How embarrassing is this, Neo? Seriously! You seem like a mental patient.”*

She slowly opened the door, one eye peeping through. The colors covered her mother’s face, fizzling away when the door was wide enough to see Amy, sitting on the couch.

“Neo, you need to tell her what you told me.” Amy’s eyebrows were pressed together; she looked sad and almost hurt.

*Am I a sad sight?*

Abigail Smart

“I don’t need help. I’m fine. I’m sorry, let’s just continue the project.”

“She’s right, she’s silly sometimes, she was probably just joking around.” The *witch* popped her cigarette back into her mouth, looking at the opposite wall dismissively.

Amy tapped her foot on the ground, staring into nothing. She breathed in deep and locked eyes with Neola’s mother, “You shouldn’t be feeding into this. You should be helping her.”

Neola’s heart dropped to the floor, her lips parted. The atmosphere changed. It was like her mother was slowly peeling off the thin layer of sanity she puts on for people she doesn’t know. It was silent for a beat, before she raised an eyebrow.

“Who the hell do you think you are to tell me what I should be doing as a mother?”

“To be okay with your child in this condition...”

She grabbed Amy by the jaw and slammed the back of her head into the couch. Amy’s face went white, and she looked away, yelping.

“I oughtta kill you for this...” She continued to talk, but Neola could no longer hear. The colors started to intrude; they no longer cared if Amy was there.

It was bright red, mixed with vibrant streaks of blue. Her eyeballs felt fuzzy, like the back of a bee. Her eyes, once panicked, were vacant; the council had taken the reins.

*“She’s evil, Neola. God-awfully evil.”*

Tears began to flood her eyes, but they wouldn’t drop, they couldn’t. In the mass of red and blue, a neon white path formed, guiding her through the maze of crimson. She followed mindlessly, looking straight ahead the whole time.

After a single twist and turn, she saw what the council pointed her to. It was sharp, it shone. A kitchen knife. She drew it, staring at it for long seconds. Her eyes suddenly fought back, her words outspoke the council. “No.”

*“Listen.”*

In trusion

The silence dissipated, allowing Neola's ears to fill with the sounds from the living room. Amy was grunting, paired with frantic sounds of friction, like she was trying to get away but just couldn't. Her mother was still talking, but she couldn't make out any of the words. The council does this on purpose to protect her.

Neola looked down at the knife again, it radiated an inviting neon white light. The colors grew brighter as the static returned to her ears. She breathed in instead of out; she was sucking in the energy.

She let her muscles go weak; she let them take control.

Her body began to move before her mind had time to protest.

*"You're doing the right thing, Neo."*

She got back to the front of the room, staring at the two; the light overtook them. There was a white mass pinned against the couch; it squirmed. The white is good, that's what she remembers. There was also a red mass. It seemed to be growing into the white. The red is bad. The red takes over, it doesn't like Neola.

*"There is the intruder, Neo."*

She took slow steps so as not to disturb the masses, to make sure she didn't scare them off. She had the intruder right in front of her, pointed out and ready to be evicted. After seventeen long years, she finally saw it. It was bright, it was so *easy*.

Her arm raised, knife in hand, the red was so close, at this point, she could walk inside of it. She trembled, baring her teeth, and slammed the knife into it. Some of the colors on the walls began to disappear, and the intruder panicked. It hissed and crackled, the loudest the silence has ever been. She slammed her hand down again. The council was starting to evacuate. Neola breathed heavily, gripping the knife with both hands and screeching on the last slam.

The voices of the council were sucked into oblivion, like smoke that had climbed too high in the air. It was silent, but the quiet kind of silent. The kind of silence where you can hear a pin drop. Silence where your ears slightly ring.

Abigail Smart

Her vision was clear, her brain finally empty. No more colors, no more council. That wretched council. Good riddance! The ends of her lips involuntarily curled up; her heart swelled. She laughed, a genuine laugh coming straight from her chest.

“Amy! They’re gone!”

“God...” Amy growled, not being able to take her eyes off the corpse that lay between them, “My *God*...”

Amy started to sob and whine, frozen in her place. They both locked eyes. No words were being said, but the air was thick, the quiet was pressing on both of their minds.

It was comedy and tragedy, facing off. One’s mouth was drawn down, while the other was pulled up to the sky. Physical differences didn’t affect internal similarities. Both pairs of lungs were working rapidly, trying to keep up with the sudden hypoventilation.

Amy’s eyes were wide as she stared at Neola. There were splatters of dark red blood all over her face. In contrast to her dark eyes, the blood was vibrant. Vivid. The more she focused on it, the more it grew. It started to fizz off her face, into the air. The color started to crack, traveling through the air like lightning. It swirled and spiraled into the air, surrounding the girl in front of her.

Neola’s laughter started to crackle into a fizzy static, her face became less and less recognizable, overcome by a neon red visual heap. Amy’s eyes started to relax; the need to focus had escaped her.

“*There is the intruder, Amy.*”

# What do the birds eat on the rocks of the Trinity?

Sophia Nelson

Jump—

I see a crab claw,  
broken and still.

Jump—

the algae waves beneath the dark water  
brushing the cement underneath.

Wind threads through my hair  
lifting it from my sweaty neck.

Jump—

my reflection shimmers and in it  
I see birds swooping low to the water.

In a pair, their shadows  
dance across the green liquid  
before sweeping up again.

Jump—

a turtle bathes in heat waves,  
its patterned shell glistening,  
as it nestles in a cradle  
of small, sunbaked stones.

Jump—

the crane flies  
into clouds of soft gray.

My feet are steady on the rocks  
as I twist, watching it land upstream.

Jump—

on the other side,  
bluebonnets rustle in tall grass  
and yellow buds burst like sunlight  
after winter's frost.

Jump—

in foaming bubbles,  
the river slowly flows past me  
coaxing me toward the new trail ahead.

# how to save a life

Grace Schafhauser

it's a strange thing, restarting a human heart  
for the first time.

by the time it was my turn,  
the ribs were already broken.  
*one. two. three. four.*

i was surprised how human flesh felt under my hands:  
warm and soft,  
yielding into my palms as the body trusted me to assume the responsibilities of the heart.  
*thirteen. fourteen. fifteen.*

there was an aching irony in it all,  
that healing demanded this much violence—  
violence that became more visceral to me with each pressing motion.  
*twenty-two. twenty-three.*

i kept my voice steady to distract myself  
from the feeling of the heart giving into my palms.  
*twenty-eight. twenty-nine.*

with each compression i felt i owed an apology.  
*sorry.*  
*sorry.*  
*sorry.*

*i wish saving wasn't so ugly.*

again.  
again.  
again.

*sorry.*  
*sorry.*  
*sorry.*

how to save a life

you and i learned how to re-start hearts together a few years ago.

today i sit across from you,  
using everything i learned  
to keep you here  
a little longer.

“remember the first time we did CPR?” i ask.

i watch you think about it. it feels so long ago now.  
“yeah. that was ugly.”

i can still feel it in my hands,  
the stillness of the muscle.  
i can also feel how life came back anyway,  
despite the violence  
again and again and again.

“yeah.” i recall. “really ugly.”

today, your heart sits heavy in my hands  
as i attempt to propel life back into your extremities.  
i press where it aches,  
knowing that this is how the saving happens.

i tell you i’m sorry  
for the pain  
and for the pressure  
and for the way this is hurting you.

there is no painless way to heal this.  
there is no gentle return.

you don’t blame me.  
you know, as well as i,  
that healing asked first to be broken.

Grace Schafhauser

perhaps the heart responds not by choice—  
merely enduring because another refuses to let it go,  
forcing the color back into the skin.

perhaps it shouldn't endure, but against all sense,  
it lives.

*so do you.*

you come back.

crushed and broken and stubbornly alive.

again.  
again.  
again.

*\*\*this piece is a work of fiction and is not based on any real patient, individual, or clinical encounter. any similarities are purely coincidental.\*\**

# What We Left Behind

## Kaitlyn Whitehurst

I lay on my bed, waiting for my father's snoring to cut through the silence. I look up, but I'm met with a vivid memory instead of my ceiling.

Sitting in a field of flowers. At peace. The sun shining. A light breeze. I'm there to commemorate my mother's friend. "Taken too soon." That's what everyone said.

A flower crown of roses woven into her short blonde hair. She looks at peace.

A somber man in black speaks blessings. Everyone drops roses. Silence, as if the world is mourning too.

A rumbling snore breaks the quiet and I know that's my cue to leave. I throw off my covers, grab my pack, and set the note on my dresser. My eyes catch the circular jade necklace glimmering in the faint moonlight. It's been so long... It won't be much longer.

I pull it on and tuck it under my shirt. I slide open my door and sneak out, dodging the lights that search the compound for those brave or foolish enough to leave. Timing is everything. Light begins to break the horizon.

I walk towards the rift in the fence. One second I see the torn metal, the next I'm drawn back into my past.

Shaken awake. Pulled out of bed. The look of fear in my father's eyes. He's wearing his standardized army clothes. Heading down the hall to my sister's room. He pulls me away. "She's sick. We can't take her. The team will help her. We'll meet up with her when it's safe."

Screeching at the top of my lungs, "Lana!" I hit at the arm grasping mine. "Why?"

"There's been an outbreak." That explains nothing. "Your mother is going with her." I don't see her. A window shatters. A groan. My father pulls me further away. "A convoy will pick them up."

Kaitlyn Whitehurst

“Don’t leave! Wait! Don’t leave me behind!” she cries. It turns to a coughing fit.

“Let me go!” He pulls harder. I turn towards Lana’s room. I have to yell above the sirens’ scream. “It’s okay! I promise!” ...*The convoy never made it. Does that make me a liar?*

I arrive at the rift and squeeze through. Waiting on the other side is Aria, with her blonde and red-streaked hair tied up, and Cyra, with her cinnamon strands floating around her face.

Cyra pulls out her mask. Her’s is an elaborate gas mask. I can hear Aria snicker at the absurdity of how it looks on her face. It blocks all light from her eyes and leaves her face blank, like a slate. Cyra hefts her bag onto her back.

“I know you can’t see it but I’m rolling my eyes,” she says.

I take out my mask as well. My throat has already begun to burn from the graininess and ash that is intertwined with the air. I fit it over my face, the cloth covering my nose and mouth. For a moment we stand in silence.

“What are you waiting for?” Aria asks. “Let’s go find your sister.”

I look to the woods. Staring at it, I realize it’s choked by its interlocking branches. No light gets through. A good omen, certainly. I want to glance back at the fence. I, for a moment, want to go back to bed and hide under the covers. Pretend that the monsters cannot reach me there; that I am safe.

But there is nowhere safe. And I have not done that since our family was under one house. And I need to find her. So, I step into the forest and the silence lures my mind away.

Kids of all ages sit on hard, folding chairs. Pulling my knees to my chest. A tall, intimidating man enters. He wears black. *Is this another funeral?*

“This is your new home. You have new rules to abide by now—yes?” He stops as I raise my hand.

“What happened? To home?”

What We Left Behind

He glances away and continues speaking. Louder each time, I repeat my question. He moves and stops in front of me. Crouching down, he lays a comforting hand on my knee.

*Comforting? Is this supposed to be... comforting?*

*White walls.*

*Strange man.*

*No home.*

“This is home now. The dead came back. Those who were buried in the earth after death; they’re a problem. But not the biggest one. Those who were abandoned, left to rot... they came back for revenge.”

I shake my head, pulling myself back to the here and now.

“We should stop. It’s been hours. And we can’t see two feet in front of each other,” Cyra says. I want to disagree. It has been like that for an hour now. But I hear the tiredness in her voice. I see it in the way Aria’s eyes droop. I can feel it in the way my legs burn. I do not disagree.

We lay our heads down on our packs. As I look up through the leaves, the rushing sound of a river lulls me to sleep. Nature is louder than I thought it would be.

\*\*\*

I sit up, and wipe away the sheen of sweat with my sleeve. This is normal. I hardly remember a time I woke up without gasping. Raspy moans and low groans echo from the direction of the river. Aria furrows her brows at the noise, and then looks to me with a gleam in her eye I’ve seen all too many times. *She’s going to do something stupid again, isn’t she?* She quickly stands up, throws the rucksack onto her back, and darts off towards the noises. *And there she goes...*

Cyra calls out after her, voice muffled by her mask. We grab our packs and chase after her. The rushing water grows louder. We break through the trees and a sickly sweet scent reaches my nose.

Kaitlyn Whitehurst

Across the river is a horde of undead. The slideshows don't do them justice. Bright, blooming flowers burst from their blackened corpses. Violet flowers grow around the neck like a thick scarf on one. Yellow and green flowers sprout from the shoulder, chest, and legs of another.

*The Blooming Undead... they're kind of beautiful. They aren't scary like Dad said. Like the men in black said. He said they were dangerous.* From here even, I can see their hollow, lifeless eyes and gaping jaw.

*I don't doubt that. The vibrant colors are like a warning sign. But they seem gentle...*

I watch as one tracks a lightning bug that flits about the forest. *He told me they were infectious. By touch, air, or smell, we don't know. He said to stay away, to leave the dead in the past. But if I did that...*

*The last thing he claimed was that they were from a genetic experiment. Others think they were a curse from Mother Nature. I don't know which one to believe.*

I glance around, and notice I'm not the only one frozen in awe. Aria stands with a stillness I didn't think her capable of. "They're so bright..." Cyra chimes in, "Careful. They're passive, for now. Don't spill any blood and they'll stay that way. Let's go." She tugs on Aria's shoulder and we return to the forest.

\*\*\*

After days of traveling, we cross the threshold. *I thought I'd feel more. I thought it'd feel like home.* It's startling. What used to be my city feels as strange as that white room once did. *I thought I'd feel sad looking at it.* It's in ruins.

The tall stone buildings, a marker of mankind and its great accomplishments, now lay cracked and forgotten. Vines wove their way up, over, and through. Brick houses suffocate under the moss, and if I look too close I can almost make out the skeletons, too.

What We Left Behind

*They're not her. She made it*

Flowers bloom in the cracks, all different shades. Colors I've not seen since... The city is not abandoned but claimed by nature. We walk down the broken streets, not quite sure what to look for. *She must be here. Where, though?*

I'm drawn from my thoughts by a particular smell. One so strong, it makes it through my mask. Aria coughs. *Decay. And rot.* But we're surrounded by life. I look around to make sure. Nothing around is dead. *If nothing here is... then there's only one thing it could be.*

"You smell it too, right?" Aria whispers. Her voice sounds strange, tinged by fear. *I don't think I've ever seen her scared.*

I nod. Cyra looks over and I can sense her confusion.

"There's a Vengeful Dead. Nearby."

She steps forward, taking the lead. From our packs, we each pull out small knives. I glance at mine, suddenly wishing that I'd stolen my dad's bigger knife.

We turn the corner and leap back, brandishing our knives. The Vengeful crawls after us, driven by desperation. The tall, grotesque moving corpse has red patches of skin rubbed raw and claw marks that ooze crimson. The red matches its bloodshot eyes.

And the eyes... These eyes are not hollow. They are not empty or gentle or peaceful. These eyes are filled with hunger. And hurt. And rage. It lurches forward, reaching out its hand, eager to sink its nails into flesh.

*This is why we left. Why we live in the compact military bases with starchy foods and cramped closets that they've rebranded as rooms.* Fear rushes through my veins, filling them with ice. I feel as if I am drowning, no—burning, no—falling.

It jerks, planting its feet underneath itself and stands. It towers over Cyra, who is the closest. Its neck is broken, twisted at an unnatural angle. The Vengeful Dead twitches and its neck makes a sickening snap as it rights itself.

Kaitlyn Whitehurst

It steps forward. *That was human. That was like me. It's not like me anymore.*

*Run.*

I move back in horror, brandishing my knife. Cyra kicks her leg out towards it, intending to topple the unstable shell of what once was a man. It slashes. Her green cargo pants rip and darken. It lets out an inhuman growl. *Blood.*

Plans race through my head. None of them work. It's faster than us. Taller. Likely stronger. Weaknesses... unknown. It steps forward again, like a predator who knows the prey is already caught.

A shadow flickers overhead. And then the shadow becomes alive. A figure—a person—lands in front of us. Torn, tattered clothes mask them, all faded and muted colors. Made to blend in.

Except for the bright yellow sunflower crown that sits over their hood. *Why?* The Vengeful Dead hisses, pained almost. *Does it feel pain?* It stares at Cyra, at her leg, tempted. It sniffs, but inhales the scent of sunflower along with her blood. It snarls and steps back.

The person pulls out a glass bottle with a cork shoved in it. They throw it as far as they can, and as soon as it shatters, the Vengeful Dead rushes towards it like a dog to a bone. Its blood. *Where did they get...?* The figure shoves us away. *Right. Move first.* I glance back to see it hunched over, blocking what's left of the blood from sight.

Cyra lets out small sounds of pain as we run away but doesn't let it stop her. We have to get away. As we run, my thoughts race.

*Seems like my father got the "fast" and "feeds on blood part" right. I thought they were like the Blooming Undead. Dad told me they were the same. Both dangerous. They're not. They're something else entirely. They're filled with rage. A second, argumentative voice sounds in my head. Not angry. Hurt. They're hurt. You saw its eyes. They were left on the side of the road to rot away like animals hit by a car when the body count got too high. Wouldn't you be upset? The Blooming Undead are the graceful, the gentle. They were put to rest, buried. The Vengeful Dead, they're Mother Nature's revenge.*

## What We Left Behind

I snap out of my thoughts, and remember the Vengeful Dead's disgust at the person's flowers. *They don't like the sweet scent. That's new. It seems to burn them...*

We all slow down, far enough away. I look towards the person, to thank them, but they're already gone. I whirl around, trying to find them, only to see them halfway up a crumbling building.

I look at my friends, raising an eyebrow in question. *Should we?* Aria nods while Cyra shakes her head. I furrow my brows and look back up towards the building. The person is almost at the top now. Cyra follows my gaze and reluctantly concedes, nodding. I tuck my knife back into my bag and take off.

I start climbing a pipe that runs along most of the wall. I reach the roof, slightly heaving. My eyes meet their hood. The sunflower crown is gone. They stand, leaning against a crumbling edge. Aria pulls herself up and then helps Cyra. Cyra stands, favoring her uninjured leg.

They pull out another bottle, this one filled with clear liquid. They toss it to Aria, who catches it with ease. "For her," they say gruffly, voice also muffled by the mask.

"I'm fine," she rejects.

"S'not infected. You won't turn. But it might go septic untreated."

"Fine." Cyra takes the bottle and kneels, pouring it on her cut. She hisses as it makes contact. The stranger then tosses a roll of bandages which she uses too. They seem to look over Cyra once more before leaning even further over the edge, dropping down. A gasp escapes me.

I rush over, bracing myself against the edge. Aria and Cyra quickly follow behind. They're sliding down a metal ladder fastened to the wall. It stops a few feet off the ground and I watch as they let go off the ladder, tucking and rolling.

I jump after them and Aria leaps over the edge too. Cyra yells after us to be careful. She doesn't want to risk following. *No time, no time.* Once I reach the bottom, landing with a grunt and nowhere

Kaitlyn Whitehurst

near as graceful, they're gone. I sigh. *They could've helped me find my sister.*

Aria lands seconds after me and looks around. She taps my shoulder and jabs her thumb towards the surrounding buildings, indicating that she's going to look nearby. I nod as Cyra slowly walks around from the other side of the building.

"You lost them?" she asks.

I nod. "Seems like they just... disappeared."

"Well, they didn't go the way I came."

I think about re-climbing the ladder to get a better vantage point but decide against it. I really don't want to make the drop again. Aria walks back over looking disappointed. "Nothing there either," she explains.

Cyra then points out there's a small trail of blood on the pavement. "That's not mine," she says, pointing. *It could be theirs. They could've scraped themselves against the building... or worse. It's fresh, at least. It must lead to a person.*

We follow the trail through the winding streets on high alert. *That one Vengeful could be anywhere. At least they don't travel in packs.* It leads us into a cracked building to stairs leading underground. *An abandoned subway.*

And it looks abandoned. There's no flowers or greenery, just yellowed, dying vines and dust. Cyra looks around the edges of the railway as Aria walks off to explore the station. I feel myself drawn to the tracks, and stand there—frozen, held hostage by memories.

The train zooms. I'm fidgeting. My mother's arm around my sister and I. The other holds the pole bolted to the floor. We're returning from shopping.

Lana vibrates with excitement. She's holding her gift for my birthday. She clutches the green bag as if it's her lifeline.

The train stops. We step off. Our mother grabs our bags. Lana asks if I want to see something special.

What We Left Behind

I nod, and out of the bag she pulls a jade necklace with a black cord tied around it. "It's for your birthday," she says, beaming. I pat her head and put the necklace gently back into the bag.

"I love it," I told her.

"Really?"

"Would I lie to you?" I say. She shakes her head.

"You'll wear it everyday?"

I smile. "Of course."

I pull the necklace out from under my shirt and fiddle with the cold jade hanging at the bottom. *I lied. I hadn't worn it since I'd left her. But what was one small lie compared to the one where I promised she'd be okay?*

Aria pushes open a nearby door and calls out, breaking me from my thoughts. She's found something. I follow Cyra to the door. Aria steps into the room and wanders about.

In the corner is a bed made of blankets and hanging plants strung from the low ceiling. *Cozy. It almost feels like a home.* Shadows linger about the room, which is lit only by small battery-powered fake candles. There's old paper and wood in a pile with coals. *A burned out fire.*

From a dark corner, the same figure from before appears behind Aria. Their cloak is pulled back some, revealing their intense eyes. In one hand, they hold a rusty knife close to her neck. *Clearly, the help was a one-time thing.* Aria sneers. I take a step closer and my necklace catches the fake candlelight.

Their eyes widen and they pocket the knife, stepping away from Aria. Aria glares and looks at me. I know that look. I shake my head. *Do not make this a fight.*

The stranger continues to stare between my collarbones, where the necklace falls. In response, they pull down the scarf and cloak concealing the rest of their face. Long brown hair falls in front of her eyes. Eyes I'm now realizing look far too similar to my own.

Kaitlyn Whitehurst

Without thinking, the name falls out of my mouth. “Lana?”

“Sofia,” she nods, courteously. Her face is stark. Her grimace is set in stone as if it had years to harden. It probably has. “You should’ve never come.”

“Why? I’ve come all this way looking for you.” I step towards her and she retreats further into the shadows.

Lana pulls off her cloak and gloves, revealing her shirt underneath. But that’s not the only thing it reveals. Long, black streaks run up her forearms from her ashen fingertips. “Because. I’m infected. ‘M turning. And there’s nothing any of you can do about it.”

# Wings of Freedom

Jocelyn Leyva



## writing an obituary in the nail salon

Grace Schafhauser

*Spring 2026*

*Helen Hamilton*

*Award Runner Up*

### to do: 12/10:

- nail appointment
- write obituary

i had the bones of your obituary already completed:  
your birth date  
your death date  
the people you loved in between.

as i search for the words to fill in the gaps, i am robbed of all the eloquence i thought i had. perhaps the acetone in the nail polish remover was getting to my brain, or maybe it was the weight of the responsibility to define the life you lived that was draining my perceived wisdom.

my mom sent me a list of things to include:  
you started a company  
you fixed machines  
you lived in california for a little bit.

i didn't want this to be a resume dump. this isn't a linkedin. this is a life.

was a life, anyway.

*i choose an opaque pink color for my nails. number 64, please.*

i don't remember you as a businessman. i remember your squinty eyes and that smile, teeth tearing at your cheeks as we laughed at you putting pepper in your orange juice. i never knew you lived out west, but i knew how you liked your eggs and that you were the best gingerbread house decorator on this side of the mississippi river.

*almond-shaped, please. actually, could you do them a little shorter?*

as i alternate your obituary between my left and right hands, i realize the breadth of my current plight goes further than my bleeding cuticles. i didn't write that you were a businessman. the world already knows what you did.

i want them to know why you did it.

for the sake of your family,  
for the sake of your community,  
for the sake of eternal life,  
you lived.

*yes, that shape is perfect, thanks! when you die how do you want to be remembered? as a nail lady? i want to be remembered as a good sister. i'm still working on that.*

when i'm in your shoes i hope my obituary writer tells everyone that i loved talking with strangers and drinking martinis with my best friends and getting coffees with my sister. don't tell them what i did, tell them why i did it. just don't tell them i never really liked having pink on my nails.

*a 25% tip is great, merry christmas! also, do you always wear hawaiian shirts in december? my grandpa always did.*

i re-open my notes app.

maybe i'll add that in there too.

# Reflections as a Reader of Imaginative Writing

Trinity Sloan

Even before I could read on my own, I was always hungry for stories. My parents tell me that I would memorize the picture books they read to me each night, so if they tried to skip a few pages to hasten bedtime I'd always interrupt them with, "No no that's not what happens next. Go back." I loved nothing more than sitting in their laps and turning the pages as I listened. It was the beginning of a lifelong obsession with words, a passion that would eventually lead me to become a storyteller and a published author. Books were my oxygen growing up—a vital constant—and they shaped me in powerful, enduring ways as I aged.

I learned to read when I was exceptionally young. According to my mom, I hit my mental milestones very early as a toddler and most of my physical milestones very late. "You could talk before you could hold your head up on your own," my mom says whenever I ask about myself as a baby. According to her, I knew sight words at three years old, and by four years old I was reading independently. Apparently, most kids start learning their letters at age five, so I was pretty far ahead of the curve. My parents would take me to the public library (the most magical place on Earth to little me), and I would check out dozens of picture books at a time. I always carried the large stack in my arms proudly to the car, and as soon as we got home, I'd read them one after another.

My favorite books to have read aloud to me as a preschooler were simple ones like *Green Eggs and Ham*, *The Kissing Hand*, and *The Rainbow Fish*, but I would listen eagerly to any tale narrated by any relative willing to sit with me. Recently, my mom even found a very old Mother's Day card in my squiggly little kid handwriting that said "Happy Mother's Day. I love you because you read to me." We had a good laugh about it, and I think it made both of us feel a bit nostalgic. It was such a me thing to say. "You drank books," my mom tells me over the phone when I ask her about it. "You sat by yourself and looked at the pages. You dragged them to me across the

floor. We sat for hours and hours reading. So many hours.” By the time I’d reached grade school and moved on to chapter books, being a reader was cemented as a major part of my personality. I spent most of my childhood with a paperback tucked under my arm or open in my lap. This isn’t to say I didn’t do other things! I ran and played and made friends just like everyone else. But reading was always a source of joy in my life.

I think a big part of why I loved reading so much as a child is that I was born with a strong sense of curiosity about the world, and a vivid imagination. I loved to learn, and I wanted to understand everything. Some of my favorite books as a child, like *My Secret Unicorn*, *The Rainbow Magic Fairy Series*, and *The Girl Who Could Fly*, reflected my strong belief in magic and my sense of wonder about the world. Other favorites, like *The Secret Garden* and *Little House in the Big Woods*, reflected my interest in people—how they lived their lives and why. I found that topic endlessly interesting. Both of these traits, my imagination and my curiosity, are what kickstarted my desire to tell stories of my own. In middle school I became a creative writer, and I learned to appreciate books with new eyes. Now not only was I a consumer of stories, but a crafter of them too. I think it made me even hungrier for words. My love of reading was my constant as I strengthened my writing muscles, and by the end of high school I was the proud author of several short stories, and a self-published poetry anthology.

Now, as a 20-year-old junior in college, reading is still a wonderful form of entertainment and escapism for me. During the school year, when I’m so busy with coursework, I tend to read more romance books and beach reads. At the end of a long school day when my brain is fried, reading about two people falling in love is sweet and comforting, like ice cream, or the Hallmark channel. When I’m less busy, I love to read classics or historical fiction. Over the winter break I read *The Bell Jar*, and right now I’m reading *Memoirs of a Geisha*, which is set in 20th century Japan. (I’m going to Tokyo for the first time in May, so I was feeling inspired. ) I read

Trinity Sloan

nonfiction less, but when I do it's usually memoirs like *The Glass Castle* and *Educated*. I almost never annotate my books—it feels sacrilegious somehow to mark them up—but I will dog ear pages with parts I want to be able to flip back to.

Reading is an immersive experience for me. I tend to lose myself doing it, zoned out to the rest of the world happening around me. So much so that when I pause to come up for air, sometimes it's a bit disorientating. I have to blink a couple of times to get my brain to come back online. Because of this, I'm not picky about my choice of venue in which to read. I read anywhere and everywhere: curled up on the couch, sprawled on the floor of my bedroom, waiting in line at the grocery store, or in the stands of a sports game. Nowhere is off limits, especially with the Kindle App on my phone, and all of the internet at my disposal. My ultimate happy place though is reading in a hammock at a campground, or in a cute coffee shop with a mug of peppermint tea nearby.

As an adult, I can appreciate just how much being a reader has shaped my view of the world. It made me wiser, more empathetic, and challenged me in positive ways. It still continues to do all of those things now, and I'm grateful for the lessons I've learned that way. Books are like old friends to me, and reading is a passion I know I'll have for the rest of my life.



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I'm a believer in the **power** of knowledge and the ferocity of beauty, so from my point of view, **your life is already artful**—waiting, just waiting, for you to make it art.



**TONI MORRISON**