



Filibuster

2021

AUM's Literary and Art Magazine

Editor's Note

Dear Readers,

I am proud to present the 2021 edition of AUM's Literary and Art Magazine, the *Filibuster*. This past year has been full of twists and turns, highs and lows, moments that made us hold our breath, or took our breath away. This year has transformed us, which is why the theme of this year's issue is Transformation. Our issue is dedicated to allowing our students and faculty contributors the freedom of expression, an exploration of their own transformations. We have tried our best to capture the past year in written and visual art.

There are not enough words to express my most sincere gratitude and appreciation of AUM's students and faculty. AUM has the BEST students and faculty. I am deeply humbled to be working with the BEST of the BEST. I would also like to thank my small, but mighty team. We have spent hours corresponding through video conferences, texts, and emails. I would like to express my deepest gratitude, respect, and admiration to our faculty advisor, Dr. Witcher. This is her first year as the advisor for the *Filibuster*. Her constant kindness, consideration, and patience led us through the toughest obstacles and kept us on track with our deadlines. I am deeply honored to have had the opportunity to work on this edition with her. I would also like to express my deepest and most sincere thanks to our AWESOME and AMAZING graphic designer, Danielle Riggs. She remained lockstep beside me the whole way, making an abstract thought a reality. She placed her heart and soul into making this edition special and unique. I could not have asked for a better partner. I would also like to extend my most heartfelt and sincere appreciation to Michelle Aitken. Her dedication and loyalty to the *Filibuster* over the years was instrumental in helping guide us through the most difficult challenges. She has put together a beautifully fabulous tribute to Dr. Gerard. She has worn many hats and served in many roles with the *Filibuster* over the years. This year, she once again, stepped up to the challenge and never hesitated to offer her kindness and assistance. I am truly honored to have had her in our corner. Last, but definitely not least, I would like to extend my most heartfelt and deepest appreciation to the AUM English



Metamorphosis

Nyaradzai Mahachi

Department. Dr. Klevay, Dr. Havard, Mrs. Tara Edwards, and so many others played a key role in the production, publication, and distribution of this magazine. We are incredibly lucky to have such a wonderful team. None of this would have been possible without each person's unique contributions. Thank you all!

We began this edition amid a global pandemic, social and political turmoil, and an uncertainty about our future. As the year transformed and morphed into a "new normal," we all grew and transformed. We now present to you the 2021 *Filibuster* with hopes of a brighter vision for our future. Change is on the horizon, an expectation for further transformation. We hope you derive as much enjoyment from this issue as we gained in making it for you.

With My Most Sincere and Deepest Gratitude,

Your Editor-in-Chief

Kimberlee Fernandez

The Small, But Mighty Team



Kimberlee Fernandez
Editor-in-Chief

As a nontraditional transfer student, Kimberlee experienced her own transformation at AUM. She learned that hard work, dedication, and patience are key ingredients to attain dreams. She enjoys helping others and tries to bring a smile to any situation. Her favorite saying is, "It's all about perspective." Kimberlee wanted to present a meaningful and thought-provoking edition, while embracing AUM's wonderful diversity and uniqueness. Hopefully, you think she succeeded.



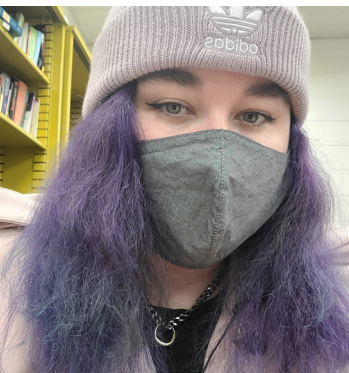
Danielle Riggs
Graphic Designer

A pure genius. That is how our little team describes Danielle. She took an abstract thought, a minimal concept, and transformed it into reality. She not only accepted the challenge; she embraced it and made it happen. This edition took form under her skill and sheer will. The attention to detail and little extras throughout, are all by her design. Danielle's graphic design skills are only outmatched by her kindness and personality. This little team would have been lost without her!



Dr. Heather Witcher
Faculty Advisor

This year is Dr. Witcher's first year as faculty advisor for the Filibuster. Little did she know what she was getting into when she agreed to partner up with the Editor-in-Chief and the Graphic Design Artist. A lover of Victorian poetry and of deadlines, she kept this little team motivated and on time. Dr. Witcher is the mighty in our small, but mighty team. Her strength of kindness, support, guidance, and determination are inspirational. Our team is grateful to Dr. Witcher for teaching us so much, especially how to maintain the utmost class and grace when challenged with obstacles.



Michelle Aitken
Editorial Consultant

Michelle is an AUM alumna, having recently completed her Master's in December 2020. She has been a vital element to our little team. Her encouragement, guidance, thoughtfulness, insight, and love for the Filibuster transformed our meetings into a gathering of friends. Her contributions to the Filibuster far exceed the touching tribute she created for Dr. Gerard. Michelle has placed pieces of her heart and soul into the Filibuster. We hope Michelle knows just how much we admire and appreciate her loving heart, and advice!

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In Memoriam of Dr. William Blake Gerard

Michelle Aitken

“What a large volume of adventures may be grasped within this little span of life, by him who interests his heart in everything...”

– Laurence Sterne

Dr. William Blake Gerard was an incredibly valued and generous individual, not only to AUM, but to all those he happened to cross paths with. He possessed the innate ability to make everyone he encountered feel important. He never looked down on you or discredited your thoughts or works, and he aimed to bring out the best in every student and every individual he met. I’d like to think he was successful on that front.

I met Dr. Gerard during my undergrad years at AUM. I was struck by his professional, yet eccentric personality, and his incredible passion for teaching and enriching the lives of students and faculty around him. I was lucky enough to have several classes with him, wherein I learned a great deal about myself as a writer and an individual. He is the sole reason I am confident in a creative writing career.

I worked on THAT Literary Review with Dr. Gerard for several years. Dr. Joyce Kelley recommended me to help with the poetry side of things after I took her poetry workshop class. This experience working on the journal was one of the best experiences I’ve ever had. It really opened my eyes to the world of editing. I’ll ever forget the first galley I proofread. I marked it up with errors and notes and sent it back to Dr. Gerard and he was impressed—which, coming from him, is not something to take lightly. He complimented my editorial skills. That’s something I’ve never forgotten, and something I’ve tried to live up to in every endeavor since. He mailed me the last issue we produced with a hand-signed note, and also sent me an email in which he thanked me for all my help over the years. These are things I’ll treasure for the rest of my life.

There was one department luncheon we had in which he presented me with a very fancy pen in reference to the editorial work I’ve done for



him. That pen has sat in its box since that day, as I always deemed it too fancy and special to use. It sits above my desk, and I often look at it and admire it and cherish it as a token of his respect and gratitude.

All this is to say that Dr. Gerard was truly one-of-a-kind. He touched my life, among the lives of many others, as he blazed a path of laughter and curiosities through this world. This tribute serves to show glimpses into his impact on several individuals from AUM—students and faculty alike. I hope this small snippet makes him proud, though he’d probably give all of us “that look” and push us to keep moving in our respective endeavors.

Sabrina Blaum

Dr. W. B. Gerard was my instructor, my thesis director, and my mentor.

Blake Gerard was one of my closest friends.

As of today, it's been 163 days since we've lost him.

A couple of years ago, I set an alarm on my phone that rings every Sunday at noon. I'd called it Blake. It was to remind me to text him and wish him a safe trip to his weekly treatments. It still rings every Sunday. Not that I'd need a reminder, given that I've thought of him every day since his admission to the hospital in August.

There aren't many areas in my life that carry no associations with Blake or our friendship. There's the dish at the Thai restaurant we always ordered, the rye bread I'd baked for him when I went through a baking phase, songs, books, movies, and shows we recommended to each other. Audio books we listened to and discussed. There's *The Sentimental Journey* on my nightstand. There are thousands of text messages and emails. My fiction. His stories.

I'd often send him screenshots of passages from books I was reading. I'm currently reading *The Old Man and the Sea*, and I had the urge to tell him about my worry for the old man, how I was suspicious that it wasn't really a fish in his net, and how my worry turned to disgust when he killed a dolphin.



When I'd heard Amanda Gorman recite her poem, "The Hill We Climb," during Joe Biden's inauguration ceremony, I wished Blake had heard this, and remembered how he tried to get me to see the appeal of poetry.

He also always tried to convince me of the value of classic literature, while I argued for the worth of fan fiction. I interned his fiction workshop one semester, and one class, after such a discussion, he entered the classroom, handed out sheets of paper and sat down. He asked us to read it. I glanced at the paper, a Harry Potter fan fiction. When I looked up at him, he offered me a proud and pleased grin. I rolled my eyes at him, but I was touched by his gesture.

It is difficult to express what Blake meant to me, and what a crater his loss has torn into my life. All my words barely scratch the surface. Blake Gerard was one of kindest, smartest, funniest, and most wonderful humans being I've ever met. Spending time with him, talking or writing to him was always joyful and enriching.

I can still hear his voice in my head, but it's a dangerous endeavor to call forth that memory because it's always accompanied by tears shooting into my eyes, a lump forming in my throat, and pressure settling in my chest.

Dr. W. B. Gerard made me a better writer than I ever thought I could be, but Blake Gerard made me a better person, and while there's breath left in my body, I will miss him more than I ever thought you could miss a person.



Tye DeVore

It's never easy to write something like this and I don't really know how to put into words the support I have received from Dr. Gerard throughout my time at AUM. He became one of my main reasons to pursue a creative writing thesis and to push myself as an author and a future creative writing instructor. His humor and wit made any subject enjoyable and even made me enjoy things I would never think I would enjoy, like eighteenth century comedy, a class I only took because he was the professor. He saw potential in all of his students and really wanted to push them to do their best and grow into what he saw they could be.

This trait is one of the reasons I asked him to be my main reader for my thesis, that and I wanted him to be part of this last step in my academic career for now. He had so much influence and helped me grow so much in my creative writing classes, I wanted his input and guidance as I used those skills to write my thesis. During the first year or so that I began writing my prospectus for this large project, I always felt like I wasn't getting anywhere and felt I just couldn't understand what he wanted me to write. Even after some conversations with him face to face, I struggled to wrap my head around the idea of what goes into this. There were times I felt like giving up and just writing a ten-page reflection paper, abandoning everything I had so far. But when I voiced this thought, he pushed me to continue on and had faith I could finish my thesis and have the best work he has seen from me.

I am saddened that he couldn't see my finished product, but I put every bit of effort into making it something he would be proud of and live up to the potential he saw in me.



Erin Terrell

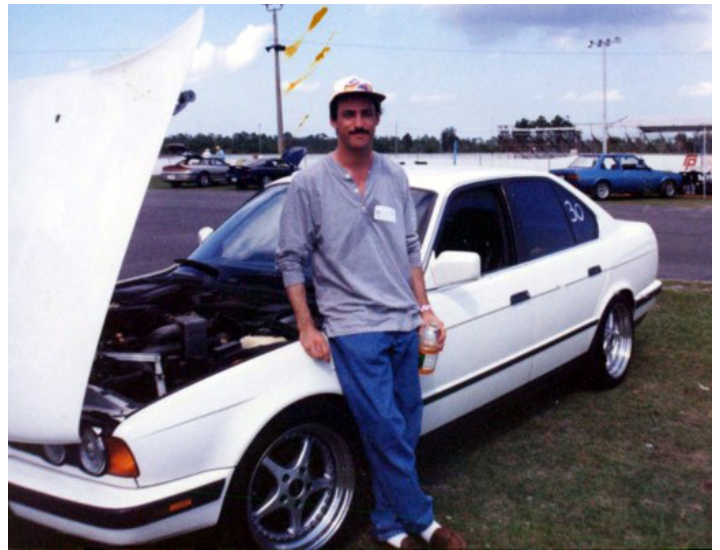
Memories are a funny thing. They encapsulate the moments you hold close to your heart and provide a comfort to you when the person you are thinking about has passed. I'm not sure if Dr. Gerard would like me to start this memento with such a sentimental tone, but I think he would appreciate the gesture. There is a lot I could say here, but I have always enjoyed trying to get my point across with a limited amount of words, so that others can express their sentiment.

Dr. Gerard played a prevalent roll in my college experience when I attended AUM. Throughout the years he was a constant, that now, I fear, I took for granted. He seemed like someone that would always be there to lend a hand or point you in the right direction. He offered me a job as an Editorial Assistant with the Scriblerian, when I felt that I was fairly inexperienced and completely lacking confidence in just about everything I was doing in my life. Apparently, he saw something in me that was worth taking a chance on, so it worked out for the better, but this is about Dr. Gerard, really, and not me. Whenever I took a class with him or he was helping me with my graduate work he always pushed me to strive to the best of my abilities. I think he applied that to everything he did in life. He saw the potential in every individual and made sure that they had the tools to reach that potential. I cannot say what the future holds, but I know that the lives he connected with and the people he taught will create a positive future.

Dr. John Havard

Two things really stand out to me about Dr. Gerard. First, his high standards. Students will remember that he demanded a lot of them. This is because he had been taught by his own mentors that people do their best work when they're asked to "rise to the occasion." I place the phrase in quotation marks because he used it frequently; it seemed to be part of his life philosophy. He demanded a lot of himself and had developed an enormous capacity for hard work. He sincerely believed that by demanding the same of his students, he could help them to achieve as much as he had.

The second thing was his sense of humor. He was witty and had many great stories. He also had a great love of satirical literature, reflected in his scholarly interest in Laurence Sterne. When I became department chair, he gifted me a copy of Richard Russo's *Straight Man*, a humorous novel about an English department chair. The novel had me in stitches all the way through. Dr. Gerard was good at discerning someone's sense of humor and playing to that.



He was both my colleague and friend. When I was hired, he was already well established at AUM. He took the time to mentor me when I was a new faculty member, giving me advice about how to manage my time, where to send my research for publication, and how to teach more effectively. The advice was very helpful. One thing that really struck me about him was that he was a good listener. He was someone you could describe a problem to, and he'd listen carefully before offering advice or feedback. I know several other faculty think highly of his mentorship.

He also took the time to involve me socially in Montgomery, inviting me to get-togethers with other faculty and friends. This was very important to me, as I had moved to Montgomery from Rochester, New York to work at AUM and didn't know many people here at the time. I particularly enjoyed the poker games he hosted.

To the department, Dr. Gerard was and remains important in two ways. First, as said, he had high standards, and he urged high standards upon the rest of us. He was especially passionate about research, and this inspired his colleagues to seek for attainment in this area. He also developed plans to seek institutional support for our research activity.

Second of all, he was instrumental in the development of a creative writing program in our department. He sought to maintain a core of creative writing courses for our students and urged the hiring of creative writers among our faculty. We hope to continue to build upon what he helped developed, and if we do, that will be a major part of his legacy at AUM.



Dr. Joyce Kelley

Blake Gerard was the chair of the committee that hired me as an assistant professor. I don't think I would be here without him. That always made me feel pretty good when I thought about it enough, because Blake had super high expectations of everyone.

Blake taught me a lot about the writing process. My first year at AUM I was struggling to revise a paper for a Victorian journal. The paper had been accepted, but they wanted it to be much, much shorter. "Cut it in half," he advised, "if you can find a natural division. Send part of it to another journal." I thought of the chapter of *Superfudge* where Peter and his friend cut all of their worms in half to boost their business, claiming, "Small ones are sweeter." "I don't think I can do that," I said. Blake was busy, as he always was, but he asked to see a copy. Two days later it was back in my mailbox. He'd marked up the first six pages, cutting about a third of my words. At the top of page seven he'd written, "I had to stop here but you get the idea." Somehow I hadn't realized that I didn't need those words. He really taught me how to be efficient with language, and it was an important lesson.

Blake was always ambitious. "I've been thinking of starting a literary journal," he announced point-blank one day. "Can I get you on board?" Blake and I worked on *THAT Literary Review* together for five years. I'd never been an editor before and it was difficult having to go through so much material and decide what was worthy of publication. I got overwhelmed very quickly. Blake reminded me that it was unnecessary to read the entire poem or story to judge the literary merits of a work. "If the first page of the story isn't good, the story isn't good enough to publish," he would say. "I imagine that a similar principle holds true for poetry." I chuckled, imagining him asking his students to revise their story openings until they were good enough to publish. He could be very exacting when he felt like it.

Often he thought the poetry we'd chosen for the magazine was just "okay." We never knew exactly what was going to impress him, and this became a bit of a running joke between the student editors and me. I remember I saw him at the elevator one day and he was complaining that everyone else wanted to publish "some maudlin story about a dog." His point was that just



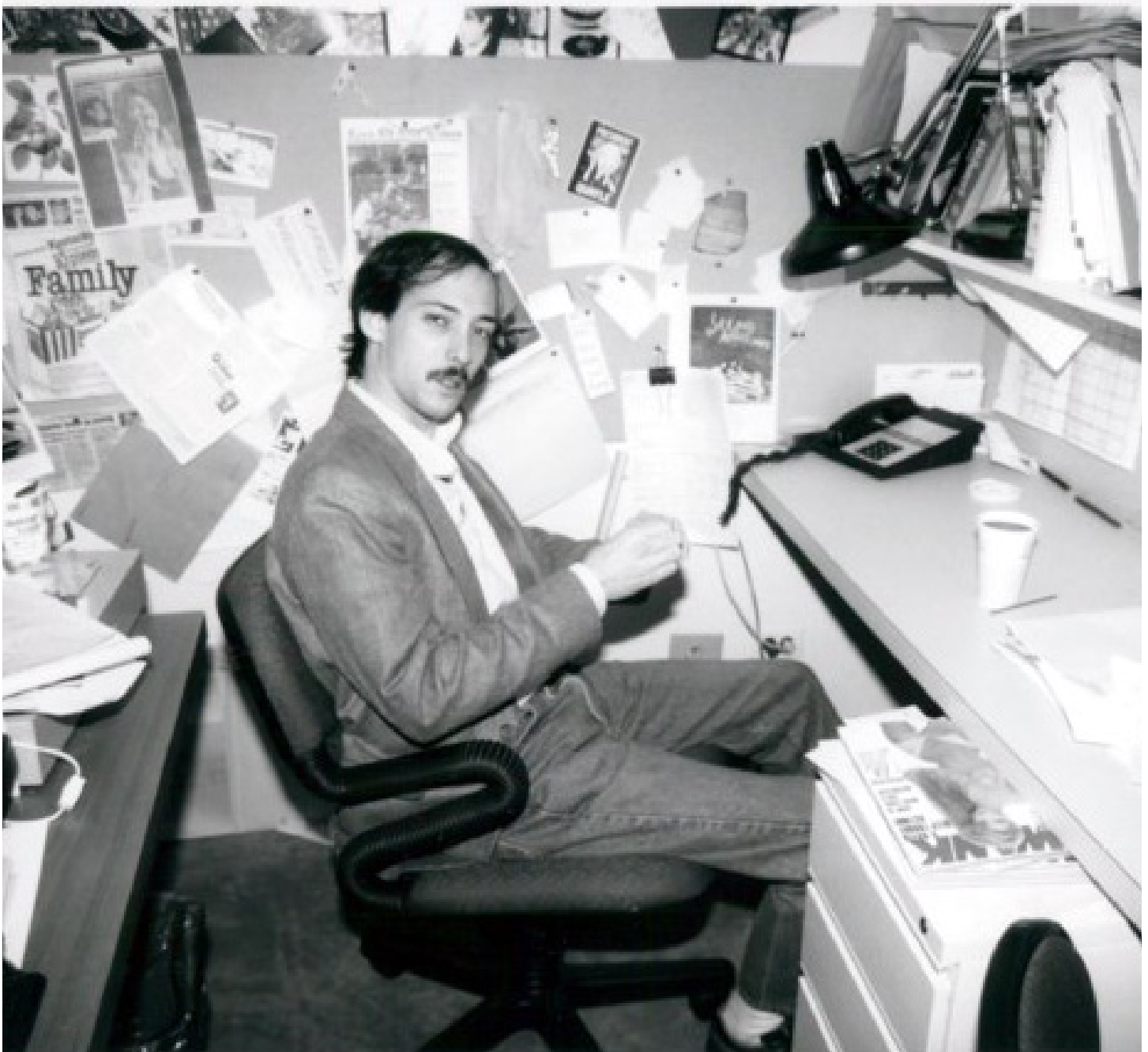
because something affected you emotionally didn't mean that it was worthy of publication.

One day I wrote an impromptu poem about my students taking their final exams and posted it on Facebook. They were a picture of misery with their cramping hands, thick sweaters, and runny noses; I wasn't much better off in the back of the room. The poem was darkly comic and didn't exactly paint the best picture of an AUM classroom. I didn't think about the fact that Blake would see it. I was rather embarrassed when he commented on it. "Inspiring and inspired," he wrote. I remember gaping at my computer. As I said before, you never knew what Blake was going to like.

Recently I decided to go up for promotion to full professor. Everyone said, "Go right ahead"—except Blake. Blake insisted that I needed to publish one more article in a really good journal.

“A really substantial one in your area,” he said. “Thirty pages.” So, just to please him, I worked all summer writing that article. To my surprise, it was accepted right away by the journal. As usual, though, the acceptance was contingent upon major revisions. The editor asked for very difficult changes and much additional research. I’ve spent the last six months trying to educate myself enough just to become the scholar who can revise this essay. In the end, I think it will be one of my best. We don’t achieve things like this, though, unless we have people to push us out of our comfort zones.

Blake was a great colleague and a good friend. I’ll miss the conversations we had about the most random things in the hallway and in the parking lot, like the time we spent an hour talking about bugs. More than anything, though, he was a true mentor. He cared deeply about his students and his colleagues and wanted us all to achieve our potential. He kept our standards high and never wanted us to accept anything less. I hope we’ll all work to continue the tradition he inspired. Inspiring and inspired—that’s how I’ll always remember him.



Facing Death

Kelly Snyder

I sat across from the in-home hospital bed,
Wondering when that moment will be;
Oxygen and morphine flowing together
To make the perfect, numbing concoction;
His eyes are glazed over and staring off into space.
How much longer does he have?

Time is a bastard
that prowls around like a lion,
Seeking out those whom he may devour.
Though we all eventually meet the same fate,
This just doesn't feel right—doesn't feel real.
Then again it never does, does it?
Nothing can prepare you for staring Death in the face.



For Whom the Rain Falls

Kelly Snyder

The raindrops fall onto the window
as she gazes out toward the woods
in the backyard.

The weather looks as gloomy as she feels—
Depression is a monster devoid of anything good;
It is like a soulless beast that sucks the happiness
out of everything it encounters.
“Dinner’s ready!” “Come!”
She makes no effort to move off the bed.

She greets everyone in the kitchen
as if nothing is wrong, as if the rain on the glass
doesn't mirror the tears that were just streaming
down her face, splintering her heart into
a million tiny slivers.

A former shell of who she once was,
a broken doll takes her place; she is no longer
her own—but a puppet going through the motions
trying to survive the night.

Grandfather's Necklace

Kelly Snyder

Hearts shattered into a million little pieces
as cancer reared its ugly, evil head,
and Earth's greatest man took his last breath.
I, young, naïve, and broken,
must confront Tragedy as it stares
at me like an unwelcome houseguest.
Grief joins Tragedy quickly to revel in my misery;
They stick around long past their welcome;
That is, until I found the necklace.

It is a small, delicate trinket,
with a dark colored chain at its top.
Two steel pieces intersect to make a cross
encased in deep red wire.
A symbol of a long-held faith
Becomes a light in this deep, dark place.

My red, tear-stained face
looks upon this trinket as if
it were a rare Egyptian artifact;
One glance floods the mind's eye
with delightful memories of old—
Every cup of chocolate milk and hot, glazed
doughnuts,
all the Laurence Welk and western movies I could
watch, and all the precious in-betweens.

Much time has passed,
the pictures have long since faded,
but the good times still roll.
Who knew such a small emblem
could bring such healing to a hurting heart?
As far away as he might be,
I know he walks with me
just like he did all those years ago.



Segregation No More

Kelly Snyder

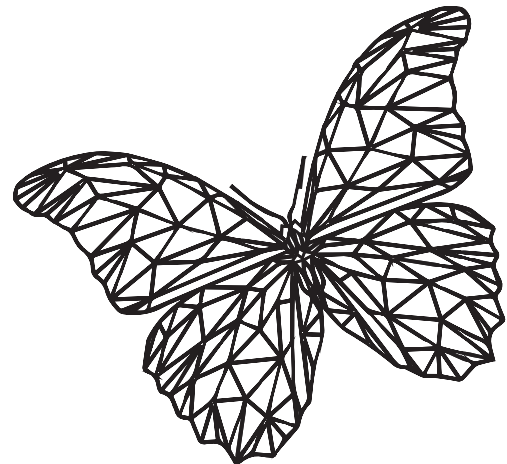
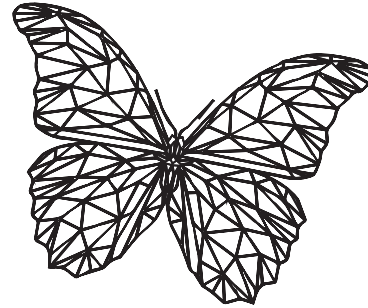
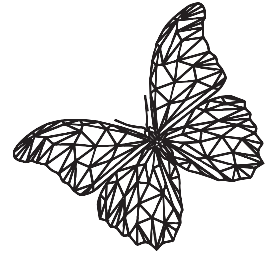
The words “Segregation Now, Segregation Forever” rang out as Governor Wallace stepped up to the podium to speak. Security everywhere, trying to keep the public safe;
Safe from what exactly? Safe from who? The injustice here is frightening.

My friends and I gathered on an upper floor to watch this horror unfold in front of Foster. Wallace barked aloud “The unwelcomed, unwanted, unwarranted, and forced induced intrusion...” —such hateful, spiteful words towards such loving, bright people. There are no differences on the inside— We are all human, but they don’t realize that, do they?

Vivian is just like any other girl here at Alabama; She laughs, plays, learns, and has hopes and dreams just like the rest of us—
While we were living in the same dorm, secrets were shared and we had fun.
“Millions of Americans will gaze in sorrow upon the situation” could not have been farther from the truth. I got to know her really well;
She became a great friend;
She is the epitome of a strong woman.

This cannot be an easy experience for her;
National guardsmen are everywhere—
seeking out those who may wish her harm:
They check each and every suitcase and bag and sweep every room on campus during all of the bomb scares.
Does she know this is all to protect her?

Stand strong, Vivian.
Don’t give up when the going gets rough.
Some will curse you, others will persecute you;
The threats will be many, but few will be serious.
You are not provoking the “Oppression of the rights, privilege, and sovereignty of this State”
Like they might lead you to believe
You are making history by being here.
Get your education and change the world.



Fire Hydrant

K. Fernandez



Blurred Plans

Olivia Foster

Emptiness and confusion fill me
as my head spins out of control.
For the past twelve years
I thought I knew what I wanted,
only to realize I knew nothing at all.
I complied with it for as long as I could;
too scared to admit I had no idea.
Everything is a blur and time soars by,
like a rocket ship into outerspace.
A difficult decision arises on the horizon,
as enormous pressure hangs over me
like a car on a jack. A new school,
a new town, and still no decision.
I long for a plan,
And in time I know one will come.

Coin like Memory

Olivia Foster

The clock strikes one a.m.
and the trophy is presented to us.
Light illuminates the night
as dark colors surround the park.
Excited fans storm the field;
they can't believe their eyes.
Emotion drives the night
as dreams come true.
Everyone embraces
and moments are captured
by the flash of a camera.
Eyes bulge as the words
"World Series" are spoken.
Dust settles and the memory fades
As I lay the coin back on the shelf.

To Infinity

Graylyn Harris



Leonid Afremoy: Rain's Rustle

Olivia Foster

A rainy Autumn night
casts a gloom over the romantic park.
Two lovebirds stroll through serenity
as soft raindrops splatter their umbrella.
Her red dress complements the fall leaves
while his suit calls out the shadows.
Bright yellow above glows from light posts and
illuminates their way, like the sun on a vibrant day.
The ground below, glossy like a fresh coat of wax,
mirrors the romantic evening as they walk.
A clearing in the background; the rain has stopped.
Is the night over or still young?



dragonfly in love

Jane Mayes

My head is all eyes,
30,000 facets to better see you with.
bejeweled and glinting,
a piece of shattered sun,
sky,
and field.
I intercept you mid-air.
A twin beauty to share half a year.

A Wasp

Tyson Wilson

Confined to my room, I
Heard treadmill-progress, so
I sought the sound and found
A wasp against a pane.
For awhile, he fought on,
Entertaining me as
I forgot my own state.
The wasp then stopped its war,
Still, on the mocking-glass
As nature overlooked
His absence. Now, we watch
Old friends mature while we
Decay, unsure of how
To get beyond the pane.



The Wasp in Sunlight

Tyson Wilson

And now, he's passed (my closest friend), his frame
Emptied. It lies, still, on the window sill,
Yet days have passed. To give the bin its claim
Would be a second's task; I've not the will.

Instead, I stare at its curled legs as their
Host bakes in the sunlight, entertaining
Even in death. Now, I see the sun's glare;
Before, it was ignored for complaining.

Although I was alone, I could have tried
To be happy, for sunlight always shone.
Instead, on companionship I relied
And still rely, as the wasp's body shows.

Soon, its vacant home will be swept, but, though
Alone, I will find light where'er it glows.



Decomposing: Piece I

Jane Mayes

Can you hear the crickets in my chest? They battle
cicadas for rights of song, of life.
Make sternum a canopy, a bed for all crying things -

including me.

A place to feast with open hands, for
all flying things, biting, and hungry
things-

including him.

A place to rest, 28 nights, 1 fleeting larvae
experience of new, of breath, either or is fine
for love-

including ours.

Lure of the Wendigo

Grace Burrow

Allen Bennett stared out his hotel window toward the forest. It had an eerie appearance in the distance, illuminated only by the dull moon above. It had been two weeks since he last heard from his sister, Elizabeth. She had come to the small town of Dichin to investigate Chindi Forest, like the dozen of other people who thought they were paranormal investigators. Allen couldn't sleep knowing his sister might be lost in that very forest.

"Forest of the Vanished. Hundreds gone missing over the course of a hundred years. Locals blame bears, or even the tourist for their own stupidity for not going in prepared." Allen mumbled to himself as he read his sister's last email.

How could she not be scared? She seemed almost exited at the thought of all the spirits that could be wondering in those woods...

The hotel owners brushed him aside when he asked about her. Claiming they never saw her. Even their daughter seemed to avoid him when he tried to approach her. The owners were an older couple, maybe late fifties, tanned skin, and long with black hair. Allen figured they were directly related to the Native Americans who called this land home long ago. But their daughter, she was odd. She looked to be a teenager, pale with blond hair and blue eyes.

Probably adopted, he thought. As Allen continued to stare out the window, he became completely alert. A woman stood at the edge of the forest. She looked like she was waiting.

"...Allen..." A faint and whispering voice called to him.

He jumped as he heard his name. Moving quickly, Allen grabbed his bag, his jacket, and ran out his room. He was certain it was Elizabeth. Going only by moonlight, Allen reached the forest edge in a matter of minutes, but the woman was nowhere to be found. A mist began to spill from the trees. He saw her again, deeper in the woods.

"Elizabeth! Elizabeth!" Allen Nearly started sprinting for her before he was grabbed from behind.

"What the hell do you think you are doing?!" Allen spun around to come face to face with the blond haired daughter of the hotel couple. "Do you have any idea of what you are doing? If you go after her, you won't come back out. I couldn't say anything earlier, my parents forbid it. This town forbids it." She glanced around. "These people know what goes on in that forest. I hear it call to me every night. My parents, they tell me to ignore it... It only goes after outsiders, or those that don't belong. Anyone who comes here will hear its call, and fall into its trap."

"What the hell are you talking about, that's my sister, she's alive and she needs my help! Let me go!" Allen easily broke the young girl's grip, but by the time he turned, Elizabeth was gone. "Damn it! Listen to me, I'm going in there and getting my sister, then we are getting the hell out of what ever twisted, messed up town you say this is. You can either stay here, or go back, I don't care." And with that Allen left the girl stunned, and proceeded into the misty forest.

"...Allen... Allen... Please help me. I need your help... Where are you? You said you were going to find me... Bring me back..." Allen had only been walking for a matter of minutes but it felt like hours. That whispering voice, it sounded just like Elizabeth, only he couldn't tell where it was coming from. The trees all looked the same, towering over him like skyscrapers. The leaves blocking any and all light from the moon. Allen only had the flashlight from his bag to go by. Yet, even the flashlight seemed too dim in the thick mist.

"Elizabeth! Where are you?!" He could hear his echo bounce off the trees. Only now did he realize that the whisper was the only sign of life he's heard inside the forest.

No birds, no animals, not even a damn insect. And why the hell is it getting colder?

Allen zipped up his thick winter jacket, but it did little to help. Allen froze in his tracks, and threw his light up toward the trees. He could feel eyes on him. Allen could even swear he saw movement in the darkness.

There was nothing there.

“Allen... Just a little further... Please hurry...” Allen lapsed his head. In the dead silence, the whispering voice felt as if it was screaming inside his skull.

“Where are you Allen?! Why aren’t you helping me? Saving me? I thought I was your little sister?! You were always going to protect me!” Allen tried to drown out the voice by screaming into the darkness, and sprinted forward.

Get out of my head! Please, I’m trying Elizabeth, just please just tell me where you are! Allen was screaming at the voice inside his own head. He could no longer muster the courage to speak aloud. *Why am I so cold?!* Even through all his layers, it was like he as if he was wearing almost nothing. He knew something was waiting in the darkness. Something was watching him go mad.

Allen came to a small clearing. It was someone’s camp. The voice was gone, and there was only silence. Allen began to look around. It seemed like whoever had been here just got up and left. The bags and belongings were still there, the tent was still up, the ashes of the campfire were untouched. Allen lift the opening to the tent,

Forest

K. Fernandez



and discovered in the bedroll, a necklace. It had belonged to Elizabeth. The mist coated the ground until it was no-longer visible. The trees seemed to stretch endlessly into the sky. They surrounded the campground like an impenetrable wall.

“You were too late Allen... It got to me long before you did. You failed me.” Allen glance down to see Elizabeth, standing with her back to him, staring off into the darkness. “You said you’d always be there for me, guess that was a lie.”

“Elizabeth... what are you talking about I’m right here.” Allen attempted to grab her shoulder, but she vanished.

“And now, it’ll get you too.” Allen turned in horror as his gazed at Elizabeth appearing behind him. Her face was slashed and bloodied. Her chest was torn open, revealing no organs, no ribs. Nothing, but an empty gapping hole.

Allen couldn’t speak, he couldn’t move, as Elizabeth’s corpse approached him.

“You belong to the Wendigo, just as I do, just as we do. You belong to me.” As dozens upon dozens of other apparitions began to appear, all Allen could do was stumble backwards into a tree. As Elizabeth continued to speak her voice morphed into a deep growl, a long, thin claw wrapped around Allen’s face. Allen had just become another missing person.

Wolf Cento

Charlotte Erin Makowski

Into the woods,
Under a blue moon I saw you,
Searchin' in the shadows.
You are the sound that I hear,
Stronger than fear,
The wolf is growling in my soul;
Oh, out in the forest it's just white and black,
I'm running with the wolves tonight.

Beaming Again

Samantha Mejia

Beaming rays glare
Sweat fearfully runs
Speeding kids scream

The mask blocking my breath is soaked in
sweat and sun.

Wheels clanking with every step
Chills creeping on my skin
Squeals erupting after every misstep

There is only a steaming metallic scent within.

Letting go seems easy
Gliding wheels on smooth concrete
Getting a little queasy

The slimy cloth sticks on my skin with every
beat.

With a hardfought breath,
I kick my foot so the panic can end.
Fifth kick in the dance of death,
I trip and bend.

Bouncing bones on cement
followed by wheezing and laughter.

With a growing grin, I try to get up again.

El Gato

Tyson Wilson

For months, I worked odd jobs, saving the cash
I earned. Eagerly, I slaved, so I could
Eventually purchase a friend: a cat.
The day came when I bought her; all felt good!

I felt joy seeing her beside me as
I drove us home, but that joy would vanish.
Now home, she settles in everyone's laps,
Leaving mine as my wallet's match: famished.

I'd bought a collar with a bell for her;
I hear it ring when she settles with them.
Leaving for my room, I await its stir,
But she's fallen asleep on top of them.

Still, I awake early, so I can feed
Her: it's the one time her bell rings for me.



Lazy

Tyson Wilson

For years, flipping the switch brought light;
now there
Is no response. The bulb has blown, but I'm
Alright with this, for changing it requires
Too much effort: grabbing a chair, standing
On it, unscrewing the lightbulb; of course,
Disposing and replacing it with one
That works, requiring that I do more work.
One day, that bulb will also blow, so why
Bother when I could get used to the dark?

“How Many More?": The Greek Gods on Racism in America

LaKendrick Richardson

The griot tells the tale, one heard by all. A great hero, loved by many, feared by all, meets his end. The hero stands tall, seemingly insurmountable, but that is not the case. No hero is truly invincible, ask the man whose heel was his ill. Our hero was slain by steel with ill intent, but not without the cries of a goddess, hell bent on intervening. She, with wisdom, knew the outcome. Man's affairs are their own, with gods' playing but a small part. Her power was no match for that of elder gods, so she begged that he be spared, his thread uncut by Fate. But no heroics, no sparks can change man's fate, when the god's dictate humanity's hate.

Athena was curled on a large chaise lounge in the far corner of the great hall of Olympus. She was annoyed, knowing the outcome of the impending meeting. She rose from the chaise gracefully, before making her way toward the table at the center. Her grey-eyes cut across the room, calculating the temperament of guests. She adjusted her calculated outcome before taking her seat to the far left of Zeus' seat, which was at the top of the rectangular table. She did not wish to sit near her father, less she take act on the urge to smack the very spot on his head from which she emerged. As the god's filled in the table slowly, she took notice of an exasperated Hera, loudly shouting to Hermes. "Time and time again, the mortals fight and bicker over something as trivial as skin color. And here we are, expected to solve their problems," Hera groaned, as she took a seat near Zeus'.

"It's as if they think we are the root of their problems," he cantillated, before taking the seat opposite of Zeus'. Athena, visibly agitated, turned from view to roll her eyes. She did not know how long she could stomach her 'mother's incessant nagging when she would offer nothing to the conversation other than cooing at Zeus's every word.

"That Doe-eyed bitch does nothing but complain," she muttered under her breath,

before turning to face the table. As if on cue, A bolt of lightning shot in from the western sky, striking Zeus' chair, causing smoke to fill the room. The smoke dissipated, leaving Zeus sitting at the helm, clearly discontented.

"Oh, father. This is going to be a long meeting," Athena muttered under breath.

"Would you like to start the conversation, daughter?" Zeus quipped as his neck snapped in her direction. "This is your hero, and your mess, after all."

Athena steeled her spirit and cut her grey eyes around the table as she rose and moved toward the dais in front. She turned slowly, facing the crowd with a curt smile.

"Brothers and sisters, aunts and uncles, Father, And Hera," she cooed. "Ayanfe is not only my hero, he is humanity's hero." Before she could continue, Ares, her brother, gasped before unleashing a hearty laugh.

"Sister," he sputtered in between gasps of laughter, "you cannot be serious."

Clearly agitated at the interruption and lack of respect, Athena's grey eyes became flecked with white. She continued her defense of Ayanfe, with the flecks of white being the only indication of the storm that raged inside her.

"Ayanfe, the chosen one. He is all that is good but is tortured by us. Born for greatness, like the great Odysseus long before him. He has fought in the great modern wars of mankind. From the streets of Baghdad to the deserts of Persia, he has demonstrated his commitment to good by serving mankind. Must his fate really be decided on a street corner in the Montgomery, Alabama?" she questioned.

The great hall was still as Athena commanded their gaze. She regaled them with Afanye's acts of heroism and cleverness. She spoke of his devotion to humanity that powered his desire to take up arms at an early age. Describing his activism after the death of countless Black men, women, and children, she pleaded his anguish. The god's listened, with Aphrodite herself swooning, as Athena's tale sought to weave its way into their heart.

"Demeter, you must see the way

Afanye tends to the garden with his daughter. Apollo, the way he handles his armaments, rivals that of Orion. His physical prowess in battle embodies your tenets, Ares.”

Athena was in her element, flinging reasons to save Afanye into the room, combatting all criticism that sought to knock her off her game. Her silver tongue cut through all, but at the helm of the table, Zeus’ face was blank. She knew his support was paramount if she was to save the hero from the Fates.

“And Zeus, father, and king, he embodies your nature like non-other. He is fair and just, never judging others, but always leading those around him toward better.”

As she closed by flattering Zeus, Athena moved to her seat, knowing that she has done all she can do. The gods muttered amongst themselves, while Zeus stroked his chin, pondering all that had been said. Athena was confident in her appeal, but she knew that dissent was bubbling under the surface. She scanned the room but knew Ares would be the first in his critique.

Like clockwork, Ares rose from his seat, armor clanking, as he moved toward the dais.

“All gathered to hear my sister’s cries for the poor mortal man, but what makes this man more special than any other mortal? Is he one of our spawn?” Ares spit, causing the Olympians to chuckle. In all of Olympus, the only god that could match Athena’s tongue was Hermes, but no one could evoke chaos and steal the show like her burly brother of War, Ares.

“What makes this man deserving of intervention? Did he not agree to die a warrior’s death in battle? Sister, surely this hero will be rewarded for his death,” he spat.

“I agree, son,” Hera said, crossing her leg and leaning toward Zeus. Hera had caught Athena’s early quip, and pettily decided to play into her Ares dissent.

“Ares, he is a good man and hero. He wants better for humanity and has worked to repair some longstanding issues with mankind. Issues that have torn countries apart and plunged the world into war” She quipped.

“Sister, why should we intervene? If it is true that he is working to repair the problems of humanity, then I am sure someone will pick up his mantle and continue in his honor. Perhaps his children even.”

Ares was fueled by chaos. He sought to divide the gods and ultimately doom Athena’s hero. Everyone hated Ares, but he did have a mercurial way with words. Ares paced the room, lashing at Athena’s argument, slowly dismantling it before her eyes.

“Does he really embody my physical prowess, sister? If so, why is his thread threatened by the Fates? If he is as masterful as Apollo, he should always be armed.”

As if on cue, Apollo hunched his shoulders and motioned to the bow on his back. Athena’s knuckles grew white and rigid as she gripped the arms of her seat and rose to meet Ares head-on.

“Ares be sensible, the world of man is much different this millennia. Men, especially ones that look like Afanye, cannot carry their swords and shields openly,” she spoke tersely.



“That might be the case sister, but that does not explain why we should intervene so blatantly for one man.”

“I agree with Ares, why must we involve ourselves in the affairs of man after we have stayed away for so long,” quipped Zeus, standing at the helm of the table, eyes turned toward the west sky.

“Because he needs us. They all need us, father,” Athena pleaded. Her steely demeanor frayed; her voice cracked.

“Daughter be sensible. The world of man turned their backs on us long ago. Why must we save them from themselves?” Zeus lamented.

“Father, you know as well as I, that we set the stage. They are acting in a drama of our own devising,” she said. “Our names have been used to justify all. Whether your name be Zeus, Set, Vahagn, or Oya; do you not make the clouds roll in and the sky splinter with your fury?”

Athena paced the great room, staring down all the gods’ that dared meet her gaze. She was hot and flushed. Her skin prickled. She was something she rarely ever let herself be. She was angry.

“Ares, you know as well as I, that our eternal tango on the battlefield did not end with the fall of Greece. We met at the 38th parallel, nearly 70 years ago. The Mason-Dixon before that,” she noted. Athena’s voice cracked. The calm owl had become a vicious hawk. She moved around the room, laying blame on all Olympians, noting their impact on destroying the world, before finally landing on her father.

“Father. Zeus. You know I am speaking the truth. Why must we sit here and deny the impact we have had on their world. They suffer because of us. They hate because of us. This is our pr—”

“Silence!” screamed Zeus as he marched toward his daughter. “This is not our concern. The world of man compounds their own issues. We cannot intervene when they are determined to chart their own course.”

Zeus turned and walked toward the end of the hall and looked out over Olympus. Athena turned away from the table and moved toward the chaise lounge. She was defeated. The

odds closer than she imagined, but a defeat is still defeat.

As he gazed over Olympus, Zeus took a slow breath. “Help them all,” he muttered. He turned his back on the world below and marched out of the great hall, signaling the end of the meeting. The gods quickly dispersed, but Athena remained in her lounge.

“How many more?” she muttered. How many more.

Jason rose at 5AM, like he would any other morning but this one was different. He struggled to get out of bed. Usually he was excited to get to school. Before getting dressed, he peaked outside just as the heavens opened and drenched the world in a torrential downpour. He did not have to catch the bus for 2 hours, so he decided skip checking over his homework from last night. He wrapped himself in a blanket and moved through the house, feeling the old floors creak beneath his weight. Ever since he turned 13, he became more aware of his size. The sinewy nature of his body and his deepening voice had alarmed his mother. She had not expected him to grow so quickly and whenever he moved through the house at night, she would remind him to leave a light on as to not give her a fright.

Jason grabbed a bowl from the kitchen cabinet and filled it with corn flakes before dowsing it with ice cold milk. He grabbed a spoon and started stabbing the flakes, crushing them into smaller pieces that could easily soak up the milk, before moving into the living room and taking a seat on the couch. Usually he liked to read comics in the morning, but he felt like listening to music. He flipped it to a music channel that played a morning count-down and began to chew his cereal as he felt the music flow through his bones.

“Gotta keep it on me I don’t wanna die young,” the rapper crooned on the screen. “I rather be judged by twelve, than carried by six,” finished Jason. He slowly ate his cereal and flipped channels looking for something to watch before he needed to get ready. He settled on the local news.

A cheery blonde appeared on screen, beckoning the viewers to have a good day before a news alert flashed across the bottom of the screen.

“Breaking News! Breaking News!” shouted a monotone voice before the scene quickly changed to a large Black man sitting at desk.

“We have sad news coming out of the River Region this morning,” he said. “Earlier this morning, motivational speaker, and war veteran, Afanye Cole was found in Downtown Montgomery suffering from gunshot wound. He was transported to a local hospital where he could not be saved. He was pronounced dead at 4:44. He leaves behind a six-year-old daughter and a wife of 10 years. The authorities are treating it as a hate crime.”

Jason’s vision blurred as the milk in his mouth took on a sour taste. A photo of Afanye Cole rolled onto the screen.

“Truly a sad day for the Black Lives Matter

Civil War to Civil Rights

Graylyn Harris

Movement. He was one of their biggest activists,” said the blonde, still to cheery, as if the news had not registered to her.

Jason turned the tv off and made his way to the bathroom. He clutched his toothbrush and plastered it with paste. And looked at himself in the mirror. His face was gaunt, hollowing as he had grown. He had wisps of curly black hair on his chin signaling puberty. A year ago, he had to use a step stool to see himself in the mirror, but today he towered over the sink. He saw his large hands. He felt his stature and newfound girth. He wished he could shrink. He wanted to disappear. He did not want to be next. He steadied himself and brushed quickly before rinsing his mouth. He then splashed his face with water and used the soapy cloth to wash his face thoroughly. After he rinsed the suds off, he rose to face himself in the mirror. The face was still the same. Would he be the next “brute” or “thug?” He did not appear any younger or cuter. He did not appear harmless.

“How many more?” he wondered aloud. How many more?



The Rusty Pot

Emma Butler

The United States is like a pot
 Boiling over with a seething rage
 For Justice and for Peace.
 A pot that steams over separation of
 Church and State
 While mulling over what people
 Can or cannot do with their bodies
 Based on personal religious beliefs.
 A pot that the bottom is rusting out of.
 The rest of the world can see it.
 A pot that says it is for mixing,
 But roasts people on the color of their skin.

The question now is...
 Who stirs the pot and why?

Flag

K. Fernandez



PEACE

Mikia Holloway

From the same
 cloth we are all formed.
 This earthly existence we're
 all forced to share. But why do
 we insist on pretending that our many
 similarities only end right there?
 Consider myself, or you, and
 the entire vast, expansive
 universe in which we dwell.
 Can you honestly say we're
 not the same, us few? Even
 when we all tread the same
 dirt in the ground we each one
 day will become? And until then we
 live the same exact lives-only slight vari-
 ations. But we're still one. All born from cosmos,
 yet we'd rather find home in these temporary
 vessels than embrace our spiritual
 bonds that'll guide us to liberation.
 we just celebrate differences,
 refusing to see that I am you, and
 you are me we roam the earth to
 collect experience, then flee. Right
 back to where we came. Sure, we all may
 sing different songs, but can't we
 please just get along and let
 there be peace?

The Tourist of Oz

Rebecca May

Let's play a game called "Spot the Tourist." The task is this: you are in a charming mountain town in southern Mexico, and you have thirty seconds to decide if the stranger passing you on the street is a tourist or a native to the area. How can you tell at a glance? The answer is simple: flip flops, sunburns, and warm weather attire that will leave them shivering in the cold night to come in just a few short hours.

I didn't know that my look screamed "¡TURISTA!" in the summer of 2014 as I arrived in stunning San Cristóbal de Las Casas with my fellow study abroad students. All I knew was that I craved adventure, yummy but not-too-spicy local food, and self-actualization.

Have you ever fallen in love with a place? In San Cris, it's easy to do. The colors of the rainbow shining brightly from adobe-looking walls romanced me, as street musicians' serenades danced alongside local Mayan women's crafts on the *andador* *guadalupano*, the town's main walking street named after the Virgin of Guadalupe. Morning Spanish classes followed by afternoon salsa lessons constituted my dream world as I tasted freedom from Alabama for the first time in my eighteen years of life. Weekend excursions to Mayan ruins called me to a past shrouded in as much mystery as my uncertain future.

One month of tourist living is worth more than a lifetime of familiarity. I knew not when or how, but I knew that someday I must return to San Cristóbal. 2016 rewarded my patience with another month of touristy bliss in my favorite *pueblo mágico*. This time, I fell in love not with a place, but with a person living in San Cris, giving me all the motivation I needed to make this touristy town my new home.

Time slipped by. My body flew back to Alabama, but my heart never returned. So, to reunite with it once more, I bought a one-way plane ticket to Mexico. I figured the easiest job to get as a U.S. citizen in Mexico would be teaching English, so I paid for the month-long

teacher certification program and prepared for my new life as a foreigner abroad.

Life is as mountainous as San Cristóbal in its unpredictable yet inevitable highs and lows, and my dream came crashing to the ground with the realization that I was the secret side chick of my so-called Prince Charming. You might be surprised to find out that it's unwise to trust a bartender in a tourist town you've only known a few weeks who promises you the world in exchange for a fun fling. (Word of advice—don't let your flings pull your heart strings too far from your own rationality.)

The heartache was great enough that I almost let it consume my desire to return to my beloved *pueblo mágico*. However, my love for San Cristóbal did not start with this boy, and it wouldn't end with him either, so in August 2017, I took the trip and the teacher training course anyway. Three years of culture shock, confusion, fear, enthrallment, and joy transformed my little tourist heart into a pseudo-native of the *pueblo* of my dreams.

I was as Dorothy traveling the yellow brick road, en route to see a wizard whose magic was never to be found. The perfect life you live as a tourist is not a permanent possibility awaiting you if only you flee to the greener grass on the other side.

Life in San Cris was not perfect like I had hoped; it required work harder than I ever thought myself capable of. The lion's fear of uncertainty transformed with each new experience into courage in the face of unprecedented novelty. Robotic, rusty, academic Spanish, once squeaky and stiff, improved as I oiled it with time, patience, and countless mistakes turned into lessons learned. Scarecrow's mindless trust of strangers hardened into thoughtful consideration before naively believing whatever I am told by whomever crosses my path. Luxurious meals on the *andador* became 10-peso tacos at the corner stand. The host families I paid to have my tourist self in their homes faded away, and in their place now stand friends who supported me like the family I needed as a newborn in this foreign culture. Maturity struck like a tornado, simultaneously uprooting and burying the tourist who arrived in San Cristóbal in 2014,

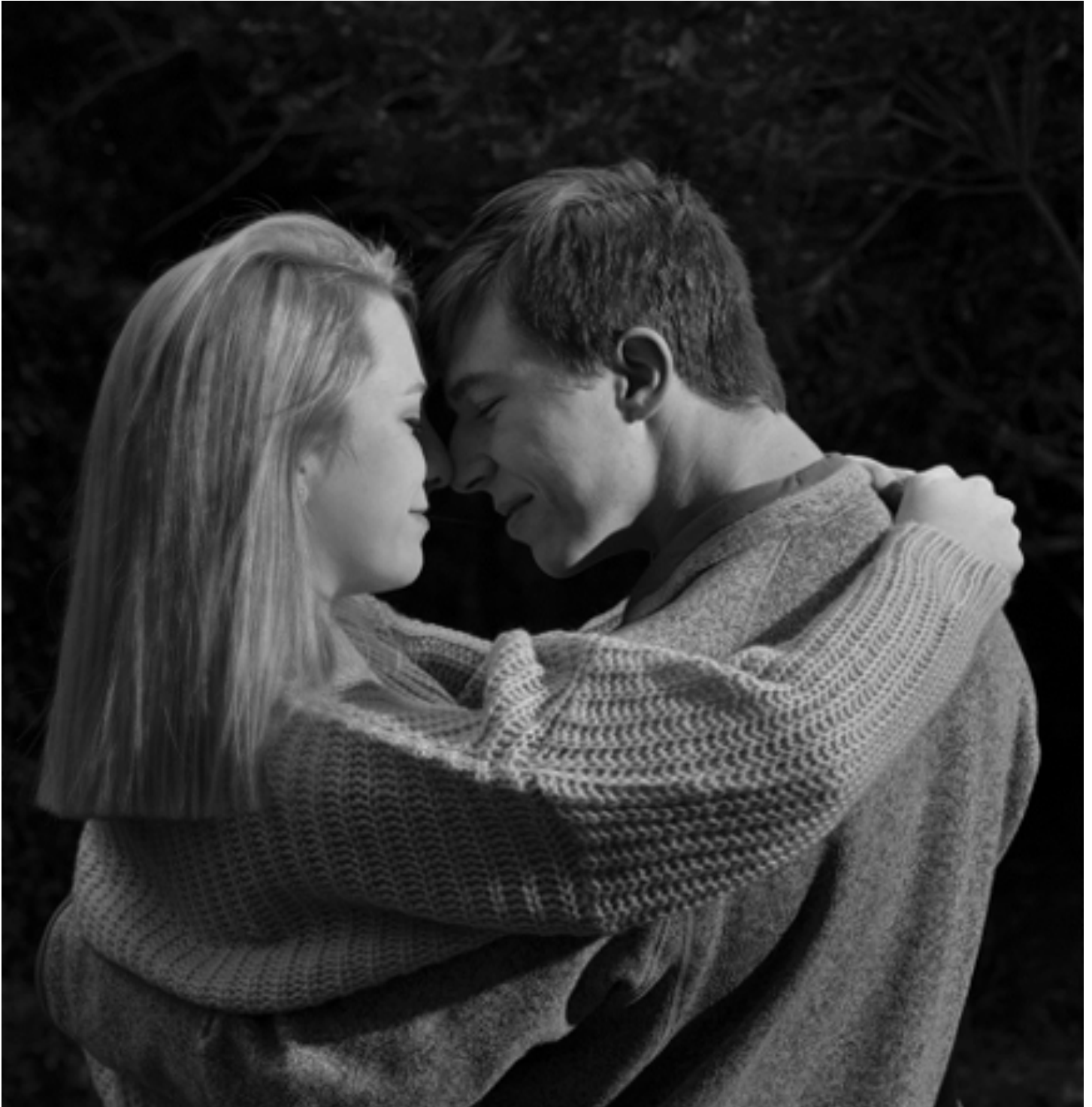
giving rise to the seasoned wanderer who now writes these ramblings.

The thing about Oz is that its beauty tempts, but its thrills last only as long as the search for the wizard does. After all her adventures, Dorothy still longs for the Kansas she once happily left. So here I find myself, in

my own little Kansas, reflecting on the dream world I left earlier this year. The color of Oz is gone, the yellow brick andador a not-so-distant memory now. The lessons, however, remain, just like San Cristóbal will always remain with me.

Coalescence

Graylyn Harries



Pure Genetics

Kristy Tillery

~A story of transformation and suspense~

“You have stage 4 cancer.” The words bounced around in my head, interrupting my attempt at sleeping. Dr. Hardwell had said it with so little emotion. Didn’t he realize he was giving me a death sentence? I slammed my fist on the desk a little too hard and knocked over a make-up mirror. I don’t know why I was so angry about dying.

A heavy sigh broke through the silence that cloaked my small bedroom. I leaned down and yanked the stupid mirror off the floor. In the dim light, I could tell that it had cracked right down the middle. My tired reflection stared dreadfully back at me and I was shaken to the core with regret. I should have known something was wrong with me before the bloody coughs started. A single tear worked its way out, but I wiped it away before it could fall to the floor. The purple bags under my eyes seemed to sag lower every day. I’d only been on this earth for 21 years and I wasn’t ready for it to end. I let my back touch the cold wall and slumped in a heap to the ground, letting my knees rest against my chest, holding them tight to my body.

My mom was with me when the doc gave me the news but it hadn’t buffered it anymore than if she hadn’t have been there. She had burst into tears immediately, but I was transfixed on the doctor’s emotionless face, frozen. Her own mother had passed away from lymphoma so she knew what that statement would mean for the quality of the rest of my life. It was in that moment, hearing the sobs erupting from her, seeing the rivers of tears stream down her face, that I made the decision that I wasn’t going to die. I refused it as if it were an option given to me on a survey. I had checked the NO box.

That night, I didn’t sleep. I couldn’t have slept if I’d tried. The entire night was spent doing research on cancer treatments, which turned out to be a waste of time. Most of the responses for stage 4 cancer were disappointing. *You better take some morphine and wait it*

out. Stage 4 is too late, maybe you should have gotten checked earlier. You don’t wanna die bald and covered in vomit, do you? The soft streaks of sunlight steadily pouring in through the sheer curtains encouraged me to take a break. I stumbled off my bed, put my laptop back on my desk next to the newly cracked mirror, and grabbed a hair tie. It wasn’t unusual for me to put my long brown hair into a high ponytail, but I appreciated it a little bit more after what I had been reading last night. The image of being bald didn’t scare me, but it was too late for chemotherapy anyway.

With my bed made and hair ready, I threw on a pair of jean shorts and a cute t-shirt and headed to the door. Before I could open it, I felt the vibration of my phone in my shorts pocket. It was my best friend, Victoria.

I pressed the green call button but I was interrupted before I could even say hello, “Hey, Lily! I went by the coffee shop this morning to grab a newspaper. It’s getting worse every day. They’ve officially announced 3 more missing persons in Seattle.”

“Did they actually find anything this time?” I asked. People had been going missing in central Seattle for the past few weeks. It started out in a small area, but it was expanding now and drawing closer to our neighborhood.

“Well, they have the usual pictures and names but it seems like they’ll never find a suspect. It’s weird.” Vicky took an audible breath. She paused for a second in thought, “They’re obviously not running away. Someone’s taking them. How can the police not have any evidence whatsoever? Are you telling me that they don’t even have a license plate or witnesses? The families don’t even have a clue.” Her voice had gotten steadily higher as she spoke, “I mean, one girl’s dad said he didn’t even remember her. How is that not strange enough to get more attention?” I knew she was agitated. We had recently graduated together and her criminal justice degree was always coming in handy nowadays; she always had input when it came to the city newspapers. She was probably one of the very few who still read them. Her passion for detective work had led her to some dangerous situations and the police knew her name by heart.

“Don’t worry. You know how it is. The bad guys always make mistakes. I bet you’ll figure it out before they do.”

She giggled and cleared her voice, “So, I wasn’t only calling about that. There was another article in the paper that I thought might interest you. I’m bringing it to your house right now!”

“Oh, okay. Why don’t you just send me a pic- Oh. I know. You just miss me!” I joked.

“Sure, sure. Anyway I’m on the way now, I’ll see ya in a few.”

About thirty minutes later, I joined Vicky at the kitchen table. She smirked at the plate of bacon I had set out for her and grabbed a slice. She placed the newspaper gently on the table and spun it around to face me. The headline read, “12 missing in Seattle” but on the bottom of the page there was another smaller headline dedicated to an experimental drug trial. Vicky’s finger tapped the paper impatiently.

“Don’t you see it?” She asked with a grin that lit up her face. “I saved you!”

Dr. Eve has successfully cured 3 patients of Cancer with her miracle drug, Vidabuena, because in her words, “They’ll be living the good life now!”

“Vicky, it sounds like a scam.” I laughed, but the look on her face told me to shut up. “Okay, well. I really do appreciate you looking out for me. But, if there was a way to cure cancer, don’t you think it would be the main headline? The world would be going nuts!”

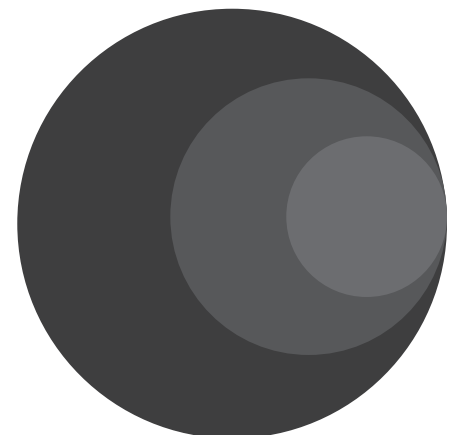
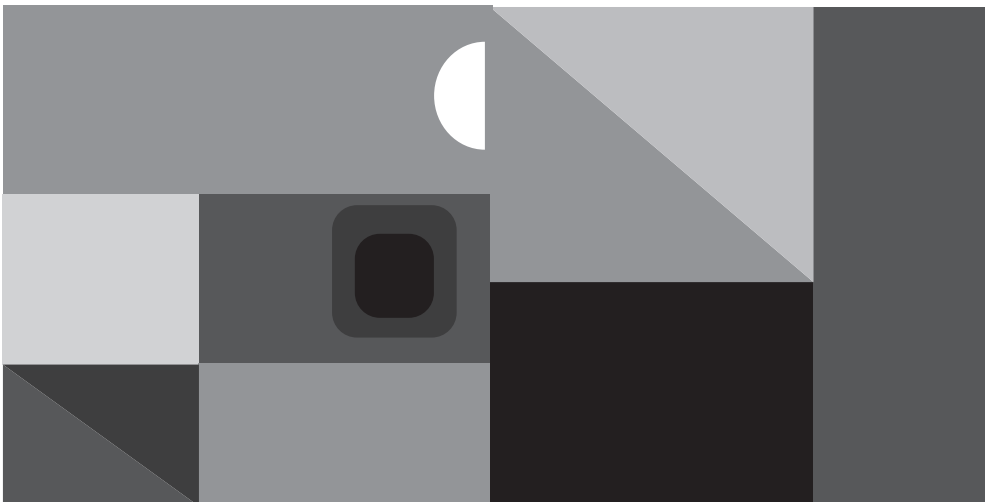
“I know. That’s what I thought at first. That’s why I did more research on them.” She knew me too well. “I went online and found their website. It turns out they’re a famous international company in the drug testing business. The company is called Pure Genetics. They were originally studying genetics but switched to drug testing. The CEO is also the most famous doctor of the company. Her name is Eve Golden but people just call her Dr. Eve. She has all kinds of awards for innovative drugs that she’s led research on. I’m telling you, I was amazed that I actually found sources on’em.”

“But what about the-”

“Hold on, girl. Let me finish. So, the reason the cancer cure isn’t advertised is because it hasn’t been through enough clinical testing for the FDA to qualify it as a safe cure. The website says that Vidabuena is on the last stage of trials before they can finally release it as a safe and effective drug. They are even paying cancer patients to participate in the trials. It’s a win-win in my book.”

“It still sounds too good to be true... but what other options do I have at this point? Did they say anything about side effects?”

“Yeah, but the worst ones were extreme fatigue and nausea. I think you could handle it, easy peazy.” Vicky clapped her hands together and smiled, “I told you Dr. Hardwell was wrong. You’re gonna live a long life and I’m going to be right there with you.”



“Good, I want to watch you get all wrinkly and gray!” I started to laugh but it turned into a cough. I covered my mouth with my hand and gave Vicky a thumbs up.

“I’m fine, I just had something in my throat.” I muttered quickly. I knew the wet feeling on my hand was blood and wiped it away with a hidden tissue I kept in my shorts pocket. She didn’t need more on her plate to deal with. I’d rather her think I was doing fine. I had already decided that I would be going to the drug trials but I didn’t have much faith in them. I just wanted to make her happy.

We spent the afternoon in the city and after stopping for some lunch, Vicky helped me set up an appointment with Pure Genetics. Luckily, they had an opening for the next morning.

It was hard to wake up that morning. When I was finally able to pull myself out of bed, it was already 7:40. I had 20 minutes to reach my appointment on time. With my eyes half closed, I threw on the same clothes I wore yesterday and brushed my teeth. I sprinted to the kitchen and grabbed a hot croissant that my mom had ready for me, yelled a quick goodbye, and got into my car. That must be a world record, I thought as I glanced at the clock. 7:45.

I made it to Pure Genetics with a minute to spare. I whipped my car into the parking lot, which was empty except for 2 black SUV’s and a red sports car. It was early, so I didn’t think too much of it and was glad that I’d be one of the first patients seen. I turned off the ignition and stepped out of my car to bask in a grand sight. The building that housed Pure Genetics was large and delicately designed. It had two pearl colored, rounded towers on either side with a wider tower in the middle. Each one appeared to be hand sculpted. The doors in the front of the building were oversized. They had to be at least 9 ft in length and the frames were enlaced with a golden, silky material. The door themselves were a deep brown that reflected the soft light from the sun. The sight of the building was amazing and left me in awe. I was so impressed that I almost missed the fact that the building had no windows. Where the windows should have been there were ornately painted panels.

They matched the doors in splendor and it was very beautiful, but unsettling.

I pulled the handle and the heavy door swung open easily. The room inside was lit by a small table lamp sitting on a desk in the middle of the room. There was one raggedy, old chair sitting in front of the desk and a large, expensive-looking, red office chair sitting behind it. *Alright, this already feels like a scam.* I walked inside and let the door shut behind me with a resounding click. There was no one else in the room so I paced around the dimly lit walls. Even in the dark, I could tell the walls were gorgeous. They were covered in the most extraordinary works of art from paintings, to portraits, to murals. I danced around the light to stop my shadow from hiding the masterpieces. A chill went through my body as I noticed a common trait in the paintings. Somewhere in the background of the picture, there was always a little girl holding a crow—no wait, a raven. Her tiny pale fingers were wrapped around its throat in each painting. I leaned in closer to get a look at her face, but I slipped on a raised piece of the carpet. I threw my hand out towards the wall to catch myself, but someone grabbed my arm before I could touch it.

“Please don’t touch the artwork, madame.” A smooth, monotonous voice mumbled.

“I am so sorry, I was just looking. I had an appointment for 8 am but no one was here so I got bored and then I was gonna fal—” I blabbered but was interrupted by the same mysterious voice. A tall man with a finely made black suit stepped out of the shadows beside me. He could have been a model because he was utterly and devastatingly handsome. He was the perfect stereotype of a beautiful man: tall, dark, and handsome.

“Come with me, the doctor is ready for you.” He let go of my arm and walked gracefully towards the desk in the center. I followed him to a door with a small, cloudy window on it. It reminded me of the doors in a hospital emergency room. We entered a long hallway bathed in white light and passed many doors before we stopped in front of the only open door. He ushered me inside and cracked the door slightly, “The doctor will see you soon.”

I turned around to see a basic run-of-

the-mill hospital room with a bed in the middle. There were also some curious tools and instruments hanging on the wall and lying on top of a pair of light oakwood cabinets. The large white tiles under my worn sneakers reflected the light, giving the whole room an awkwardly bright appearance. I climbed onto the hospital bed. The room was completely silent, but it was momentarily disturbed by the crinkling of the paper covering the bed.

I dug my phone out of my shorts pocket and checked for any messages from my mom or Vicky but I had no bars in the room, so I put it back. About 20 minutes passed before the sound of the door caught my attention. A female doctor with long, sleek black hair strutted into the room. She was wearing sexy red high heels and blood red nails with a black dress under her white lab coat. She was like a goddess.

“Good morning, dear. I’m so sorry for your wait. We’ve been quite busy today.” Her voice flowed like music from her succulent, tinted lips.

“Oh, that’s perfectly fine, no worries. I actually didn’t see many cars in the parking lot, though. Do you keep patients overnight?” I asked.

She flipped her hair from one shoulder to the other and enchanted me once again with her voice, “Every patient is different, some need more help than others. If a patient is very sick, we may keep them for observation. You seem to be doing fine for your condition, Lilith.” She was looking down at the chart in her hands now. “Stage 4, hmm?”

“I recently found out about it. It’s still new to me but I was told I didn’t have long to live, so I’m looking into all of my options. By the way, most people call me Lily.”

She nodded but continued looking at her chart. “Have you had any severe symptoms?”

“Yes, ma’am. I get really tired sometimes, but I can’t actually sleep. I’ve been coughing up blood and forgetting to eat. It’s been ongoing for about a year but I only went to the doctor after I saw the blood.”

More nodding. “I see,” she remarked. “I would like to put you through some tests to determine your eligibility for the program. I will send in a nurse to take your blood and prepare you for testing.” With that, she stood and

elegantly left the room. Almost immediately the door opened again and a small child walked in.

“Hi.” The little girl said. There was something familiar about her, but I couldn’t put my finger on it.

“Hey there, what are you doing in here?” I asked her, gently. She smiled a curious little smile and showed me her hand. I was going to speak but she shifted her weight and revealed her other hand. She was holding a stuffed raven, like the raven from the wall. So, she was the little girl from the paintings.

“Mommy is going to fix you and make you all better.” The girl said before giggling and running out of the room. She must have been the doctor’s daughter.

I sat in silence once again in the lonely room. My phone still had no bars and my legs were falling asleep so I stood up and walked around the room. There was a strange noise coming from the A/C vent on the ceiling. The sound reminded me of gears grinding together but it slowly turned into a low growl. I felt a chill and the hairs on my arms started to stand straight up. I thought I heard a whisper. I grabbed the chair that was in the corner of the room and put it under the vent. I carefully stood on the chair and tried to get as close as possible. There was a voice. It sounded distant and terrified, Don’t... not again... no!

I felt my heart drop into my stomach and jumped off the chair. I freaked out and kicked the chair back to the side of the room and sat on the hard bed again. The excitement had stirred up my coughing and blood was splattering all over my hands and shorts. It got bad and I fought to take a breath. By the time the coughing fit had ended, I was tired and lying down on the bed. The room had started to take on a heavy aroma, like it was covered in a coat of lavender-scented perfume. The powerful smell filled my nostrils and my head started to feel dizzy. I considered leaving but I couldn’t even stand without the room spinning. The sound from the vents abruptly stopped and the room was quiet again. After a time, I had convinced myself that I hadn’t heard anything at all.

I didn’t even notice when the door slowly creaked open. Reality started to fade into the

background and everything was covered in a thick haze. The doctor walked in and told me I passed the tests. I managed to weakly tell her that the nurse had never come in. She told me that I had just forgotten, and I believed her easily. The rest of that night became a blur. The last thing I remembered was Dr. Eve setting an I.V. in my arm and the burn of the drug flowing through my veins.

I woke up in my own bed. I immediately grabbed my phone and the first message I saw was from *Vicky*. *Hey girl, I'm glad to hear it all went well. I hope you can actually get some sleep tonight and I'll see you tomorrow before work.* But what was she responding to? I didn't remember sending her any messages or even coming home. I tried to see what message I sent her but the text history was deleted. I glanced at the clock. 10:30am. If Vicky was coming before work, she should have been here by now. I tried to call her but there was no answer. I called the restaurant she worked at. They said she wasn't there and hadn't called in. I tried to stay calm as my fingers dialed her mother's number, but I couldn't control the shaking. I had a bad feeling brewing.

"Hi, Lily! It's so nice to hear from you!"

"Is Vicky at home?" I skipped the greetings and spit my words out as fast as I could.

"No, she's at work."

"She's not at work. I called them. Did she tell you anything today?"

"Well, she told me she loved me quite a few times before she left. That seemed a little different, but I was happy to hear it." Her mother's voice sounded relaxed. She wasn't worried about her daughter's whereabouts?

"She is missing, Traci. You need to call the police. Vicky never disappears without letting me know. And if she did, I would be with her! This isn't like her and you know it!" I was getting angry with her but kept my voice level. I grabbed my keys from their hook near the front door and held the phone with my shoulder.

"It's okay, she's probably just hanging around the mall. She's fine. She should be back soon. Maybe her phone's dead. I think you're overreacting a little, it's only been a few hours. But if you want to call the police you can go ahead."

Click. She hung up. I was at a loss for words. I dialed 911 and told them that Vicky was missing but was told that it hadn't been 24 hours yet and that she was an adult. The pit in my stomach grew. I couldn't understand why her mother was so nonchalant. I wanted to scream. I drove around the city like a bat out of hell searching for any trace of her.

The hours passed without notice. The sky became a deep purple as the sun set and the streetlamps flicked on. I continued searching in the dark. This became my routine for 3 days. On the second day that she was missing, the police called the alert. On the third day, I was desperate. The police claimed they were on the lookout for her but it seemed to be going in the same direction as the other missing people in Seattle. I had to do something more.

I rushed home and opened my laptop. There was nothing. No messages. No emails. But then I saw something peculiar. A new document appeared on my desktop that I hadn't created called, "If there's a will, there's a way." I clicked it and a beautifully painted portrait of Vicky appeared. Her face, as always, was perfection. I always imagined that she had been sculpted by the gods, themselves. She was wearing a gorgeous white wedding dress that brought out the deep, emerald green of her eyes. Her dark brown hair fell in curtains around her face and had been curled to appear to be as light as a feather. She was sitting on a concrete bench in a field of lavender. She seemed happy but there was something wrong about the picture. There was something distracting me from her pale beauty and gentle gaze. It was the little girl. The little girl with the raven. And the little girl was smiling as she held the raven by its neck. That little girl's smile drove me over the edge. It was like she was smiling at my misery; she was enjoying my suffering. And now Vicky was missing and this was the only trace of her I had. There was only one place where I had seen portraits like this before.

Pure Genetics was gone. The small parking lot had become a dirt road that ended abruptly before a field of green grass with dandelions speckled here and there. The building was just completely missing. There was no line in the sand, no demolishing

equipment, no equivalent to a crop circle. I pulled up the built-in maps application on my phone and searched for the address, but an error screen showed that the address didn't exist. I felt my forehead crinkle with frustration as I checked the original newspaper for the article. It, too, was nowhere to be found. I went online. Nothing. The police must have thought I was crazy when I told them a whole building had disappeared. No one believed me, of course.

I called Vicky's mother once a day to see if Vicky had come home. Each day her mother would become more distant. After two weeks of waiting, wondering, and calling, I contacted Traci for the last time.

"Hello?" She said.

"Hi, Traci. I'm sorry to keep calling everyday but has Vicky come home?" It had become my routine one-liner.

"Who?"

"Vicky?"

"Who are you asking about, Ma'am? There's no Vicky at this residence, just me and my husband, and his name's Travis." Traci said confidently, "Hold on, the muffins are done." I heard a ruckus in the background and Traci calling for her husband to come downstairs. It pissed me off that she pretended to not know her own daughter. I hung up the phone but as soon as I stowed it away, a call came in from an unknown number.

"Lily. It's Dr. Eve. We need to meet. Go to the place where it started." Click.

My mind was spinning. I was given the perfect opportunity to figure out what happened to Pure Genetics. I followed the same directions as before and found a red Porsche sitting alone on the orange dirt road. I parked beside it and Dr. Eve stepped out. She waved at me to follow her, in the same manner that the tall man had done when I first came here. We walked through the dandelions and finely cut grass. She stretched out her hand and appeared to grab something in the air. She made the motion of pulling something and the air wavered, revealing the building that I had seen before. I gasped. It was still here and it had been here the entire time. Dr. Eve walked inside and held the door for me to follow.

"Lily." She began, "The ads that we put in the papers and on websites list me as the C.E.O. of our operation. They hold me to a very high esteem and call me the boss. It is a lie. I am a slave to the system and I'm tired of following the rules blindly. And before you ask, yes, we are the reason there are missing people in Seattle, but I am the reason the families aren't despairing. I wipe their slate clean so they can be happy. Don't be too angry with your friend's mother, I didn't want her to suffer needlessly. I helped her forget."

We followed the same route that I took with the tall stranger, but we didn't stop at the hospital room, instead we took the door opposite to it and went down 3 flights of stairs. I knew there was something extraordinary going on here now. What kind of abilities must a person possess to be able to make a mother forget her own daughter?

"Hold on, where are we actually going?" I complained, becoming nervous. "Why should I go with you after what you just told me?"

"That's why you have to come with me. Don't you want to find Vicky?" She asked in a compassionate tone. She then took a deep breath and prepared to speak again, "When you came in, you were dying. I can feel death, you know? I can feel them both, life and death, so you'd think I would value them more, but I wasn't created that way and I had to learn it on my own. I was created to be emotionless, merciless, and obedient. But I made mistakes. Those mistakes are how I learned to find compassion, and how I have now learned to think independently of my orders. I realized that I had always been given a choice, but I was too selfish to choose someone else over myself. If I didn't obey, death would destroy me. If I obeyed, I would destroy an innocent life. But, I've decided now that I would gladly embrace death over being controlled forever and causing more pain." Dr. Eve turned a corner and paused. "We are almost there, come on."

I was confused and didn't understand a word of her speech but I was starting to feel excited at the thought of seeing Vicky again. I didn't really care if Dr. Eve was some kind of crazy witch, or about the danger that she might pose for me, as long as she hadn't

hurt Vic. My only priority was to find Vicky and take her home. I was supposed to be the one in a perilous situation, not her. She was supposed to keep living a full, long life and remember me after I was gone. It was selfish of me to want to die before her, just to escape the grief of not having her, but I couldn't imagine surviving and losing her forever.

I accidentally kicked a loose rock. Dr. Eve glanced back at me, almost as if to make sure I was okay. As she turned back around, I saw a deep red glint in her eye that unsettled me. The rock was still echoing and bouncing down the stairs when she cleared her voice.

"I am truly sorry for infecting you. I didn't have this epiphany until after I met you and your friend Vicky. Her overwhelming desire to protect you convinced me that human life is worth saving. My life has been long enough."

It took a second for me to grasp her words. I still didn't actually understand her at all. It felt like listening to the blabbering of someone who had completely lost their marbles.

"Infecting me? What do you mean?" My voice echoed loudly in the dark stairwell. A flickering light could be seen up ahead, revealing an opening at the end of the stairs.

"Death grew bored of reaping human souls. He is not God, but he wanted to create his own children like God created humankind. He even created a place to send the souls of his children: Purgatory. These drug trials that we're running are for the benefit of creating the perfect monster, not for the benefit of humankind. They do heal the ailments of man, but at a cost. Have you not noticed that you are cured of your cancer?"

I took a second to think and replayed the past few weeks in my head. I was too distraught and caught up in my worries about Vicky to notice improvements in my health. She was right, though. I hadn't felt tired, I hadn't coughed up blood, and I felt, physically, perfectly fine.

The opening that I had seen was held up by an ancient-looking arch covered in hundreds of small decaying bones. If the arch wasn't creepy enough, the short hallway that we entered was filled with a stench that would stain my memory forever, it had no comparison

to anything I had ever smelled before. The walls were made of mudbricks and the floor was dirt, hardened by years of walking on it. Dr. Eve stopped to grab a torch from the wall.

"I was the second successful creation, in the eyes of Death. My name isn't really Eve. He gave me that name in irony, knowing that the first female human and the mother of all humans was a woman named Eve. She was my grandmother. She has long died and found peace, while I am trapped here and forced to cause mortal suffering. When I was still human, I fell in love with a man. It was the kind of love that is dreamed of, love at first sight, that sort of thing. It was so powerful that it became the reason I woke every morning. I dedicated every waking moment to him and I trusted him fully. One day he asked me a peculiar question. He asked me if I knew I was dying. I didn't take him too seriously and thought he was making some sort of sick joke or romantic ploy, but over the next few weeks I got very sick. Soon, I was lying on my deathbed. He came to visit me at the end and told me he had something that would make me better. The only thing he asked for was a piece of my soul. He said there would be other conditions but I didn't have enough time left to question him, and why should I question the love of my life? So, I accepted his offer and I woke up more beautiful than I had ever been. He called me the first succubus and used me to lure men to their peril for hundreds of years. I had not but to walk in front of a man to steal his heart. I am now, as I have always been, an abomination. The man that I loved was an incubus and he had no feelings for me at all. He wasn't even giving the commands; he was just following orders given to him and passing them down to me. He was the first experiment, and his curse was his allure. We were Death's most entertaining monsters. He enjoyed watching humankind ruin themselves in their fight to claim us, plus it brought him more volunteers for his experiments as their love for us would always lead them to their doom. I am now known as the mother of monsters, and Death's right hand." Dr. Eve stopped suddenly. Her voice transitioned from the grave tone of storytelling to the serious snap of a command, "From this

point on, we must remain in silence. If you speak here, Death will know.”

Dr. Eve kept discussing death as if it were a person. The only image of a personified death in my mind was the Halloween-style, scythe-wielding, cloak-wearing skeleton man. I really hoped that she wasn't talking about that kind of death.

We walked and time dragged. It seemed like hours before we finally reached a change of scenery. It was a wide, oval-shaped chamber, about half the size of a football field. Every few feet, there was a cell with iron bars guarding it. Each cell had a set of two brackets on either side of the bars, holding torches. Some cells had glass behind the bars and others had tanks full of water or other liquids. I began to hear a combination of different sounds, from screeching, to grinding, to things I couldn't describe. Like nails on a chalkboard, the noises filled me with disgust, and I shivered. They were quiet at first but, as we got closer to them, the sounds started to take on a different form. There was growling, splashing, scratching, screaming, and something beautiful. It was the call of angels; it pulled me closer. I needed to see what was at the end of this captivating sound. I began to realize that it was someone singing. I was filled with pleasure and a feeling of comfort. It pulled me closer still. I felt like I was floating towards the music, gliding across the floor without ever touching it. My hands found the cold bars of a cell. I reached out towards the water and a deep happiness came over me.

Suddenly, Dr. Eve cuffed her hands over my ears and my body jarred to a stop. I was forced to bend over as a sharp, agonizing pain resonated through me. I dropped to the floor and sat down for a moment while my head cleared and the pain trickled away. Confused, I tried to ask what happened, but she immediately put a finger to her lips and handed me some ear plugs. The pull of the intoxicating chant disappeared but I remembered the feeling and I missed it.

I took Dr. Eve's hand and let her help me up. I shook my head and patted my face with my hands before fully observing the cell that I had been pulled towards. The tank inside was full of crystal blue water that was lit from below by a dim, but strong, green light. Above that, the most beautiful woman I had ever seen, even more beautiful than Dr. Eve, swam gently through the water. Her scarlet hair appeared to be dry, even as it was obviously floating. Her waist tapered off into a beautiful fish-like tail covered in glimmering scales that seemed to reflect the green light, sending rays through the water, giving her hair the appearance of a living fire. I was mystified, but I remembered Dr. Eve's warning. I watched the woman's face fall into sadness as I turned away and moved on. She was lonely.

I guess that was one of the flaws of being human, the everlasting search for beauty, and the deep loneliness that comes with the discovery that beauty isn't actually as important as we think. Beauty means nothing if you're forever alone. It was a weakness



that Death had been fully exploiting over the years. Later on, Dr. Eve motioned for me to remove my earplugs and explained that this creature trapped in the cell was the first siren. Her song was so delicately and intricately designed by Death, that any mortal who heard the call would be captivated and led to their deaths. The siren's alluring song was the only successful trait that she had inherited from the drug. She had been created in the image of Dr. Eve but had been a failure in the eyes of death. She was only useful for catching sailors and unlucky souls who ventured near the ocean. She could never live up to Death's most successful creation, the infamous succubus Dr. Eve. And so she had been trapped here to be experimented on and studied. I was told that one day Death would figure out a way to transfer her abilities to another creature that would not be cursed to roam the sea. On that day, Dr. Eve would no longer be the most powerful, alluring creature and Death would have no use for her. She would become a failed creation and find herself trapped in a cell made just for her, like the siren.

A few moments after seeing the siren's cage, we came upon hundreds of nightmarish monsters and other creations. Each cage housed a new unique creature, some angry and brooding, others sad and lonely. The animal-like monsters launched themselves at the bars on their cages with amazing strength and ferocity, bloodying their faces and tearing their claws. Enchanting creatures with human features waggled fingers at us and smiled. One of them stood on four legs like a dog, but it had two heads and a long slimy tongue that poked out through the bars.

I looked away, not wanting to see more, but met the eyes of a beautiful, young woman in the cage across from the beasts. She looked at me with a hunger in her eyes, in the same way that a starving lion looks at his prey. She opened her mouth and revealed sharp, dagger-like canines but closed it quickly when she saw the Doctor.

I felt a connection with her. She was pitiful. She used to be human and was made into what she is by a selfish, evil creature.

"You smell good." She moaned and leaned her head back to take in more air before

returning to a sullen and lonely state. She kept her slanted eyes on us as we moved further from her cell. I broke eye contact and turned my head forward. I felt more and more uneasy as I saw more proof of the supernatural beings. I started to worry about what Dr. Eve had said before, especially since I knew she wasn't crazy. She had been telling the truth. *I'm sorry I infected you.* Would I become one of those creatures? What did Death have planned for me?

Dr. Eve's voice sounded like liquid gold compared to the frightening noises in the background, "Lily, this cursed place is where every monster from humankind's legends and myths originated. This is Death's playground. In the beginning, God created Death to keep balance in the world but reaping souls eventually drove Death to madness and he became an uncaring, curious spirit. He was given one rule to command his existence; he could not interact with the living unless their death was approaching. This rule chained death to the spirit world for many a millennium until he discovered a loophole. He learned how to inhabit corpses in order to interact with the world. The rule still stood strong and he could only directly interact with the dying, so he decided to make a new race, the undead.

Death commanded me here to ensure that an early death was in store for a human before converting them. He has experimented with many different combinations of monsters over time and has had failures and successes. The dysfunctional subjects are studied or destroyed, but the monsters that Death approves are released to wreak havoc and bring him more souls. He fills each monster with a ravenous hunger that overrides their human emotions and forces them to commit atrocities.

I told you this because you have to understand why your friend is ultimately in danger. Unfortunately, Vicky showed a very special trait that caught Death's interest. She could see the ads in the newspaper, even though she wasn't meant to die an early death. He marked her, but the rules in the contract with heaven prevented us from touching her. He was absolutely furious. Imagine Death's satisfaction when Vicky sent

her best friend straight to us. Once you were here, all we had to do was send her a little message from your phone, and she came running. I called you because tonight is very important, and our last chance. There will be a blue eclipse tonight that will thin the barrier between Death's Purgatory and our world. If we bring Vicky to Purgatory, he will be able to touch her. He wants to know what allows her to see our realm, what makes her special. But he doesn't care what happens to her. He only cares about his formulas and he wants to make one that will allow him to touch any human being, dying or not. The experiments he could perform would destroy her. I can't directly disobey his command, so I brought you here to save her."

I had been straining to concentrate on Dr' Eve's voice but there was a thundering booming in my ears that was distracting me. I couldn't pinpoint where the noise was coming from until I finally realized. It was the sound of the doc's heartbeat. For a moment I was surprised she had one, being "undead" and all.

"I can hear your heartbeat, Dr." It was a new sensation. My ears were picking up sounds I shouldn't be able to hear. The cages were far from us now, yet I could hear the raggedy breathing of the beasts and a caged woman's fingers sliding through her hair. I could hear each individual spark as it burst into a new flame on the torches.

"That's not good at all. It's about time for your transformation. I regret giving you the drug but I cannot reverse it, I'm so sorry. It's going to be distracting but if you want to save your friend, you're going to have to stay focused."

She reached into the pocket of her long white lab coat and brought out a vial of clear liquid, "This will help put off the change for a while longer, drink it and listen. I will tell you exactl-"

Dr. Eve's voice caught and there was silence. I heard tiny footsteps approaching us from the direction that we were walking and a quiet, cheery humming.

"Mommy?" The little girl from the paintings was there. She was smiling, "Mommy, what are you doing here?"

Her voice perfectly echoed a child's voice but there was a maturity in it that gave me the creeps.

The girl revealed the raven in her hands. She had its beak covered.

"Tell me what's wrong."

Her smile faded instantly.

"I'm sorry, there's nothing wrong. I was just trying to prepare Lily for her transition." Dr. Eve's voice lost all of its previous confidence and shook in the presence of the girl, but she managed to put on a fake smile, "We're done now and Lily understands that her only purpose is to serve."

The air was dense in her presence. I gripped my hands behind my back so tight that my knuckles turned white. The girl had no sound coming from her body, no heartbeat, no breathing, no blinking. I could hear air passing over her vocal cords when she spoke, but that was it.

"Why is she still human, mommy?" The girl held the raven tightly with her arms folded over its head. Dr. Eve's face started to turn blue. "You don't want to make me angry, do you?"

Dr. Eve desperately shook her head and gasped for air. I panicked and blurted out, "I can feel the change. It has already started." Her grip loosened on the raven and Dr. Eve's face was restored to its pale complexion. "What do you feel?" She asked, suspiciously. "Well, it hurts!" I exclaimed immediately, not knowing what the change should feel like. The girl's face began to change. I faked the widest smile I could manage and blurted out, "I can hear everything, even the sound of my own eyelids when I blink."

This intrigued her. I don't think she believed me but she smirked and skipped past us.

"The next time I see you, you better not be human." Her humming resumed. I saw her tiny hand yank at the raven and a feather fell to the ground. Dr. Eve screamed out in pain as a long, deep cut appeared on her right arm. The little girl giggled in the distance. She enjoyed causing pain.

Dr. Eve waited a few moments for the girl to disappear down the hallway before she abruptly spun around and grabbed my hand.

She pulled me and we ran together down another hallway to the left of the cages. Her red heels made dull thumps on the hardened dirt, but I could still make out the quickening heartbeats from her chest. As we ran, the scent of Dr. Eve's blood tickled my nose. I had smelled blood before but it was iron-y and bitter. This was different; the scent was powerfully sweet, like honey, and pleasant. A drop of blood ran down her arm, slid down her finger, and dropped to the floor. The splash, that should have been inaudible to human ears, echoed through my head. I could even feel the heat coming from her body as we ran side by side. I was frightened but filled with an overwhelming excitement. Adrenaline started pumping through my veins and I started to run faster than the doc. She took immediate notice and called out my name, but I continued speeding up.

"Remember, you're the only one who can do this!" She yelled at me. I slowed down to a stop and let her catch up. Her breathing was labored but I was relaxed.

She looked down at the watch on her fragile wrist, "You have an hour before Death sends me to take Vicky. Don't let the change take over before you reach her or you'll both be stuck here forever."

I nodded solemnly and reminded myself to stay focused. I pulled up a memory of Vicky and held it in my mind for a while. The adrenaline gradually abated but my senses stayed heightened. Now that we had come to a stop, I took the time to ask her about the girl.

"Who was she?" I asked, remembering how the stuffed raven affected Dr. Eve. "I don't know who that little girl used to be, but now she's just a host being possessed by the spirit of Death. That raven she holds is the form that my soul took when it was reaped, it's how Death controls me. The girl's soul has already been delivered to its proper resting place, all that remains is the shell. Possessing it is the only way that Death can communicate across the realms. When the body decomposes or is destroyed, he is forced to take a new one. It's not an easy task either. The host must be ignorant of death, so it is most often a child, but not always. And not all children are innocent enough to be taken."

"Death cannot truly touch this world. He must have followers that will obey him without question. He is starting to suspect that I am no longer his loyal pet, so he is becoming angry and hurts me to enforce his will."

Dr. Eve gently grabbed my shoulders and looked directly at me, "Now, get out of here. Follow this hallway until it forks. Take the path to the left, the 8th room on the right holds your Vicky. Take the stairs to the right of the room until you reach a door labeled Overworld. When you pass through the door, close your eyes and hold your breath. If you're successful, never come back." With that, Dr. Eve turned on her heel and headed in the opposite direction. It was saddening to watch her walk back to her tormentor, even knowing the people she had helped curse over the years. Could she really be blamed?

I was alone now. I traveled down the dusty,



dank tunnel at a quick pace until I saw the fork she mentioned. There was a sign above the left entrance that read Waiting Room and the right entrance had one in the same font Zoo. I didn't have time to lose so I sprinted down the left hall, counting doors as I went. I passed 2 doors, 4 doors, 6 doors, and finally I came to the 8th door. I anxiously wiggled the door handle. Locked.

"Vicky?" I whispered at the door. There was no response. I leaned in and put my ear to the door.

I tried again, louder, "Vicky?"

I heard raggedy breathing and a shuffling just behind the door.

"Who's there?" a weak voice croaked. It was her.

"It's me, Lily. Are you okay? Hold on, I'm going to try to open this door." I desperately searched for something I could use to break the door handle. There was nothing but dirt on the floor.

"I don't feel so good, Lily." Vicky mumbled. I could hear her take a deep, raspy breath, "It's hard to breathe. I'm tired."

"What did they do to you?" I felt tears welling up. Was I too late?

"I got a text from your phone that said you were being transferred to the emergency room and something had gone wrong with the testing. I drove here as fast as I could and a man in a suit led me inside. He told me that I would need to wait here for you and locked me in. Someone or something has been bringing me small portions of bread and a glass of water once a day when I fall asleep. But, it's been so cold. I can't believe I'm hearing your voice right now. I thought I was going to die." She wheezed with each breath she took.

My head was spinning, I had to get to her right now. We were both running out of time. Suddenly I realized what I needed to do. I focused all of my strength on the door and channeled whatever kind of power the transformation was giving me. I slammed my shoulder into the door and felt it budge.

"Vicky don't worry. I'm gonna get you out. Step away from the door." I took a few paces back and prepared to launch myself at the door. I counted to three in my head,

sprinted towards the door, and threw my whole body forward. The hinge broke and the door swung open revealing my best friend. She was leaning on the wall for support and holding her chest with one hand. Even in such a state, her beauty was unmistakable.

"You still look cute with those panda eyes, Vic." I said, with a smile pointing at the bags under her eyes. She smiled back and started coughing. She covered her mouth with her elbow until she could catch her breath again.

"I'm fine." She insisted, knowing that she wasn't. I ran to her and gave her a warm hug, but it was quickly interrupted by the sound of footsteps down the hall.

"We have to go." I exclaimed and took Vicky's arm. I pulled her out into the hallway, and we headed to the stairs as fast as she could manage. She was too weak to go up the stairs so I scooped her up with my newfound strength and pushed my way up. After a few flights, I could hear noises from the outside world and knew we were getting close. Who knew a car horn could sound so good. I felt relief as the door labeled Overworld finally appeared.

"Vicky, when we go through the door you have to hold your breath and close your eyes. It's important," I told her. She didn't reply. I looked down to see her eyes closed and was afraid that I had lost her, but I heard a very faint heartbeat and breathed a sigh of relief. It was a short moment because there was a loud creak and the door we had come through just seconds ago, opened. There was no time. I wrenched open the Overworld door, cupped my hand over her mouth, and held her nose closed. A gust of fresh air blew in. I held my breath and closed my eyes. Suddenly, a strong hand grabbed me from behind and pulled. I gently heaved Vicky's limp body through the door and made sure my hand didn't leave her face until she was fully through. I held onto the door as hard as I could but the pull was getting stronger. I ripped my phone out of my shorts, dialed 911, and threw it out the door. Another hand reached around me and grabbed my head.

Goodbye, Vicky. I thought, as I was pulled back into hell.

The Sea of Choices

Charlotte Erin Makowski

The violent waves are crashing and colliding overhead.
The ship they threw you from is rising and falling away.
All because you are a woman, on a ship, you will be dead.
The water pulling you down, you wish to make them pay.

The ocean's turbulent surface is slipping away from sight,
And it is forcing you farther down into the inky blurry dark,
You start to relax as you drift down fully giving up the fight.
Something moves beside you, first your mind screams shark.

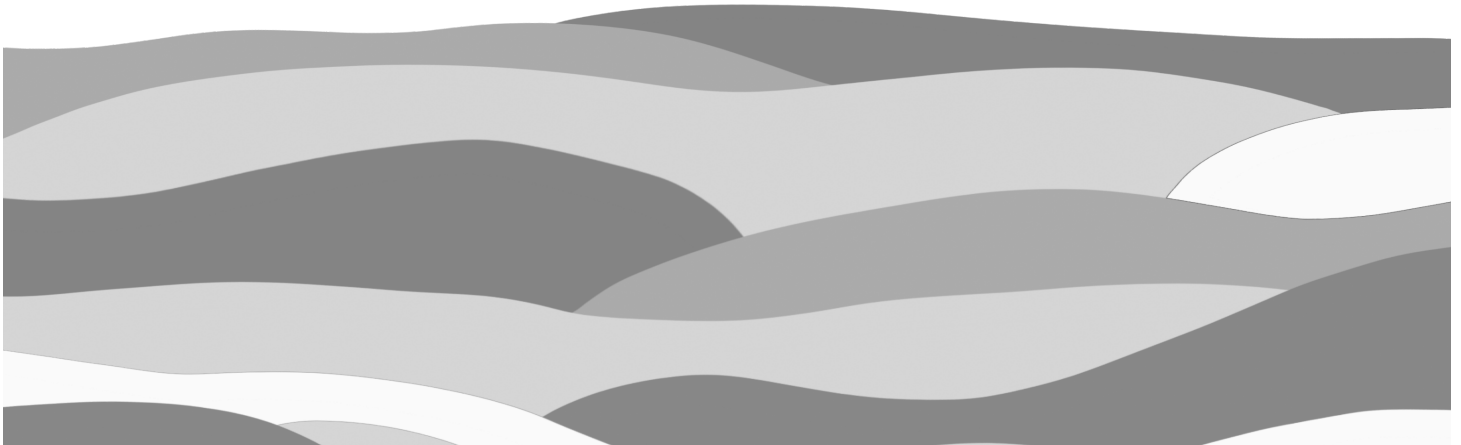
You force your eyes to fully open, it is not what you first thought.
Before you is a mermaid with thick ghostly white hair that glows,
Her eyes like blue ice, her tail shimmers an aqua blue, you ought
to be fearful, but she offers her hand and it feels like all time slows.

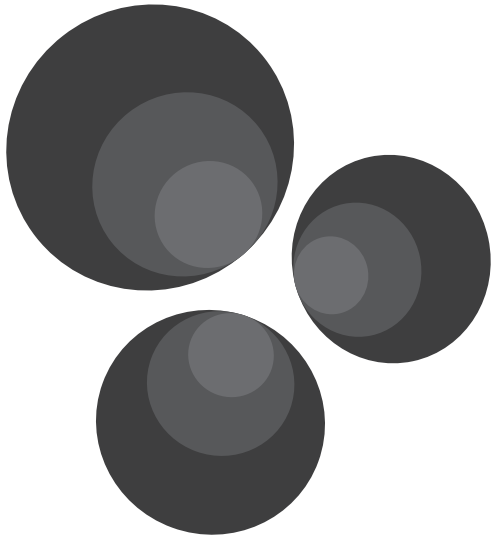
Her lips do not move but you hear her velvet voice, it is crystal clear.
"You can make them pay if you become like me, just take my hand."
You look at the hand then take it into yours, then bright lights appear.
Your dress is gone and a long vivid cyan tail forms then the lights disband.

You take a deep shocked breath, twisting yourself around in disbelief.
You look to the mermaid and speak without words, "I am like you now."
The other smiles and says, "I am Atargatis." The ocean sighs its relief.
"You are a Goddess. Why save me?" you ask. She grins raising her brow.

"You were wrongly murdered and so I offered you a choice for life."
You smile then over her shoulder you can see a ship tossing in the waves.
"Now you can choose the fate of others for you were forced to pay a tithe,
that shouldn't have been paid. The choice of safe passages or watery graves."

You stare at the ship thrashing at the surface in the waves and the violent squall.
You swim toward the ship that murdered your mortal life without care.
Your mind goes back and forth, save them or bring about the men's downfall.
Be a Siren or a Saint? Be the ravenous Monster or the answer to a Prayer?





Define Transformation

Rebecca May

Transformation:

The same information,
With conjugations.

Once was,

Now is.

A new point of view.

When I become you,

And we become one.

Form.

Changing form:

Old renewed,

Shifting views.

Young men get old;

Babies walk.

Tales are told,

Then forgot.

Feared by many;

Revered by all;

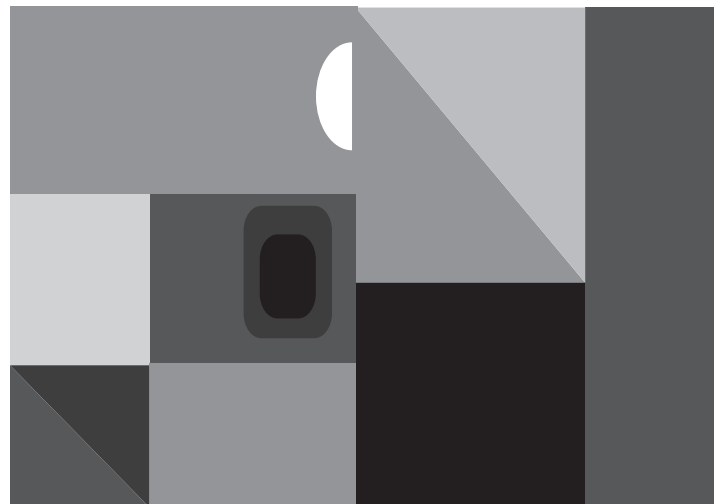
A law universal;

Transformation.

Unescapable.

Reflections

Graylyn Harris



Youth + Time

Rebecca May

Brightly shine your leaves;
Sweetly bloom your flowers.
Sparkly essence of vitality;
Luminescence at all hours.
The sun, your dear friend.
The tide, companion true.
Your chin up so high,
Your energy too.
Turns quick the moon;
Summers come and go.
As does the youth
Of once upon ago.
Time flies, they say,
But in what way?

Like a bird, a wasp, or a plane?

Fly it does,

As a balloon,

Through the years:

No longer so fresh, so new.

Wrinkles reside

On hands once tiny.

Every senior,

Once an infant.

Every infant,

A future senior.

Every moment,

A future past.

Every past,

Once a present.

If time flies,

I will too.

Way up high,

Won't you?

Defying Time

Graylyn Harris



Thoughts of Time

Evelyn Hooks

As I wake to another day of existence,
I think back on a time you were here
The sky seemed bluer; the winds breezed
different
Every day was easy, and we always made it
through
You taught me to be brave
Dream powerfully
Tread in faith
That God is love
But you forgot the important lesson,
Life without you

Your love was unconditional
Your spirit was carefully, wonderfully made
You were everything I dreamt of being
I am now the woman you were always seeing
As I wake to another day of existence,
I think back on my biggest fan
I think back on the greatest man
A man of family, of hard work, of God
The man that risked everything,
Your back was becoming heavy
But we still didn't fall

As I wake to another existence,
I think of your last day
It was so cold as you went on your way
You bid goodbye with just a wave
Your journey was complete
And your all, you gave

Family

Evelyn Hooks



My Father, Like the Mighty Dragon

Mikia Holloway

The cold scales wrap
Around the chamber of life's light.
But you've no more fuel left to burn.

Just like the mighty dragon—
Whose shape you take,
You roam this earth no more.

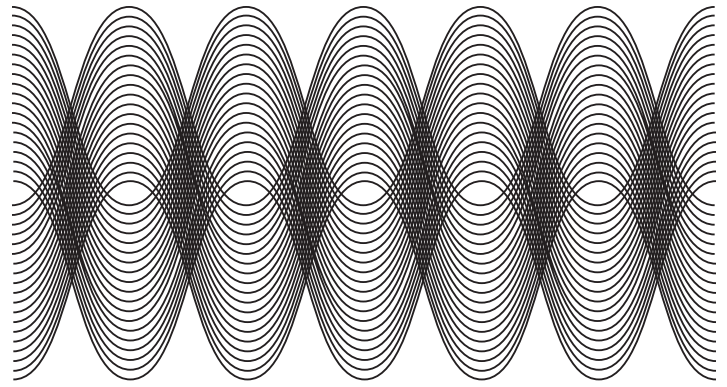
You were my rock until age 13,
But no more, now,
Than the unrefined minerals
Deep within the alloy.

Just like the mighty dragon
Who no longer breathes fire,
Your flame's been put out.

But when I glance at the tiny dragon's surface,
I see your reflection staring back.

Mighty Dragon

Mikia Holloway



Sincerely, The Eldest Daughter of Edward Darley Boit

Mikia Holloway

That once was me
Sitting front on the carpet with glee,
Foolishly, with no clue of what would soon be.

Oh, to be young when all is so interesting.
To be fresh to the idea of this thing called
living.
Before you catch wind that it's oh so exhaust-
ing.

I envy you, your bright shining eyes,
Doll in hand, not yet corrupted by lies,
But the uglies of this world, you'll one day
realize.

Now that I've grown
These shadows I call home
Protect me from a world I no longer wish to
roam.

So much going on; their expectations are
chores.
Too many people, most trying to make a
score.
I'd rather stay home, so they call me a "bore".

I wish I could protect you, but I'm afraid it's
too late.
You were already born into a world filled with
hate.
So, take a good look at me—you'll share the
same fate.

Dear sis, enjoy your time in glory's light;
Soon you'll join me in the dark of night.

The Sunrise across the Ocean

Luciane Kahler

Looking at this picture what do you see?
Some people may say that they only see
balloons flying in the sky,

Others may say that they see a beautiful
sunrise in the skyline,

Or maybe it is crazy to fly so high in the
sky.

But behind that picture, there was a girl,
alone in another continent,
just her and her backpack,
seeing her childhood dream come true.
When she looked at it, her breath was taken
away,

She had a feeling it was better than she
would have imagined.

After this sunrise she was never the same,
It changed her forever.

She is not afraid to face her fears,

She is not afraid to be alone,

She is not afraid to make new friends

Or to take a flight back home.

It just proved to herself that all the dreams
can become true

It just needs a person to believe in it.

Sunrise

Luciane Kahler



For Better or The Same

Mikia Holloway

The floorboards creaked with each step Gloria took down the stairs, prompting me to dust off my apron.

“This is it,” I whispered.

“Honey, can you stop by the donation center for me on your way to work?” I looked up at Gloria, now in front of me, carrying an outstretched Hefty garbage bag. Walking towards the front door, she completely bypassed the breakfast of strawberry and cream waffles I had made for us. She was dressed in a red bodycon jumpsuit with a black leather jacket thrown over. Her sandy blonde locks perfectly contrasted the jacket, cascading down her back in beautiful waves. I glanced down at her newly pedicured feet which rested inside black strappy heels.

“Uh—isn’t today your shopping day?” I’d never seen her so dressed up to go to the store.

“Yeah—no, I just thought since the Goodwill was closer to your office that—”

“No, that’s not—I mean—yeah of course.” What else was I supposed to say? Ask her why she looked so good? That sounds like she doesn’t look good every day. Ask if she’s going anywhere else? No, that sounds like I don’t trust her. I need her to be in a good mood for this.

“Thanks, I’ll just leave the bag in your car.” She picks up my keys from the side table next to the door and just as soon as the unlock beep rang, her hand was on the doorknob. “Okay, bye!” She bolted through the door.

“Wait!” I managed to call out just before the door met the frame. She poked her head back in. “You don’t want to have any breakfast? I was actually wanting to talk about—”

“I’m sorry, Charlie, I really need to go. I’m late meeting Jen for coffee. We can talk later!” The door slammed shut before I could respond.

“Sure. Later,” I mumbled before turning up the whipped cream cannister and squirting some in my mouth, “That’s fine . . .”

I plopped myself into the driver seat of my white VW bug. I glanced in the rear-view to

notice the large garbage bag in the back seat. I stared at it for a few moments before curiosity got the better of me and I yanked the bag over into the passenger seat. My face contorted after opening to reveal a shimmery red fabric that I’d recognize anywhere. It was the floor-length bodycon gown that I had bought for Gloria. I felt like a magician pulling a scarf from his sleeve as I gently tugged the dress from the bag. This same dress had put me in awe so many times, seeing it perfectly hug Gloria’s body. It was my favorite, she knew that.

“Surely, she must’ve put this in here by mistake.” I continued rifling through the bag. My mouth dropped to the floor upon realizing that the bag was filled with all my favorite dresses. I don’t understand. I bought these—I loved these. I can’t understand why she’d donate them.

I drove the route to work on autopilot, my eyes glued to the road in front of me but not consciously in control of where I was going until I had suddenly arrived at my office building. I sat in the parking lot, with my foot still on the brake, staring at the steering wheel. My trance was broken by my friend, Cici, incessantly knocking on my passenger window for me to unlock the door.

“Girl, where were you?! We only have like five minutes, now, so spill the tea, sis! What happened? How’d it go?” She said as she plopped herself down into my passenger seat like she did every morning before we clocked in. She turned to me with her head cocked, her stare becoming more intense by the second.

“Well—I—I didn’t—” I refused eye contact.

“You didn’t tell her!? Bitch! What? Why?”

“I tried! I tried, I made a nice breakfast and I was going to do it then. That way she’d have the day to like . . . process. But she left in such a hurry, I didn’t get a chance. She wouldn’t even sit down for breakfast. It almost seemed like—like she was avoiding me.”

“Why would she be avoiding you?”

“What if. . . you know. . . what if she knows? What if she’s figured out somehow and she’s. . . like. . . rejecting me?”

“That’s ridiculous, she wouldn’t do that!”

Why would you say that?"

"Well, this morning she . . . well, just look" I grabbed the opened garbage bag from the bag seat and dropped it in her lap.

"What?" She rummaged through the bag, "you've already shown me these before. I loved them, remember? What's the problem?"

"This morning she gave them to—"

"She gave them to you? But that's great! Why—"

"No. She gave them to me to donate. She told me to take them to Goodwill."

"Oh my God!"

"See!"

"She's donating to charity, what a bigoted bitch!" I'm embarrassed that it took me until just now to note the sarcasm. Disgusted, I let out a scoff before I turned away from her.

"Would it kill you to be serious for one fucking second? I'm serious. This is my life! You can't even begin to understand how—"

"I know, I know! I'm a piece of shit, I'm sorry. You're right, this is really heavy shit and I can't even imagine what you're going through. I'm just trying to make it easier for you."

"Come on, we're gonna be late." I took in a deep breath of fresh air while stepping out of the car. After a few brief moments, Cici followed suit. Shoulder-to-shoulder, we walked through the large double doors of the building. Neither of us spoke a word on our elevator journey up to our floor. The silence grew unbearable as we made it to our computers, which were right next to one another.

I didn't know what to say, but I knew she was right. She's the only one who's ever made me feel comfortable enough to be who I really am. And I've just been dumping all of my shit on her—and she's let me!

I scooted my chair towards hers to extend an imaginary olive branch.

"So, what do you think I should do? Maybe I should just keep the dresses and tell her I donated them. You can keep them at your place!" Having immediately perked up in her chair, she turned towards me.

"I'm sure her reason for getting rid of them isn't malicious. Maybe she just wants new ones. You could go dress shopping together and maybe—" She observed the uncertainty in my expression. "You know, you can do this literally however you want. It can just be a super casual conversation; it doesn't have to be some super serious super stressful thing." Oh, how I wish that were true.

I pulled up to the Goodwill after work, relieved to see Dill outside on a smoke break. Dill was usually working when Gloria or I come to drop off items, so we'd become pretty acquainted.

"Charlie, man! Back again so soon? You just can't stay away, can you?" He smirked.

"Oh, you know, the heart wants what it wants." I didn't miss a beat. Our back and forth banter had become somewhat of a routine that I can't pretend like I didn't look forward to. He took the bag from my hand and



we walked to the donation station at the back of the huge store. I winced as he placed the bag on the table and began going through the items. These beautiful gowns deserved more than to be sprawled atop a filthy counter in a Goodwill.

“More of Gloria’s dresses, huh? She must be doing a big closet clean out.”

“More? She’s brought others?”

“Yeah, she came in with a bag about this size last week.”

A wave of relief swept over me. She didn’t just get rid of my favorite dresses. Maybe Cici was right – Gloria’s just making room in her closet. Maybe she’s right about everything else, too. Today was still the day.

After Dill finally made it through the endless bag, I swiftly headed out the door with a purpose. The receipt he had handed me immediately found itself crumpled up atop the many other discarded receipts in my cupholder. I sped out of the parking lot with that lost tax write-off being the least of my concerns in the moment.

When I arrived home, Gloria’s BMW was already in the driveway. I’ll probably never feel completely ready to have this conversation with Gloria, but after having Cici hype me up for a good eight hours straight, I was as ready as I’d ever get. I walked to the front door, took a deep breath, and reached for the doorknob.

My heart raced faster with each step I took further into the house. I walked up the stairs feeling like the character in a horror movie going towards almost-certain death. Finally, I find Gloria in our bedroom putting away laundry into the chest of drawers. She was completely dressed down from earlier today, wearing a baggy t-shirt and some stained sweatpants.

“Hey, how was your day?”

“Eh . . . Did you drop that stuff off at Goodwill?”

“Um, yeah! I was meaning to talk to you about that, actually. Since you donated all your dresses, maybe we can look for some nice new ones to buy? My treat!” My face warped into what I know had to have been the most uncertain-looking smile.

“Hm, that’s okay. I don’t really need any gowns for anything right now.”

“Well, who says? We can always go on a date to a nice, fancy restaurant. Besides, there’s always a good reason to own a nice dress!”

“Yeah, maybe. We should really be trying to save money, though. Why the sudden interest in my wardrobe?” She tried to disguise her seriousness with humor by adding a laugh.

“No reason. I was just wondering if there was a reason that you got rid of all your dresses? They seemed like they were in perfectly good condition.”

“You know, that’s the weird thing about it.” She tilted her head upward and crossed her arms. “I thought so, too.”

“What do you mean?” I cleared my throat as I felt it get tighter.

“Well, I started to notice them looking a lot more worn than I remembered them. Which is weird, because I haven’t worn any of them recently and I’d always be extremely gentle with them when I did. But I started to notice loose threads and missing sequins. Like someone else had been wearing them.” She moved closer to me and made glaring eye contact. “Isn’t that strange?” I remained silent, afraid that I’d get choked up if I let any words out. It was obvious at this point that she knew the truth. “And you wanna know the strangest thing? A couple of them even had red lipstick stains on the inside of them . . . but I never wear red lipstick. Do you know anything about that?” She shot me a smirk as she tilted her head.

“I-I was going to tell you, I always was. I just—” I grabbed her hand, but she pulled back and walked away. “Just let me explain!” My face was on fire as I fought to hold back tears.

“Explain what? What is there that you could possibly say to justify this? I already know! I know everything, Charles!” She marched over to my sock drawer, dug to the bottom, and pulled out a red-laced push up bra. “I found this, too! And I know it isn’t mine! So whose is it?”

“I know this isn’t ideal. But this is hard for me, too, Gloria! That doesn’t mean I don’t still want to be with you. I love you! I want us to get through this!”

“There’s no more fucking us, Charles! You threw that away with your poor choices. I respect myself too much to forgive this.” She threw up her arms and paced around the room.

“This wasn’t a choice! I can’t help who I am! Why don’t you understand that?” I let go and the tears flowed down my face like a roaring river.

“So let me get this straight? Fucking some skank and letting her wear my clothes wasn’t your choice? You didn’t have any control over that? Make that one make sense for me!” She put her face inches from mine, giving me a close-up of her intensely furrowed brow.

“W-what? Gloria, I didn’t—”

“But it’s cool, don’t worry about me.

Because guess what? I slept with someone else, too!” She crossed her arms. My head began swimming before I buried it in my hands. “You—you . . . cheated on me” I fell back onto the bed behind me, while the room spun around me. “You think I cheated on you?! Are you out of your mind? I love you . . .”

“C’mon, I thought we were past the clueless innocence act. You can’t make me the bad guy just because you can’t handle it when it’s done back to you!” She attempted to storm from the room, but I quickly sat up and grabbed her arm in protest. I pulled out my cell phone.

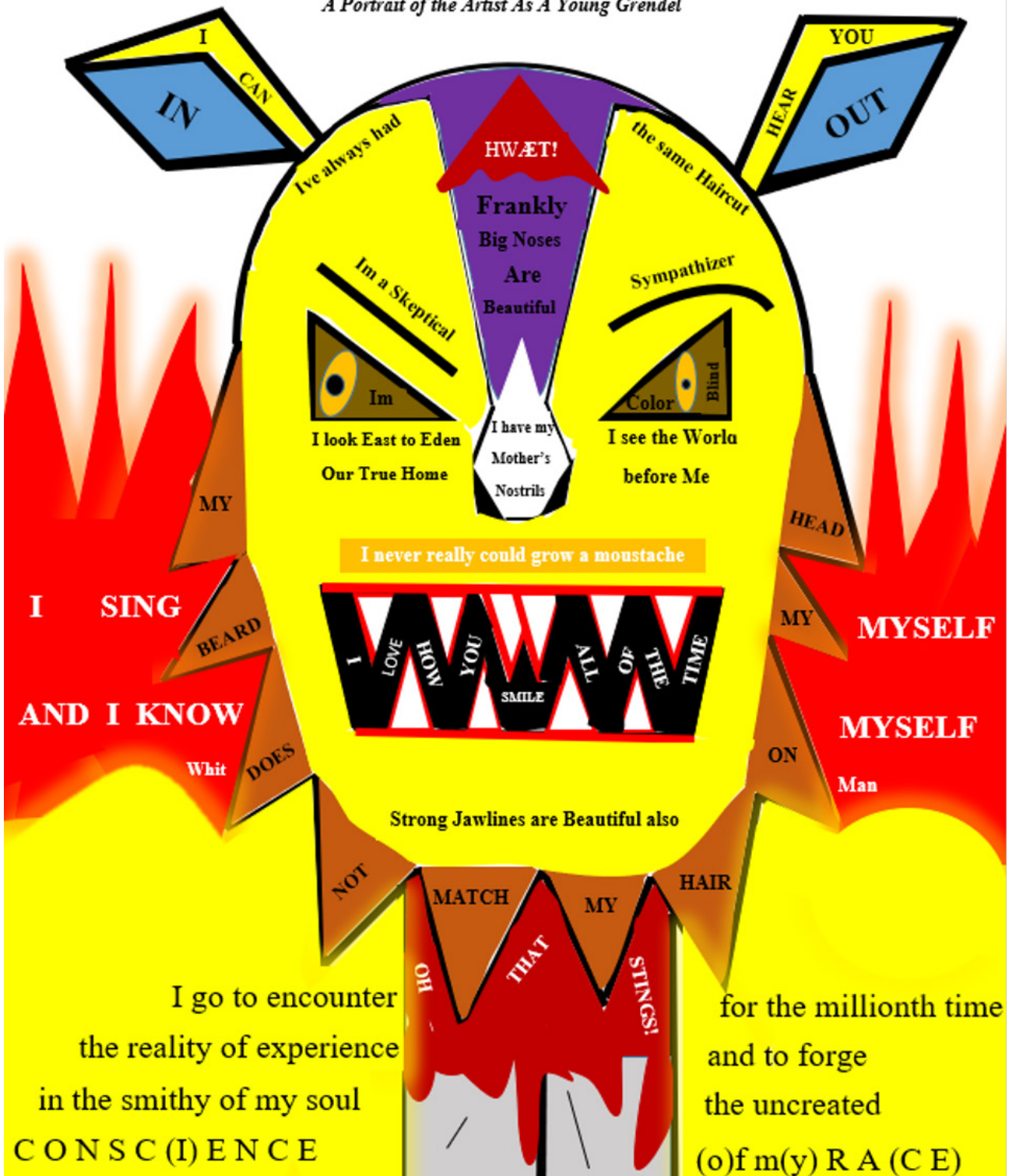
“No. You’re the one who ruined this marriage. You wanna know who the woman is that was wearing your dresses? You wanna know whose bra that is? Here. There she is.” I hand her my phone opened to the gallery of photos of me wearing her various dresses in full-faced makeup. “Her name is Charlie. She is me.”

Pond

K. Fernandez



A Portrait of the Artist As A Young Grendel



The Poet's Theosis – An Image Restored (To Blessed Augustine, unafraid to confess errors)

I am like the Primordial Blue Sky who is at last overwhelmed from the immensity of his climax.

I seek to endow Earth, who bore me, herself from nothing, shaped like her beautiful daughters.

Quaking sublimely, she takes my expanse, pulses seed, grows heavy, mounds now swelling into high peaks pleading to have the life sucked out of them by my own insatiable broods.

They flow out like the Ocean, rise like the Sun, recollect Memory, and deliberate Order until the Harvest can reach formidable height: And now he leads them to my demise!

Ungrateful, insolent brats! Could they not wait for the Sky, in Time, to fade away?

Why must they tear and rip me asunder until they can bleed no more out of me?

Are they not satisfied, procreating with one another, engendering new Muses?

Soon they shall birth and seek to eat their own progenies to sustain tyranny.

Alas, it was my own fault; I delighted to taste all the Earth's sweet fruits, greedily plowed her to gratify myself without caution, and went astray from the mark so neatly delineated by the Knowledge of Good and Evil.

I made her to groan with birth pangs, songs vain or too malformed.

I saw shattered images in lake's mirrors: I am not **Most High God**.

All I can do now is to submit to castration, to be so diminished

as to be able to be cast into Depths-Unfathomable-to-Angels

where I shall be transfigured in The God-Who-Is-All-Love,

Who inhabits the Height-Too-High-For-Human-Thoughts

and has become a Man, so that Man can become as God,

Trampling down Death and becoming Without-Death

by hanging from a Tree and becoming Fruit of Life.

that many Fathers still are laboring Deserts to find.

My Comfort for now is she, the Queen of Heaven,

Ever-Virgin, Unwedded Bride, and the New Eve,

Mother of All the Living, who still prays always

and, like the Burning Bush, Never Consumed,

enthrones The God-of Being-Beyond-Being,

Whose Essence is only known from Grace

reaching out to us through His Energies

which appear as yet Uncreated Light,

swiftly dispelling Darkness.

The Imageless Word,

In Body and Blood,

will restore Me,

in His Image:

Body, Mind,

Spirit.

✱

"In the distance I glimpsed the shadow of Angelica's bed and the curve of Angelica's hips. Like an island observed from another island." – Bolano, The Savage Detectives

"Then He who sat on the throne said, 'Behold, I make all things new.' And He said to me, 'Write, for these words are true and faithful.'" – Revelation 21:5

The Mysterious Supper

Father – Christ's icon,

Spoon-feeds *His Body and Blood*

to awe-full *Children*.

A Lovesong Revisited

I am not glad to have known it.

It is just an inbreedream now,

~~and that is why I can't forget.~~

It shall look [**bad**] if I show it.

I cannot help but think on how . . .

I am not glad to have known it.

And I must have overblown it

Some(wher and did not know some)how,

and that is why I can't forget. . . .

And how will I have outgrown it

if I cannot but regret how

I am not glad to have known it?

And I know I'm not *Prince Hamlet*,

nor am I meant to take a bow,

and that is why I can't forget.

I cannot help but linger on the subject now,

on why they shall not sing and how

I am not glad to have known it,

and that is why I can't forget.

What if it tempt you toward the flood, my lord,
Or to the dreadful summit of the cliff
That beetles o'er his base into the sea,
And there assume some other horrible form
Which might deprive your sovereignty of reason
And draw you into madness? Think of it - Horatius

Now take up arms and shame My House no more!

to ebb your forces and once more surge with overwhelming
Roar-of-Death!

thou are less than He and know not when

But at least he has the gall to commit the deed!

He kills men with the wily wit of cowardly curs,
Maybe my bastard brother is fiercer than thee!

Thereto until the virgin sea ran crimson with blood!

And drowned those who dwell too long on books

But the Men of Old mastered the vast waters

thou think on the sea of troubles,

Where is thy bloody Accent-of-Iron?
Are thou of Denmark or some Frankish
baker's son?
For shame, boy, have thou forgot the
songs of our Fathers?!

Let Thy Thoughts Be Bloody!
zu Pound, der Stärker Dichter!

"And would it have
been worth it... To have
squeezed the universe
into a ball... To roll it
towards some
overwhelming
question?"

- T. S. Eliot

Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow

Derrick Gates

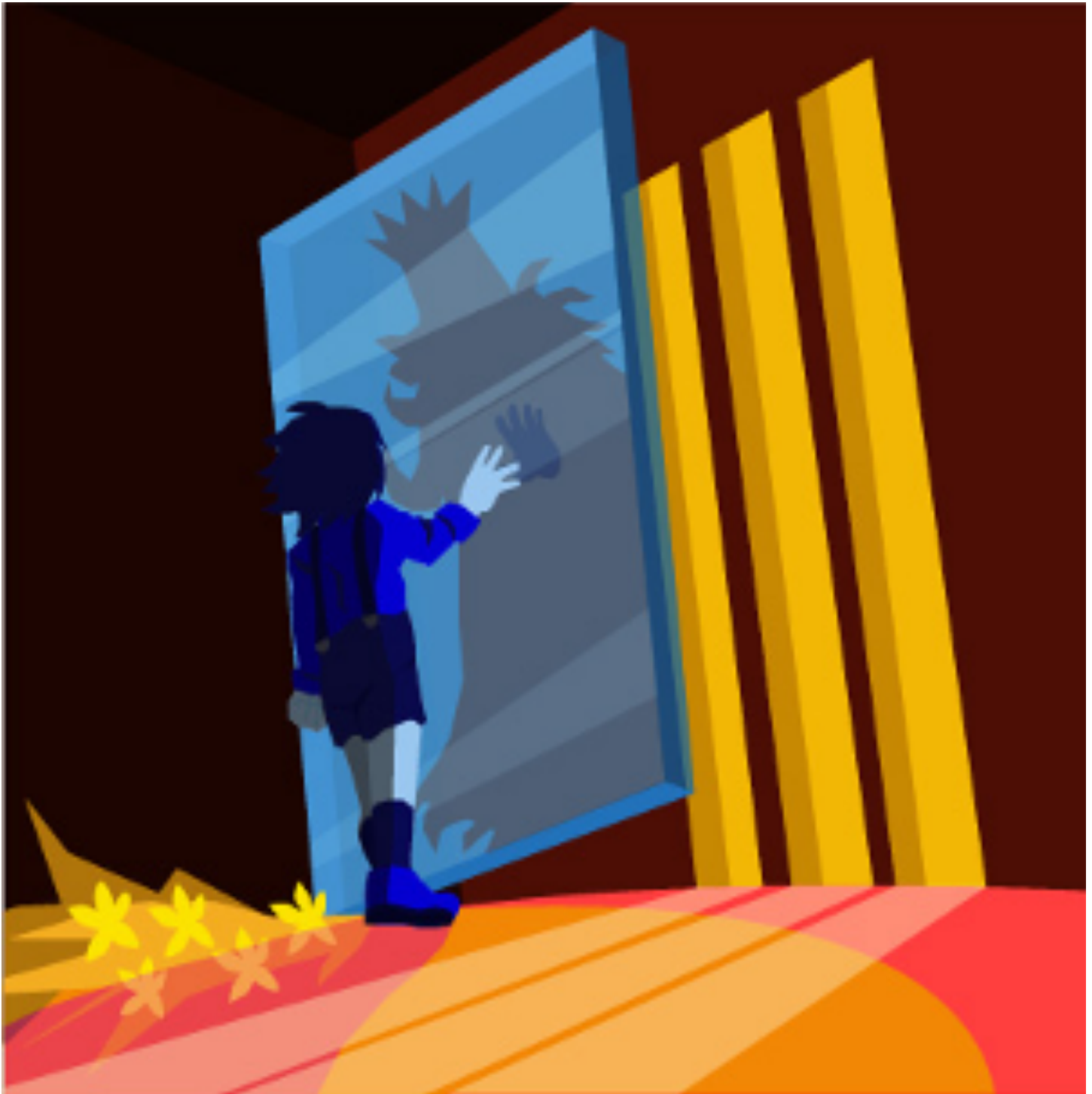
Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow
The past melts away
The present exists today
Tomorrow unseen

Today, Yesterday, and Tomorrow
Tocks ticking sideways
Deja Voodoo, magic clocks
Will tomorrow come?

Tomorrow, Yesterday, and Today
Will be is now was.
Time melts into forever.
Nothing is certain.

Mirror Mirror

Eric DeCree



getting clean

Jane Mayes



Wings of Color

Amana Diab

I. The Betrayal

I wish I'd never known
The red, white, and blue could sink this low
To shun me for the color that I show.

You were given the upper hand--
Your skin complexion is your platform stand--
A blemished humanity is your brand.

Your promises are hollow and fake--
A banner of heroic lies you display--
And your might blinds you in every way.

A leader of people you were to be--
You stretched out a false hand of peace--
You talk of greatness nowhere to be seen.

Well, I still have my wings, I can fly--
I did it once, I can do it twice--
And a million times to set it right.

II. The Confrontation

How does it feel--
To know that I still stand so tall?
Your words don't make me fear at all--
I stand back up each time you force my fall.

What will you do--
Now that you know I am unshakeable,
And my strength will forever grow?

Though you like to step on my skin,
Through history you berate my kin,
We stay proud--it's our only sin.

I walk down unknown streets--
I feel the rage inside of me--
I see the hope that will set me free.

You put a mountain, I climbed it all--
You built a wall, I made it fall--
Filled up an ocean,
I crossed it like a fireball.

III. The Rising

Don't you see what's going on?
The righteous winds are just too strong
For you to calm them, they'll right the wrongs.

Sense the rage in the air--
Feel free to stop and stare--
Hear the voices for justice,
Beautiful beyond compare--

There's nothing you can throw at me
That'll make me sway--I have steady feet--
And a heart to show exactly what I mean:

Put a mountain, I'll climb it all--
Build a wall, I'll make it fall--
Fill up an ocean,
I'll cross it like a fireball.



touched by the acrylic'd hands of God

Jane Mayes

Faculty Advisor Note

This year has brought about “Transformations” for so many of us. Reflecting on the past year of monumental change, struggle surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic, combined with broader acknowledgment and recognition of the much-needed continued work to reform racism and sexism, there has been no life left unchanged, no life left untouched. But in the midst of struggle and hardship, we recognize our own capabilities to transform—to renew, to rebuild, to make new.

Within Filibuster, too, there has been transformation, as our team had undergone a change in advisorship. It has been my absolute pleasure to work alongside our editorial team. With the changing tides of the 2020-2021 school year, Kim, Danielle, and Michelle rose to the challenge of a school year that looked and felt like none other. I’m delighted by the work our team has done in presenting an issue that makes a remarkable claim for the restorative and transformative power of art—in all of its forms.

- Dr. Heather Witcher



Jackie Beanstalk

Jane Mayes

A Note About The Filibuster

For more information on the Filibuster or ways you can help with the next edition, please email Dr. Witcher at hwitcher1@aum.edu. Or you can send your creative works as an attached file to filibuster@aum.edu.

The deadline for the 2022 issue is December 31, 2021.

We are always available and happy to answer any questions!

The background of the image is a repeating pattern of the Auburn University at Montgomery logo. The logo consists of the letters 'AUM' in a stylized, bold, serif font. The 'A' and 'M' are connected to the 'U'. The pattern is rendered in white lines on a blue-to-purple gradient background. The pattern is oriented vertically, with the 'AUM' text appearing to be written from top to bottom.

AUM

**AUBURN UNIVERSITY
AT MONTGOMERY**