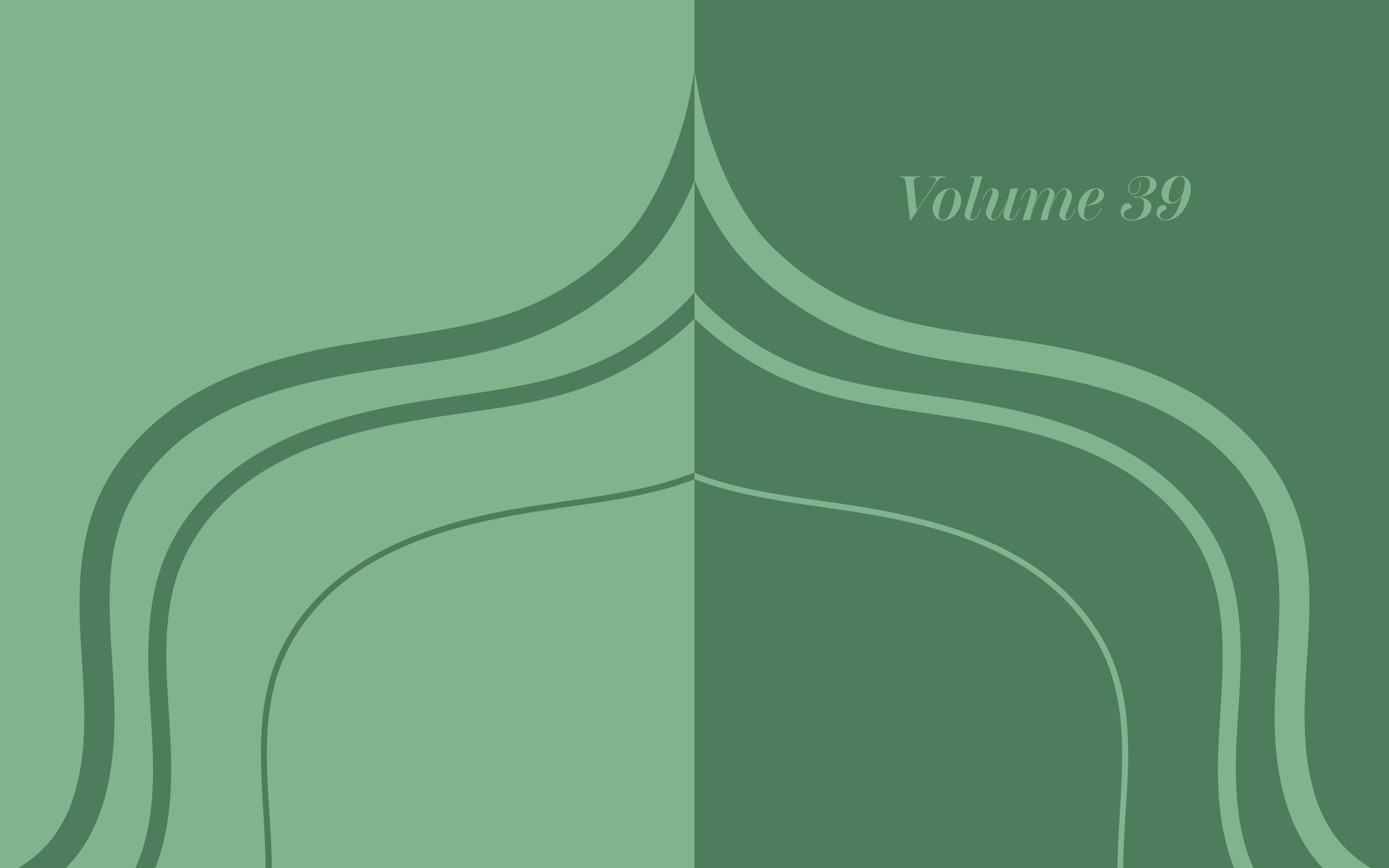




Signatures

The background is a solid dark green color. A vertical line runs down the center of the image, dividing it into two equal halves. On both the left and right sides of this line, there are three thick, wavy, horizontal lines that flow from the left edge towards the center. These lines are a lighter shade of green than the background, creating a layered, organic effect. The lines are not perfectly horizontal, having a slight undulating quality.

Volume 39

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A Letter from the Editors

Welcome to Volume 39 of the *Signatures Art & Literary Magazine*, a collection and exploration of creativity.

Every semester, students eat, sleep, study, and traverse our campus. Inch by inch, we evolve, and that is our guiding force and theme in this volume. In a year of growing changes and reflections, and a cloudy solar eclipse, we find this transformation of self and life so intriguing. This collection is made up of works, direct from the hearts and minds of the RIT student body, embodying this often difficult, but triumphant metamorphosis. You can see the colors shift from black and white to vibrant color and watch the themes flow with them as you flip through the pages.

Some of these journeys include mature, vulnerable themes that shed light on love, life, food, memories, creativity, nature, trauma, culture, and so much more. These are the stories the students wished to tell, whether they used words or visuals.

Consider this edition to be the next step in our collective, ever-forward voyage. A journey that you may now gain an insight into and are hopefully inspired to create your own work in reflection of. With any thoughts that are provoked from this magazine, we sincerely hope that you enjoy the collection. The entire team at *Signatures* knows that we certainly did.

Sincerely,
Francesca Delaney, Rich Kennedy,
Gabrielle Koehler, & Colin Farmer

Francesca Delaney Richard B. Kennedy
Gabrielle Koehler Colin Farmer



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Visual Arts			Literary		
Title	Artist	Page	Title	Author	Page
lil soccer tigers	Nicole Joffe	04	Thoughts in Dolce	Rich Kennedy	08
Drifting	Alyssa Neff	09	Religion	Nat Wilson	11
Untitled	Sydney Maas	09	Remember the Alamo	Sarah Appel	13
Untitled	Spencer di Basilio	10	We Are All Children*	Amelia Anderson	14
Untitled	Jack Connolly	12	Flowers and memories	Colin Farmer	18
Night Walk at Amagerstrand	Luke Sharkey	17	bones	mps	21
Your Heart, My Birth	Tiffany Vu	19	Blank	Morgan Suwara	22
Life in Death	Alyssa Neff	20	spider	greer	24
Like When We Were Kids	Kai Umayam	24	Popcorn	Gareth Smith	25
Andy’s Diner	Chelsea Cohen	27	the ever-present burning	Francesca Delaney	26
Rendezvous	Jeremy Brown	27	Apollo and I	Phèdre K. Schlagenhauff	28
Stereopsis	Jeremy Brown	28	Funny Little Bugs	Hannah Nettikadan	30
Bike and Tricycle	Matteo Randall	31	Wegmans	Annie Barber	32
Inventory	Nate Tangeman	33	Voices	Emerald Emmerich	35
Rest	Juan J Hernandez-Guerrero	34	Argument	Silas Chen	36
Checkmate Atheist	Kai Umayam	37	Meeting With Myselfs: An Autobiography	Cameron Robinson	38
Untitled	Matteo Randall	37	Recollection	Michael Robinson	41
Wall of fame	Shubhang Mehrotra	39	Who If Not Me?	Connor Pringle	42
Untitled	Matteo Randall	39	Divine Lies	Lillian Rose	44
Fragments of The Moon 1	Chase Honahan	40	He alone with me and I alone with him	aa-person	45
Lost	Olivia Greenberg	40	Spring	Dimitra Cappers	46
kurueru	Jeremy Brown	40	Changing	Rahmel Church Jr.	50
Glass Wall	Emma Mankowski	43	I’ve stopped hanging up empty picture frames	Adrian Deslongchamps	51
Old-school	Shubhang Mehrotra	44	Asian Banana Split	David Gao	52
Fragments of The Moon 8	Chase Honahan	47	Her Canvas	Matilda Yemoh	57
moral conscience	ALIRO	48	All I wanted was a break	Olivia Greenberg	60
Mess	Nate Tangeman	49	6.19.23 I	B	63
100 Colors	Kylie Russo	51	A Very Short Time	Joshua Talbot	66
Jar of Peaches	Amina Webster	53	The Luckiest Boy	Ayane Naito	68
Untitled	Chase Honahan	54	Storytellers	Benjamin Hemmers	71
BABY HOTLINE	Skylier Grooms	55			
He Only Loves the Broken You	Amina Webster	56			
Vertigo	Francesca Delaney	58			
Untitled	Michael Johns	58			
Untitled	Sydney Maas	59			
Woman	Olivia Greenberg	62			
Sunrise Boat	Grant Bush-Resko	64			
Self Reflection*	Irene Tu	65			
Trexlor Nature Preserve	Chelsea Cohen	67			
Untitled	Sydney Maas	69			
Untitled	Jack Connolly	70			
A Fall Day	Madeleine Saint Pe	70			
Fall in my city	Shubhang Mehrotra	70			
			Each year, two students are honored by awards for their submission to <i>Signatures</i>, generously funded by the UWP and CAD. Winners are determined by the student staff of <i>Signatures</i>. *The College of Art and Design (CAD) 2024 Award for the Best Art Submission: <i>Self Reflection</i> by Irene Tu *The University Writing Program (UWP) 2024 Award for the Best Literary Submission: <i>We Are All Children</i> by Amelia Anderson		

Thoughts in Dolce

Life leaves many things rattling around my mind,
Thankfully, there is a remedy to the constant noise,

Thoughts of her are so exceptionally soft and light,
I ponder in periwinkle, curious in crayon cerulean,
Fluffy pillows line the walls, to catch each shy thought as it dances down,

Her spirit's glow is better than a great memory remembered.
I would trade my mortal body for a chance to feel the warmth of her palms or laugh. Either is plenty.
Does she hear the hum of the piano notes when she walks, too?
Her lips move with poise and kindness, and I want to taste her insightful words.
If I could just rest my heavy head in her lap, as she reads, just long enough for me to take a tired breath.

My best guess is that I am trouble,
After each memory is made,
The only desire,
Is the chance for another.

Life leaves many things rattling around my mind,
Thankfully, there is a remedy to the constant noise.





Untitled
Spencer di Babilio

Religion

I used to think god could only see me on sunny days
And if it was cloudy he would send angels to watch
Since they could sit on clouds.
I thought thunderstorms meant he was angry
And rain meant his angels were sad
So when it rained after I kissed her in the woods
And stormed the day I wrapped my chest with tape
I thought it was my fault.

Religion
Nat Wilson



Remember the Alamo

You scared me half to death. You were always breaking something.

Like your arm in fourth grade—Mr. Rackowitz carried you off the playground, screaming,

To your mom. Broke it again a couple years later—volleyball, I think. Ankle, too, even though you had your lucky socks on when it happened. (You were always so indignant

That your lucky socks were on when it happened.)

In fourth grade, when you got home from the hospital, you said

You dreamed of leaping from rooftops during the surgery, and

I don't think I've seen you since I was thirteen. Once you threw a balled-up Go-Gurt tube

At a dog that was chasing after us. You did five-strand braids. You had this CD player

That never worked but you made it work anyway. You were late to my bat mitzvah. You were

Late to everything important. At the rodeo we watched the pigs race around the little wood-shavings track and after that we got matching bracelets. Mine is in my jewelry box, still.

A couple years ago you wrote your new phone number on the back of a Sonic receipt and left it taped to my door.

We went to the Alamo on a field trip and you bought a Davy Crockett hat in the gift shop.

I slept on your shoulder the whole way home

Even though it gave me a neck crick. You got in trouble with every teacher you had.

I remember you with your arm drawn back to scare off the dog—I was so afraid—and

You were as radiant as Davy Crockett riding Halley's Comet. You scared me half to death. You—

We're always breaking something.

We Are All Children

I cannot remember the last time I loved.

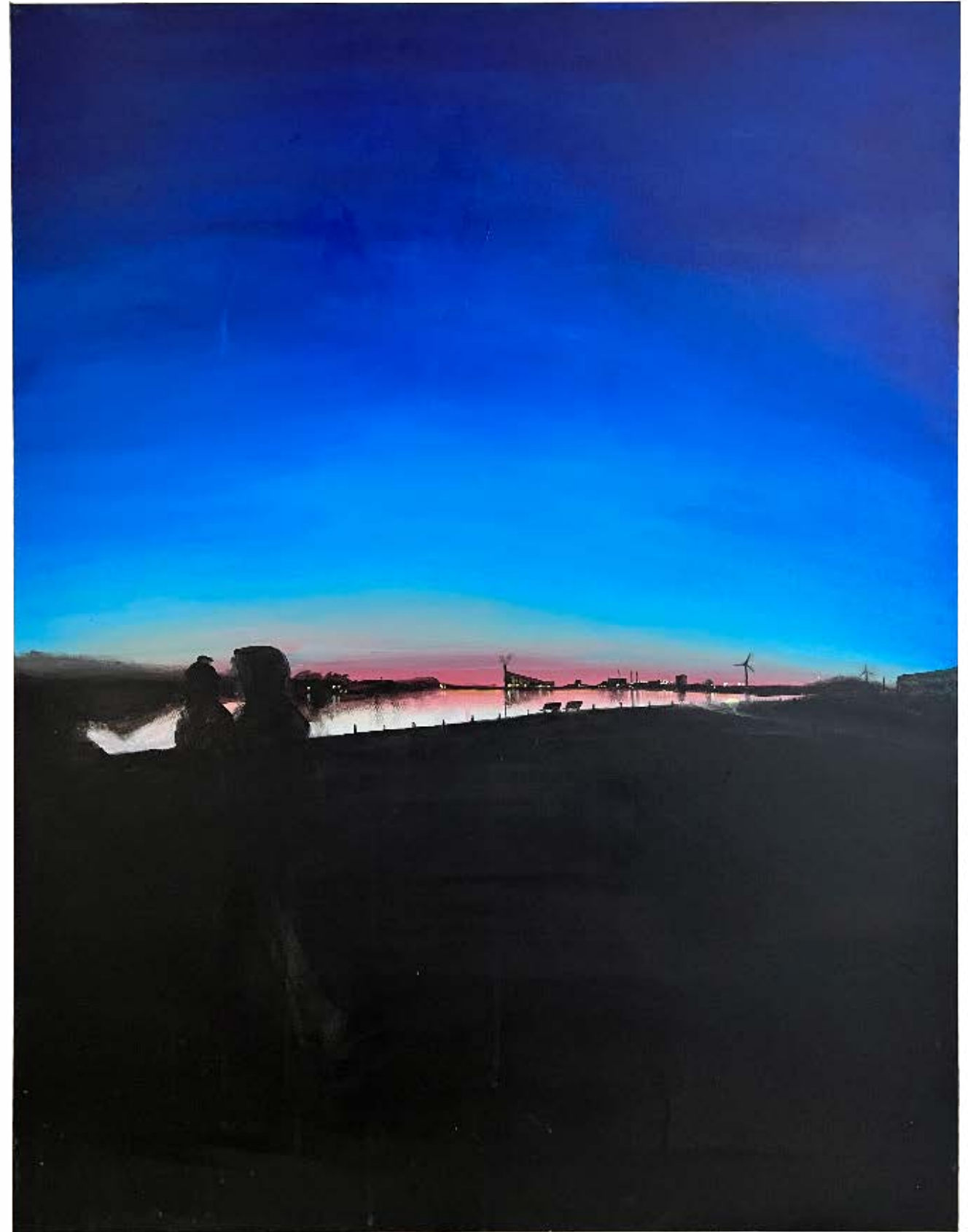
I have been loved, certainly:
that all-for-nothing familial love that is
the province of mothers and fathers
and grandmothers and grandmothers and grandmothers
(I never knew my grandfathers).
I have known the love that is udon and tempura and seaweed salad
and a place to sleep that smells like
old cigarettes and
green tea and
seawater
where the curtains were once white
but now they're the color of Californian sand, or
coffee with a little bit of milk;
and I have offered love in return:
the jealous, blind-spot love of children.
But I have also learned
that family is not a prerequisite
for love; and that love
is not a requisite for family.
The word "break" on a whiteboard becomes a name I
will not speak
and strangers bring back memories
(echoes of screaming in the dark)
love becomes hate
and hate becomes a hole that swallows you
a coffin for hurt:
love, locked up, eyes glazed
buried six feet under.

I remember the last time I had a crush, of course;
I remember the mop of his hair
and his slim wrists,
the stubble of his shave;
I remember I wrote him a poem:

*By the time I saw you,
like a kokanee salmon chasing lead line in the water
I knew
I was hooked.
I knew what I was asking you
when I said "What's with the collar?"
And just for an instant
you blushed &
looked down &
it was perfect;
and I wanted to hook a finger under that collar &
pin you to the wall &
perform a variety of unspeakably delicious things.*

But I never sent it.
And that's because I can't see myself
caring for anyone deeply enough
to say 'love'
after college;
(or even during it?)
I can't see myself opening up to anyone
(I mean, can you imagine willingly
letting a stranger into your house)
beyond a passing fling,
because there are always deeper secrets.
You will never know
everything
about anyone.
I can't see myself
asking anyone
if they'll grab dinner with me
maybe watch a sunset if
the fires are good
when the haze makes the sunset

a violent
 sharp-edged
 purple-blue
 sinking beneath a coal-red moon
 after college,
 because that's when shit gets real;
 that's when they could walk in
 —could? I'd go so far as would—
 take my debit card
 or my driver's license
 overdraw my accounts
 strike my name from the property deed
 stick a knife in my heart
 leave my family a body
 and a funeral
 and a courtroom nightmare
 while I loved them for it.
 And I just can't see myself deciding
 —you know what? maybe I've decided—
 I won't leave an exploitable opening like that.
 So I'll stick with college,
 thank you,
 where nothing is permanent
 because none of us really believe
 we have all that much worth taking
 where a crush is exactly that
 just out and say it already
 heart leaping
 heart broken
 over and done with
 where we are all children
 in each others' eyes.



Flowers and memories

Do you remember when this field was full of flowers?
There were too many petals to count
We could spin in circles, surrounded by colors
The beauty seemed almost unreal

Do you remember when this field was full of flowers?
I hope that one day, they'll grow here again
I wanted to see you again among the flowers
To see your smile as you held my hand

Do you remember when this field was full of flowers?
On the day you were called to leave me
When you picked the last flowers you would ever give
And made me one last floral crown

Do you remember when this field was full of flowers?
Before they became trampled by soldiers' feet
And ravaged by the fires of war
Every leaf torn in the terror

Do you remember when this field was full of flowers?
Or do you only remember it as a crimson sea
As your allies fell and begged for mercy
Among wilted and broken stems

Do you remember when this field was full of flowers?
Because my memory of those days are fading
Perhaps this was always meant to be
Your final resting place

Do you remember when this field was full of flowers?
When happiness and love were bountiful
I know I now stand on hallowed ground
Where all that grows are daisies





bones

my landlord ran over my cat before school one morning when i was 7.
my stepdad moved and buried him in the yard before i could see.
even after moving from house to house to house, i still wonder if he's there.

i wish i had a piece of him—
of everyone i've known who's gone and of everywhere i've lived.
in the way that we are all tapestries of our loved ones, i do, but not tangibly.

i want to hold your bones and close my eyes and be taken back to a time when
things didn't need to make sense.

Blank

This void is blank in every sense of the word.

Nothing to see...

nothing to smell...nothing to taste...

nothing to be heard

outside of my own screams into this unforgiving vacuum.

Somehow, there's not even anything to touch.

Oddly enough, I can't feel the ground
beneath my feet,

though I wouldn't say I'm floating, either...

The void is blank in every sense of the word.

At least...
that's how it's been for a long time.

Suddenly the white barriers aren't so vacant.

White is, after all, all colors in a way.

But beyond that, the walls are now filled

with	red	orange	yellow	fire,
and	blue	green	purple	ice.

The air smells of harsh smoke and cold, wet snow.

There's laughter and conversation in the air.

I can taste clear water and flaming ash.

After years of sitting here,

I've finally started to color in the page.

Or I guess I should say we're coloring in the page.

We're taking control of this idle world and

shaping it in a new way.

Building walls of freezing ice

and scorching fire.

We're making ourselves a home.



spider

Stuck in the space between your couch
cushions sits a spider; he is in his home, between the cushions
standing on his tallest stool.
With his longest legs he pushes
a single coin through the roof.
He is paying rent.
You are a landlord.

Popcorn

Popcorn,
“Fuck you, you whore!
You slept with him!”
“It’s alright hon,
You know I love you.
You know I’d do anything for you,”
I hear through the cardboard wall
At three in the morning.
Girl, she does not love you.



the ever-present burning

I can still smell the fire on my hands
 the deep char of the wood
 sawdust from fallen trees
 the garage with my dad
 my college woodshop
 trying to keep my hands intact

every day I think I smell fire
 I'm afraid one day it will be true
 smells like birthday candles left on too long
 the smoke that swirls around the sweets
 I'm convinced the fresh air smells like smoke
 convinced the rain smells like fire

there is no soap to wash it away
 the water just burns



Apollo and I

Perhaps there is nothing more to say
To you, you which without planning
Took from me, ripped from me,
Something so precious and delicate
That my tempest could not conspire.

You came and plucked from me
The flower that I held on my chest for you;
The purple iris that, so closely held,
Grew in just one way; the roses from my cheeks
You took, my peony ears you snipped.

I see not, now that you took my iris,
That I should have held closer my hope, that flower
But I do, I do, I really and truly do,
See that my iris is perennial and that I may
Forget how genial you were.

Because I see them now, I with new iris,
That they do not snip, why, this miraculous
New, and glorious, wait! — not quite yet.
Describe them more, tell me more:
Do they walk like Apollo? Or terrify like Set?

Can I pour from my iris gentle morning dew,
Can I blanket myself in twilight night with you?
If I tell you all my pictures and landscapes,
And spend my time knowing, face to face,
Would you show me all your shapes?

If I break you down into your parts —
This one's fair, this one's clear, this one's art —
If I put you back together, make you something new,
Do you sunset-smile the same flashing teeth?
Can you recall that iris o' mine dew?

I am hesitant because I know the storm,
I know its awful shades; it washes my memory, torn
From remembering and remembering and
Remember that I beseech you, my dear Apollo, To look
me past my roses, my peonies, my clasped hands,
Under which I hide the newest, budding iris.

My chest begins to beat with heat just knowing
this! To feel as free as skylarks do, catching winds
And our song, fast and jumping, through rushes
And brushes we run, we tumble, we free our skin



So that sunlight kisses us, Apollo and I,
We pray, so simply, to clouds and sky;
We pray with our finger-tip touches;
Pray with laughter and tears, pray with
Sharing fears, pray with loves and *touches*!

I feel blossoms under feet, and I remember
Joy! Joy! I remember Joy! I remember
The ecstasy of nose to nose, lip to lip,
The intimacy between crepuscular clouds
And nautical night where our arms most fit.

I learn not to love from the fleeting things like flowers
But from the soil that they do grow; the fantasy powers
From things like fertilizers that do make flowers aglow.
Hotter days and sun's rays from my Apollo forgive any
Cracked earth taught by ice and rain and snow —

Oh! I think what they have done and then they run me mad!
Stark mad! For it was my by-gone foolery that clad
My purple iris in dark red tartan; I forgive not and want not
What I have not forgotten. Perhaps a bit intense, yet I hope
I do pick not my iris but the forget-me-nots:

Those who lie, and scheme, and make me dream
Over and over the remembering, flooding my stream
With algae and slugs and rocks! Bash those forget-me-nots
Against the rocks! In that stream they flood with pain!
They forgive me not, forget me-nots! Set's all to blame!

Sometimes, Apollo, you come in a flash of memory,
The one where "Are you sure?" is what you say to me,
Memory where your chocolate eyes begin to melt into mine,
Where what's next is as blind as future past,
Where all that's left is simply time.

The clocks tick and the hours pass us, still no sign of Set...
Rhythm is all that's left.
What comes after this, Apollo? Can we make something wholesome?
In summer heat all that's fair, you bask me in cloudy hair,
We dance with rising flair, and are no longer lonesome.

Funny Little Bugs

A Volkswagen Beetle is a sort of embarrassing vehicle to find yourself at the side of the road with. You imagine the fun little bug bumping along with polka dots on the side or flowers on the hubcaps or whatever the hell people put on the damn thing. It's always moving, and it's so happy about it, which is weird, because it's a car, but people like to project these kinds of things in their own way.

A Volkswagen Beetle, by image alone, is not meant to break down.

But it was not his car. It was his grandmother's car, and he had to take it out every now and then because she was too old to drive and he was 17 with not much else going on but to take Grandma on country roads in her funny little Beetle. It was good for him, his parents always said, because the old woman was interesting and insightful and full of old-country wisdom, and it was good for her to get outside, too, and share that wisdom with the boy. They always said he could use wisdom.

What he could use was a drink. Like a Coke or something. It was one of those terrible summer days where you wouldn't want to be anywhere but shoulders-deep in the ocean or in a cool dark basement with all the lights off and the sweat-riddled patience to wait for the damned season to end. He did not enjoy the summers as a young boy ought to; he did not see the point—but in his humble defense, his summers usually went like this. His family did not possess a cape house or relations in cooler climes so he found himself, more often than he cared to, in constant proximity to his grandmother. Not to say that this had bred any sense of closeness between the two. The old woman had no interest in any of the things he did. The boy had no interest in the things she did either. It was mutually understood.

His grandfather had long passed, or was the useless sort who hadn't been around. He could never keep it straight. Either way, it did not matter. The old woman did not tend to dwell on the past. "I think the tire's flat," the boy offered, rather uselessly.

If the boy was a car he would be one without A/C. He would be a car in unbearable heat. He did not have time for abstract thought.

"It's more than flat. It's gone."

By personality, his grandmother was not a Volkswagen Beetle woman. She was not sunshine or smiling daisies, not ladybug polka-dots or fake eyelashes over headlights. She was hardy.

She had grown up the good way, and took care of herself, though she didn't do any of the things a grandmother ought to do. She didn't bake cookies or make quilts or meatloaf or any of that. Well, that wasn't completely fair. She had tried once; she had knit him baby clothes but he was born with a bigger head than anticipated, and all further attempts at grandmotherishness were therefore suspended.

"Do we have a spare?" he tried again.

"No spare. It's not that kind of car," she said. "You can swear, if you like."

"...Fuck," and he sort of half-wheezed it out, and he could feel by the disappointed silence she knew he really didn't mean it.

He crouched down, and the two peered at the gaping holes in the back left tire. He ran his finger over them, one by one. They were absurdly large, like they had run over a bear trap. Five gaping holes, smooth, with rounded, almost scalloped edges. Five perfect circles.

It was too hot for this. The summer sun was beating down in that terrible way that breeds irritability, where the cloth of your clothes chafe at your skin just for being there, for the sole purpose of picking the fight. The boy stood up, looked around, and picked at the seams of his jeans listlessly. There was nothing around for miles. Just fields and dusty dirt roads and him and the odd little old woman. And, of course, the funny little bug.

For the sole purpose of feeling useful again, the boy popped open the trunk of the little green Beetle. He was looking for a spare, because the old woman was old enough to be allowed to forget and maybe there was a chance God was smiling upon him on this day. There was the day's groceries, and a shoddy burlap sack, sort of bulgy all over, labeled "Emotional Baggage," which looked as if it had been sitting there for years.

"What is this?" he called out to the front of the car, where the old woman was kneeling, rifling through her purse.

"Can't you read?" she called back, and then laughed, with an unexpected warmth. He pushed the bag to the side, noting it was sticky, wet to the touch, like it had sat in jam over the course of many days. He tried not to think of what it all really meant.



The trunk was dark and warm, from the bake of the summer sun, and the contents, save for the bell pepper which had fallen out of the plastic grocery bags, were largely unidentifiable. Something skittered by his hand, all legs and exoskeleton, the kind of creepy little thing that felt, if crushed, would give an excellent crunch. He pulled his hand back with a yelp, leaping backward. The sound that came out of him was embarrassing and very much unlike the person he believed himself to be.

"A bug," he said sheepishly. "There was a bug in there."

The old woman came around to the back of the bug, peered inside, but remained remarkably unsurprised.

"Aha. They've escaped."

The boy sat with that because it was the sort of thing that bred uncomfortable silence, and he was okay with that. He found that happened often with his grandmother. She was always saying things with ominous airs that were technically right for the situation. She was an eerie little woman.

"Perhaps it's back here," she muttered. "I knew I had an old can rattling around somewhere." Then, to him: "It's good to have this sort of thing around."

He watched as she rifled around in the trunk. The sleek objects within clattered and rattled as she did. Finally, she produced a container, a spray produced by a brand he had never heard of or seen. "You know the funny thing about this car?"

Bike and Tricycle
Matteo Randall

He shook his head.

"It's infested. Horribly infested." She smiled an old woman's toothy grin. "The bug has bugs."

The boy had nothing useful to say, so he followed and watched as she sprayed the wheel, and, as promised, lines of shiny blue bugs came streaming out of the five perfect holes in the tires, little rivers disappearing into the fields around them. Then, the holes scabbed over, in threads that thickened as they stretched across the holes. Like it was regrowing a skin.

They got back into the car, and it started without incident. That made sense, of course, because the car was fine, except for the bugs and the gaping holes in the back left wheel. There were times in a person's life when one witnessed the inexplicable, he understood, and he was okay with that.

"I saw this bag in the trunk," he started, and then paused. "Frankly there were a lot of things in that trunk and not a damn thing I recognized except that bag, and really I thought it was kind of funny, like, ironic, I guess—"

"You'll find out," she cut in. "Someday. Christmas. Thanksgiving, maybe. I'll leave it to you when I'm dead."

She kept her eyes on the road. He drove on. They had groceries in the back, and if they stayed any longer, they would spoil.

Funny Little Bugs
Hannah Nettikadan

Wegmans

As I step through the automatic doors, I'm greeted immediately by the vibrant cherries, plums, peaches, and grapes. I melt right into the warm splash of colors, the calming lull of voices, carts, and items being stacked on perfectly stocked shelves. I roam the aisles giving myself up to the intricate fonts and neatly packaged items. "Pick me! Choose me!" They all call out to me in varying pitches and tones. A box of penne rigate cat-calls me; his Italian accent is charming, but far too nasally for my liking. I wink in his direction and head off to the freezer aisle where I'm now face to face with a mouthwatering display of ice cream, gelato, and popsicles of every flavor imaginable. The orange creamsicles jump out of their box and lure me in with a choreographed dance routine, their white bottoms shaking at me as I clap along. I grab them quickly before my tip-tapping toes drag me away to self-checkout. An automated voice thanks me for shopping at Wegmans. I tip my hat and say "You are welcome. You are so very welcome!"





Rest

Juan J Hernandez-Guerrero

Voices

In silence, they come.

In noise, they come.

In fighting them off, they come.

They tell of failures of being a friend.

They tell of failures of being truthful.

They tell of failures of being smart.

They tell of failures of being able to *do anything right*.

They relentlessly hound with not being...

...good enough

...kind enough

...smart enough

...talented enough

...skilled enough

...*enough*

And it is when these voices are loudest that another comes.

In silence, it comes.

In noise, it comes.

When the others refuse to leave, it comes.

It tells of successes of being a friend.

It tells of successes of being truthful.

It tells of successes of being smart.

It tells of successes of *all that is done right*.

It relentlessly supports with being...

...good enough

...kind enough

...smart enough

...talented enough

...skilled enough

...*enough*.

Voices

Emerald Emmerich

Argument

The page and the idea are arguing again

It's not the same page as last time

And it's not the same idea

But the argument feels the same (quiet, all encompassing, stupid)

And because it's the same, I'll say it's happening again

Instead of happening anew

The page and the idea are arguing again

It's a sketchbook page, if that's important

It's unclear what the idea is (is that important?)

The page isn't crisp or white

the idea has covered it in erased pencil lines and ink smudges

I haven't even used ink today, but it still outlines my nails, the creases of my palm

The page and the idea are arguing again

It's gotten louder now, and the top of the page has worn off, scraps of paper alongside eraser crumbs

Is the eraser part of the argument? I wonder whose side it's on

The idea seems hazy and tired (are the pencil marks eyebags, or is that just me?)

Maybe that's why it keeps up the argument

I'm always more likely to argue if I'm tired

The page and the idea are arguing again

The light in my room hasn't joined in but is still making comment on the side

If it keeps buzzing, humming, commenting, I'll have to turn it off so the argument can continue

It's not good for arguments like these to be commented on

The ceiling light gets turned off, and the desk light turned on

The desk light does not join in the argument

The page and the idea are arguing again

It might be a new idea from the one at the start

And if it is, does that matter? (is that important?)

This new idea is better at arguing than the first (louder, brasher, still stupid)

I can't say if it wins the argument or not

But at least the page is full now (the ink smudges are still there)



Meeting With Myself: An Autobiography

I stand outside the conference room, nervous for my presentation. I would have thought it would be easier, after all, I know them all so well. But that’s what makes me so nervous—I know how judgemental they can be. Even if I’m the only person they’d say it to. I steel my nerves and step through the door.

The room is noisy, cluttered and dim, there are nineteen office chairs placed around a table with a podium at its head. The chairs are arranged in a sort of U-shape, and for the most part the people in the room have organized themselves by age, with the youngest on my left and the oldest on my right. There are a few exceptions though. The two chairs to the far left of the room are empty and a few of the people in the middle of the room seem to have moved their chairs to sit together in a group. People are talking loudly, some arguing, others catching up like old friends, there is a baby crying. All fall silent when I enter the room, even the baby is shushed. I walk nervously to the podium and put up my slides.

“Good afternoon, everyone, I’m—er—we’re... No, I suppose the word actually is ‘I’m’. What I’m trying to say is: I’m Twenty,” I sputter awkwardly. I take a breath and glance around the room. Most of the audience is children, which I know was to be expected but still feels odd. I suppose it’s that I don’t remember the younger ones as well. A few of the people in the audience are infants and toddlers, held by the older members of the group on my far right. I hardly remember who those children are and they certainly don’t know who I am, honestly I doubt they even care yet. The middle of the room is full of young boys and tweens, most of whom have just placed books and Nintendo consoles on the table, creating a fairly comprehensive library of children’s media from the mid to late 2000s and early 2010s. There are two people in that crowd I avoid looking at too long. On the other side of the room from the babies I recognize some of the audience as close friends. Seventeen, Eighteen and Nineteen are familiar. Seeing them gives me a comfort that helps me push on.

“This year was our third year of College, we—” I say, more confident in myself until I am cut off by a voice from the crowd. “I still can’t believe we went there,” says Twelve under his breath and almost through a sneer. Seventeen looks sheepish. It was his choice after all. Eighteen looks mad at Twelve and opens his mouth to reply but I interrupt before he can. I know that Twelve has spent years being told how smart he is, and how wonderful it is to be smart, being told he has a gift, being taught to cherish that gift because he can’t imagine what he would be without it. “We’re very happy there,” I tell him. “Our classes are interesting and challenging, I love it here and I wouldn’t want to be anywhere else,” I’d like to think Twelve takes this as a comfort, I think he does, but it’s hard to tell.

“As I was saying, we’ve officially become a double major in Software Engineering and English. This year we—” “English?” an excited young voice interrupts. I glance over and see a young boy, Six, who has jumped out of his chair in excitement. “That’s like writing, right? Are we an author?!” the boy asks. Another young voice, Eight this time, chimes in “Is Jeremy our publisher? You write stuff and he publishes it. Just like our dads? Just like we said we were gonna do?” The teenagers at the end of the table look a bit uncomfortable. I can tell they don’t like being called authors, especially Fourteen, who decided to focus on computing as a career path, and Nineteen, who wishes he called his grade school friends more often. I smile softly. “Most of what we do is computer stuff. But we’ve been writing a lot more lately. Jeremy is a writer too, he works for a newspaper.” The boys look at me expectantly, a bit confused. I take a moment and say “I suppose that does make us an author,” and joy washes across their faces. “Good,” says Six authoritatively. “And we can keep doing the computer stuff too I guess, I had fun setting up the Wii.” It’s nice to feel as though I have approval from those kids. I want to make them proud.



Wall of fame
Shubhang Mehrotra



Untitled
Matteo Randall

“Where was I, oh right, this year we had our first co-op we worked in the software engineering industry. It was a wonderful experience, and it really made me feel like the skills and knowledge we have are—” No one interrupts this time but I get distracted. I notice one of the boys who hasn’t made eye contact with me this whole time has finally looked up at me. He is Fifteen and I understand why he doesn’t look at me. Fifteen has been going through a lot. He doesn’t enjoy his classes, his relationship with friends is changing in a way that he doesn’t like and he is on entirely the wrong medicine. He doesn’t think he can do it. He doesn’t think he has the gift that Twelve is clutching on to. He can’t stand to be the way that he is. He doesn’t wanna look at me because he can’t bear to see the pain he feels in my eyes. He can’t bear to know that I feel that way too. He thinks it’s better that he doesn’t know me at all. But he’s an audacious kid, I’ll say that for him, and in this moment, he takes a chance and looks up at me. I gather my focus and return to what I was saying. “Enough. It feels like we’re enough.” And I’d like to think I see Fifteen smile.

“All in all this year I think I can honestly say that despite some stress and ups and downs I think things

are going pretty well and I’m—” I pause. I know what I want to say but I’m not quite sure I can say it yet. There is someone in this room I haven’t confronted yet. Someone I can’t look at. He isn’t like Fifteen though. Fifteen avoided me. This one has been staring at me the whole time. Wordlessly. Critically. Wincing at every word I say as if they burn his ears and clutching a book to his chest with a white knuckle grip like it’s a plane’s seat cushion barely holding him above water. He is Nine, and he has just learned what death is. His grief is smothering and sharp. I see it in the eyes of half the room and feel it in my gut. He doubts me and I know why. I struggle to believe the words I’m saying when I look at him. But in him I see a desperate hope. Clinging to his life rafts. Trying to keep his head above water. And that hope looks back at me desperate for my next word. “Happy. I can honestly say we’re pretty happy.”

I sit down next to Nineteen. My presentation concluded. A short video showing the highlights of my year plays. In a whisper I ask him what comes next. “Next?” he asks. “Next we wait for Twenty-One.” “He can’t be too different, can he?” I ask. Nineteen thinks a moment. “Probably not all too different,” he replies. “But little steps are all it takes.”

Fragments of The Moon 1

Chase Honahan



Lost

Olivia Greenberg

Recollection

I sat on the black bench under a blue light as the night fell
Fully aware that it wasn't a *real* emergency
My shadow stretched over the field of lush greenery before me
Painting a dark, deformed version of myself upon it
It seemed almost devoid of any life
As if anything I touched would eventually decay into dust
The occasional passerby gave me an uncomfortable glance
As I buried my face in my hands
And stared at my blank phone screen, riddled with cracks
Suddenly, I was aware of my poor body
Trembling in the cold
I reluctantly arose and began walking the long straight home
Dragging my feet, swaying every which way
As I listened to some stranger's lighthearted laughter
Somewhere far behind me

Recollection

Michael Robinson



kurueru

Jeremy Brown

Who If Not Me?

Oh, my trusted subordinate
Whom I so deeply adore
Looking at them, I feel unfit
To handle the problems of more
But hearing them I feel such power
A leader with none who compares
I always step up, never cower
To answer all of their prayers

The weight resting upon my shoulders
Is more than anyone could ever know
But you, my friend, a beholder
The only one aware of my woes
Friend, you know me so deeply
You know why I must listen so
The fate of these people completely
Relies on me routing their foes

So who if not me can save them?
Who if not me is their friend?
Who if not me is there for them
To stop them from meeting their end?
Their bodies are just full of weakness
And brains are just full of sand
Except you friend
Their lives are consumed with bleakness
Without me lending a hand.

Those who have died without me
Had lost all their faith in their gods
But standing here, you might see
That I easily beat the odds
Looking at me, a savior to some
And a god to so many more!
With me at their side, the outcome
Is Death walking right past their doors!

So no one but me can save them
No one but me is their friend
No one but me is there for them
To stop them from meeting their end.
These people are fools
When they're on their own
But with me they're greater than all.
And to me, they are tools
To better myself
And to stop me from making that fall.

So my subordinate,
Whom I adore,
I must ask you again.
For days they wait,
On their own,
With nothing to do 'til the end

My greatest follower,
Look at them!
I cannot just let them be
You concur, my friend,
That I must stay,
So who if not me?

Who If Not Me?

Connor Pringle



Glass Wall

Emma Mankowski

Divine Lies

What have I done to deserve your love?
Your older love, oh should you care to be.
More than you are—lack compassion thereof.
A grip of your grasp, a flinch to myself flee.
A slash to the face, marked with a forgiving kiss.
The scars imprinted in my mind, forever endowed.
With your feigned apologies, given to all dismiss.
Inside myself, find abstruse confidence vowed.
Sealed in your holy sepulcher, ordained by a flock.
Of white doves and poems of praise.
Chests sealed by scorns and tears that seep into crops.
How would you ever know that secrets betray?
I find myself picking locks behind a sealed door.
One day, shall spill, spring, steal, and finally, soar.



Divine Lies
Lillian Rose

Old-school
Shubhang Mehrotra

He alone with me and I alone with him

This time is not an addiction I talk about but more of an enjoyment,
and I mean, how can I not?
If he is so precious, so sweet, and so kind,
that every night he wraps me in his arms and takes me to the depths of his heart
and reminds me that lonely I am not.
He who calls himself loneliness is no longer lonely when I am with him,
and I got used to his presence to the point where I befriended him,
therefore,
I'm no longer lonely, *just alone with him*.
I used to believe “you'll get used to it, it'll pass” I said,
but every day,
whether it is night or day,
he sits with me and comforts me,
wipes my tears off my face
and holds me until I drift away into my dreams.
Right there,
loneliness sits there and waits for me till I return,
and together we share moments that only he and I will ever know.
It is him, loneliness,
I'll never get tired of,
it is him my second greatest companion that I'm falling in *love* with.

He alone with me and I alone with him
aa-person

Spring

What used to work doesn't anymore
Cardinal whistles cutting through the smoke in the air
Spring stepping through the cracks in the pavement
Leaving her scent in every dreary corner

Do I even care about the surges of petrichor?
What used to feel like a kiss on the forehead
Turns sour as it dances,
twirling through my body

I'm tangled in dreams
and thoughts
On April mornings when I wake
Lifting my limbs one
by one

Am I even the one in control anymore?
Blooming flowers no longer help me to rise
Their beauty turned bitter in my jealousy of carelessness

Nostalgia hits every day now
For moments that occurred but weeks ago
When then I was dreaming of last year

I long passionately for a time in space that no longer exists
And cannot come to fruition no matter how many
dandelions pappi's I disperse
or puddles my dirty sneakers trod upon
No matter how gratifying the sun feels beaming on my bare skin
it will never feel the same as it once did
in the time when I had no blemishes, inside or out
when the only place I knew was home

What happens when home no longer exists?
I go home but I don't
go home

What used to work doesn't anymore
Spring came knocking on the back door of a house that's not home
She smelled sweet,
she caressed my cheeks with a loving look in her eyes
Then she turned,
rain dripped down the window as she saddened
Her light and warmth dissipated slowly
As if she could tell that she was no longer enough

Tears trickle down my face too,
why wasn't she enough?



moral conscience
ALIRO

Mess
Nate Tangeman

Changing

Neutral Ending (Original Piece)

You are changing and it's bizarre. You wake up and again tell yourself to always be better. Wash your face. Brush your teeth. Shadowbox in the mirror. You go to class. You don't want to sleep but you do. You have multiple sleepless nights. Why? Because you lack the confidence to believe you can complete your assignments on time so you work all night. You constantly worry and you hate yourself. Sometimes you hurt others. Sometimes you heal others. Your partner says you're wonderful. Your family appreciates you and you being more open than your past. Your friends see you as inspirational like a hero. They all love you. Classes end. You get food. You get to your dorm. Maybe play the game for a little. Maybe go straight to doing work. You hear the phone's steady ringing. You answer and enjoy your partner's company. Accompanied. You hang up. Maybe dive back into work. Maybe sleep. Regardless, you think to yourself "I'm a bad person..." Yes, you are but change can always happen.

Bad Ending

You are changing and it's terrible. You wake up and again tell yourself to not be worse. Wash your face. Brush your teeth. Sulk in the mirror. You go to class. You just want to sleep so you do. You have multiple sleepless nights. Why? Because you lack the confidence to believe you can complete your assignments on time so you work all night. You constantly worry and you hate yourself. Every day you hurt others. Rarely you heal others. Your ex-partner says you're awful. Your family despises you and you being more secluded like your past. Your friends see you as cunning like a villain. They all hate you. Classes end. You skip food. You get to your dorm. Never play the game for a little. Always go straight to doing work. You hear the phone's steady silence. You think and desire your ex-partner's company. Alone. You give up. Always dive back into work. Never sleep. Regardless, you think to yourself "I'm a horrible person..." Yes, you are but change can always happen.

Good Ending

You are changing and it's great. You wake up and again tell yourself to still be great. Wash your face. Brush your teeth. Shadowbox in the mirror. You go to class. You don't want to sleep and you don't. You have zero sleepless nights. Why? Because you have the confidence to believe you can complete your assignments on time so you sleep all night. You rarely worry and you love yourself. Rarely you hurt others. Constantly you heal others. Your partner says you're wonderful. Your family appreciates you and you being more open than your past. Your friends see you as inspirational like a hero. They all love you. Classes end. You get food. You get to your dorm. Always play the game for a little. Then go straight to doing work. You hear the phone's steady ringing. You answer and enjoy your partner's company. Accompanied. You hang up. Never dive back into work. Always sleep. Regardless, you think to yourself "I'm a good person..." Yes, you are but change can always happen.

I've stopped hanging up empty picture frames

Not really the method of discernment they encouraged in Catholic school, but I keep ending up drunk in someone else's bathroom. Grinning myself stupid in the mirror, hands braced on the porcelain rim. Leaning so far in that I'm on my tiptoes.

Every day is beautiful. Dad calls me his boy and shows me how to tie a tie. Every day is the same old humiliation. I thank him with a girl's voice, and I know he hears it too. So does every cashier at the stores we go to, and the waiters at the restaurants, and all the strangers on the street.

I used to dream that I was ruined and hopeless; I wished to death that I could go home so at least I could feel held by the hands that have struggled to love me. But last night I went out to my car in the rain. A drop of water traveled down the dear bridge of my nose, another down the darling arch of my jaw.

I used to hang up empty picture frames. Creepy, I know, but there's a comfort in that negative space that I never found in these old photographs of me, the ones that reveal there's nothing behind my eyes but candlelight shadows flickering on the wall. I think maybe if I could go back and tell Adrienne that everything would be okay, then it wouldn't feel like any photo of me with long hair is of someone I abandoned on the front lines. Not a stranger, but not a friend. Family, I guess.

But there's someone in the mirror now, when I look. I've stopped flinching away when you try to love me in the light. I'm coughing up smoke like a radiator on the fritz but you humor me because I'm growing.

My skin remembers it all now. There's no one to come back to. It's just me. It's just us. I love you. I love you. I lean in.



Asian Banana Split

coated in a thin layer
I drop in,
each banana. The golden liquid splashes
outwards, but my fingers do not retreat and they glow red,
The liquid envelops
me, and they sink to the bottom, bouncing softly off the bottom of the pot.
I was only supposed to leave them in for a minute but the steam fogs up the sink mirror and every inhale
is suffocating, but I wish it were hotter, I wish they would cook faster.

A scoop of red bean and a spoon of green is beset by a fine china
so close to touching, but a
mango puree splits the two worlds.
Assortments of colors are set before me, all bottled up and separate.
I start with a weak drizzle of chocolate atop the banana, I lift to my lips,
and it's warm still, but soft on the inside, and its
skin crumples beneath my teeth.
not my favorite flavor, but
there's a green which is fresh and soft, and smells of earth and is a sudsy delight,
And I love the mango, which is so fun, and practically glows and is so juicy, but
the red is so deep and sweet and full and dark and whole and... and it's where I wish I was.
I wish I didn't have to stay on this side.

so I stare longingly at the red,
now flowing out of me,
its color falls through the water,
staining my tub,
but eventually it crosses the orange and
finds the red.

They're entangled together,
united again, right before I go,
creating a beautiful
Lobster red.





Untitled
Chase Honahan



BABY HOTLINE
Skylier Grooms



He Only Loves the Broken You
Amina Webster

Her Canvas

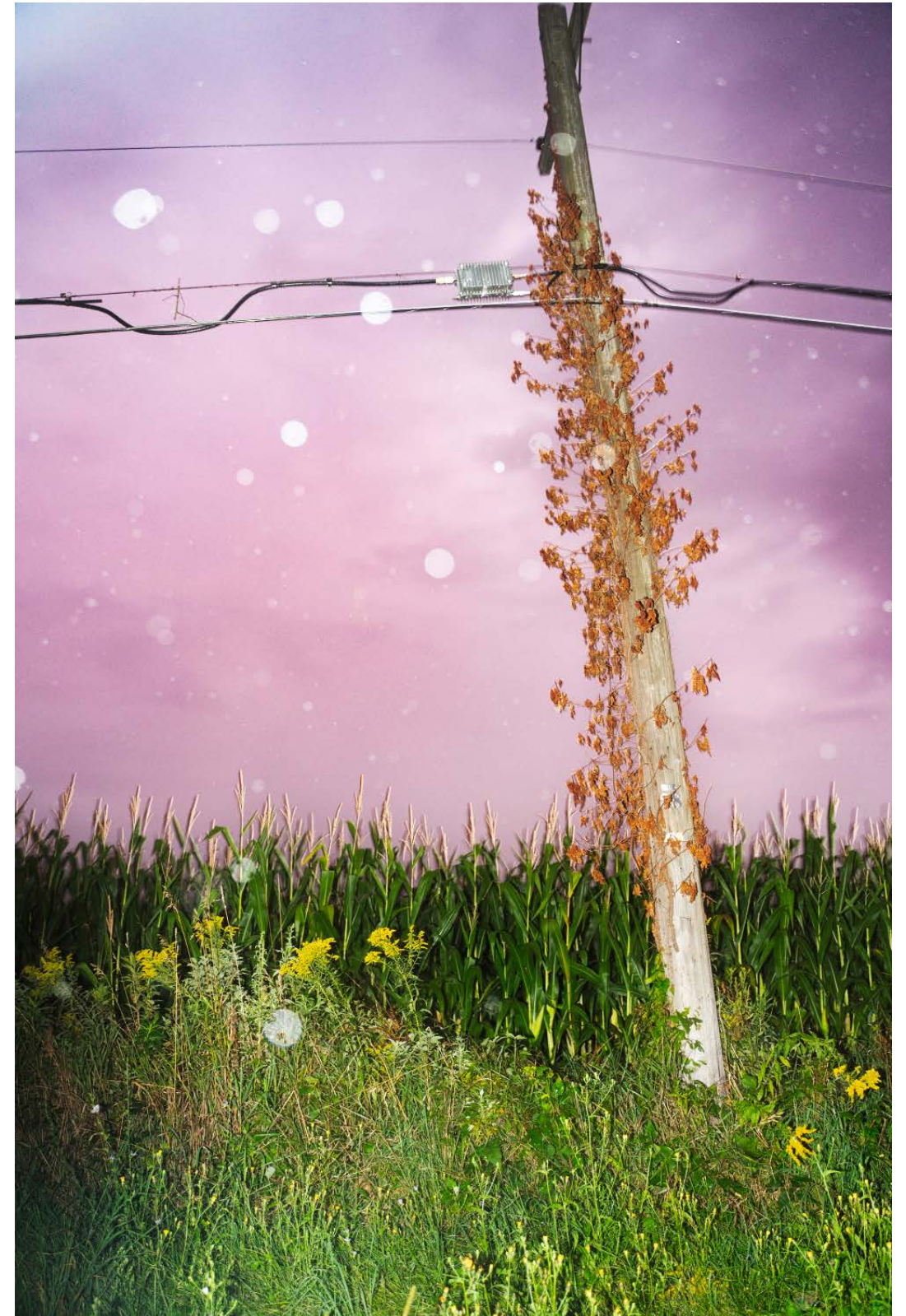
Mommy is like an artist,
And my hair is her canvas.
She uses the white paint in the cup
To turn my hair a pure white.
It looks like frosting,
Almost good enough to eat, but
The strong smell puts me off.
The paint feels like it's soaking into my head.
My scalp screams in pain.
"It burns," I cry to mommy.
"I know it hurts but you must stay still," she says,
"This is so you'll be beautiful."
The fire continues to dance but
I sit still in my chair like a good girl.
I want to be beautiful.

Her Canvas
Matilda Yemoh



Vertigo
Francesca Delaney

Untitled
Michael Johns



Untitled
Sydney Maas

All I wanted was a break

It had been a long week
Days felt like months
Minutes like weeks
The sand in the hourglass had started to suffocate me
I needed out.

I decided to run
Away from this mess
I decided I deserved a break and went
Towards home.

I'm looking forward to the weekend
Finally able to relax, spend time with family, friends
Let my stresses
my worries
Slip away for five days.

This is what happened instead:

“I tested positive for COVID” my father
texted me before my 6-hour drive.

*my irrational fear of
illness insufferable*

And I need to go to my grandmother’s house
So I waved to my sick father
from the driveway
and crashed at a friend's house.

*all i wanted was my bed
and a hug from my parents
that i won't get this weekend*

And so I chopped off three years worth of hair growth
In hopes of cutting through
my stress and letting it
fall to the floor.

*maybe finally letting go
will let me move on
maybe finally
things will be better*

And so I went over the
river and through the woods
to my grandmother’s house.

*and that's when
things got bad*

*taking care of my uncle
is ingrained in me.
i have been his legs
since i could walk myself
my love for him overtakes
any sense of frustration.
but this time things are different.*

*i don't know what to do
i'm just me.
it's not enough
i'm just me.*

*i don't know how she does it
i don't know how my mom does it
i don't know if i can do it
i don't know*

*if he tells me to calm down
one more time i
might just punch him in the face*

And so my uncle cried out in pain.
“My hand hurts”
His swollen hand immobile
Like the rest of him has been his whole life.

When I speak he doesn’t answer
When I’m there he can’t find me
When he sees me he doesn’t know me.
My mom’s name the only words he could
muster when he looks me in the eyes.

A sleepless night playing nurse
A retired nurse who should be asleep
But takes care of her son
with such love
And care

I was told not to worry
My bigoted uncle is here to save the day.
He meets me with a raised voice
and frantic movements.

They took him to the hospital the next morning.
While I sat, and wrote this poem, across
From my worried grandmother
As she prays.

*yes i think he will be okay
i'm olivia, remember?
yes i think my dad is feeling better
yes i think he will be okay
i already ate lunch, remember
yes i think he will be okay
yes i think he will be okay
i think my dad is feeling better
i'm olivia
he will be okay
i already ate
he will be okay
my dad is feeling better
he will be okay
he will be okay*

ALL I WANTED WAS A BREAK.



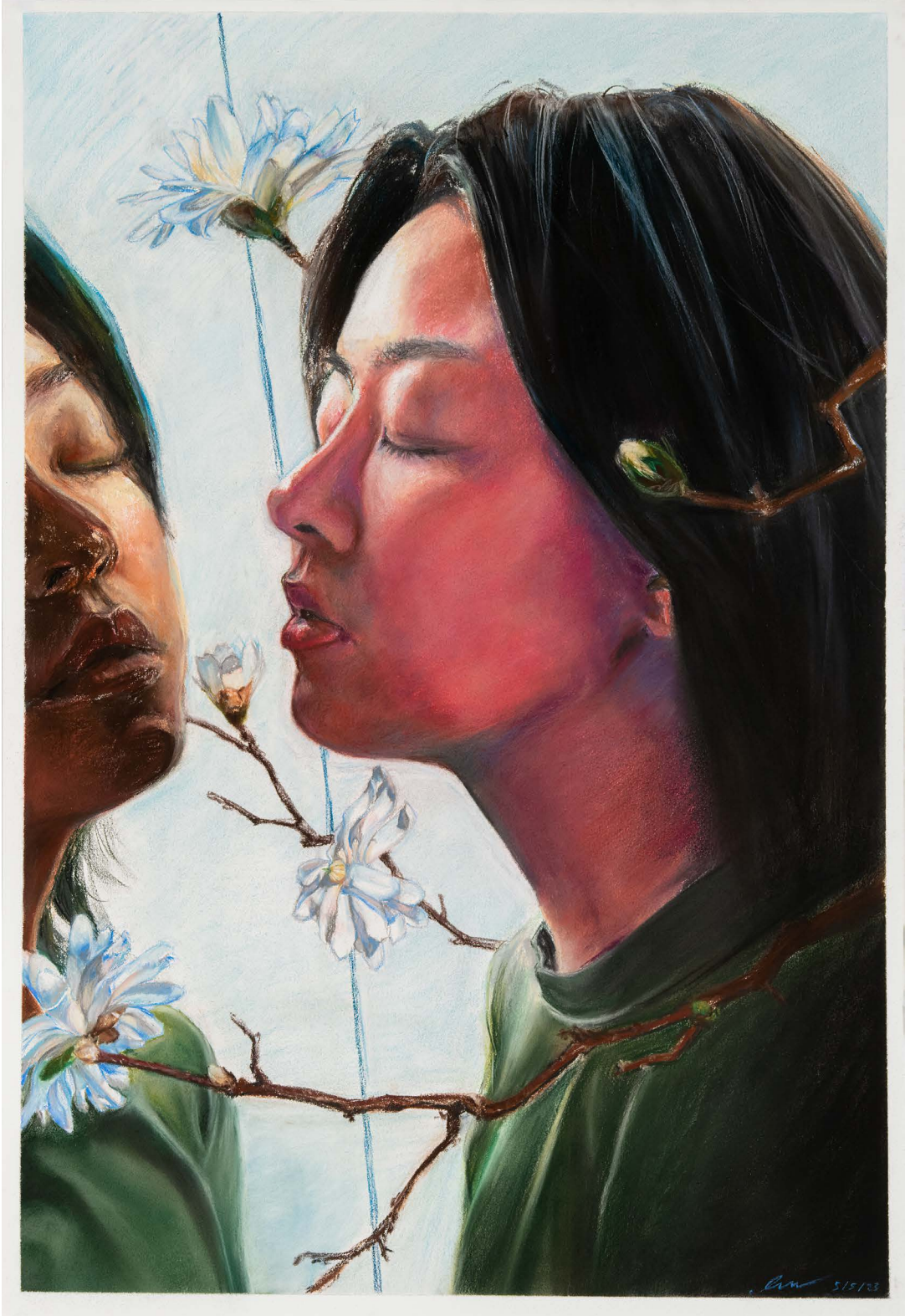
All I wanted was a break
Olivia Greenberg

Woman
Olivia Greenberg

6.19.23 I

I don't know. I don't know what
I want. I want warmth. I want
forgiveness. I want fairness.
I want kisses and hugs. I want
everything I want. Every fleeting
want. I want to be understood.
I want to shrink down and live in
a tree. Or transcend beyond this
plane of reality. Something feels
wrong. I need to get there. I need
to fix it. Restoring my humanity
is not the answer. I need to go
beyond. Something needs to be
unlocked. I'm not who anyone
thinks I am. There is something
really different about me.

6.19.23 I
B



Sunrise Boat
Grant Bush-Resko

Self Reflection
Irene Tu

A Very Short Time

In the sleepy seaside town of Rockhaven, where time seemed to drift with the tides, there was an extraordinary phenomenon known to all as the “Fleeting Stars.” Every July, near the end of the month on a singular day, as the sun dipped below the horizon, these tiny, radiant lights would bubble into existence for just a few precious minutes.

Rockhaven itself was tucked away in the valley of a remote region. The housing situation was charming-rustic vermillion log cabins and low-pitched idyllic pastel gray cottages, though those moving into the town sometimes rented from others or resided in their motor vehicle for a short time. The closest metropolis was a three-hour bus ride away, which was the only transportation residents relied on. Life in Rockhaven was full of simple little things such as angling, farming, or quarrying. Days filled themselves quickly with the devotion and joy of such a simple life. The Fleeting Stars were, to the town of Rockhaven, a miracle of nature and a testament to how much they cared for the land.

The people of Rockhaven held a festival in honor of the Fleeting Stars, a spectacle that drew visitors from far and wide. They would gather on the beach, blankets spread out, and their gazes fixed upon the darkening sky. Then, as twilight cast its enchanting spell, the Fleeting Stars would begin to twinkle.

These stars were unique. They were not celestial objects but a kind of luminescent plankton that shimmered beneath the water’s surface. As the waves lapped against the shore, they would dislodge the plankton, causing them to rise and create a mesmerizing display of bioluminescence.

Among the regular festival attendees was a young artist named Clara. She had a fascination with the Fleeting Stars, which she imprinted into her artwork. Her paintings captured the ephemeral beauty of these magical moments, and they were highly sought after by collectors. The anticipation still drove her to arrive early and set up her canvas for the brief yearly encounter.

One summer evening, as the festival reached its peak and dislodged plankton began to cover the sky, Clara noticed a stranger sitting alone on the beach. The woman had a wistful look in her eyes, and Clara, her curiosity piqued, approached her. The stranger introduced herself as Elena and explained that she had traveled to Rockhaven to witness the Fleeting Stars because her late mother, who moved from the metropolis into Rockhaven in anticipation to see them and settle down, had always dreamed of seeing them but never had the chance.

Clara, touched by Elena’s story, invited her to share a blanket and watch the Fleeting Stars together. As the stars began their brief, radiant dance, Clara painted the scene, capturing the luminous magic that enveloped them. Elena couldn’t believe the beauty before her, and she felt a profound connection to her mother’s dream. The vision filled her eyes with light, fulfilling the wish of her late mother and filling her with a warm feeling. The plankton filled the sky as Elena’s face lit up and her jaw dropped, and Clara smiled at her company’s reaction for she felt the same her first time.

The minutes slipped by as if they were an elusive smoke wisp, and soon, the Fleeting Stars began to fade, returning to the depths of the sea. The night had reclaimed its dark mystery, but in their hearts, Clara and Elena held the memory of a fleeting moment of beauty and connection that would stay with them forever.

Elena returned to Rockhaven each summer to watch the Fleeting Stars, always with Clara by her side. They grew close, and their shared experiences formed a constellation of fleeting, precious moments, much like the stars themselves. For in those short-lived glimmers of beauty, they found a love that would shine forever, even after the stars had vanished once more into the depths of the sea. Elena’s annual return to Rockhaven was a bittersweet pilgrimage, a heavy reminder of the love she had lost. Her connection with Clara had grown stronger over the years, but the reason for her visits lay in a past she could never change.

Elena found herself moving into the picturesque community. She had decided to go one step further than her mother’s dream and settled into one of the quaint cottages that adorned the town, drawn by the allure of the Fleeting Stars. The close-knit community warmly embraced her, unaware of the knots of despair tangled deeply. She carried the memory of her mother’s desire with her each year, cherishing the moments she spent under the starry display, knowing that her mother’s spirit was with her in those precious moments. Elena’s bond with Clara continued to grow, their shared experiences a testament to the enduring power of love and the ability to find light even in the darkest of times.

And so, in Rockhaven, where the Fleeting Stars illuminated the night and whispered stories of dreams, loss, and love, Elena found solace and the courage to move forward, knowing that the stars would always shine in her mother’s memory, as well as in her heart.



A Very Short Time
Joshua Talbot

Trexlor Nature Preserve
Chelsea Cohen

The Luckiest Boy

Things fall into place for the luckiest boy on Earth. He dances through life to the sound of silent night, by the soft glow of streetlights on the river. He smiles without knowing why, nor does he know the half of it.

He doesn't know how frigid was the heart he was trying to warm. He doesn't know how clumsy were the feet he asked to dance. He doesn't know the deep pink carnations he chose at random meant exactly what he wanted to say. He doesn't know.

Things fall into place for the luckiest boy on Earth. So much so, that one can't help but question how much of the screenplay he's read before. The only thing holding back disbelief is tentative trust. Trust that he might mean what he says. Trust that he didn't know. Trust that he really might be the luckiest boy on Earth.





Untitled
Jack Connolly



A Fall Day
Madeleine Saint Pe



Fall in my city
Shubhang Mehrotra

Storytellers

I thought back on the old adage as I stumbled, desperate and weary, through the thorned undergrowth...

***Fell** the devil of beasts, whose foil is her pride.*

***Veil** the devil of storms, whose form is broken by steel.*

***Hallow** the devil of fire, whose hearth he must hide.*

***Scorn** the devil of famine, whose true name is his seal.*

***Gore** the devil of war, whose heart is not her own.*

***Despair** the devil of pestilence, whose aversion is a flower.*

***Quell** the devil of death, whose fear is to be alone.*

To kill one is to kill none, but the weapon that kills nothing will spell their final hour.

Everyone in Myridia knew the story of the Seven Devils: immortal creatures as old as time. They were the scourges of humanity. From the frigid wastes of Sovia to the scorching sands of Syr, everyone knew their names.

We were taught by our mothers not to stray too far out of sight; to stay silent in our lofts at night; to respect the beasts in the wild; to always carry a penny of steel; to wear the scent of the panacea flower. There were stories about the children who did not do these things. Stories of those who didn't respect the Seven and didn't commit to memory the things that warded them off.

And yet, breathless and blood streaked, I found myself unprepared for the sight of Him as I clawed through the thrall of the Ulderwood and entered a clearing of silver, moonlit grass.

Scorn was an ancient creature, His voice deep and melancholy, swirling through the midnight air like a siren's song. He could've been mistaken for a man

if not for His Ulderwood bark skin, His sprawling antlers, and His pale golden eyes, which peered back at me with a grim sympathy. He was called many things by many villages' people. The black rot. The beast. The betrayer. The nameless. The erlking. The king of the fae.

His symphony of one ended abruptly, and I realized I had been staring for what must have been several minutes, enchanted by His eyes and the dour melody of His voice. And as the spell over my mind broke, I found myself held still, the Ulderwood roots and branches coiled around my wrists and throat and ankles. Stolen by their wooden embrace, I could only watch as the Devil of famine approached me, His movements smooth and otherworldly, as if He were a phantom gliding over the moor towards me.

I could see, now, the intricacies of His lumber flesh as He neared, wrinkled and stiff. And in the dark hollows of His eyes was a gentle kindling that scoured me like a beast overlooking its prey.

"You poor thing. What are you doing, so far from home, child? Why have you come so deep into the Ulderwood? Have your parents forsaken you? Have they not told you the places, the things that lurk here?"

"I—" my throat tightened under the roiling tree roots as I struggled to break free from their grasp.

Beneath the bristling whiskers of tangled vines around His mouth and chin, I could see His lips shift into a frown.

"Why you would disturb such a miserable thing as me could be nothing but your own folly."

His sigh was like the sound of wind rustling through trees.

"I am not like the others. I do not hunt man for sport like Despair, and I do not feed on their fear like Quell. I do not share Hallow's temper, or Veil's vitriol.

I will not hurt you, child. I will let you free from the Ulderwood if you give me something in return.”

The roots around my windpipe loosened enough for me to breathe, and the air never tasted so sweet.

“There is only one thing that I want. And it is something that you may have.” His eyes glittered. “I want to be the knower of all things, and the teller of all stories.” He leaned in close, and I could smell the crisp oleander on His breath.

“I would like you to tell me a story. A story that I do not already know.”

The roots loosened a little more, and suddenly I could speak again.

“Please—please, my father was angry. He’s a bastard when he drinks, and I—I ran from home. I didn’t mean to come so deep into the Ulderwood, I’ve heard the stories, but I got lost, and I—I…”

I paused to drink in a deep breath, hot tears welling in my eyes, and I could see the displeasure in Scorn’s ancient eyes.

His voice was softer, now.

“I know, my child. All these things are true, and all these things I have heard before. I do not disbelieve you, and I understand that you are afraid… but if that is the story you wish to tell me, it is a story I have heard countless times. Do you think your father is the first drunkard from your village? Do you think you are the first victim of such belligerence? Do you think you are the first little girl to come tramping through Ulderwood—through my home?”

There was a stillness as He paused.

“I want you to tell me a story that I have never heard before, and then I will let you run home,” He reiterated.

My mind raced and my heart trembled as I pushed my fears aside and thought. I tried to remember

the stories my mother once told me when I was little more than a babe nestled in the warm crook of her lap.

There was the story of Kaine the Great. The story of the fox and Hallow’s hound. The beast in the ballroom; the unkillable king and the man in the mask; the hobgrine and the hunter; the fall of the seven sages; Aarlin the strong and Kaisyn the hated; Elliard and the woodsman…

I swallowed.

“Once…” my voice quivered. “There once was a boy named Elliard. A boy with a beautiful voice, who—”

“Strayed too far from home and met with the miserable and wicked man in the woods, who stole the boy’s voice, because he did nothing with it except grumble and moan,” Scorn finished. “Then the woodsman turned Elliard into a beautiful dove—a dove with no voice to sing or cry—and so Elliard lived the rest of his life in the woodsman’s garden, where he could do nothing but listen to the man sing with Elliard’s stolen voice.”

I felt ice in my skin as Scorn stole the words from my own mouth.

“Yes, I have heard the story of poor, young Elliard. I find that the moral of that story is simply too contrived, wouldn’t you agree? It is nothing more than a cautionary tale to children to be content with what they have, and to keep them from fussing and whining. Clever, I suppose. A mother tells that story for reasons twofold: to warn their child of the man in the Ulderwood, and to quiet the child’s incessant bleating.”

Scorn stepped away and let His eyes wander to the woods all around, as if looking for something.

“Every story you’ve heard has been told, and every story that has been told I know. Did you think I wouldn’t know the stories told about me?”

His eyes snapped back at me.

“So, I will ask you again, to tell me a story that I haven’t heard.”

I shuddered and thought, but my mind was blank from sheer panic. As I tried to think of another story, I could feel His eyes growing impatient with me. An idea came to mind, a momentary distraction to give me time to think.

“Is it true, then? If you are the man in the woods, is the story of Elliard true? Or is it nothing more than a mother’s tale?”

“It is true. But Elliard is not the name of the person that story is based on, and Elliard was a grown man, not a child. Humans tell stories full of little lies, so that the story says what they want to say. Now, if you are all out of stories, young lady, then you have nothing to offer me, and you would make a better Ulderwood tree than a guest in my home.”

The roots constricted around me, and I whimpered a hoarse, “wait!”

“I have a story,” I gasped. “It’s the story of the two storytellers!”

The roots halted. Scorn tilted His head curiously.

“That doesn’t sound familiar.” He grinned slightly, and like a moth to lanternlight, the Devil of famine inched ever closer.

“I should warn you, though. This story has no ending, and I don’t think you’ll like the moral. But I assure you, you’ve never heard this story before, and I’ll tell you it, but you must promise me that you won’t interrupt me, and you’ll let me tell this story in its entirety.”

Scorn frowned, but nodded, and let the roots loosen around my throat.

“You have my word, or my life,” He cooed. “I will let you tell this story until you have nothing else to say.”

It was a story I had never told before, so I took a long moment to catch my breath and think of how to begin.

“There once was an old hermit who lived deep in the woods, miserable and alone,” I started. Scorn’s eyebrows furrowed.

“The people in the nearby village hated and feared him, and so they called him many terrible things. Whenever someone wandered too deep into the woods, the old hermit turned them into a tree, so the woods would grow thicker between him and the villagers, hoping that one day they would grow too thick for the villagers to wander into, and he could be completely alone, forever. But the truth is, all the hermit really wanted was someone to keep him company; someone to share stories with for the rest of time.

“One day, a young lady ventured into the hermit’s woods, because she heard the old hermit wanted to be the knower of all stories, and she had the greatest story of all.”

Scorn’s wooden teeth creaked and splintered into a terrible, amused smile as He caught on.

I cleared my throat and continued.

“The young lady thought back on the old adage as she stumbled, desperate and weary, through the thorned undergrowth…”





Sigmaris