

THE OPAL

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CREATIVE NONFICTION



Katherine Schwarz, *Cupcakes*, Oil on Canvas, 2022

THE MONMOUTH MIXTAPE

By Jan Abel

I wake up to a hairdryer.

My roommate is someone who enjoys a good morning shower, and with hair as curly as his, you can't just step out of the shower and be ready to go. Apparently, it doesn't work like that. There are leave-in products that need to be added and a hairdryer that must be run for exactly 11 minutes.

The two of us have a good system in place for the mornings—especially since neither of us are exactly early risers. I stay in bed until they leave a little before 9, then I glare at my ceiling and book it out the door to make it to my 10 AM.

When my alarm tells me it's time to quit daydreaming in bed, I already have two apps open. One: the weather. Is it a t-shirt or a hoodie day? Two: Spotify.

I sing into my hairbrush.

I brush my teeth to the bpm.

I've hit play on my life's mixtape.

* * *

The house where I grew up was filled with music. My mom would always have the local country station playing while she drove me around in my car seat. I had no idea what a “badonkadonk” was, but I knew that shaking it was of the utmost importance. My sister—ten years my senior—would blast Gwen Stefani until I could spell “bananas” at the tender age of five. Meanwhile, my dad was *the* man of all things classic rock. He somehow redneck'd a surround sound stereo setup in our garage, and there were countless nights the electric riff of Deep Purple, and the crooning of Mick Jagger would rattle the house down to the window panes. I related to that small town girl, living in a lonely world far before I probably understood what a midnight train could be.

Looking back on all of this, it was no surprise I was a musically-inclined kid. The mildew-covered picnic table and the back of my dad's old pickup

truck were my Globe Theatre and Carnegie Hall. I will forever remember one Christmas where Santa left me a microphone stand—powder puff pink with that iconic Barbie signature running up the side. Not to mention it actually worked! The amount of nights that microphone was dragged out to the machine shed, forcing my parents to be my captive audience, I will never know.

* * *

I wave to Charlie as we separate at the doors outside of Wallace Hall. I head back to my dorm for a break as he heads over to the art building to put the finishing touches on his project due that day.

With a finesse that speaks to the weeks-upon-weeks of practice, I open up my earbud case and pop them in my ears without missing a step. The amount of weeks I nearly met my maker trying to master that move is a secret best kept between me and God, for the sake of my own pride.

Apparently, the last band I listened to was Green Day.

Making my way back to the dorm, I pop a cup of mac and cheese into the microwave and grab some water from the fridge. My roommate taught me that the secret of perfect microwaved mac and cheese was a teaspoon of butter stirred into the steaming noodles.

Sitting down with my feast, I open my laptop. I have a few hours to kill before my next class, so for now I'm relegated to my desk, my fairy lights and my never empty inbox.

* * *

I am the baby of the family, meaning I was almost constantly following behind my much older cousins, like a lost little duckling. So really, I suppose one day, I should thank my cousin Sarah for exposing me to choral music.

You see, my cousin Sarah is a whole six years older than me, and never once let me forget it. When I was but a young, scrawny, ten-year-old, she was a “fully-matured” 16 year old, and a first soprano in her high school's choir. Hearing her sing so completely enraptured me, that at then-years-old, I signed up for my elementary school's choir.

Now that I'm remembering it, we choral singers of District 205 were definitely more screeching the words to "Rhythm of Life" than actually singing them, but I suppose really it's the thought that counts. And the one thought I hold near and dear just as I did all those years ago: I love music.

There I was, Jan Abel, rising Alto II, and in love with the stage.

* * *

I am what one would call an avid daydreamer, and my biggest crutch for that is music. I have a "jumping across the rooftops, running from cops" playlist, and a "frolicking in the flower fields" playlist, and a "riding out a thunderstorm in an abandoned castle" playlist.

So when it comes to creative writing—both the class and in general—my stories and pieces are almost always inspired by music.

I return to Wallace Hall once again to work on the poetry needed for our final portfolios. Usually, I would be all for the chance to write a story to add to my collection. But this semester, I've learned the musicalities of poetry. Now as an English major, poetry is still the bane of my existence. But in terms of writing it? A whole new world had opened.

My tiny notebook is the protector of all my ideas, hidden away in my flannel pocket, close to my heart. The scribbles of great characters and daring escapes are hidden between the crook of every line.

The best type of creativity is when you can blend your old loves with your new darlings, in my humble opinion.

* * *

During my junior year of high school, almost all of my friends were involved in the advanced choir with me. In my group of friends there was: an absolute sweetheart of a soprano; myself, a mediocre alto; a rather reluctant tenor; and a very kind bass. I was well aware I was definitely not the best in our group. Heck, I was happy to just be standing on the same stage as them. But, this was the year that I learned that maybe, *just* maybe, I had the chance to be just as good. It was a random Sunday night in January that I got the email in my inbox.

TLMEA All-State Members - Galesburg High School

My sophomore year, I had received that same email, and my heart had dropped when my name wasn't on that list. One year later, my hopes weren't that high. As I said, I knew I didn't hold a candle to my classmates. Line by line, I cautiously scrolled through the names on the list.

Kaitlyn Sckovach - Soprano II

Arturo Paritio - Bass I

Lucas Bredhimir - Bass II

Samira Wilton - Alto I

Janice Abel - Alto II

There are very few moments I can remember feeling as proud of myself as I did then, ripping open my bedroom door to go scream the news to my parents, still seated for dinner in the kitchen. Did they understand just what it meant to be selected as an All-State musician? My money is on no, but they were happy for me all the same—just as they always were when I did something musical.

At state, I was surrounded by some of the best singers in the state of Illinois, and I simultaneously felt like I was *an amazing musician* and also as if I could never hope to measure up. These kids were from Chicago, talking about singing at Wrigley Field, or spending their summers in New York City. And I was just the kid who lived in the cornfields.

But none of that mattered to me. All I cared about was getting to make music.

* * *

At this point in the term, I should really know the name of the clerk who works in the campus convenience store. At least two or three days per week I'll stop in for a drink and snack, and today is no different.

As I walk out the door of the store and begin my ascent to Wallace Hall one final time, I take stock of all the goodies I have tucked away in the satchel slung over my shoulder.

There are my keys, my laptop, and my notebook. There is my emotional

support water bottle, and my chocolate-covered pretzels. There is my British Literature book, and my pencil case with its multicolored pens.

Now something that should be mentioned about Wallace Hall is that the steps are killers, and just going up two flights to the creative writing classroom may just be my downfall one of these days. But this time around, my destination is my own tiny corner of the top floor.

* * *

I was always told growing up that nothing can last forever. Things always will have to end, separate, or evolve.

Much like many people, evolution for my passions came in the form of a quarantine and an international pandemic.

My senior send-off concert was canceled, since obviously we weren't in class to rehearse and prepare. That long black dress reserved only for standing on those risers hung unused in my closet. Singing was suddenly reserved only for my bedroom and the shower.

Months went by, and when college finally rolled around, I was so excited to get back to doing music. To return to that stage, and be reminded of all of the things I came to love over the past 18 years. I was so excited to walk into that audition on orientation week!

I got the email with the results only a few days later.

We thank you all for your wonderful auditions, and those of you who are not listed as a part of our auditioned ensemble, I highly recommend still participating in our community chorus, and reauditioning in the spring.

Spoiler Alert: I was nicely asked to practice, "get better, and audition again!" So there I was, freshly out of the house, and told that the only time I could rehearse music was at 9PM Tuesday and Thursday nights, on a strange and new campus, along with whoever would show up. In my dad's own words: I was shit outta luck.

A part of me mourned for that bit of my life that I had had since I was *a fourth grader*, but the other part understood that it was time for a new adventure. Lucky for me, it was located just on the other side of campus.

* * *

The world is filled with music, much more than I ever realized when I was younger.

Sure, we grow up in a world full of music. We sit around the preschool rug and learn our ABCs. We learn solfège with the help of Dame Julie Andrews and the Von Trapps. We memorize little tunes and jingles that help us remember facts for the test next period.

Now me personally, I can connect music to just about anything. The songs in my earbuds connect me to the world in the shows I watch, the books I read, or the people I talk to.

Imagine Dragons is the soundtrack of Sherlock Holmes.

Cody Fry makes every evening stroll into something straight out of a movie.

Suddenly, I wasn't just one voice blending into a massive chorus. I was Jan Abel, that friend who you could come to for new music. Making playlists for people became my love language.

And my newest adventure allowed me to share it with the world.

* * *

As mentioned earlier, the steps of Wallace Hall are absolute killers, so if you want to have time to catch your breath, it's best to always arrive early.

Unlocking the door to my little safe haven, I drop my bag on the table and connect my laptop to the main computer. My Spotify, my notes, and the weather forecast are already pulled up and ready to go.

Deep breath in.

The guitar riffs of the legal ID begin to play, and I feel myself starting to grin.

Deep breath out.

The tiny clicks of the soundboard echo as I bring myself to the mic.

“Hello Monmouth College! My name is Jan Abel, and *you* are listening to WPFS 105.9 Proud Fighting Scots Radio.”

THE DRESS SHIRT

By Elise Burch

I'm alone in the street, there's not a lot of light but I have my phone to guide me. I needed to leave my aunt's house. I couldn't see my mom the way she was: pale, fragile, and silent.

On the gravel road, I walk without autonomy.

I am a yo-yo, and a forgetful child drags me across the road.

Where did you go? Where are you now?

I enter his house, but it's not day anymore and I'm alone. My Papaw died of Covid-19 this morning. I always thought he was immortal. My mind is absent, my brain is fire and ash, but a visceral instinct brought me to his cabin tonight.

I need a memory.

I want to start my inspection in his bedroom, but I had never entered it before his death. I don't have the confidence right now. I sit on his couch and stare impassively at the fireplace, the family photos on the mantel reflect the light of something extraterrestrial.

The moon? The stars? The fluorescent light outside?

I don't know.

I enter the doorway of his bedroom. The shameless light winks at me from his bed. This was acceptable in the living room, but I don't want this stranger here. I wish I could sweep the light away, but I know it will stay like sand in the sheets. Tenderly, I open his closet and slowly touch two dress shirts. I think that he wore an orange shirt to my elementary school once. But my vacant mind gives me nothing. It's not here.

Finally, I open the door to his bathroom. There's a washing machine and I suppose that there's something there he touched recently.

Saturday is vague. The sun, the grass on my feet, the cold water, all of this I can taste and roll on my tongue like fractals of gold. But I'm missing the crown jewel. I can't remember a final moment with my Papaw. I don't have it. It tortures me.

Two days ago, I entered the cabin looking for one thing: a shirt. I wore a new blouse to the family get together and I wanted to start a water fight outside. My Papaw was a farmer, because of this he had few dress shirts that were not ripped, faded, or stained. I knew he wouldn't have a problem if I dirtied one of his shirts to have fun. I chose a brown shirt on top of the washing machine. I took off my clothes and quickly fastened the buttons. I needed to prepare my cousins to battle my little brother.

"Avery! Do you have the water balloons?"

In the dryer, there's only towels. They don't satisfy me, so I open the washer. I identify the brown dress shirt and my mind bursts into flames again. I think for a moment if it is safe to touch, but I touch it anyway.

I cradle the shirt to my chest and sob.

Did you find what you were looking for?

I don't know.

(Editor's note: The author submitted this piece in both English and Spanish. Both have been provided.)

LA CAMISA

By Elise Burch

Estoy sola en la calle, no hay mucha luz pero yo tengo mi móvil para guiarme. Necesité dejar la casa de mi tía, no podría ver a mi mamá como ella estuvo, pálida, frágil y silenciosa.

En la calle de grava, camino sin autonomía.

Soy un yo-yo, un niño olvidadizo me arrastra sobre el piso.

¿Dónde se fue? ¿Dónde está?

Entro a la cabaña de mi abuelo, pero no es de día y estoy sola. Mi Papaw se murió de Covid-19 esta mañana, todavía pensaba que él era inmortal. Mi mente está ausente, mi cerebro es fuego y ceniza, entonces un instinto visceral me lleva a su casa esta noche.

Yo quiero una memoria.

Quiero empezar mi inspección en su cuarto, pero nunca he entrado antes de su muerte, no tengo confianza ahorita. Me siento en su sofá y miro impasiblemente a la chimenea, las fotos de nuestra familia en el marco reflejan la luz de algo extraterrestre.

La luna? Las estrellas? La luz artificial afuera?

No sé.

Entro por la puerta de su cuarto, la luz atrevida me guiña desde su cama. Fue aceptable en la sala, pero no quiero este extanjero aquí, deseo que pueda desaparecer la luz. Pero sé que quedará como arcilla en las sabanas. Con calma, abro su closet, lentamente toco dos camisas, pienso que él llevó una camisa naranja a mi escuela primaria una vez. Pero mi mente deprimida no me da nada. No está.

Finalmente, abro la puerta del baño, hay una lavadora y supongo que hay algo que él tocó recientemente.

Sábado es vago, el sol, el césped en mis pies, el agua fría, todo de eso puedo paladear y girar como fracciones de oro. Pero, me olvidé de la joya central. No puedo recordar un momento final con mi Papaw. No tengo nada. Me tortura.

Dos días antes, entré a la cabaña y busqué una cosa: una camisa. Llevé una blusa nueva a la fiesta familiar y quería empezar una lucha de agua afuera. Mi Papaw fuera granjero, por eso él tenía pocas camisas que no fueran rasgadas, descoloridas, o manchadas. Yo sabía que él no tendría un problema si yo ensucio uno de sus camisas para divertirme. Escogí una camisa café encima de la lavadora. Quité mi ropa y amarré los botones rápidamente. Necesité preparar a mis primitas para la batalla con mi hermanito.

“Avery! Tiene los globos de agua?”

En la secadora, hay solo toallas. No me satisfacen. Entonces, abro la lavadora. Identifico la camisa y mi mente se inflama otra vez. Pienso por un momento si está seguro para tocar, pero toco ni modo.

Agarro la camisa a mi pecho y lloro.

Encontraste lo que buscaste?

No sé.

TOO LATE TO TURN BACK NOW

By Carson Cawthon

I met the boy I want to spend the rest of my life with at sixteen years old. It is a blessing and a curse.

It is a blessing because we are all of each other's firsts: first first-date jitters, first time holding hands, first time arguing in a Food Lion parking lot.

It is a curse because the boy I met is not the boy I will marry. We met when we were each barely bumbling towards selfhood. We are growing up parallel with one another, but growing up always runs the risk of growing apart.

When we met he was a rapper, on Spotify and everything. I was a goner as soon as I learned he had a signature lasagna recipe. He made it for his family. I'm a sucker for a rapper with a signature recipe.

He wore basketball jerseys and short-sleeved hoodies. (Who ever heard of a short-sleeve hoodie? An oxymoronic clothing choice.) He looked down when he spoke to me. He asked if it was ok before he kissed me. He wore his shoes untied on purpose, a fashion statement.

I wore sweaters. I was aggressively baptist. I was a writer but too afraid to say so out loud. I didn't drink caffeine or shop at Old Navy, on principle.

Here was a boy who did not fit any of my categories. Maybe I was in love. Maybe I was deeply curious.

To commemorate our first month together, I burned him three CDs. Each contained music from one of my favorite genres. I traveled to that soulless wasteland known as Office Depot to carefully select the disks I would inscribe my love on. I spent an afternoon, with all the copious amounts of spare time a sixteen-year-old girl possesses, laying on my bedroom floor and selecting songs from iTunes. I proceeded to handwrite the title tracks on the front of each CD, but I stopped just short of drawing hearts on them. It was only month one, after all! There would be time for that later.

Sufficiently pleased with my gesture, I wrapped the disks and eagerly awaited my date. It all felt so romantic, so vintage. I'd never had a boyfriend before and, all of a sudden, I was making him a mixtape. I felt like the star of a teen romance.

My dashing date arrived in a collared shirt (fancy!) in his blue Jeep Patriot. Boys who drive Jeeps are obviously cool. I decided I would play it cool, too.

I was able to wait an entire fifteen minutes before asking him if he wanted his gift. I am notoriously bad at giving surprises; I get entirely too excited. I eagerly handed him the CDs, explaining that they contained all my favorite music. I imagined a future where we would go on road trips together, pop in one of these CDs, and sing at the top of our lungs together, windows all rolled down.

“Oh, cool! Thanks,” he said.

“Yeah... cool,” I replied.

The response was a little underwhelming, but I was sure he'd be more enthusiastic once he heard my carefully curated playlists. Who could resist the romantic powers of Louie Armstrong or Ella Fitzgerald?

On our next date, I hopped in the Jeep and reached to pop a CD into the radio. It was the one with The Temptation's “My Girl” on it. I thought maybe we could sing it together.

“Oh... I didn't really like *that one*,” he said. “*Maybe we can listen to something else?*”

“Yeah, yeah, that's good,” I replied.

Romance was not all the movies made it out to be.

* * *

It has been four years now. We are twenty years old. The last few years have seen a move to college, a fight on the sidewalk. The words: “If you ever speak to me like that again, I will break up with you on the spot.”

They gave also seen Thursday nights curled up on the couch, watching our favorite shows. They have seen cream soda floats and being picked up

from the airport. They have seen playlists and double dates and going back to the grocery store because he forgot the cheese.

Now we are on a road trip. All the windows are rolled down.

The Temptation's "My Girl" comes on shuffle and I sing my heart out. Our friends in the back seat croon and holler with the song. He drives on, stoic, unmoved by the music. We drop our friends back off at home. His eyes don't leave the road when he says, "You really like that song."

"Yes, I do."

"You knew all the words."

"Yes, I did."

"Why have I never heard it before?" He sounds almost affronted. I cannot believe it.

"Well, you don't like that song," I remind him. "I made you that CD all those years ago. You didn't let me play it."

He has tears in his eyes now. They drip off his eyelashes and down onto his t-shirt. We find ourselves here again. Still, just two kids bumbling towards selfhood. Still just trying to make it work.

"I'm so sorry." He looks down when he says it. I nod but now tears are falling down my face too.

On our next date, I run out of my apartment a bit late, per usual. He is parked on the curb scrolling as he waits, per usual. But this time, something is different.

As I walk closer to the car, I hear the ecclesiastical sounds of Motown. The likes of Armstrong and Fitzgerald and The Temptations were the soundtrack for our evening. We drive around, his hand resting on my knee and the classic "Too Late to Turn Back Now" by Cornelious Brothers & Sister Rose comes on.

It's too late to turn back now

I believe, I believe, I believe

I'm falling in love.

I think maybe four years is not too late to begin again.

He sings along.

HOMEMADE FRIENDS: ORIGINS OF A PARAGENIC SYSTEM

By Emery Hall

With the chaos of the morning bus ride still ringing in my ears, I pulled a crooked slate-gray door open to enter my high school sanctuary: a small city of books. Double-sided bookcases, the homes of old encyclopedias, outlined a block of wooden tables where students scribbled away at last-minute homework assignments (or snored). I passed these fellow tortured souls, peered over a strip mall of YA novels—and finally spotted a neighborhood of computers.

The 2018 yearbook would list me as an honorary library aide for this ritual: passing each and every monitor, pressing a small button on its back to awaken it. The fastest to reboot would house my prize. Eventually I settled at the winner's keyboard and clicked on a viridian folder in my Google Drive— “Storytime.”

Thirty minutes of furious typing and copy-pasting later, I would print out several one-page tales for the hapless (though consenting) peers I'd deemed trustworthy enough to read them. Today's snippet centered a school bathroom “meet-puke” between two supernaturals:

I slowly unlocked my stall and resumed my place huddled up against the wall. By the sinks, arm crutches were now tossed haphazardly on the floor.

The owner of said crutches finally dragged himself out of the next stall and settled in beside me. Once he noticed me, he visibly started and stared at me for a few seconds, unblinking.

Evergreen irises stretched around oddly catlike pupils (hub—werewolves wore contacts over that back home), barely dusted by unkempt chocolate-ish bangs.

I was jolted out of my thoughts when he croaked, “So. What color was yours?”

For my peers, that's all these scenes were: tales. Kitschy, convoluted (mishmashing half a dozen supernatural species in various slice-of-life situations)—and ostentatiously queer. Perhaps I persisted to spite every teacher that side-eyed my he/they pronoun corrections...or to vent the last

of the middle school *yaoi* phase that preceded them.

But, to me, these were the life stories of my best friends.

These ‘characters’ often kept me company at home, where I spent many evenings blasting Big Time Rush’s debut album on repeat, bingeing all six seasons of *Naruto*, and mastering every *Mario Party 6* minigame over the animosity outside my bedroom door. In the summer of 2011, months before my eleventh birthday, my mother had filed for divorce from the barracks of Qatar’s Al Udeid Air Base; my sixteen-year-old sister Judy, already grappling with PTSD, began sparring (verbally and physically) with my father, who entered a deep depression on top of his existing struggles with anger.

One afternoon, I walked in the door to find Judy wielding a butcher knife, detailing to Dad her urges to self-harm. That night I dug around the mess of my room (characteristic of a ten-year-old with undiagnosed ADHD) for the Uglydoll stationery I wrote my mother with. I drafted a letter to the *Discovery Girls* “Ask Ali” column, then hid it behind the *Little Critter* section of the bookshelf by my bed: *What do you do when your family feels broken?*

The rules of The Game were, as second graders’ games tend to be, simple. First, participants could assume any persona and roleplay any scenario they wish. (I had by then upgraded from *Sonic the Hedgehog* protagonists to *Naruto* self-inserts.) Second, participants could only conduct The Game when isolated from external parties, lest said parties ground one or both participants over an age-inappropriate utterance. Third, participants could never disclose in-Game happenings to external parties, lest said parties question a plot inspired by participants’ uninhibited access to YouTube, Adult Swim, and Investigation Discovery.

I spent most quiet days staging one-person shows for the CRT television across from my bed. In between smuggled DVD viewings of *South Park: Bigger, Longer, and Uncut*, I memorized the scripts of various standoffs, developing lives and worlds around the voices that rose from my

body. I soon preferred the summers I spoke into being over the one passing outside my window.

Upon my mother's return from deployment in September, I moved in with her to start middle school—but the years to follow offered little reprieve from that summer. Mom struggled with bipolar disorder and PTSD from her own upbringing, my stepfather Michael with trust issues and outbursts like my father's. Mom once stormed in the back door and told me, "Get your stuff, we're leaving." On the highway I was tasked with Googling nearby air force bases and shelters (to no avail); I didn't ask how I'd be getting to school the next morning, lest I reignite whatever rage we'd left behind us. We ended up patronizing a Kentucky Microtel, off an interstate that I couldn't recognize. Only upon reading Michael's message on my phone the next morning, learning of the Be On the Lookout report he'd made ("What's a bolo?" I asked), did Mom drive us back across state lines.

Very quickly, I learned that my family had enough on their plate without me contributing to the crossfire; my job was to do my homework, do my chores, and disappear. And thanks to *The Game*, I was already exploring a new paracosm to call home.

Key to the flavor of crazy that had lured me here is the phenomenon of *maladaptive daydreaming*. To escape the trauma of circumstances beyond my control, my mind searched for different memories to play in place of my past and present life; I was constantly aware of my room's true emptiness, yet I filled the silence with *what-ifs* that soon wove a folkloric tapestry of other lives. Then one day, in my mind's ear—not as hallucinations, but as intriguing thoughts I couldn't claim—the *what-ifs* began talking back.

The first name they surrendered: Evan Marion Monroe.

Both this name and its owner had gone through various iterations across various stories: Evan tended to need rescuing from beatdowns at his father's hand, and/or from an 'evil' split personality that overtook him during full moons. But on this day Evan showed up alone, in an empty

white room somewhere near my subconscious. I felt the throbbing pain in his chest, heard his sobs reverberating through my brain. While he'd escaped his own trauma, he'd also inherited the curse of my sentience—now with no one and nothing to engage it.

For months, all I had to offer him were tearful sympathies, broken whispers beneath the hum of my air conditioner in the quiet of the night. But time fostered utter fascination with his existence—and the interest was mutual. When Evan wasn't weeping, his sparks of interest haunted my thoughts as we devoured any schoolwork, YA novel, or English-dubbed anime series we could get our hands on. Before long we'd begun an entirely new *what-if* tapestry for him to reminisce: a residential school for 'young' supernaturals, whose physiological aging processes had stalled in adolescence. Jackson Academy (renamed *Pratmore Academy for Chronic Minors* in collegiate writings) would soon become the nexus for dozens of others' tapestries, beginning with an unlikely friend from our past.

We thought back to that vengeful persona that once haunted Evan. Had it not, he asked me, suffered the same fate as he—relegated to a lonely corner of another's thoughts, while that other claimed the outside world? No wonder it had grown so restless.

Suddenly, in-psyche, I saw a doorway part the walls of Evan's room. A pallid, trenchcoat-clad figure slunk in, looming six inches over Evan's meager 5'1" and peering through the vantablack antithesis to his platinum bangs. His alter ego—now brother—given form: Eclypso Linnaeus Monroe.

The three of us (who would one day exceed fifty) had now tasted a new flavor of crazy. We wouldn't find its name until our third year of college: *paragenic plurality*.

Meanwhile, in the real world, I grew tired of hoarding these fantastical happenings in secret. I began pouring all I knew of my headmates' narratives into Google Drive; I couldn't resist the impulse to spill pages into the laps of any peer who agreed to read them, or sprinkle bits and pieces

into car ride conversations with my parents. Their true import to me lay hidden beneath the guise of ‘creative writing,’ as the only cohorts I knew like us were relegated to psychiatric wards and villains’ roles in *Criminal Minds*. After so many years hiding away, I’d finally found a means to connect with people again—more importantly, in giving voice (or print) to their memories, I’d found a way to assuage my headmates’ yearning for life.

I can’t say that the lives we built were all Hallmark specials and Comedy Central sketches. Asher’s skill with bare-minimum executive function, one I’d learn to draw from in years to come, came from stories of conversion therapy and chronic depression; Evan learned to avoid the forefront of our mind when viewing true crime television, lest he suffer flashbacks of his first boyfriend’s murder. Nevertheless we persisted: in August 2018, I matriculated at Vanderbilt University with an English-communications double major.

For two years, workshops and Socratic seminars fed our collective soul—granted research papers (still too ‘real’ to suit our interests) proved our Achilles’ heel. We learned what made a compelling character or a comprehensible setting, spent sleepless nights patching plot holes in the what-if tapestries until their vividity spawned new headmates. Though we still sought refuge in a single McGill Hall dorm room, our gravest concerns were now Bubby’s weekly parties four doors down.

Then...well, 2020.

Bubby disappeared after the mid-March campus exodus. Most McGillites did, opting for remote learning the next semester—but I moved right back into my room, after my sister and I grew sick of sharing her one-bed apartment for quarantine. (I took many a Zoom class, and finished many a paper, from my car in the parking lot.) Suddenly I was spending entire days staring at talking screens, second-guessing every allergy-addled snuffle for signs of COVID-19. I’d landed right back at square one: alone, with a viral chaos lurking just outside my door.

Spring 2021 would mark my breaking point. Two late-diagnosed

neurodivergences (autism and ADHD), and now two anxiety disorders (generalized and social), spiced up the anniversary of coronavirus's takeover; Asher took the reins of our body when the stress of midterms hollowed out my *everything's fine* smile, and through four weeks of poems, screenplays, and speeches, he didn't—couldn't—let go. Our first instance of a headmate in our cohort becoming 'frontstuck.'

To make matters more interesting, my now-former psychiatrist prescribed a little devil pill (to us, at least) called Topamax. It took four days of the starting dose to limit my sleep to two hours a night, and heighten my anxiety between pills. The psychiatrist's response: *It must be wearing off too quickly for you to feel it. Up the dose.*

Within the week, anxious insomnia gave way to full-blown hypomania—but I could finally take Asher's place at the front as the heart palpitations grew too painful to let me 'detach' from my body. I shut myself in my room, pounding away at a backlog of midterms and finals work while chasing a blur of racing thoughts. Every night I practiced spiteful meditation (*f—k you, chest pain, I'll breathe as deep as I want*), took agitated jogs around Alumni Lawn with My Chemical Romance blasting in my headphones, binged episodes of *My Hero Academia* between writing stints. My mother approved of these methods when called for tips on mania management; she also quickly hung up the phone when, after a week without sleep, I called her in hysterics about a group presentation I'd surely fail. (In fact, our lackluster attempts to market Alaska pollock dishes to college students earned a C.) Asher, now the only headmate I could 'hear' in our psyche, drafted a final message to our psychiatrist: in sum, *Life is now a constant mood swing between grandiosity and utter hopelessness. I'm getting off this thing.*

Three days later, Topamax's grip on our mind finally loosened. Heavenly exhaustion weighed on our eyelids, but not before a new friend joined our cohort.

“Look alive, sunshine!” rang through the labyrinth that had now expanded from Evan's little white room—from the darkness above

descended an eight-foot shadow in a three-piece suit. His plastic mask grinned at Asher's interrogations: "So we've got fight, flight, freeze, fawn... what are you?"

Max (quite proud of his name) leaned down to Asher's level. His voice took on the hiss of a snake, its mock New York accent punctuating his grandiose design: "*Fake.*"

As in, fake it 'til you make it.

It would take another week to reestablish contact between us and anyone else in our cohort, but Max's shows of feigned confidence pushed me through the rest of finals. Simultaneously, a different curtain lifted: I realized that this headmate—and the story of every other before him—had manifested from the very trauma I'd been hiding from all these years. Asher's chronic depression grew from my anxiety-induced burnout; the rage-filled roaring of Evan's father echoed that of my father and stepfather; how trapped Eclypso once felt, locked away in someone's head...

I wish I could say this epiphany fixed the estrangement from my family. I still haven't told my father that I'm not the single person he sees, but a clown car of disjointed identities with ever-changing stories. It's a flavor of crazy just a touch too strong for most (including Judy, now with a bachelor's in psychology). They're friends to me, is all I've said—"homemade friends," to quote my sister's jokes, that I would be far worse off without.

And I don't know if The Game will ever be over. We've made eight years' worth of stories and poems and plays with our charades now; to stop here would be to forfeit our most fruitful efforts to reconnect with the people around us. Perhaps in these endeavors to capture our impossible origins, we will find the unified whole we were once meant to be.

HETEROPHOBIC: THE GAY AGENDA

By Zoe Kopecki

The problem I will be discussing today is how our world has become overrun by straight people. Out of the world's population of 7.837 billion people, almost 10 billion of them are straight. The world has been plagued by this life choice for too long, and change is long overdue. Nobody should have to see opposite-sex couples hold hands in public. Those people are oversexualizing our children and trying to force them into their lifestyle. It's becoming a trend to call yourself straight, and people are glorifying this sin. While most normal people would say that they don't have a problem with them as a person but they just can't be around them or their lifestyle, I know that we need to do something real about this issue. I know that I personally would not let my kids be around a Straight, and I'm tired of having to shield their eyes in public, these things should not be able to roam so freely. No one should be allowed to love someone of the opposite sex. These creatures are over breeding and we are running out of resources quickly because of them, our population is growing too much and it is completely out of control. They marry a thousand times just to get divorced and live in miserable marriages, and instead of trying to fix it they breed more kids into this world to try and hold their miserable lives together. But I am seemingly the first to come up with a solution that will solve not only the problem of heteros but also population control and inflation and resources. Everyone was too stupid to ever see it before. No one in their right mind would be able to disagree with me because if they even try they will then live a life of eternal suffering because they will be supporting and nearly praising this unforgivable sin.

I was sent here by our creator for this exact purpose, he put these insane visions in my head and I have heard him speak to me, so I have written it all down into what we will call the "Gay Agenda." Anyone who rejects this text and does not worship it will be put to death. He has told me that the best way to deal with this impending downfall of our society as we

know it, is to extinguish them entirely. By any means necessary these creatures need to be put to death, whether that means a regular citizen on the street, or an organized firing squad. If any regular citizen sees two opposite sex people so much as look at each other romantically, they are at liberty to punish them however they see fit without any consequences. The higher power will forgive them because they are putting an end to this unforgivable sin, therefore they are paying their debt for their sins they have committed, or will commit, and I promise you this, because he has emphasized this to me in my dreams, making sure that I just carry out his mission to end this plague.

With the demolition of the heteros there will be the obvious benefit of protecting the minds of our children and making our society whole again. No one will have to continue to pretend to tolerate the token heterosexual couples that are put into our shows just to be “special.” No one will have to worry about their children thinking it’s okay to be like these disgusting sinners. We won’t have to worry about having to see them out in public whenever we just want to go out. Past that we will no longer have to worry about unintentional breeding, therefore no more abortions, or debates about abortions. There will be only IVF to create children for gay couples who wish to have children, and therefore we will get a better hold on our economy and inflation. Only people who can financially support a child will be able to have a child, and we will not have to worry about running out of resources and will have less of a need for welfare and food stamps, there will be a lot less children in the foster care system, and less unhappy marriages. The general livelihood of society will greatly increase and children will live happier lives with happier parents. Such a simple solution has been long overlooked, until I was able to bring it to your attention. Join me in the slaying of the heterosexuals.

Now obviously I sound effing ridiculous, and nobody actually thinks like this. However, it is 2022 and gay people still have to deal with the microaggressions, persecution, and overall outright hatred towards them.

And still, in 69 countries there are laws that criminalize homosexuality. In the Russian Republic, gay people are still being tortured and murdered while no one bats an eye. While a firing squad and extermination of gay people clearly isn't the answer, change definitely has to be made especially about the mindset society has regarding the LGBTQ+ community.

AVOIDING THE AUDIENCE

By Thomas Mixon

I left my books, the ones I wrote, on benches, mostly. They were almost always abandoned, the benches, but I noticed them when I walked past, so the hope was that other pedestrians would notice them too, especially when they saw a book on the seat, with a little note, held down against the wind with small stones which I collected in the woods and hauled around in my backpack. The note was typed, and it said something like, This book is for you, it was left here on purpose, take it. I don't have copies of the books or the notes anymore, but I remember I left just over a hundred, in public spots across New England, in 2010.

The books took a long time to assemble, so after a while I started to leave just 2 or 3 books in a town, and then leave a bunch of little folded and stapled "samplers," which had a few excerpted chapters in them.

It wasn't modesty that kept me from hanging around, seeing who, if anyone, picked up my novel. I didn't want to know my readers. I think I even wrote that, in the "sampler." I wasn't on social media, but someone found me via an old WordPress blog, which I promptly deleted.

There was one time, though. I saw a middle-aged man bending down, staring at something atop the wooden slats. I had circled around Newburyport, was about to head home. His hunching over told me immediately, without needing to get closer, that he was looking at the book, deciding whether or not to pick it up, whether it was a trick, a hoax. Even I wondered if it was. Real, I mean. I had some insecurities about my book. It was the length of a novel, it had chapters, but it was kind of all over the place. It was also bound with glue and found cardboard. I "borrowed" novelty paper from work, so the pages were sometimes different colors too, pink, orange, blue.

My best friend would send me tips about where to find card stock or material of similar thickness. He clued me in to a family that had just bought a big treadmill, and they invited me over to break down the package

it came in. They offered me a knife, but I preferred to use my hands. I was romantic, then, and had a higher tolerance for pain. I wanted to feel my book, every iteration of my book, as much as possible. I may have told them this, while I was carting off the layers, because I felt a little awkward, about the project, about quitting my job and living off credit card convenience checks that I had to figure how to transfer over to a new 0% offer every six months or so.

They invited me to Seder where we sanitized our hands profusely. Someone had just gotten a transplant of some kind, or had been in the hospital for some disease. I didn't listen. I wanted to write things that weren't at all related to my real life. I made sure not to catch the details, and never wrote about that Seder, never wrote about transferring balances on credit cards, or the man who, curving his spine and holding it at a superfluous angle for much longer than I ever would, considered whether or not he should take the book. I looked away. I never found out.

FICTION



Korbin Hatcher, *Tomato Orange & Cake*, Oil on Canvas, 2022

THE PREY

By Ameerah Brown

Just as the shorthand of the monthly clock hung above ten, the heat hung along with it, choking the traveling animals, and sizzling above the stone well in the middle of the kingdom. As the lion stalked forward from the mighty west, the zebra strode from the humble residence of the east, the eagle from the glorious north, and the snake from the misfortunes of the corrupt south. They all met in the center. Eagle perched on the rough stone edge; eyes trained on the bright distorted reflection. Zebra quickly dunked its head in—the water had to be better than the killer death rays burning against his fur, and Lion launched up on its mighty back paws and splashed a puddle of water for the hissing snake. With this they began to gulp the warm water, letting it run down their chin—drips hydrating the ground. When their throats were no longer scratchy, Eagle swooshed away, Zebra turned back east, Snake slithered back south, and Lion pounced off the hot stone heading back west. As they all headed home, a tiny crack formed against the frame of the well and a pebble fell into the water creating a dance of ripples one after another. The heat simmered right above it all.

The sprays of honey yellows and crimson reds spread across the land, a dark glimpse of the eagle etched in the sky could be seen as he approached the lion's territory. The wind splashing against his mane as Eagle landed before him.

“Lion. Lion,” Eagle pestered. “Say we get a drink before the others?”

Lion licked his front paw then patted his hair down, resting his head softly to the side—eyes shut closed.

“We should go before Zebra gets there. He always drinks too much,” Eagle flapped his wings. “It's going to be hot today. Hotter than yesterday. Zebra is going to drink all the water.”

With the mention of heat, Lion opened an eye and then two. He sluggishly began to stretch out his front paws, then his back, and with one

quick shake of his wild mane, he was ready to go. His eyes locked on Eagle, his claws scratching the dirt shifting weight to weight. Swiftly, one big paw came swatting at Eagle, and then Lion took off east. Eagle quickly readjusted himself, then he flew off into the burning sky.

Neither of them thought of each other as friends, but there was an understanding. They both sat in front of the well, taking all the cool sips possible before the rays of the sun could burn the water. Gulp after gulp, their understanding grew—Lion and Eagle. When Lion looked up, the sun was smiling down at him while an open blue sky wrapped around him. He turned to Eagle and gave a small nod up and Eagle was off. Lion returned to his drink.

When Zebra and Snake came into view, Eagle came too, circling twice in the northern sky as the sun blazed against them. Lion sat on his bottom, paws pressed against the ground looking out at the fellow animals. They would never know. The heat had dried the remnants of any indulgent water that stuck to his fur. The truth had been burned by the rays of the sun, and Lion was content with that. Snake slithered up first from the suspicious south as Eagle landed, and then Zebra came up from the east.

Zebra looked at the well and quickly back up. His head glancing over at Eagle, then Lion, Snake, and finally back to the well. “What happened to all the water?”

Snake hissed, and Lion moved forward. Zebra looked around again and then back at the water bringing his head a little closer, “There was much more water leftover, yesterday.”

“Says the one, who drinks the most out of us all,” Eagle chimed up; chest puffed wings back.

“But there was more water when we left yesterday,” Zebra turned, taking a step towards Eagle. His face lightened up. “Unless you came back and drank some. You’re always up in the sky flying around. It could’ve been you.”

Eagle leapt off the stone, flapping his wings quickly landing again.

Ripples splashed against the inside of the well. The crack releasing a drop down the outside. “How dare you accuse me! The protector of the grand northern skies. I watch over you—”

Lion had heard enough. “What we have here is enough,” he declared. “It’s hot, so let us cool ourselves with a drink.”

No one spoke, so Lion reached up on his paws against the well and splashed a puddle for Snake. Then they all began to drink, and when they were finished, Zebra went back east, Eagle flew north, and Lion went back to the mighty west. As Snake turned to slither south, in the brightness, it caught a reflection of a water droplet down the split. Snake hissed and headed back south.

The coming days were followed by cracks in the dirt splitting like hair ends. The sun was hanging in the sky with the eagle who refused to let the moon come out and play. Eagle flew from one land to another, reporting back to Lion who rested each time. His head against his paws, eyes closed, and ears turned down with his tail tucked tightly in. Snake knew.

After each meeting at the well, Snake watched as the crack spilled out more water—something Eagle had missed. And Snake timed Eagle’s route starting east, then south, and lastly west.

Snake waited until he knew. Then he began. When the sun would say goodnight, leaving the heat to marinate above them with the stars, he would slither back to the center while Eagle was out west. His tongue tasting the cool water of the night, drinking up the waste of the well. No one knew. He would slither back before Eagle flew over the well for a last-minute check before heading north. When the mornings would come, whatever possible water crumbs of the well were already taken care of. If only Snake could’ve been satisfied. He had never had more than what was given to him. His southern land was always looked at with distrust and governed with such diligence. He had finally won in life. So, he waited for his morning helping—not contributing to Zebra’s cries of the diminishing water supply. Snake knew, but eventually Eagle knew too. And in the morning meetings,

Eagle began to eye Snake, blocking out the cries of Zebra.

Eagle waited for a night when the stars did not come out to dance, hiding against the canvas of the sky. There was Snake, in the center of the kingdom. Eagle circled the sky twice and flew west. He landed at the head of the lion, who was sprawled out on his back, legs up against the air and paws tilted to the side—one pressed flat against his stomach, the other on the dust of the ground.

“Lion, Lion! It’s an urgent matter. Wake up,” Eagle said.

Lion lazily rolled over, flipping to lay on his stomach. Resting his head against his front paws, eyes closed, ears open.

“I caught the snake drinking from the well. He’s drinking all the water. What should we do?”

Lion yawned, “We drink the water when no one is around.”

“Yes, but he’s going to drink all the water.”

“It has been extremely hot lately,” Lion mumbled uninterested.

“Yes, but he’s going to drink all the water...We’ll have no water left. What should we do?”

“Rain will come soon.” His ears fell flat against his head as his mane covered them up.

There would be no water left if Lion, Eagle, and Snake kept drinking extras. Eagle knew this for certain. So, while the sky was still painted of dark blues, Eagle flew south scoping for his prey.

Snake had just finished his fill, slithering back home to the suspicious lands of the south. An unsettling presence casted over Snake, and he wasn’t sure if it had to do with the liquid-full guilt in his stomach or something else. Before Snake could even consider, Eagle swooped down clamping behind his head. Snake tried to play dead, but Eagle was smart and with one quick motion of his sharp beak, Eagle crushed Snake’s spine. As the crack echoed, in the night, the crack in the well spread several stones down and out against the south end. Snake laid limp in Eagle’s mouth as he continued to fly away. Snake was now dead, and Eagle would never know.

When the morning light spread across the land, the heat was waiting for the sun to catch up. The heat blistering—leaving the animals uncomfortable in their skin. Lion sluggishly walked up to the center, his mane glistening in the light. Then came Zebra from the humble east and Eagle out of the sunlight, landing gracefully on the stone. Lion and Zebra looked to the south as the dirt sizzled.

“Where is Snake?” Zebra asked.

“I killed him,” proclaimed Eagle, chest puffed wings back. Lion and Zebra turned. The heat rising.

Zebra stepped forward, “Why would you do that?”

“I caught him drinking from the well last night.”

“You should have told us. We could’ve punished him together.”

“He was going to drink all the water. So, I took action.”

“Lion, what do you have to say,” Zebra turned to Lion, but Lion’s tongue stuck to the top of his mouth. The heat catching his words. “You knew, didn’t—”

“Tell me, Zebra. Could you have done it,” Eagle edged up to Zebra, trapping the heat. “The rod of justice must be served. I kept us alive.”

“The sun doesn’t rise nor set in the north, Eagle. Justice can’t be found in the sky,” Zebra protested back.

Lion’s teeth came out, an echoing deep roar bursting past causing Eagle and Zebra to fall back.

“This is our center, our heart, where no battle will reside,” Lion snarled out, his razor teeth gleaming against the morning sun. He slammed a paw against the stone—the crack spreading south to east.

Zebra cowered back safely to the east. As the days passed, Zebra would walk towards the well, but Eagle stalked the sky circling above. So, Zebra turned back each time away from the threat of Lion and Eagle, but Lion was worried about Zebra. As the heat continued to climb the staircase to hell, Zebra was nowhere to be seen. Lion told Eagle to make sure Zebra received water. However, Eagle would do no such thing, the water in the

well was diminishing quicker as the heat grew with each passing day. So, Zebra laid against the common lands of the east as the heat took his life along with the eastern landscape.

The sun hung above Lion as he waited at the well with Eagle. They began taking sips when Eagle spoke up.

“Zebra has died.”

“How could that be,” Lion looked up, interrupting his quench. “I told you to make sure he received water.”

“He was going to drink all the water—”

Lion roared viciously. He crouched forward on his paws and began to circle the well.

“It’s been so hot. We had little water left,” Eagle justified. “We would’ve died.”

Lion pounced over the side of the well, but Eagle flew back adding more time to his life. However, Lion wasted no time. He snarled and swung his right claw at Eagle’s wings, catching one. Eagle fell slightly, and Lion tried to pounce again. His sharp teeth aimed for Eagle’s throat, slightly grazing the soft white fur. He missed.

Eagle had evaded him again, but the heat had found a way into Lion’s thirst. As Eagle tried to fly out of reach, Lion hurled himself up—the might of the west on full display. His arms stretched out with his claws catching his prey. His claws dug into Eagle’s wings, dripping the brightest shade of blood against white. They crashed into the dirt stuck together. Lion slammed a crimson-soaked paw against Eagle’s throat, squashing him to the ground as his nails pierced into the skin. Eagle squirmed desperately as he looked up at the sky. Lion slid his body weight over Eagle’s—the squirming ceasing to an end. His wings lost fight as clouds began to erase the light of day.

“I thought we had an understanding,” Lion said above the lifeless body.

The stones of the well crumbled behind him as fresh rain dropped from above. Lion glanced ahead, behind, and to the east catching the soft warm water droplets. Then he went west and didn’t look back.

NO APPLAUSE

By Dylan James

Oliver left my apartment with a smile on his face. Less than twenty minutes later he crashed his car into a tree, flying face first through his windshield dead. His car had scrunched into itself like a sandwich being stepped on, and the severed skin of his face dangled off of the shattered glass of his windshield like a mere skin mask. In a matter of seconds, my best-friend was gone.

The news came my way an hour after it happened. Oliver's mom called me, unable to even get the words out. When she finally managed to speak her words hit me like a train. Sixteen years of friendship—through the trenches of life together—reduced to nothing. Oliver's smile no more. His engineering career forever on hold. His family destroyed. His girlfriend, Casey, leveled.

I was broken.

Oliver's funeral fell on a Friday; an ill-starred day marked by unfortunate rainfall. Since we were the two closest people to Oliver outside of his family, Casey and I went together. There was no open casket to view but watching Oliver's casket get lowered into the ground sure was something. Casey started crying uncontrollably at the sight of it, her cries shivering with the desperate yearning of a seven year relationship. Oliver and Casey were going to get married. They were going to have kids too. When his casket thumped against the dirt six feet down, Casey watched those dreams get buried.

After Oliver's funeral, a reception was held at his mom's house. People flooded inside, many who I had never met, mumbling the quiet hushes of death while decked out in black. Photos of Oliver were on display and spread all over the house too; from infancy, to his rowdy elementary years, to the days of high-school baseball.

Oliver had been one heck of a catcher. I found the photo of us during our junior year, arms wrapped around one another, rejoicing as we had just

won states. I missed playing baseball. I missed Oliver. That photo was the warmest knife. When Oliver's dad arrived at the reception, he immediately pointed it out to me.

"I love that photo of you two." He wiped a tear away. "You guys had such a great team that year."

I agreed. Oliver's dad loved baseball, he loved Oliver, and he sure loved his booze. The man was a raging alcoholic but only Oliver and his mom truly knew how spiteful he'd get after one too many. A few years back, Oliver's mom and dad had gotten divorced all because of his dad's drinking problem—a fact that Oliver told me himself. Oliver told me other things about it all too. The divorce came as a shock to most people but it didn't shock me.

I sauntered about the house, soon finding Oliver's mom and Casey out in the kitchen. Casey was crying still, and Oliver's mom held onto her with a sincere embrace. Oliver's mom spotted me and smiled at me, but I knew it best to leave the room. I went out the backdoor and headed out to the backyard, soon sitting on the top step of the deck.

Out in front of me, a bunch of little kids were playing on a swing-set, swinging and running about in their little black suits and dresses. Their giggles made me happy. I pulled out a cigarette and lit up. The air felt nice too; cool and dewy after the rain had subsided.

I took a puff and exhaled, smoke dancing through the air. A little girl noticed the smoke and came skipping my way soon enough with a smile on her face. I recognized her the closer she got too. Her name was Sadie and she was Oliver's favorite cousin. He had always talked about her and how funny she was. I flicked my cig into a bush as she sat down right beside me.

"Cigarettes can kill you, you know." She told me.

"Oh, I know. So *don't smoke, alright? It's bad for you.*"

"Then why do you do it?"

An inquisitive one. I shrugged my shoulders. "So Oliver was your cousin, huh?"

“Yeah.” She started biting her nails. “Thing is, I really didn’t see him much. Only once a year at Christmas—that was it. Do you think heaven is a real place?”

“I don’t know...what do you think?”

“I think it is. I like to imagine that grandma and Oliver are both there waiting for us to join them. Then we can all be together again.”

“It’s a nice thought for sure.”

“Yeah. Anyway...my mom said that you were the last person to see Oliver alive.”

“Yes. I was.”

“I have a question...”

“Shoot.”

“Did Oliver have any last words? Like, did he say anything to you before he died?”

I chuckled, reached for a cigarette but thought better of it. Oliver had last words alright. I had replayed my final moments with him so many times in my head. They were sacred to me. As Sadie stared at me waiting for an answer, and as those final moments with Oliver seared through my brain, I sighed.

“Yeah,” I looked over at her, “Oliver had last words. That night before he left my apartment, he grabbed his coat and threw it on just like always. We then chatted for a bit in my doorway too. We talked about the Milwaukee Brewers, his job, my job, this goofy video game we used to play as kids—and then when it was all said and done, he said, *‘see you later man’—and that was it. As simple as that. Those were Oliver’s last words.*”

“Were those really his last words...?”

“Yup.”

“Oh...how *boring. In music class, my teacher Mrs. Summers taught me what Beethoven’s last words were. They were so much better.*”

“Yeah? What were they?”

“*Friends applaud, the comedy is finished.*”

I laughed aloud—such a profound thing to leave an eight year old's mouth. She had enough of me and skipped back over to the swing-set, jumping on a swing at once and giving it a ride, getting higher and higher with each swing she took. Carefully, I grabbed another cigarette. I took a drag but there was no applause.

AND SO WAS THE SUN

By Hannah Tirlea

“We can't go there. Past that part of the yard,” Eli said, pointing towards the tree line just beyond his mother's garden.

He and Kyra were sitting among the wilting purple petunias, plucking the petals off while they spoke. Kyra watched the way he dissected each petal, pulling it apart as slow as possible and then squishing it to a pulp. She followed suit, crushing an especially dry one between her thumb and forefinger, and flicking it to the ground. An ant crawled in the dirt by her boot and she raised a foot slightly, bringing it back to the earth only when the ant was fully under the shadow of her shoe.

It was nearing sunset. They'd spent their Saturday getting on Eli's rusty old swing set, and seeing who could jump off when the swing was at its highest. It felt a little like flying, closer and closer to the sun. From time to time, Eli would plop himself down on the grassy lawn behind her to watch her leap. She knew he just stared at her. He had started doing that this past year. It was weird. It seemed like his eyes were always just there, peering into her in a way they hadn't before. She figured, though, that this time he was mesmerized by her agility- the way her legs pumped her higher and higher, the way she looked almost like a bird suspended for just one second in the air before gravity dragged her back now. After a while, they'd collapsed in his mother's garden, listening to the sound of the wind and swapping stories. A crow sat on the powerline above their heads, watching.

Kyra's stomach grumbled. She ignored it. Being hungry meant going home, and the day had been much too fun to end it now. Instead, she pointed, “But what's back there? Ya know, *beyond* those trees?”

Eli shrugged, “More trees. They start and just keep going. For like a mile. All the way till you get to the creek bed.”

He focused on another petal, one that still had life left in it. When he squeezed a fist over it, a soft act of violence, his hands glistened wet. *Nasty*,

Kyra thought. He reached for another petal, but before he could do anything, she said, “That sounds cool. Why wouldn’t we go there?”

He didn't reply. The petal disappeared into his hand. Kyra found herself training her eyes at the trees to avoid looking at him. The woods were a bit spooky, she had to admit, but she liked it all the same. Sometimes, scary things were the most fun. A few weeks back, her mom allowed to watch her first ever horror movie, and ever since, she had sought out that same feeling - the racing heart, the heaving chest, the ultimate feeling of winning when the spooky, bad guy finally kicked the bucket. The woods up ahead didn't have any monsters in them. They probably didn't even have a serial killer. But they did have lots and lots of what her mom liked to call “atmosphere.” The thick grove of trees were tangled up together, limbs outstretched over limbs. When the wind blew, the branches writhed there. Unable to escape, they just kept growing all piled over one another. Kyra watched a leaf twirl down and land in the grass just beyond where they could not go, resting there as if to taunt her to follow. Beside her, Eli remained silent. She nudged him once more. “Seriously, why?”

His chubby cheeks were pink- from the chill of the autumn evening or embarrassment, she didn't know. Finally, he blurted, “My mom can't see us. It goes back too far. ”

Kyra rolled her eyes. “And?”

Eli avoided her gaze. “And ya know... she's suppose to heck in on us.”

“What, like we're babies?”

“No, like we're in *middle school*.”

Kyra groaned. She knew what he meant. Ever since the talk about the birds and stupid bees, everyone acted so weird. The boys in her class looked at her like she had three eyes and her parents had stopped letting her have sleepovers with Eli. She didn't get why it was such a big deal. Being older shouldn't mean things got lamer. She eyed the forest line, the way the trees swallowed everything up, and then looked back on her friend, the way he was digging his fingers into the soil now. She socked him in the arm. And

grinned.

“Hey! What was that for?”

“For being a baby, that’s what. Why do you care what your mom says, anyways?” She grabbed his hand, getting dirt on her own, and dragged him up and over to the tree line.

“I don’t! I don’t care,” he protested. He wriggled out of her grasp and stopped just short of the woods, crossing his arms. “And I’m not a baby.”

“Oh, yeah?” She glared, wiping her hands on her pants at the sight of the mud he’d smeared. Before her, Eli looked frozen solid. She gave the final blow. “If you’re not a complete loser, prove it.”

She whipped around towards the forest and walked in without a second thought. She had taken a good ten steps when she paused. *Is he not going to follow? Really?* Going in here was fine with a friend, but alone, she didn’t know if she could take it. She’d never been good with directions, got herself lost in her own neighborhood riding bikes plenty of times. *Can I find my way back on my own? What if something happens and there’s no way to get help? Would he really just leave me in here?* Another set of images flashed in her mind- big bears with giant claws, and vampire bats, and Gretel without Hansel or any breadcrumbs. It was too much. Just as she was about to retreat, she heard footsteps behind her. Something rattled loose in her chest and she let out the breath she hadn’t known she was holding. “Took you long enough,” she called back.

It was darker in the forest than Kyra anticipated. The canopy above their heads cast the rest of the forest floor in long dark shadows, slivers of light poking through the cracks. Sticks and stones dotted the uneven ground, and Kyra was careful not to stumble. This wasn’t the kind of place to run. Instead, she placed each foot in front of the other purposefully to avoid breaking an ankle. Her old best friend, Molly, had broken an ankle in the second grade and looked silly hobbling around the hallways. Kyra wouldn’t be caught dead looking that dumb. So each step was calculated, feet hitting the earth just so.

Eli was less graceful. He walked with a wobble, forgetting to watch where he was going. Each time she looked back at him, she noticed that he wasn't scanning for tree roots on the ground, but rather, looking up directly at her. Even when she wasn't looking at him, she could feel his eyes drilling into the back of her skull. She shivered and then spoke, "So uhh...you like...plotting my murder or something? You're way too quiet."

"Nah," he said. "Just thinking."

"Okay...? So think out loud then. You're creeping me out..." she said, then added loud enough that he could still hear it, "...weirdo." Somewhere in the distance, a twig snapped.

"My mom used to take me out here," Eli said. His footprints overlapped her own, heavy and hard against the forest floor. "It was one of her favorite places to go...ya know... before."

"Before she went cuckoo," Kyra said, twirling her finger in the air next to her head. She had no clue how Eli could keep on living with his mom. Kyra knew that people like her don't normally get to take care of kids. At least, that's what had happened with Katy Penning in the grade above them. Her dad beat up on her so bad that she had to go live with her aunt in the next county. Eli didn't have an aunt, or anybody else. He talked about it sometimes when he got sad. So if his mom didn't take care of him, they'd take him away somewhere far- somewhere with a bunch of strangers. So he was stuck, she guessed, dealing with his mom's craziness until who knows when. Now, every time he mentioned his mother, he didn't know quite what to say, caught alternating between coming to her defense and complaining about her.

"Oh, shut up."

"Hey, you're the one who told me about it. I'm just repeating what you said. Over. And over. And over again."

"She's not crazy. She's just... I dunno. Working it out."

"Throwing dirty dishes at your dad is 'working it out' to you?" She threw her hands up. "No, dude. If your mom was doing better, then why'd

your dad leave?”

“Sometimes, you gotta leave,” he said.

“Sure, sure. All I’m saying is-”

He stopped walking, his fists balled by his side. She remembered the petals from the garden, the way he drained them down flat, and wondered if he thought about them too as he spoke. “This isn’t *nice*. Bringing it up. You know what? Whatever. Let’s go back.”

Kyra went over to him and took his arm once more, gently this time. “Hey.” The word felt silly in her mouth. Weirdly shaped. Too wide. “Hey,” she repeated. Something about the way he looked at her made her mouth feel dry. His eyes, so brown they looked black, felt like they were piercing her, shrunken down to small slits in his face. For a second, he looked unrecognizable to her- a stranger in a familiar body. For as long as she’d known him, he’d never looked like that before. So quietly it was scarcely a thought, a voice in her head said, *Maybe you’ve never known him at all... Maybe you’ve never known what he wants from you.*

Somewhere overhead, a bird cawed. She jolted out of her own head and looked towards the sky, “You, uh... you think that’s an eagle?”

He softened. Not much. But enough to make the panic boiling around in her brain die down. “No, idiot. Eagles don’t live here.”

They began walking again towards the creek, side by side now. Kyra kept him talking, asking, “Where do they live?”

“I dunno. Like D.C. or somewhere like that. Not Kentucky, dummy.”

“*You’re* the dummy,” she said, but glanced over to test the waters. His face remained neutral- same lips, same brows, same nose as before. She didn’t know why, but the feeling that he was shifting into something else when she wasn’t looking crept up on her. It was as if the second she took her eyes off him, he was a stranger again walking around in her friend’s place.

“No, *you’re* the dummy,” he said, and she internally agreed.

She distracted herself with thoughts of eagles, listening for birds in the distance that did not sound. “Hey, Eli? I’m really-”

“Let’s not talk about it. ‘Kay?’”

His voice sounded strained, but Kyra tried to brush it off. “‘Kay.”

They walked on. Fallen leaves crunched under their feet like bird bones. The trees were growing closer and closer together, and they zigzagged through them. Occasionally, one of the trees they came across were toppled over, so they’d climb. Swing each leg over the thick log and propel forward. They moved onward towards the creek bed until Kyra asked to stop to catch her breath. They both sat on a fallen log, the inside hollowed out by bugs or rot. Next to her, Eli picked the caked dirt out of his fingernails without saying anything. Words came tumbling out of her mouth before she knew what she was saying. “So the creek- is it big? Can we swim in it?”

“Probably. It’s been a while since I’ve seen it. Can’t remember. But it’s too cold to swim.” His voice darkened at the last part, and Kyra saw an opportunity to lighten it again.

“You’re just chicken,” she teased. “I bet there’s all sorts of germs in the water. Parasites and amoebas and skinny fish with razor teeth.”

“No. No, I know what you’re doing.” He picked a medium-sized stone out of the dirt and tossed it lightly in the air. It thumped lightly in his hands with each throw. “You’re just trying to bait me into going into the water when we get there. But you know what, Kyra? You’re just trying to avoid it *yourself*.”

“Bull! Why would *I* be scared?”

The moment she finished, Eli tossed the rock at a tree just up ahead with enough force it knocked a small branch down. The noise made her jump and she placed a hand to her chest. Eli looked at her and smiled- *have his teeth always looked so white?* - and said quietly, “Cause if you swim, you’ll have to take your clothes off.”

“Oh, gross,” she said as a reflex. She moved to punch him again, but he tensed up. Something about it made her bring her fist down. She pressed

on, and her throat squeezed tight as she talked, “Dude. That’s so weird. Why would you think that?”

“I dunno.”

His voice was monotone. She couldn’t tell what he was thinking. “You got like one brain cell? I can swim with clothes on.”

“Not in movies,” he said. “In movies, they swim without them in creeks and stuff.”

“This isn’t a movie.”

“Yeah. I dunno.” He was much closer to her than before. *When did he get so close?*

“You thinking about me with no clothes?” she asked, moving away just a little.

He inched closer, his knee touching hers. It felt wrong, like spiders crawling on her skin or getting covered in mud and needing to shower. When he spoke, his tone was unrecognizable. “I dunno.”

It hit her, suddenly. The reason for his weirdness. All of it. “Oh my God. You got a crush on me!”

He recoiled, drawing his knee from hers like it stung. “What?”

She felt lighter, freer. She couldn’t believe she hadn’t realized before. A laugh billowed out of her so loudly that a nearby critter scurried away. “That’s why you didn’t want to come in here without your mommy. You got a crush! Oh my god. I can’t wait to tell everyone. They’ll never believe it.”

“Kyra, stop.”

“Why didn’t you just tell me? Were you scared-?”

“KYRA.” His voice reverberated in the trees. Something in her chest sank to her gut. He had stood up when he yelled, and now leered over her. His hands were shaking and she could see parts of his fingers were just barely stained purple, echoes of the time before in the garden when they were friends and only so. *He wants something from you, a voice warned. He wants you. You.*

“You’re so... so...”

“Hey, man, I was just asking-”

“No!” His face was so red she thought he’d pass out.

She clambered backwards off the log and pressed herself against a tree, her spine in line with the bark. “Eli?”

“I’m sick of it. I’m just sick of it.” He wasn’t looking at her, and had started pacing slightly.

“Sick of what?” Her voice trembled. *Was it darker here? Where’d the sun go?*

“You! I’m sick of you. Poking fun at me. All the time. It’s like I can’t do anything without you just... I don’t even know! You’re supposed to be my friend.”

“I *am* your friend.”

“A shitty one!”

She flinched at the curse word and looked to the trees around her as if to ask if they had just heard him say it too. The trees didn't stir, so she looked to the sky. *Why is it so dark? Really? Did a cloud pass over the sun? Or have we been walking so long that it's nightfall?*

“Kyra,” his voice was metal and soft, but loud- too loud- *where did the sun go?* He was looking at her, but it felt like he saw right through her- past her clothes and flesh and bones to that sticky stuff in her soul that kept telling her she was in danger.

“I was just joking,” she said and hated that she said it.

“I know. Close your eyes.”

“What?”

“Close ’em. I dare you.”

The trees were too close. She couldn’t breathe. “A dare? Now?”

“A dare. Now. And then, we’ll go. And we won’t talk about it anymore. ‘Kay?”

She gulped. Why was he looking at her like that? And would the sun come back soon? She really needed it to be lighter outside. The hairs on the back of her neck stood up straight.

“Kay?” he repeated.

Just get it over with, Kyra, she thought to herself. He'll give you a good punch and you'll get going. She felt her mouth form the word, “Kay.”

Her eyes shut. She braced herself for the pain. None came. She waited. A second. Another. “Eli? C'mon, man.”

There was silence.

“Can I open my eyes?”

Nothing.

“Eli?”

She waited a moment more, and then slowly opened them again, expecting for him to jump and spook her. Yet as she looked out into the woods, she saw no one there. She scanned the trees, but they were thick- so thick. Was he hiding? “This isn't *funny*. Come out, dude.” She turned in a circle, looking for eyes among the foliage. Everything looked the same. Where would he have gone? *And which way did they come from?* He couldn't have just left her here, not like this. Not when it was dark, and she didn't know the way home, couldn't find her way back- not on her own. “Eli?”

But Eli was gone, and so was the sun.

POETRY



Shannon Torrey, *Untamed Fem*, Ink on Watercolor Paper, 2022

INTO THE SUN WE GO BLINDLY

By Eli Apple

My mother's voice was the left-behind remnants of an earthquake, pieces of cracked brick spilling out over the phone when she told me that your hematoma was not a hematoma after all. I had not been outside for five days, and the sun was in my face, a thin strip of light escaping the chokehold of closed blinds only to die once meeting my eyes. That night, I prayed for you and hoped for rain.

Tears appeared in my mother's eyes as she watched strangers lay their hands on you. Hands enclosed behind white satin gloves, the imprint of fingers leaving with them fleeting prayers for your "speedy recovery." Impressions became incisions. A doctor's medical gloves, a scalpel preparing to insert a port into your chest. Two hundred miles away, my hands wrapped themselves up into fists as I lay in my bed, tightening an imaginary spear in my hand as I fought against that invisible army in my mind. Yet my spear falls short, cleaved in two as chemo now spills through and out of that port and into you.

In literature, rain means unhappiness. I tell this to my mother, stepping into the car. In the past three days, we have fallen from the sky with you. Raindrops become lost in the deluge only to be crushed against the asphalt. Our splattered edges show, but already their impression is fading from the pavement. Lost to the sun, bidding us to dry. I didn't tell my mother until later that rain also means rebirth. We evaporate, our singed edges floating back up to the clouds, and

The rain lashes out,
Consoled, clearing the path for
The sun to come home.

THE BIRDS HAVE VANISHED DOWN THE SKY

By Eli Apple

after Li Bai

I. June, 2021

5:03 AM and I'm at the airport, pretending the
Silhouettes of airplanes alighting in the dark are birds,
Reminding myself that the lost signs of stars in the sky have
Not exploded into their death-song, but temporarily vanished
Beneath city light smog. I'm going down,
Passing through the arrival terminal's skeleton, skirting the
Rib cage of unpeopled exits and driving to welcome the sky.
I'm turned around, on my way to the city now,
And there have been no departures, no arrivals, except the
Sun, now rising like a red toddler eating up the last
Leftovers of the night and shining on the first morning cloud.
Later, standing in the rain and watching as water drains,
I think of the sun that did not go away.

II. November, 2021

I push the IV that ends in your chest as we
Make your hospital laps and then we sit
And you're watching movies and I'm thinking that together
Is a word that I've not thought of in a long time. The-

oretically your hair might not fall out, but already there's a mountain,
Chemo-induced fallen curls creating a carnivorous peak and
We're left in its shadow. I return to my room and there's only me, me-

Andering thoughts tucked to my chest in a silent plea, unable to sleep until
A cough syrup river washes me away. When I wake, the only
Thing to be done is to scale the sierra, solitarily exploring with the-

Atrical vigor and if I reach the peak of that mountain-
Ous hair you will be there, okay. The sun remains.

ATLAS AND ME

By Eli Apple

If you are Atlas, let me be
The skies that you carry.
My hair will flow through your hands
As you count each of my stars;
Your arms will wrap around me,
My body nebulous and lithe and twisting,
The wisps of a nimbus, giving you reprieve.
Atop your shoulders, I'll tell you stories
Of what I see: Soldiers laying down
Swords and walking into the sea,
Bodies drifting out to meet the waves'
Embrace in pelagic harmony.
My hair, my body, my voice—
All given forever to you out of love
for holding me

Above. And below

I begin to wonder: Do you miss Clymene? Do thoughts of chained
Prometheus
Rule your agony? So when Heracles arrives, golden
Apples spilling from every smile dripping with duplicity,
I will see your duty clash with hesitant longing. And when his hands craft
tricks
To bind you to me, let me be the whistle of the wind, rewriting history—
A whisper in your ear to restore a former life: *Never look back, but always
Look up. Let me, held in the arms of another, still glimpse you*
In the moments when my funereal rainfall washes away your debris.

BY THE RIVER

By Ace Boggess

We drank deeply of night,
didn't we, walking the riverbank,

observing large rats
we never knew could swim,

drawing mandalas in silt
laid by recent high water,

casting bottles with obscure pleas
for help, stopping at the playground

to ride forgotten swings of youth.
We were buzzed & high &

desperate for a bond
of shared understanding,

lovers who made love
only in the calm between us,

telling our stories &
writing new ones

by wandering place to place
while going nowhere.

LONELY IS THE ORACLE

By Ace Boggess

Ask, I say, but there is no call & response
with the past. A woman said “Are you lonely?”
once, & I, lacking a live voice, wrote my reply
in lines. I have continued writing since,

trying to answer the same question
although it arrives in different forms &
tenses. A cereal box once asked me about desire,
a roadside sign if I needed help or love or god.

The questions are mine. I command them,
trained tigers putting on a show,
ready to turn on me. Won’t they?
They’ll hover over my corpse like monoliths

with teeth. Still, I summon, & they come;
answer, & vanish into memory
like a love affair with a stranger
in a stranger’s house that now stands empty.

ROOTS

By Ameerah Brown

We find ourselves labeled in those dirty monochromatic housing projects

I don't think they can taste all the flavors of life like I can

Hallways filled with fresh baked dough

The trickling scent of garlic salted beef and dirty rice from floor 2

The rich flavors of shared poverty

Not too dark	Brown is the calluses that fathers return home with
Not too light	To the branch of their wives
My mud red brown skin	To the warm embrace of their brown blooded children
Some call it a broken piece	Engulfed in the honey chocolate love
From the root of the maple syrup tree	Deep
The Indigenous to Blacks	And
I call it a dirty sink pool	Deeper
Each footprint out getting lighter and lighter	Into the honey chocolate love

Brown is the heritage of my people

Molded by the African dirt and the African Sun

Generation after Generation

Like the way wood became brick and brick became stone

On my skin

Red rushes to the surface

When they teased four-year-old me that lil Kevon liked me

Red rushes to the surface

When eleven years later his older brother told me he loved me

My mud red brown skin

Browne is the British surname	B	Lay your head to rest in the bedding of the Earth
That was tattooed into the spine of fathers	R	Six feet under
The "e" buried in those wheat fields	O	Woven into the roots of a new birth
Blowing past cotton fields, hanging trees	W	Molded from Clay
Straight to the factories	N	By the hands of your Lord

SUPPLY AND DEMAND

By Carson Cawthon

An object is worth
whatever someone is
willing to sacrifice
to obtain it.

I wonder how many
women never felt
permission to like their
bodies until someone
else liked it
first.

THE MONSTERS IN MY MIND

By Linda Crate

there are soft songs of the moon
soothing the aching of my soul,
and in starlight i can hear a psalm
i once knew in my youth;

there will always be a part of my
lore tethered to the night and the
moon and all of the stars—

the sunlight can be kind,
but he can also be deceptive and you
never know if he is going to offer
the warmth he promises;

but the moon has never lied to me—

& she has taught me that i am lovely
in every one of my phases,

and so i am kissed with compassion
that comes in hymns of rainbow moons;
and i know that even when there is
darkness that the light isn't far behind to
save me from the monsters in my mind.

Hanahaki (花吐き病)

By Hannah Enciso

I never liked poems about flowers
There's always something sickly sweet to them
Cloying, like cough syrup and old perfume
The mustiness of old feelings decaying in their vase

If I could paint my love into tulips, roses, violets
I'd rather be the dirt in the ground
Worms and slugs feeding on death and rot
Grow me a skeleton stem and tombstone buds

Let my words fall, petals in the wind
Crushed under careless steps
Drowned by the sky clouds behind my eyes
Hook a rake between my ribs and weed out the love in my lungs

Prune my limbs until there are no more fingers to reach for thin air
Let me curl towards the sun until it burns through my veins and dries out
my body
Display my husk on your rainwater windows

Do not write my eulogy in chlorophyll and milk
Spare me rosewater tears when you plant my corpse
Give me an empty garden

Hanahaki Disease (花吐き病 (Japanese); 하나하키병 (Korean); 花吐病 (Chinese)) is a fictional disease in which the victim coughs up flower petals when they suffer from **one-sided love**. It ends when the beloved returns their feelings (romantic love only; strong friendship is not enough), or when the victim dies. It can be cured through surgical removal, but when the infection is removed, the victim's romantic feelings for their love also disappear. -Fanlore.org

THIS I BELIEVE

By Zoe Kopecki

For as long as I can remember, my parents have talked about God and living a life “for God.” One of the main beliefs they hammered into me was that marriage should be between a man and a woman. My parents always said I need to find a good christian man to marry and have children with. But that was never what I wanted. For years I tried to fit into this mold they had built for me and cried many times because I knew I could never be happy in that life. My parents have made me go to church every single Sunday and this has only made me resent the church more. I constantly heard things like “homosexualiy is a sin, and those people will go to Hell” and how they should “choose God” instead of “choosing a sinful lifestyle.” I never understood how love could cause people to be so angry and hateful just because it was different from what they believed love should look like. From when I was a young child, I heard my parents make so many comments about gay people. Even though they may not have been outwardly belligerent or hateful, they avidly expressed their uncomfortable feelings towards same-sex couples. They were annoyed when there was a gay character in a show because “its just uncomfortable” and “I don’t wanna have to see that.” I didn’t want to accept that I could be just like those people I had always heard my parents talk down on or glare at for a little too long when they saw them expressing normal affection in public. I tried to please them and tried to live out the life they already wrote for me, but I got tired of pretending, I knew I could never be happy that way. I still don’t understand how someone loves could fuel so much hatred and disgust, but I no longer care what they think. I was always so confused why boys never gave me butterflies, and I thought I was supposed to feel something if he called me pretty? But instead I saw girls that “if I were a boy I would date her” and “I could treat her better than he does” but I told myself I just really wanted to be her friend.

I realized I was the person my parents ostracized, and when I met *her*, I realized I would break every law in the Bible to love her. From the second she came into my life, it was like the world all started to make sense. She fit so perfectly it was like the spot was made specifically designed for her. A girl so ethereal I could never get tired of admiring, every feature on her face, every thought in her mind, I want to know it all. I want to know everything about her, every moment that has led her to where she is today, everything that has shaped her into who she is, and every goal and aspiration she has for her life. I always thought there had to be something wrong with me. Why didn't I feel the way my parents always told me I would feel about boys. How come they never gave me butterflies, and I never felt the need to just stand and admire their beauty? But there is absolutely nothing wrong with me. I just wasn't made to fit into the mold they created for me. I found a love so beautiful in her, I don't know what I did to deserve it. But I am content with this life I live because in the end it is all worth it. Every moment I share with her, every part of her I get to experience, and every adventure we may go on together. Because in the end, any kind of love is beautiful, and it is this I believe.

I SMOKED A CIGARETTE

By Kendall McCalla

I smoked a cigarette and
twisted a single Pall Mall Blue round and round in my hands feeling the
inevitable and intangible weight. I grabbed your old lighter from my pocket
and lit it.

I smoked a cigarette and,
for a moment, I just let it sit between my fingers, ever-so-slightly aflame.

I smoked a cigarette and
I brought it to my lips and inhaled the smoke, the same smoke you felt in
your lungs two short years ago. I felt it bleed through my throat and my
chest the same way it bled through yours.
Enveloped into your smell, the same smell that gave you away before you
came into a room.

I smoked a cigarette and
I was a natural, the same way you were.

I smoked a cigarette and
maybe that's all I was chasing: one last tie that would keep you here, keep
you with me.

I smoked a cigarette and
exhaled and watched any connection between us dissipate into the air.

Of course, I didn't do any of this because dying like you will never fix me.
Dying like you will never bring you back.
You exist in the open plains of my mind and smoke will never build a home

INSIDE GRAVITY

By Kelly Morgan

“You open the heart to list unborn galaxies”
— Agha Shahid Ali, “By Exiles”

newton knew it, so did einstein—
of the five forces driving our world,
attraction is almost always outreached by the unceasing
pressure of separation

the atom so far removed from its siblings
that touch is catastrophe cannot sweep
through the loneliness of empty air
to allow another of its kind
to share its nucleus— what it knows to be its soul

the most massive, the stars,
are pinprick needle holes
kept apart by darkening energy,
black magic pressing at the hinges
of our strange, recessing world

few things touch in this ever-accelerating explosion
but still I can lie here beside you
warm because you are warm
and expand in a way ungoverned by physics,
accepting you and your staggering touch

my mouth implausibly against your mouth,
 your breath around my breath,
 my hands and yours—
without space, most cruel of all tyrants, dividing our lives

it is perhaps the closest thing to a miracle
 this cold and nearly empty universe
 has ever allowed

PAPI

By Selena Tomas

A trailer home in Chicago is where your songbirds were last found.
Resemblance from blood and spit, you see yourself in his face.

Stitched with red ribbon, your mouth is an open wound—
your bruised bones are the shallow foundation of a house.

A scorpion inhabits an elderberry shrub,
where toys are abandoned in the undergrowth that steers

the younger bushes away. Their acacia branches probe
at the glass doorknobs, each dangling a pearl chandelier.

Lock. Unlock. Repeat five more times until you are sure the door
is deadlocked. Enough times for each year he sends

you to your mother with fewer eyelashes. Human fur
loose and lost in June's swelter that sings

your prepubescent eyelids—sealed shut as an indigenous arrow
shoots in the wrong direction. His consequences sum to zero.

NOSE

By Selena Tomas

after Hadara Bar-Nadav's "Thumb"

You are a tribal woman who
speaks her native language.
Prolonged and sharpened. Your body oleaginous
like a whetstone.
A cracked clay bridge that alludes to
generations of alcoholism and genocide.
You cling to a never-ending identity crisis.
You carry the burden
of a dying indigenous bloodline.
When you remember the man with your nose
you wince at the possibility of being hit.
You are that of an eagle. Aquiline.
You grimace at intensity and envy
curvature—a small, nimble button.
Who resembles ancestors who would be
disappointed in your inability to speak Tarascan.
Who sits solely for appearances, and is hopeless
for recognizing the difference between
strawberries and red roses—the flower
that your middle name translates to.
A volcano. A Michoacán volcano.
A noticeable feature of humiliation.
You protrude. Narcissistic.
Heavy in comparison to the Mexican Creole.

AUDITION TAPE: THE BACHELOR

By Ella Treinen

My name is Ella Treinen and
I'm like *really good at love*.
I can convince myself
I am in love with anyone,
so I will convince a bachelor,
and I sure as hell will convince America.

I will be charming, elegant, and polite.
I know how to stand up for myself,
without being abrasive.
I have a feminist tattoo, I'll request
respect but not in the angry feminist way
that will coax America to turn their back on me.

Like a chameleon, I will change myself
to be whoever he wants.
I will adore sex, I will be the girl you take
home to mama, I will be beautiful and untouchable.

I'm well-equipped to emoting in bathrooms,
not in public, so I'll admit I may not be your girl
for the tearful teasers and promos.
I won't be the villain, maybe the victim.
But I'm a pretty crier.

I love to play dress up,
I can walk in heels like I'm walking a runway,
it won't take me long to determine
who this man wants
and become her.

You see, I've been doing it all my life,
pouring myself into ice trays,
taking on new shapes.

I DRIFT TO SLEEP HOLDING MYSELF AT NIGHT

By Ella Treinen

What I know is

I can trust my own hands—

to cradle me and bathe me
and pleasure me
and hold me.

I can trust my strong fingers to

fiddle with broken things

until they're fixed.

I can trust my own fists to

pound at closed doors and
low ceilings

until I break through them.

I may work harder on the hangnails around
my cuticles than I work to

redirect intrusive thoughts,

but at least it isn't anyone else

ripping at my skin.

My touch is familiar, there's no gamble.
It won't hurt me in a way

that it hasn't before.

CONTRIBUTOR BIOGRAPHIES

JAN ABEL: Jan Abel is a junior at Monmouth College with a focus in English Studies and Public Relations. When not writing, Jan is probably binge watching anime and petting their roommate's cat. This is her first formal submission of work outside of school opportunities.

ELI APPLE: Eli Apple is a junior at Vanderbilt University studying English, Spanish, and Portuguese. He normally writes fiction, but also experiments with poetry from time to time.

ACE BOGGESS: Ace Boggess is the author of six books of poetry, including *Escape Envy* (Brick Road Poetry Press, 2021), *I Have Lost the Art of Dreaming It So*, and *The Prisoners*. His writing has appeared in *Michigan Quarterly Review*, *Notre Dame Review*, *Harvard Review*, *Mid-American Review*, and other journals. An ex-con, he lives in Charleston, West Virginia, where he writes and tries to stay out of trouble. His seventh collection, *Tell Us How to Live*, is forthcoming in 2024 from Fernwood Press.

ELISE BURCH: Elise Burch is from Louisville, KY. They study Spanish and Creative Writing at Centre College. During the fall of 2021, Elise studied at the Universidad Marista de Mérida and lived independently in Mérida for five months. She is a swimmer on the Centre College Swimming and Diving team. They received NCAA III All-American status in the spring of 2020 and became a Fulbright semifinalist for the Mexico ETA program in 2023. They hope to teach English in a Spanish speaking country after graduating college. Elise lost her maternal grandfather to Covid-19 in May 2020. His death was the catalyst for the works submitted in this collection.

AMEERAH BROWN: Ameerah is a current senior at North Park University, in Chicago, studying exercise science and a minor in english/creative writing. She enjoys most art related activities such as drawing/painting, music, films, and television (especially anime) when not exercising.

CARSON CAWTHON: Carson Cawthon is an English: Writing and Digital Studies major at Anderson University. She enjoys exploring the intersection of Christianity and popular culture and previously hosted The Cultural Reset radio show discussing this topic. She has been published in *The Ivy Leaves Journal For Literature and Art*, where she was selected as a featured poet. She has previously worked with both the C.S. Lewis Foundation and the American Enterprise Institute, discussing the way Christians should interact in the public sphere. She also enjoys good stories, kombucha, thrift shopping, hot chicken, disco balls, and frequent trips to the local library. She lives in South Carolina.

LINDA CRATE: Linda M. Crate (she/her) is a Pennsylvanian writer whose poetry, short stories, articles, and reviews have been published in a myriad of magazines both online and in print. She has eleven published chapbooks: *A Mermaid Crashing Into Dawn* (Fowlpox Press – June 2013), *Less Than A Man* (The Camel Saloon – January 2014), *If Tomorrow Never Comes* (Scars Publications, August 2016), *My Wings Were Made to Fly* (Flutter Press, September 2017), *splintered with terror* (Scars Publications, January 2018), *More Than Bone Music* (Clare Songbirds Publishing House, March 2019), *the samurai* (Yellow Arrowing Publishing, October 2020), *Follow the Black Raven* (Alien Buddha Publishing, July 2021), *Unleashing the Archers* (Guerilla Genesis Press, August 2021), *Hecate's Child* (Alien Buddha Publishing, November 2021) and *fat & pretty* (Dancing Girl Press, June 2022). She is also the author of the novella *Mates* (Alien Buddha Publishing, March 2022).

HANNAH ENCISO: Hannah Enciso is a Senior Theatre Major and Creative Writing Minor at Ohio Northern University (ONU). She grew up in Romeo, MI with two younger sisters and one older sister. She has been writing for both personal and academic settings since their sophomore year of high school and is currently serving as the Production Manager of their campus magazine Polaris. Hannah hopes to pursue a career in theatre while continuing to submit and publish their work.

EMERY HALL: Emery Hall is an aspiring author born in Dover, Delaware and raised in Dickson, Tennessee. As a recent graduate from Vanderbilt University, Emery has focused their creative works on the intersection between neurodivergent and queer identities. Emery also credits writing with the management and documentation of their many alters (or 'headmates') formed by an undiagnosed dissociative disorder. Through creative collaboration, these fragments continue to develop worlds of their own—and find connection with the world a tumultuous childhood urged them to leave behind.

DYLAN JAMES: Dylan James is an emerging writer and Ohio University alumnus based out of Columbus, Ohio. He enjoys reading, hiking, and throwing tennis balls to his dog, Bo. Find him on Instagram @dylanthomasjames

ZOE KOPECKI: Zoe Kopecki (she/her) is a High school student and California Native. She is also an ENFP and a Gryffindor.

KENDALL MCCALLA: Senior English Literature and Secondary Education student at Illinois College.

THOMAS MIXON: Thomas Mixon first started publishing by binding his words with glue and found cardboard, and leaving them in public spots across New England. He has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize, and was part of the Massachusetts Poetry Project's Ekphrastic Gallery and Under 35 series. He has fiction, poetry, and nonfiction in *Barren Magazine*, *Rogue Agent*, and *elsewhere*.

KELLY MORGAN: Kelly Morgan recently graduated from Vanderbilt University with highest honors in creative writing and a minor in mathematics. Winner of the Merrill Moore Prize for Poetry and the Outstanding Honors Thesis Award, she served as editor-in-chief of The Vanderbilt Review and poetry editor of SciLit Review. Her poems are published or forthcoming in Oakland Review, Rainy Day Magazine, Blue Route Literary Journal, Collision Literary Magazine, and elsewhere.

HANNAH TIRLEA: Hannah Tirlea (she/her) is an English Major at Transylvania University in Lexington, Kentucky. Writing and reading have always been important aspects of her life, and she grew up in the Scott County Public Library, nestled in the fiction section. In 2018, she participated in the Governor's School for the Arts in the creative writing discipline, and self-published a short chapbook titled, *Hive Mind*. Tirlea tend to write about topics around mental health awareness, using her own experiences and fears to shape her fiction. She'd like to sincerely thank anyone who reads her work. She'd also like to put in a content warning for very light discussions of mental health issues, abuse, sexual assault, and abandonment. As well, she would also like to note that the words "crazy" and "cuckoo" are used by very young characters because they don't know

any better and because they're flawed people. But she would like to acknowledge, however, that people who struggle with mental health issues should never be dismissed/reduced down in this way.

SELENA TOMAS: Selena Tomas is a Native American woman studying English at Lewis University. She is the Managing Editor for *Jet Fuel Review*.

ELLA TREINEN: Ella Treinen is a junior at Centre College in Danville, Kentucky. She's been writing poetry since she was a kid and is getting ready to publish her first book. She is studying to become a counselor and also has aspirations to continue writing books. In her free time, she enjoys spending time with family, playing collegiate lacrosse, creating all sorts of art, and playing pickle ball.

