THE OPAL

Literary Magazine

Summer 2026 Issue 5

The Opal claims First North American Serial Rights for all included works.

All contributors maintain full ownership of their work.

Editors

Malakhi Barton

Trinity Chenault

Bailey Haws

Hannah Owens

Ace Prather

Layout

Charles Maynard

Cover Photo

Bailey Haws

*This issue features pieces with prominent themes of mental health, suicide, and assault. If you or a loved one you know is currently struggling, please reach out to these numbers. You are not alone:

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 1-800-273-8255

National chat/text line: Text 742742 to chat with a trained Crisis Counselor

Trevor Project: 1-866-488-7386

Sexual Assault Crisis Line: 1-800-656-4673

SAMHSA's National Helpline: 1-800-662-HELP (4357)

TABLE OF CONTENTS

FICTION

"Something to be Heard" by Tessa Arnzen 1

"A Meditation on the Apocalypse" by Isabelle Hammond 9

"Chatbox" by MacKenzie Rogers 20

"The Automaton Vice" by Trinity Snyder 29

NONFICTION

"Buried" by Brianna Arnzen 40

"I Love You Equals Scrambled Eggs" by Davey Long 47

POETRY

"Sculpted from a Memory" by Mac Dare 55

"CST+13" by Zin-Lei Ho 56

"Bodies Bursting Bodies" by Zin-Lei Ho 58

"Clair De Lune" by Brianna Jackson 60

"Self Portrait" by Brianna Jackson 62

"Triptych on Smuggled Things" by Rowan Tate 64

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES 69

ARTIST BIOGRAPHIES 71

FICTION

Rhap-sea-dy **(2026) by Araceli Sánchez**

The Opal Issue V

Something to be Heard

By Tessa Arnzen

The orphanage Greta grew up in had a roof that was succumbing to gravity, and the floorboards were so cold during the winters that her knees went numb during bedtime prayer. The bedroom she shared with fifteen other children was the warmest at night, when they all crawled into nine beds, the smallest children tucked in together like sardines. Greta was often found in rooms she was not supposed to be in with things she was not supposed to have, like stolen pastries or a tutor's stationary. She snuck into the kitchens to leave extra bread in the younger children's rooms, trading it for their promise not to tell Matron Vogel about the books hidden under her mattress. The house had a small collection of donated books, many of them copies of the Bible in varying conditions. The room they were kept in was called the library, despite bare shelves and few desks. Every now and then, a boy's grammar school would leave old books at the orphanage's doorstep. They were often too complicated for Greta to read, but when they had pictures, she would show them to the children at night and make up her own words. Taking things that had once come from outside of the orphanage made Greta feel a little powerful, moored to something bigger than her.

A few days after Greta had her knuckles lashed for trying to open the dusty piano lid in the library, the orphanage had a guest. A man, much younger than the orphanage matron, had walked in the orphanage's double doors one rainy afternoon, a large case at his side. He was shrouded in a big coat and a brown cap, his thin shoulders sloped forward just slightly as if he grew too fast too suddenly and feared the ceiling was going to cave in on him. Ms. Vogel eyed him in a way he did not return, eyes going up and down the buttons of his coat. The man turned his attention to the children peeking their heads through the old banisters. He cocked his head towards

their snickering and took his damp hat off to reveal scruffy hair with pieces that stuck out every which way.

"Hello," he said.

"I apologize for them, the poor things have appalling manners," the matron said. Greta peered out from behind the wall the staircase led to. The matron clapped twice and the children stood straight and plodded single file down the creaky stairs.

"Children, this is Sir Becker. He will be performing today in place of your music lessons."

"Please, Henri is fine," the man said.

The children shifted on their feet and glanced at each other. They'd never met a musician, just Ms. Vogel plunking on the old piano from memory while the children sang and picked at their pilled sweaters. Greta strayed during scale practice, harmonizing and moving her voice up or down to see what sounded right. Sometimes they heard music on the phonograph, but only on special occasions. She'd loved what little music she'd heard, always sitting closest to the phonograph and pressing her cheek into the floor to feel its vibrations.

Ms. Vogel pointed Henri to the library and led the children to the prayer room. Greta lingered in the hallway, waiting until Ms. Vogel was out of sight before following the tall man. His leather shoes had scuffs and water stains, and clacked on the floor, unlike the shoes of priests when they came to see sick children. The sharp sound unsettled the usual Sunday solemnity of the house, and Greta held her breath. The big case Henri carried had a handle so weathered that you could see where his fingers rested each time he picked it up.

The door to the library was cracked open just slightly enough for her to be able to peek in. The man sat in a chair with parchment spread on a low set table, little black dots all over them and a pen in his hand. The case

he had brought stood open to his right, a wooden instrument resting inside. Greta squinted to see it. There were intricate patterns in the wood and different little pieces attached to its front. She concluded it was a cello, there was a picture in one of the books. She leaned forward to see better and a floorboard under her groaned loudly.

The man looked up. Greta stumbled back, but he stood from his chair and walked to the door.

"It's not polite to spy," he said. Greta could tell he wasn't mad because he smiled crookedly.

"I'm sorry, I was just . . . admiring your instrument."

The man opened the door just enough, beckoning her inside. Greta did so timidly and followed him to sit down. She looked at the papers with labyrinthine marks on them, and her brows furrowed. She'd never seen markings like this in any books. Henri laughed at her expression.

"That's music," he told her. She reached out to touch it.

"I thought music was sound," she said. He laughed again and she flushed.

"Sound is the translation of all this," he waved his hand across the patterns. "Or rather, this is the skeleton of music. "

"Oh."

"Do you enjoy music?" he asked. She nodded. "More than going to prayer?" She nodded again, more fervently this time. She had always found it easier to memorize songs with Ms. Vogel than bible verses.

For a while they sat in silence while Greta thumbed through the pieces of paper. She felt Henri eyeing her small hands, with remnants of lashes from the punishments of the matron. He was bent over a piece of paper that was only marked up halfway with the little black dots.

Moments later, Ms. Vogel burst into the room with children trailing behind her. Her eyes narrowed at the sight of Greta sitting next to Henri, and she inhaled sharply.

"I'm sorry the child has disturbed you, Sir Becker. I must have miscounted during prayer," she said, jaw tight.

"Oh, it's no trouble," he replied. The matron sucked in a breath and ushered the other children inside. Henri stood up from the chair and moved to his instrument, taking it out with a long, thin stick called the bow. Children sat on cushions and leaned against shelves and walls to get a view of the mysterious musician. Henri sat down in a chair, placed the instrument between his legs, and lifted the bow with his right arm.

And then he started playing. Before the bow made contact with the instrument, his eyebrows were already furrowed and his posture had straightened. Then he dragged the bow's soft side across a string and the sound enveloped the children, making the hair on Greta's arms stand up. Henri's entire body rocked back and forth and the cello followed, his hair falling forward into his eyes as he played and made gestures with his head. His fingers plunked on the strings, but not the way Ms. Vogel's did on the piano keys, instead with precision in every note, and Greta was sure the sound replaced all the air in the room. The music became loud and quiet, fast and slow, warm and cold, bright and dark.

When Henri brought the bow back to his side, the density of the room hummed. The children then put their small hands together and clapped until they stung. The musician gave a modest nod, and invited the children to touch the instrument carefully. Greta took her index finger and ran it from the top of a string towards the bottom, but her finger slipped and lost contact with it. A dull sound rang out and she took a step back, nervous she had broken something.

"Pizzacato," Henri told her. He imitated what she had done. Greta chewed at the flesh in her cheek and plucked another string, which made a darker sound. She hummed a song Ms. Vogel had taught them, which seemed to start with the first note she made on the instrument. Henri didn't pull the instrument away from Greta's humming until the matron interjected with directions to wash for dinner.

Henri placed everything back into the case and made his way back to the foyer with his coat and hat on. Greta padded behind him. Before stepping out into the cold, he winked at her and pulled up his collar.

In the days following, as she paced through the bedroom, she knew she had to leave, unable to stand the sounds that were not as kind to silence as music was. The younger children cried for parents, for affection, for food. Many of them woke up crying from nightmares. She hated looking at them when they did sleep soundly, knowing they had fates no different than that of so many other orphans or poor children. Greta was sure that if the orphanage got any more children the older ones would have to go to the factories, risking their small fingers in garment machines. About a year ago, Greta had seen a newspaper drop from the letter slot before Ms. Vogel had a chance to take it. There was a picture of a building on fire. It had started in a garment factory a ways south from the orphanage, killing so many people. The youngest victims were about fourteen years old, only a couple years older than Greta. She had seen Ms. Vogel's reaction when she read it. Her eyes went glassy and she quickly tucked it under her arm before going into her room. She never said anything about it to the children. That night, Greta prayed to God to let the young girls into heaven. She felt especially bad for thanking him that it wasn't her.

Greta did not want to work in a factory, and she most certainly didn't want to become a nun. It sounded like being an orphan but for grown ups, with all the obedience and poverty, though there would be wine. She instead thought about Henri and his cello and his drawings. When the

windows of the house fogged up she would try to imitate the drawings with her finger, making squeaking sounds with each circle and line. She thought about the cloak of peace that covered Henri and entranced her when he played. The week after his visit, it snowed and rained and snowed again. Greta lay in bed at night and hummed along with the wind that whistled through the walls. She didn't want to live somewhere where the walls whistled and children cried. She wanted music and stories with something meaningful to be said. She wanted, above all, something to be heard.

Greta's boots were not nearly warm enough for the New York winter. Before sunrise, she hopped down from her metal cot and pulled the fraying laces of the shoes taught, crept into the matron's room, and plucked up the key to the safe box as Ms. Vogel snored horribly. She had seen the pretty things the matron owned and she was certain it wasn't from the glorious pay of running an orphanage, but possibly from her special guests she would usher into a locked room that they would leave from flushed. So, Greta took a fancy-looking pair of wool fingerless gloves and clicked the lock closed.

The light snow had muffled the world for a bit, and the sky was thick with clouds. Greta shoved her hands into the stolen gloves and thought of how they would be struck if she was caught returning to the orphanage.

She tip-toed down the stairs and out of the house to make her way onto the cobblestone streets. The cold seeped into her clothes and the snow crunched under her boots, the wind had settled just slightly but the sun hadn't come out, making everything look black-and-white. Greta made her way through the roads and pulled her coat tighter around her. Horse hooves clomped against the ground, and children scurried through the street traffic aimlessly, coach drivers hollering at them. It was all very loud to Greta. Ms. Vogel never really took the children outside, perhaps for fear of losing them, or perhaps to avoid getting them true winter clothing.

"Move," a voice hollered from behind Greta. Her shoulder was shoved from behind and a large man with a cane pushed past her. He didn't look back. Greta stumbled forward a few steps and another person bumped into her from the front. She scampered out of the path and kept her left hand out, feeling the walls and the windows of shops. In her reflection, her cheeks were pink and windburned, and she wiped her nose with a brittle coat sleeve.

For a moment Greta thought of turning around and going back to the house, back to matron Vogel, back to cold creaky floorboards and her lumpy cot and stale pastries. It was all she knew, and she was afraid it was all that knew her. But Henri knew her now, and he was out there somewhere, in the city. The orphanage used to have a housekeeper that was kind to her, she would even braid the children's hair. She left when Greta was still very young. Around the same time, the children went from having two meals a day to only dinner. Winters became much colder, and the children's hair became tangled and dirty.

Greta's joints were stiff with cold and tears were welling in her eyes from the wind. She didn't know what she was doing, wandering aimlessly around a city she lived in but was so unfamiliar with. She thought of all the characters in the books she read, and how they were often condemned to wandering as a punishment. Once, Greta had envied that freedom. Now, she understood it was unmooring, not freedom. She used to be moored to the orphanage, to the phonograph, to the music book she kept under her cot. She didn't own a bag, so she couldn't take anything with her besides the clothes on her body. Her face crumpled and she started to cry, coughing out every exhale.

Greta then saw a cap blow across the street and against the door of a chapel. She dodged after it, desperate for something to keep her hair out of her eyes and her head warm. After bobbing and weaving between people and trolley buses, Greta bounded up brick stairs and headbutted into the

door. She grappled for the cap in a corner full of dead leaves between the building's doors and stone wall. After brushing it off, Greta pulled it on her head and looked up at the chapel. The grey stone wall was cold, and there was a circle of colorful stained glass a bit above the doors. Greta walked to the doors and pressed her face against the solid wood, hoping some warmth emanated from inside. There was a keyhole in one of the double doors, and a soft light shone through.

Greta crouched slightly and put her ear to it, to see if anyone was inside. Instead of talking, she heard music. She gasped and put a hand to her mouth. She tried to peek between the doors to see inside, but the gap wasn't big enough. She wanted to go inside. She *needed* to go inside. Greta pried her little stiff fingers into the small gap and pulled, one hand on the round door handle. She squeezed into the chapel and let the door click quietly behind her, then turned and faced the music, which echoed from the front of the room.

Pews sprawled in front of her, people dispersed with their heads bowed in contemplation or gently swaying their upper bodies. Greta went on her tip toes to see ahead at where the music came from. It echoed through the room, cascading off the walls and the floor and into Greta's ears. She inhaled through her mouth and it went down her throat and into her belly, rested between her ribs and thawed her fingertips. Greta spotted a familiar man sitting to the far right of the ensemble, cello in hand. Entranced, she padded to the very last pew and sat, hands folded into her lap, and listened.

A Meditation on the Apocalypse

By Isabelle Hammond

One of the few things you and I agree on is that the apocalypse could be just around the corner. You've planned for it. You know everything you'd want to do.

In the apocalypse, you'd go to the grocery store, now devoid of people, and lay on the ground in the middle of the aisles, spreading your limbs like a starfish. When you were a kid you did that once, and your mom yanked you back up on your feet so hard it left fingerprint-shaped bruises up your arm. You know she was stressed. She didn't mean it.

And while we're there you'd want to jump into that tall cage holding the plastic balls, just to see what it would feel like. Would you sink? You've always wondered about that. And on that note, this would be the time to make a pile of potato chip bags, and then jump into them like a pile of leaves. Would the bags pop on impact? Or just slide away across the slick store floor?

And when we got tired of that we'd sit in the dairy aisle and finally try the fancy yogurt. We've always wanted to know if it would taste better in the glass containers rather than plastic, but kept saving that extra fifty cents for a special occasion. But when would there have ever been the right occasion for fancy yogurt?

"What's on your mind?" you ask me.

"Sorry, I'm listening,"

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, I always listen."

"Really?"

"Really."

"Okay. So, like I was saying, I already told her we could go that weekend. So, you can, right? I want everyone to meet you!"

"I'll need to take off work."

"But it's on the weekend."

"And we'll need an extra day or two to drive up there, won't we?"

"Yeah, I guess so. You don't sound very excited."

"I'm just thinking logistics."

"We'll have plenty of time to figure all that stuff out, okay? We're just setting a date."

"I've never gone camping."

"You'll like it."

"Do we even have a tent?"

"No, but we can find one somewhere."

"My dad might still have one tucked away in the basement. We tried camping in the backyard one time, but in the middle of the night I went back inside the house and climbed in my own bed."

"Oo, can we get one of those double sleeping bags?"

"We can try! Have you seen one in a store somewhere before?"

"No, but they must make them somewhere."

"I'm not sure how comfortable it would be. I wonder if we would get tangled up."

"..."

"Will there be bathrooms and showers?"

"Yes, they reserved a spot near the bathrooms this year."

"Do you think it has toilet paper, or are we supposed to bring that?"

"Hey."

"Hey, what?"

"Relax. We'll be in a group, okay? Last year I think I wore the same tee-shirt all weekend. I just brought a change of clothes and borrowed anything else I needed from other people. It's just camping. All you really need is a pair of socks."

"What about bug spray?"

When I ask about the details to try to be prepared, I wish you knew it meant "I love you".

In the apocalypse, you would paint your nails a deep navy blue. When you were 14 you read a magazine that said girls with short nails should stick to pastel shades. After that, you thought you didn't deserve midnight fingernails until you got over your nail-biting habit. Why did anyone ever listen to magazines like that? Who even writes that stuff anyway?

You'd wear clothes that didn't match–clashing colors, pattern on pattern, baggy on baggy, tight on tight–because for once being beautiful wouldn't feel like the entry fee to exist in the world.

You'd climb something tall, a billboard or water tower, probably something you could see from the highway. You've always thought it would be fun, but never did because you didn't want to get in trouble. Halfway up, we'd decide we had gone far enough and would climb back down. We'd wonder if giving up on this meant we were grown up, or if it meant the opposite.

"Did you hear me?" you ask me.

"Sorry, I'm listening."

"I asked if you think this dress will work."

"I think you're going to be cold."

"I prefer to stay optimistic."

"I'm not trying to disappoint you. It's going to get down to ten degrees tonight though."

"Would it kill you to just say I look nice?"

"You do look nice. I thought you were asking about the dress."

"I just wanted you to notice."

"I always notice."

"Really?"

"Yes, of course I do. You look great. But you're going to be cold."

"Are you sure you can't come out tonight? Everyone's going to be there."

"I really shouldn't, I still have some work to finish up."

"Haven't you worked enough this week?"

"As soon as you want a ride back, just give me a call and I'll be there in ten."

"Okay."

"You should get going if you want to beat the lines. Do you want me to grab you some leggings? Or a jacket?"

"Leggings-smeggings."

"You're going to be cold."

"I'll be fine."

When I pick you up at the end of the night, your nose runs and your fingers are numb. I give you a jacket you don't put on. I give you what you need rather than what you deserve, and you hate me for that.

In the apocalypse, you'd go to your high school English teacher's house and throw eggs and stones and poetry at it. She didn't believe in you or your work back then, and now that it's the end of the world she will never see you prove yourself. You had wanted to send her a copy of your first novel with a big "F-YOU" written on the dedication page.

You'd go to your ex-best friend's house and dig through her closet to see if she kept that friendship bracelet. You wanted to throw yours away, but you couldn't do it until you knew she'd thrown hers away too. You'd never admit that to anyone.

You've made so many plans. I've made plans of my own too: to stay with you.

"Did you get a chance to look at my poems yet?" you ask me.

"Sorry, your what?"

"The poems I wrote today. They've been sitting on the table."

"I've been making dinner."

"They aren't that long. Just a page."

"It's dinner for us."

"I want to know if the poems are any good before I submit them."

"I'm sure they are. You're a really good writer."

"You can't possibly know that if you don't read any of my work."

"How are you going to have the energy to write more poetry without someone making sure you're well-fed?"

"Well, can I at least read them to you?"

"If you want."

"I want you to want it though."

"Okay. Please read them to me."

"You don't sound like you want it."

"I just… I never understand them."

"You don't need to understand, I just need you to listen."

"I don't know. They always make me sad."

"Fine. Just forget about it then."

I fill you up with food and disappointment. I think the poetry you write about me requires both. I don't want to know. I don't want to know the things you think about me that you can't say to my face.

Okay, you got me. My statement about the apocalypse, "I just want to stay with you", isn't the whole truth and you and I both know it. Just staying with you wouldn't be enough for me. I'd need canned food, duct tape, first aid, a lighter, a flashlight, a map, batteries, a Swiss army knife, a water purifier, tampons, tools, vitamins, superglue, rope, gasoline, fishing kit, a compass, radio, walkie talkies, sunscreen, insect repellant, medication, your favorite books and snacks...

I don't want to just exist with you, I want to provide for you. I want to make sure no mothers bruise you and you get to paint your nails whatever colors you want and

check off every single thing on your list. I might not have much of a list of my own, but all that means is that I can help you complete yours.

"Sometimes I think no one really sees me."

"I see you," I whisper back.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. I see you and I love you."

"Why? Why do you love me?"

"You're beautiful, and sweet, and my best friend. We could get through anything together. No one understands me like you do."

"Do you think you understand me?"

"I think I understand you as well as anyone could. Don't you?"

"I want to know everything about you though. I love you."

"I love you too."

"Why don't we say that to each other more?"

"I guess sometimes I want to save it so that it feels special every time."

"I think no matter how many times you said it would feel special to me."

"It's hard for me to say it out loud. I try to show it."

"I wish you would do both."

"I'll try."

"..."

"I see you."

Love is seeing each other. But the love that lasts is seeing each other in the ways we want to be seen. I already think you are the most beautiful person, inside and out, that I've ever met. What more do you want me to see?

My answer about the apocalypse wasn't the answer you wanted to hear. You wanted me to speak to you with passion, "I love you so much I'd die for you" or "let's run away together". Or at least wanted me to have my own list with the same complexity as yours. You don't want to be alone in having a list of regrets you want to somehow fix once the world turns upside-down. Do you think your complexity comes from cultivated creativity or a history of pain? Why do you give so much power to the latter?

Each day in the real world I seem to let you down. But if you lived one day in the apocalypse with me, you would know how much I love you and realize how much you needed me. Why can't you see that you need me?

"Hey, this is the last of it right?" you ask me.

"Yeah, I labeled and numbered the boxes on the side there so you wouldn't forget any."

"That eager to get rid of me?"

"No. Not at all. Don't say that. Please don't say that."

"Why shouldn't I? You don't even look sad about it."

"I am sad, I'm just not a crier."

"This is the last time you're going to see me in this town and you aren't even crying. I'm so stupid."

"..."

"I wanted you to ask me to stay."

"I wanted you to never put me in a position where I would have to ask you not to leave."

"So this is my fault then?"

"I mean, is it mine?"

"..."

"Remember when we talked about our plans for the apocalypse?"

"What does that have to do with anything?"

"Please, just, do you remember?"

"Yeah. On our second or third date wasn't it? I'm surprised you remember that."

"I just… I don't want to be one of the things you add to your list of things that you need to rectify. I don't want us to only work things out when we're out of time. You need me to ask? Okay, I'm asking. Please, please stay with me. You can still back out of your new lease! Or I can quit my job here and move there with you! Just please don't go. If there is a chance we can fix things between us, don't leave."

"I gave you so many chances to say that."

"I know, I'm sorry. I'm saying it now."

"It's too late now."

"I'm not made of big, romantic gestures like you are. Just tell me what you do to make you stay."

"That's the whole problem. I shouldn't have to tell you. You should just know."

We agreed on one thing: the apocalypse could always be just around the corner. We planned for zombies and the grid going down and things that go bump in the night.

We could complete our lists, complex or not, in any of those scenarios. Together, we were prepared for anything.

But to me, those things were never the worst-case scenario. For me, every night that we went to bed angry, part of me silently prepared for the one apocalypse I truly feared, the thing that for me would be the end of the world. And as you walk out the door with the last box of your things, I know it's upon me.

***We Broke Up* (2026) by Grayson Schleuning**

Chatbox

By MacKenzie Rogers

A plastic princess tiara.

17:43

PrettyDragon93: hey jsut got out of school

RedHands: awesome! r we still on tn? I cant wait 2 c u

PrettyDragon93: yeppp so hppy

A glitter heel covered with fake pink jewels.

18:14

SillyTurtle041: Sofie wnna play adpt me?

PrettyDragon93: cant I have plans

SillyTurtle041: aww what planss?

SillyTurtle041: can we play after??

A magic wand with a pink star and torn streamers.

18:15

PrettyDragon93: if I get back b4 bedtime!

PrettyDragon93: i'm meting a new frend

SillyTurtle041: ok

A friendship bracelet, with beads missing.

19:02

RedHands: I'm on my way

PrettyDragon93: YAY

Sofie jumped off her desk chair, the wood covered in foam stickers and paint. The rainbow rug sank under her eager steps, the plastic heels creaking beneath her feet. Her older sister, Grace, lay on a beanbag, inches from their television, grumbling that she couldn't hear the show.

Sofie ran down the hall, dodging some shoes and a backpack, past the living room where her older brother and father were watching a stupid football game, and into the kitchen, where her baby twin sisters and her mother were. She smiled brightly up at her mother, dimples forming.

"I told you not to run in the house," Her mother scolded, scooping smashed bananas into one of the twins' slobbery mouths. "Does that taste good? Yeah, we like bananas, don't we, yes we do." Her mother's eyes returned to the twins.

"Mom! Mom!" Sofie persisted, tugging at her mother's slightly stained shirt. "My friends coming! My friends coming!!"

"Sofie, please stop!" Her mother glared down at her, her eyes tired, skin pale. "It's a school night, no one is coming over, please be a good girl and go quietly do your homework."

"He is coming!" Sofie stomped her plastic heels against the kitchen tile. "He is! He is! He is!"

"Enough!" Her mother's grip burned, and she stared down at her with dark eyes. One of the twins began to whine in her highchair before bursting into violent sobs, her tiny hands slamming against the plastic tray. "God, look what you've done! It's going to take forever to calm her back down! Go to your room. Now!"

Tears quickly formed in Sofie's eyes as she turned away from her mother, who was pulling the sobbing baby from her highchair, bouncing her up and down soothingly. A mark began to form on her arm from her mother's hold. She ran back to her room, slamming the door behind her. Grace looked up, startled, staring at Sofie for a moment before a smirk spread across her face.

"Oooo, someone's in trouble." Grace teased, sitting up with an evil grin. Sofie wanted to scream at her, chuck a few LEGO blocks at her stupid head, scribble across her library book, and rip its page into tiny pieces, but she didn't. She stormed over to her bed and burrowed her face into her favorite stuffed animal, a little yellow rabbit with a soft pink tutu she had named Bonny, curling in on herself.

The tears wet Bonny's fur, but she only gripped the bunny tighter. Grace was a meanie, Mommy was angry at her, and Daddy was busy watching the stupid ball game. She pulled her princess blanket around her body, blocking out all the lights and sounds. In the dark, it was just her and Bonny, and it was safe.

Her mother was wrong, Red was coming, he promised! It had been a long time since she had been able to have a friend over. She peeked out from underneath the covers when her tears dried up, Bonny close behind her. Grace was back to watching TV, an almost empty bowl of tortilla chips in her lap. Sofie climbed out of bed, rubbing her snotty nose against her dress's sleeve before hurrying back to the computer.

Three small blue heart barrettes, one covered in mud and twisted awkwardly.

19:11

PrettyDragon93: mommy is mean! she said ur not comig

PrettyDragon93: u r right?

Sofie desperately watched the screen, waiting for the three dots to appear. She rocked in the seat, spinning around until her head ached and the ground started to tilt. Giggles burst from her chest as she steadied herself.

A stretched-out black and blue striped hair tie.

19:16

RedHands: I am 20 mins away

RedHands: U couldn't stop me fm coming :)

PrettyDragon93: Yay!! I new mommy was wrng

RedHands: U member the plans?

PrettyDragon93: Yeh!!

Sofie left the computer and hurried to the closet, digging around until she found her small Bluey backpack. She tossed the bags' contents onto the floor: pages of homework and workbooks, crayons and markers scattered around, the red and purple crayons breaking in half. She glanced back at the screen. Red had told her what to do: bring a backpack with a blanket, some chocolates, and her favorite princess dress. She would go into the backyard and unlock the little side gate with a long stick, like she had seen Grace do once. Red will be waiting in a blue car down the street, past the nice old lady with the loud puppies' house.

It was going to be a fun adventure!

"What are you doing?" Grace asked, kicking the stray blue marker. "You're making a mess."

"I'm going on an adventure with my friend!" Sofie tugged the

blanket off and stuffed it into the small bag.

"Friend?" Grace mused, smirking again. "Let me guess, the bunny?" Sofie hugged Bonny closer, covering one of her long ears. "Have fun discovering the junk under the bathroom sink." When Grace turned back to her show, Sofie stuck her tongue out at the back of Grace's head.

Half of a yellow crayon.

19:27

RedHands: I'm almost there.

RedHands: R U ready?

Sofie spun in another circle, excitement taking over. Everyone was wrong. This was going to be a real adventure with her new friend.

A few strands of pink mesh fabric.

19:28

SillyTurtle041: U don yet?

PrettyDragon93: no, bout to leav! srry

SillyTurtle041: awwwwww.

PrettyDragon93: Almst!

RedHands: I'll be at the spot.

RedHands: Dnt be late.

She turned off the computer, the chat log disappearing into black. She returned to the backpack, her mind back on how she was going to fit everything inside.

Sofie put a few chocolate bars into the front pocket of the backpack, struggling to close the bag after adding a flashlight and her floral tea set. She slipped the backpack over her shoulders before quietly leaving her room. The door creaked, but no one heard it beneath the shrilling cries of the twins and her father's passionate shouts. She scurried down the hall into the cluttered mudroom, slipping past the piles of mismatched shoes and haphazardly hung coats before crawling through the broken doggie door into the backyard.

The wooden playground called to her. The squeaky trampoline, too, but Sofie resisted. She had a plan to follow. Her signature princess dress fluttered in the slight night breeze, the glittery pink tulle hard to see in the flickering street light that cast one side of the backyard in a shaky glow. She cheerfully danced for a moment, everything going exactly as Red said it would. She couldn't wait to surprise Mommy and Grace when she came back with her friend and the story of the adventure the two of them shared.

It took her a minute to find a long enough stick; the first two were too short, and the third crumbled when she picked it up. She dragged it over to the side gate. Mimicking what she had seen Grace do, Sofie fumbled with the lock, her stick shaky against the wood and metal, her hands uncoordinated and slow.

The bark dug into her palms, but after a minute, the lock lifted and the side gate swung open with a soft gust. Sofie dropped the stick, jumping in uncontained excitement and pride. She lifted Bonny off the ground,

where she had sat her before hunting down a stick, and the two of them left the fenced backyard, skipping down the short walkway and into the front yard.

She ran down the driveway, slowing only to complete the chalk-drawn hopscotch that she had made yesterday, twirling with satisfaction. The street was quiet, no loud cars flying by, and no loud music trailing behind. The flickering street light pointed the direction for her, and Sofie happily followed. She jumped over the cracks in the sidewalk, remembering the path Red had told her to follow.

Her steps clinked against the concrete, its sound different from earlier, deeper. She stopped to tap her feet a few times, deciding she preferred the kitchen floors to the concrete.

"Bonny, I'm gonna be a dancer!" Sofie exclaimed, twirling again before continuing down the sidewalk. The houses were dark, lacking the warm glow that only the daytime offered. It made everything look different. Sofie wasn't used to seeing the other houses all dark at night. She couldn't decide if she liked it or not.

Her pace slowed a hair, and she clutched Bonny a little tighter. She wasn't scared.

The bright headlights of a car appeared in the distance. Sofie froze in place. Was that Red? Her excitement faded when the car drove past, its red taillights disappearing. Not Red. Red said he would be parked, not driving. She shook her head, pushing toward the old lady's house, already imagining the little dogs barking. She was saddened to see the dogs were inside, hearing their little yips and howls from the open front window.

She made it to the end of the street, a stop sign halting her. She looked both ways, like her Mommy had told her to, her and Bonny's eyes looking around hopefully for Red.

"Do you see him, Bonny?" Sofie asked, her eyes straining in the darkness when she saw it. A car was waiting beneath a streetlight, exactly like the one Red had described. It flashed its lights once. Relief filled her as she burst from the spot and ran over to the vehicle, almost tripping on a few stray rocks. Her backpack bounced with the shared excitement, the soft clinks of the tea set against the chocolate bars followed each step. "There! It's him!"

She was steps away when the truck's door cracked open. A tall figure emerged. A man. Much bigger than Daddy. The man gave her a little wave. Was this Red? Sofie had never stopped to wonder what Red looked like.

"Sofie?" He asked softly, the confusion fading at the call. His voice was nice and soft, unlike Daddy's after work. "You did such a great job following the plan." She puffed out her chest in pride, not used to being told she was doing something right.

"I found you!" She squealed, stepping a little closer. Her friend actually came. She raised Bonny up, letting the bunny wave in greeting.

"I brought what you said!" She proudly proclaimed. "The blanky and chocolates and, and my dress!" She gestured at her clothes, twirling around to let the diamonds on the dress shine.

"Good," Red chuckled. "You are such a good little princess." She perked up again, closing the last of the distance between them. She couldn't wait to show Mommy her new friend.

Red opened the back door of the truck. "Come on, princess," he smiled, holding a hand out to her, "It's warmer in the truck and we have so many places to see." He was right! They had a map full of places with so many secrets to discover. The promised adventure was waiting!

She glanced back down the street, looking at the long row of dark houses. Mommy would be so proud of her walking there by herself.

She took Red's extended hand and climbed into the truck. It smelled like grass and metal inside, like the garage after Daddy mowed. Red buckled her in, his face hard to see. She hugged Bonny close.

He pushed the door closed.

A soaking wet, muddy rabbit, with one of its ears torn off.

The Automaton Vice

By Trinity Snyder

All around him, the dawn of a new decade, the 1920s. Happy couples were arm in arm, tightly bundled in their long, tailored coats. He looked at them with practiced disdain. Arthur had a funny habit of viewing anything which brought many people together as being simpleminded. Yet, here he was, on New Year's Day, watching others carry on without him, and he couldn't help but feel lonely. He ruminated on the feeling a bit, romanticizing his own solitude, picturing himself as the pinnacle outlier of all those around him. His reverie was not effective, however, and instead of feeling powerful he began to feel embarrassed and out of place. He got up in quite a flurry of motion and walked away heavily, attracting the faint attention of passersby, which was just what he wanted.

Arthur tended to draw attention anywhere he went; he had a very sallow complexion which clashed with his rather feminine facial features, and dark blonde hair with one or two premature white streaks, which he speculated were signs of some underlying stress. Although not stereotypically handsome, he could certainly be considered attractive in an outlandish sort of way. His strange demeanor made him believe he was rather unpopular, although he still found himself surrounded by people more often than not, a circumstance that he did not particularly appreciate. His eyebrows, thin but unkempt, were furrowed, and his face was flushed as he stalked towards his apartment with long strides. He imagined his poetically melancholic expression was the sole attention of all whom he passed. He unlocked his gate in a less dramatic fashion due to the difficulty he had in fitting the key to the lock, but more than made up for the lapse by throwing the thing open as soon as he had unlocked it, his cloak even flying back a bit, creating spectacular imagery. He was sure everyone on the block behind him would be staring in awe of his mystery. Unfortunately, that

street was barren besides one mangy yellow dog, who barked. He stalked up the stairs leading up to his apartment, unlocked that door with similar motions, and immediately flung himself down on his bed upon entering the small room without bothering to look around, one wrist covering his eyes in an intentionally artistic way. His dramatics were not only to please his mind, but he believed his doll was watching as well. However, when he opened one eye, it became apparent that he was alone in the room.

"Where is she?" he whispered, his heart pounding in his chest.

He began looking around his room with fervor, although there were very few places to check in such a small apartment. He was nearly hyperventilating by this point, and he flung himself out of the door into the hallway. Swinging his head back and forth with wild eyes, his gaze landed on the apartment next to his, of which the door was cracked slightly open.

His eyes began to water.

He slowly walked towards the door, his stomach dropping in dread even more with each step. He opened the door with shaking hands. The scene which greeted him confirmed his fear.

"Lillian!" he gasped sharply.

A human girl, lying peacefully in her bed, and the automaton, looking right at Arthur.

Tears of horror ran down his cheeks. He ran to the resting girl, his whole body trembling. She was very clearly dead, but only just. He stared at her face; he had never seen death before. After a moment of this, Arthur looked around wildly; he could not bear it anymore. There was a small brown book lying on the bed. He reached for it. The diary was filled with very neat handwriting.

December 1st, 1919

He moved in about a year ago. It feels longer, but I still remember the day. He came into the apartment with nothing other than what he had on his person. He was wearing a large jacket, far too large for him, under which he had on the most shoddy of

suits. He looked to be about 20 years old, and he was handsome; although his eyes were sunken. His blonde hair was almost Nordic - and rather unkempt. His expressions seemed manufactured, forced, and often did not match his tone. Reader, he was a strange man, even from the beginning, but he drew me in.

The day after he arrived, I brought him a small housewarming gift; hastily prepared cookies and a bottle of pop. Not much of a gift, you might assert, but it was all I could afford, and it is the thought that counts, anyway. I changed out of my working clothes that day, although I didn't usually bother, picking a black corduroy skirt and a pink silk blouse. Perhaps too nice for the occasion of traveling next door, but I somehow wanted to impress this strange neighbor. When I had gotten myself in order, I knocked on the door, tentatively. I knew he heard the knock, for he began shuffling around. He shuffled for almost a minute before finally opening the door, barely a crack. I could just see one of his clear blue eyes. His wide gaze took me aback for a moment, but I regained my senses.

"Hello," I said, my smile catching up a moment later. "I only noticed that you moved in a day ago; I brought you a little something." There was a pause, where I adjusted my skirt.

He opened the door wider. "Oh, thank you," he said, with a slight stutter. He took a noticeably heavy breath, which he seemed embarrassed by. "I appreciate it." He took the tin and bottle from me, almost dropping everything. He then stood there, looking at me with those wide eyes as if waiting for a cue. His demeanor made me feel uneasy.

"Well, I'll be going!" I said cheerily. "Please don't hesitate if you need anything. I'm just next door!" With that, I left him. I turned around quickly, and as he closed the door, I realized I had barely taken a breath. I put my hand over my chest, it was fluttering. That was the last time I really talked to him, besides a nod in the hall, an occasional "Hello!" on the stairs.

Oh, how I want to talk to him! I really don't know why. There is something about those eyes, so troubled. I yearn to know what makes him so sad.

He draws me in so much, in fact, that I have begun to memorize his routines.

Not on purpose, of course. I simply can't help but listen for when the door next to mine would open. I leave the flat for my work before I hear any noise from his apartment. I have no idea what he does during the day, though I like to make up stories about what it could be. Reader, you would surely laugh! I love to fill in silly little details, such as how he likes his tea, the music he favors - oh, just those little pretend details that make me feel as though I know him. Of course, when I am less optimistic, I imagine he may have engagements with other women…but I do not want to write about those thoughts. When I am more creative, I have thought to myself he could be a rich heir who chose to live in poverty because he was tired of the high life. I'm not quite sure why I make up such stories - just to provide some rationale for his strange demeanor, I suppose. But I digress - his routine!

He comes up the stairs leading to our floor each day at 8 pm, long after I have returned, and I notice from the sound the handle makes that his door is always left unlocked. Sometimes I see him outside, looking at the small gardens that are grouped around our building. That has been his routine for quite a while. It has become almost comforting to me.

That is why I noticed so pointedly when it began to change. The first day it happened, he did not return until almost 11 pm. I am ashamed to admit this, but I only know the exact time because I remained awake, worrying myself until I heard that familiar door click. This late return began to happen more and more often as time passed. How embarrassing it felt when this change began to affect my whole wellbeing!

As I said, I would often lie awake waiting for his return. This is how I first began to notice the strange happenings. First, the muttering. I could never hear the words, but I could hear his voice, it was high pitched and breathy. When I first heard it, I wondered whether he had brought someone back to his flat, the thought, when it reached me, came towing a pang in my chest. But my ears had been so trained to his footsteps, his habit of never fully picking up his shoe and simply letting his sole scrape the ground, that I was sure I would hear if another rhythm had muddied his own. From that deduction, it was clear that he was talking to himself.

I would not have thought much of it - it's something we all do, I'm sure - if it wasn't for the intensity of the false conversation. He really did sound like he was having some sort of argument in his own mind. Perhaps you would have to hear it yourself to truly understand why it began to worry me, although I knew it was none of my concern.

Then came the scraping. It was hard to place at first, but it definitely sounded like some type of metal. There were times it seemed immensely heavy from the sound it made. I often heard his labored breath as he dragged whatever it was across the carpeted hall. I hardly knew what to make of this.

But these strange circumstances are not all that trouble me. When we come across each other in the hall, he seems thinner every time. His hair is unwashed, his eyes wild. And really, those eyes, they are what worry me the most.

Well, after putting my thoughts to pen and paper, I surely am glad that she suggested it, but I think I shall leave this hobby alone for the time being. Farewell, reader!

Arthur stared at the blank space on the page, his hands shaking.

"I remember how she would smile at me," he murmured quietly. "I would never have thought—"

He stopped abruptly and began to flip through the preceding pages quickly. "She sees me, she truly sees me…she really looks at me, she watches me…" There was almost a hint of a smile on his face as his wide eyes read over the neat lines again.

"All this about *me*…"

He turned back to the page he had just read and swallowed, then glanced up at Lillian through his eyelashes. Any semblance of a smile left his face. A new entry started on the next page.

January the 1st, 1920

Happy New Year Reader, I have returned to you, and I write with a shaking hand, for I fear this diary may be all I leave behind.

I must take you back to the morning of December 31st, to a rather embarrassing occurrence which seems much less important now. I heard the door of his apartment open as I was getting ready for the department store, uncharacteristic to his routine of sleeping late. In some strange frenzy, I opened my own door as well. There he was - wearing his oversized coat and a tweed suit. He jumped immediately upon hearing my door open and glanced at me very quickly, covering his face with his hand before hurrying down the steps. I suppose I could have said New Year's Eve to him, but I did not say anything. All there was to do after that was chastise myself for my own stupidity and go about my morning.

I almost ran back to the flats at the end of the work day, though there was no reason to. Only to listen to him. When I arrived, I sat down in my chair rather listlessly and looked out the window onto the courtyard below, ruminating on my predicament.

And suddenly - oh! - there he was. A jolt of electricity shot through my body. Down in the courtyard, my predicament was there. I rushed to stand near my door as I heard his heavy boots stalking up the stairs. Then, he was opening his own door, and I heard him throw himself onto the bed.

Perhaps you will balk at what I did next, for I am certainly ashamed. I hope you will understand that in my fervor, I so dearly wished to be near him. I came up to my own bed, which was against the wall we shared. Here I sat and pressed my ear against the wall, only hoping I might hear something.

I did.

"I cannot live without you any longer, my love," I heard him whisper.

I jumped back from the wall, my hand over my heart. Who could he have been talking to? As my heart slowed, I put my ear up to the wall once again.

I could hear the sounds of metal, screwing, unscrewing. As he did this, his breathing became louder and louder. I could almost hear what sounded like crying. My heart raced as I tried to place what tools he could be using. I imagined instruments of torture - but no, I was surely being too rash in that assumption.

I must have continued listening, my face pressed against the wall, for many hours. I heard no voices, only that metallic working sound, and the sounds of distress. At some point, I suppose I fell asleep, for I woke up quite disoriented, and it was New Year's Day, that is, today. The sun was in my eyes, it could have been spectacular weather. I sat up with some conviction. I wasn't entirely sure what caused this sudden change in me, but perhaps I just didn't want to think of his voice saying "my love, my love, my love".

I could only pray that he would return to his flat at the time he usually did. Truly, I must have been possessed as I walked up those steps and stood in front of the man's door.

I placed my hand upon the silver handle, taking a shaking breath. I opened it.

I heard the blood in my ears. I stepped into the room. I turned my head and immediately let out a gasp, which I stifled with my hand.

My first thought was that it was a dead body. But no, as I looked in paralyzed horror, it was something much more grotesque. A conglomeration of different types of metal in the shape of a body, wearing an outdated women's frock. But no, that was not the horrible part. The worst part was the head. I do not know what it was made of, but it looked like human skin. The grey eyes looked like human eyes. They looked wet. I could swear it was staring at me. Looking at me, analyzing me. I half expected it to speak. It looked so real, truly like a face, like a real head had been placed on this false body. I began to doubt myself and wonder again if this was some type of crime scene. I felt sick, as if I might vomit, and my whole body was hot and cold. Still, I couldn't tear my eyes away from that thing. I felt that if I dared to move, it would surely get me. I continued staring at it, finally forcing myself to step backwards. I moved my hand towards the door, grasping for it without looking. Without warning, I heard a disgusting sound. I swiveled in that direction, choking on my own breath.

I had inadvertently turned on a phonograph machine. The noise I heard was "By the Light of the Silvery Moon"; a song familiar to me. It felt twisted and made my hair stand on end. I looked back to the thing on the ground and my heart dropped again.

Its head moved in time with the tune, its arms moved back and forth in some horrid dance. Its face twisted into a false expression, as its mouth moved along to the lyrics; "Place, park; scene, dark."

I felt I surely was in some sort of nightmare. I could hardly believe - never in my lifetime had I seen such a thing. The way it imitated human movement, the expressions. My vision began to close in, the music became static. I grabbed onto the doorframe and managed to walk with numb legs to my room, barely reaching the bed before, I suppose, fainting.

I have now covered all events up to present, and here I sit in my room. It is now noon. I have no eloquent way to write this, but that monstrous creature is staring at me. Of course, I did not think to lock the door behind me in my state, so I can only assume it came in at some point and has been watching me for hours on end, for I was in a catatonic way in which I cannot remember anything up to this point. I suppose I have reached a state of strange calm by this point, as it has taken me quite some time to recount all this by pen, and the thing has done nothing but look at me. It is sitting on the floor in front of my bed. I suppose I can find solace in the fact that I must be insane.

And even so, as I look back at this strange doll, I feel such an indescribable feeling. I hardly know why I am doing this. Life has not been cruel to me. It is my mind that is weak, and my illusion of sanity has been shattered by these events which I cannot explain. The being in front of me transcends my understanding, I feel as though it has given me permission to die.

And man next door, you who dominated my mind and existence?

I suppose it's foolish to think you even know who I am.

Arthur set down the diary.

He cried out, gripping his head with his hands. The room was blurry, his face was hot. His heart was beating so fast he felt it might rip out of his chest, and he was sobbing to a point of hyperventilation. He turned to the automaton.

"*You!*" he said, his tone pure despair. "You, my creation!"

She looked back at him, expressionless, as she had no way to express.

"You caused this, you caused the only person who cared for me to–"

He suddenly lunged forward, grabbing the inhuman by her neck. She did not struggle, for she had not been made to resist.

"You–"

He broke off again.

"No, not you." He shuddered violently. "Me, me, me, that was all I ever thought of. That was all I ever cared for. I wanted to be loved. I wanted to feel what love felt like. Was that so wrong?" He shook her by her shoulders. She did not react.

"But I knew all along you were flawed, Automaton." He began to rub his temples. "No, not flawed. I am flawed. It is I who cannot feel love. You are not flawed. You serve your purpose, not the purpose I wished for, but something else, I suppose." He now spoke in an emotionless tone.

"You cannot feel for me. You weren't made for it. That was my mistake, for how could I create a thing that feels love when I do not know love?" He paused for a moment, looking at her. His face began to twist.

"I can admire my creation, but I cannot love you. In fact, I now find you grotesque. And, I'm sure you see me the same way. I hardly blame you!

Your creator made you for love, and yet could not love you! Why? He was too busy loving *himself*, you see! And so, deprived as you were, you naturally crawled to the first delicate flower you found, a true human being, unlike the two of *us*!"

With this last proclamation, he flung the Automaton away with wide eyes. She landed on the floor in a crumple.

"Automaton, you must go. My creation, my responsibility, after all. But I never much liked responsibilities!" He began to step closer to her as his voice grew louder.

"She *loved* me, Automaton! You are nothing. You didn't even serve your purpose. You are nothing. A reflection of my incompetence."

The Automaton could not speak back. She was not made to disagree.

Arthur picked the Automaton back up with one hand. "You are nothing," he said as he wrapped his fingers around her delicate neck. The cold metal warped as he clawed it apart. "You are nothing," he said as the metal began to cut his hands. His blood dripped down her metal body as if it was her own. "You are nothing," he said as he tore at her with a vicious desperation.

"I am nothing," he said as her shattered form lay before him.

The Automaton made no sound, for she was not made to scream.

And in that instant, as I perish with *her*, I finally feel real - what would have happened if I was not infatuated with my own suffering! But I have written a fantasy story! And yet, that is what I so crave! The passing of one world, a world of stark, mundane reality - into that wonderful world of the terrible, fantastic mind!

NONFICTION

Untitled **(2025) by Mario Loprete**

Buried

By Brianna Arnzen

In the summer, even the air is saturated with life—heavy, wet, suffocating in its abundance.

How do I function when my body is heavy with this saturation? It's like trying to walk after swimming across the creek fully dressed—burdened by dripping clothes attempting to drag me back down to the bank.

Hot summer sun and cool water, lulling me to lie down, take root in the earth.

My blood, my bones, my body is heavy. Love flows syrupy-thick through my veins and leadens the marrow in my bones. It's difficult to move and the earth is tempting—sun-soaked clover over warm soil. And this body is so *heavy* with the love I have. How can I *move?*

* * *

Fireworks. Sparks glitter across a bedazzled night sky littered with stars and ash. Lights rain down, approaching the soil we recline on. Blankets, beach towels, lawn chairs, and truck beds. We're laid out on the field watching the boys shoot off fireworks. Well, not so much a field as an expanse of lawn, but can you have a lawn if there's no house? The grass has already grown back over where the house used to be.

Technically, it's grown over the house itself. They were able to collapse the trailer—eight feet tall to eighteen inches—that was then sunk in the earth. A full life gone and covered over in a day. Apparently, it was cheaper to crush and inter the skeleton than to haul it off and sell to someone else.

So we're setting the sky on fire—me, my sisters, my cousins, aunts, uncles, Gummy, Pawpaw—while we sit on the remnants of the different

lives we've lived together.

In the trailer, I was once 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, but I never got to be 23 or 24 or any other number of myself in the trailer. Maybe that doesn't matter. More of me at 10, 11, and 12 lived in the trailer than me at 20, 21, or 22. Growing up and branching away even though I'm always pulled back, pulled back.

I was born on the evening prior to the start of the summer season, and a piece of every summer—sometimes massive chunks, other times tiny slivers—has been spent on this property. From the very first, just days old, to the most recent, decades later.

My eleventh summer, I read most of the *Percy Jackson* series at the trailer: inside on the couch; outside in the shade; on the trampoline, a lawn chair, a ratted towel splayed under the sun, or the picnic table—one of the only remnants of life at the trailer still above ground. They asked me what I liked about the books so much, if I felt like going to the river, whether I wanted to learn to hunt that fall.

My thirteenth summer, they asked me about what I was reading, what it was like to have a new baby sister in the house, how I felt about going back to school in the fall. The answer to the last always an affirmation, as I spent most of the summer missing the school library.

My sixteenth summer, they took turns teaching me—overly-anxious and frantic—how to drive, slowly creeping up and down the gravel driveway. They asked me what kind of car I wanted, how cross country practice was going, what classes I was taking.

My eighteenth summer, they asked about post-high school plans, 'cause I'd *always been a reader* and reading *such big books* that I had to be going to college. They asked me what I wanted to study, what I wanted to do, where I wanted to go.

Regardless of my answers, they always concluded the conversation the same way. Some variation of *I might not know what you're talking about, but I do know I'm proud of you, baby.*

Beneath the showers of sparks, concrete squares sit in an unneat row, stepping stones to the absent trailer steps. Grandkids' names carved in order of age: Brianna, Ava, Jesse, Lilly, Macy, Briley, Isabella. That's all there were at the time. A reminder of another time, another summer. Steps that now just lead to memories. Our life once looked like this, was shaped like this.

Gummy and Mom cried when I decided where to start my first year of college. Only two hours away, but *so far* away. Proud of me, but preemptively missing me. How can they not, when my place here is laid in stone?

But before all that, there were full summers of this. Picking tiger lilies that always seem to love growing in the ditches. Watching Jesse nearly drown himself in his enthusiasm to learn to swim; seeing Ava toss the training wheels on her bike. Keeping an eye out for snakes, like Gummy reminded us. Catching crawdads and tadpoles and frogs and minnows and turtles. Catch and *oooohhh* and *awwwww* and release. Jesse and Ava climbing high in the tall trees while I watch from the solid ground with the little ones, whatever assortment of the little ones had been brought into being by that summer: Lilly, Macy, Briley, Isabella, Bailey, Jozie—not yet Kylee or Thomas or Maron.

Life in endless multiply. The creek is overflowing with life: fish and frogs and tadpoles, pockets of sticky alien eggs. The earth is wreathed with fat nightcrawlers, black beetlebugs, and fiery-red anthills, laced in clover and acorns and walnut husks and infinite blades of grass. The trees are flush with squirrels catapulting and cicadas trilling, ringing their voices and brief existences out into the open air, brimming with whirring maple seeds and floating clouds of dandelion fuzz. Out here, it's just me, my family. Life is

teeming, spilling over in its abundance.

Full summers of this: sunlight pouring in cascading waves, supermoons glowing and bright, dappled starlight bathing well-worn dirt paths, paths littered with rising fireflies all leading to a single everlit porchlight.

Inside, the television hums with static electricity. There's no internet, but there's a tote of watched and re-watched VHS tapes and scratched blu-rays—take your pick. I've got a backpack full of books I've read and re-read before, and there's a deck of tattered playing cards on the kitchen table. We've got incomplete sets of dominos and dice. The babies have their bouncers and teething toys and rattles, and the little ones have baby dolls, model cars, and a little kitchen set—all well-loved and well-worn from years of extensive use. There's not much new distraction, so we're left to spend our time together. With each other.

In the trailer, pregnancies were joyfully announced and deaths were somberly discussed. In the trailer, I fought with my sister and cried to my mother. In the trailer, I brewed fresh sweet tea and Gummy baked brownies and we had cinnamon-sugar toast. In the trailer, box fans hummed and children chattered and family gossiped. In the trailer, babies learned to crawl then walk then run then get into *any* and *every*thing.

In the trailer, worms push through hard packed soil, and wood slowly, slowly decays. In the trailer, bacteria and fungi work to break down the skeleton of a house that used to be a home.

But many things are buried here. On the surface, the tilled rows of Gummy's garden sprouting cucumbers, tomatoes, watermelons, corn, okra. In the earth extend the roots of even the tallest trees. Go deeper to find fossilized remains of life that lived here before any Lindley. But even in the earth, there is evidence of the Lindleys who live and *have* lived here. Plastic toys washed away and buried in mud from summer storms. Beloved pets:

Harley, Daisy, Ozzy, Oliver.

Five hundred yards down the road from the trailer, a few Lindleys are buried at the little Baptist church where the congregation will hold a few Lindleys as well.

It's hard to leave a place where the roots are dug so deep.

On the surface of the earth is our home. A persevering place, enduring in its ability to change—be made and remade as we need.

And right now, home is a place where the sky is on fire. It's a place where grass grows lush and green over the remains of a house I grew up in, and that grass is littered with the members of an evergrowing and evolving family that might not always know what the hell I'm talking about but is *always* proud of me.

They ask me what's next. *What's after the master's?*

I'm thinking about a PhD.

More school?

More school. An affirmative.

So they ask me more questions. How it all works, where I have to go, what I have to do. I explain I'd be away a few years; I make sure to mention what schools are closest. I make sure to mention what places I can work that are local—or as local as I can get to this patch of nowhere forty-five minutes away from the closest grocery store, much less a university.

I talk about what I'd study, what I'd teach, what I'd learn. What I'd *read.* They listen to my big boring academic aspirations.

Of course you'd want that. A chuckle and a shake of the head. *I'm proud of you, baby.*

The air is thick: humidity and smoke. It sticks in my throat, and I've got to go. Go before I settle into this. I give my hugs and kisses goodbye.

Make up some excuse about how watching the boys—grown men with wives and children but always "the boys," especially when they play like this in this distinctly boy-ish explosive way—shooting fireworks makes me a bit nervous.

I tell Pawpaw and he teases me for my nervousness, but he immediately comes to my rescue anytime someone tries to delay my escape, explaining that *the fireworks make her nervous, so she's going home.* But really, I'm running away from it. I've gotta go before I get stuck—take root with the tiger lilies and oak trees, bury myself with the trailer.

Jesus washes away our sins **(2026) by Gulshabnam Alisher Kyzy**

I Love You Equals Scrambled Eggs

By Davey Long

I am leafing through my childhood sketchbooks on the floor of my father's apartment. He is hovering over me, holding a Phillips craft beer in his left hand and pointing to the sketchbook with his right.

"I love that one," he says.

It's not great, a drawing of my father from when I was probably six. He is shirtless in the drawing, emerging from the ocean, with crosshatched shading on his cheeks. This is how I pictured my father when I drew him from memory at six years old. Now, my image of him is not much different: shirtless, in a pair of khaki cargo shorts, in the backyard with a slight beer gut, holding a garden hose, his wide, hooked nose shining from sweat in the sun, in a pair of khaki cargo shorts. From his window, we can see the backyard where he spent twenty years of his life doing just that, my childhood home. Now, his plants are confined to a fifth-floor apartment. He has four bonsais and a Christmas cactus that sheds brown flowers onto his hardwood floor. Somehow, he brought the smell of our home with him. I think it's the foliage from his bonsais, his array of spices, or even the acrylics he's been spreading across wax paper since his twenties, rather than investing in a paint palette.

Throughout my years in elementary school, my dad worked from home on weekdays, taking care of me and my mom's dog in the afternoons. I watched cartoons on the red cushioned chair, speckled with dragonflies, in our living room, copied the cartoons I watched into my sketchbook, or followed my mom's senior Jack-Russel Terrier on walks she managed to take all by herself.

I curled up on the dragonfly chair. I was little enough to fit both my

dad's laptop and me on the cushion to watch SpongeBob SquarePants. My dad passed me a plate of oily scrambled eggs and apple slices, brushing the soft back of my hand with his calloused thumb. His hands were rough and scarred from years working the line at Café Mexico, a busy restaurant nestled downtown. Shuffling to accommodate the plate in my chair nest, I balanced it on the arm. My dad trudged back into his office. My after-school snack was fine there, aging. The dog tried to hop up on the chair, pawing the dragonflies on the cushion, stretching her back, and huffing through her wet nose. Pulling her up, I knocked the plate onto the floor, coating the worn wood in scrambled egg bits, apple slices, and broken glass. My dad's footsteps bounded towards us. He groaned.

"Gah, kid," He shouted. "Why would you put that there?" His sentence fizzled out into a frustrated exhaustion.

"I don't know."

I was careless. When my mom got home from work, she came to me on the couch where I still watched SpongeBob, but I was stuck on more somber episodes like "Have You Seen this Snail?"

"Hi, Baby," she said.

"Hi."

She melted into the sectional across from me, her shirt loose at the collar and leggings bunched around her knees.

She said, "When your dad cooks meals for us, it's like, how he says he loves you."

My mom was a big "I love you" person. I sat with this for a moment, mulling over how "I love you" could possibly equal scrambled eggs. I wasn't even that crazy about saying I love you. For me, love was as easy as sharing time or space with a person. I didn't know love could be scrambled eggs and apple slices.

When I was little, I thought my dad wanted me to be a boy. He already had two girls with two other women, and I was his last chance at having some semblance of a father-son relationship, something like he had growing up. Despite wearing princess dresses and carrying a doll with me everywhere, I also made sure to wear gumboots, sharpen knives, and chop wood in the backyard with vigor.

My dad instructed me on how to make a fire every time the opportunity arose. He showed me how to widen my legs, lift the heavy axe above my head, and bring it down onto the tree stump that served as our chopping block. The weight of the steel compensated for the force I did not have, parting the wood in front of me. I practiced this on summer nights. My face was in reach of the firepit as he built a pyramid with the smallest chunks of wood first, the ones that split off when I missed the center of the log.

My dad taught me how to skateboard. Selkirk Avenue is lined with trees that occasionally deposit leaves and bits of bark onto the ground. The bumps in the pavement and little twigs jostled me because my body was only almost twice the size of the board. It was an ancient skateboard, one from the eighties, with a flat nose, wide kicktail, and a broad deck between its front and back trucks. I rode it for an afternoon, balancing awkwardly on my right foot and pushing with my left. Inevitably, I slammed the ground with my hip, got up, and rubbed it with my palm. I skinned my elbows falling forward and got up. I scraped my knees and got up. This is what courage looks like, I thought, sweat accumulating above my upper lip and under my armpits. I was coated in bruises by the evening, but I wore them with pride.

When I was eleven, I went to Beau's house after school. Beau was my childhood best friend. His bedroom was upstairs. He had stickers from skate shops stuck onto his mirror, and his metal bedframe sat atop a green

shag rug. My dad's old board hung, mounted on the wall like a taxidermy dear head.

"Is that my dad's old skateboard," I asked.

"Oh, yeah. He gave it to me," he said.

Beau was the perfect picture of boyhood. He was stout, and his brown hair was always shaved into a buzzcut. He wasn't vain. His hair couldn't get in the way of fun. He had grand plans to build a tree fort next to his house and a book that instructed him on how to do it, *The Adventure Book for Boys*. He knew how to tie knots. He didn't like reading. He liked messy art like pottery because it could easily turn into another activity, like a mud fight or a pretend war game with cracked brown face paint.

I hung onto that, *For Boys*. I could never be this boy. My father had to resort to a boy I'd befriended when we were toddlers in order to find a home for his old board. Beau knew how skateboarding worked. He had his own board for actually skating the park. But this was a beautiful old piece of wood, practically antique. It represented the era of California, and skating pools that had dried up from the drought. I didn't look up at the board on the wall with the same admiration as Beau, who detailed the history of skating and where this board landed in the timeline. I looked up at it in anger.

My mom, dad, and I always went for Saturday morning walks. I was twelve at the time; the skin on my forearms stung against the air, covered in dash-like scabs. My dad packed his backpack on the chair next to the front door; his Blundstones placed delicately and conveniently underneath, by the heater. He's owned the same backpack since university. The same one he brought to class every day with books and sketches was now home to a giant Cannon camera, oranges, and a pack of discounted roast beef from Save-on-Foods. He doesn't get rid of things. He repairs them the moment

they begin to wear. That is, *if* they wear at all.

I stood between the credenza and the kitchen closet. The tiles on our floor were cold through my socks, but I still neglected to wear a long-sleeved shirt.

"What's that, my baby?" My mom grabbed my hand, "What's going on?"

I jerked my arm away. My dad shuffled his feet, staring at the ground. He grumbled, "If you really wanted to kill yourself, you'd take the axe from the backyard and slit your wrists with that!"

The door shut behind him.

That evening, my mom asked if I wanted to walk the dog to the park and back with her. I obliged. We trudged down the muddy hill leading to the water in Banfield Park. Her dog sniffed the wet grass. She crinkled her brow and pursed her lips. It was not yet cold enough to see our breath in the air.

She said, "Your dad was just shocked."

He told her that being a teenager is hard. She relayed this as we trudged down the muddy hill; her dog obliviously indulged in the impromptu walk. She breathed heavily as we walked, watching her step on the mud patches. The first time he cried from something other than injury was when he was a teenager, fourteen. It was his dad's affair.

"It's because he cares for you," my mom said.

My dad and I have never spoken about that conversation. I imagine he didn't want to. I might as well have taken his backpack and ripped out the stitching with sixteen shallow slices.

Now, when my dad and I hang out in his apartment, we cook. I can see the living room windows shrouded in trees in his old house, where this all went down from his kitchen. He stands beside me like a chef, and like I'm the one working on the line.

"Uh, yeah, just dice up this onion and these tomatoes and mince this garlic, here, and we'll just toss them in."

He boils the pasta and drinks craft beer out of a comically large dragon goblet, a gift from one of his ex-girlfriends. Standing over me, he reminds me to curl my knuckles. He rubs the white scars on his fingers from nicking them on so many knives. It doesn't feel like love sometimes. Sometimes, I draw portraits for him. I write poems for him. I endure back-patting-ly awkward hugs. I say, "I love you," and he scoffs. It doesn't feel like enough for him to stand picking at more recent kitchen burns as I dice onions. But it is. It is.

My parents separated when I was fourteen. I haven't lived with him since. He missed me shutting myself in my room for hours, sneaking out at night. He missed parent-child screaming matches. He missed me temporarily, turning the sink black with hair dye, the phase in which I baked cookies every day for a month, and the first time I clunkily snuck a boy into my room. All of which my mom endured.

When I was eighteen, my dad and I sat at his old kitchen table at my mom's house. We were full of turkey, gravy, and mashed potatoes. His beer glass was almost empty. At that moment, neither of us were in service to one another. We were gluttonous and lounging, bouncing around my Spotify playlists.

"This is my music!" My dad said, scrolling through my December playlist full of songs for cold days. They are songs that remind me of snowflakes and the sun setting at four: Nick Cave, Cocteau Twins, and PJ Harvey. My mom could not stand Cocteau Twins' *Treasure,* because there were "too many noises happening."

Regardless, we played it on her Sonos Roam speaker, letting the noises run free. My dad rubbed his eyes as if he were tired. They were red and dewy between the smile lines.

It is hard to love a man born in the sixties, born into the era of punk rock and skateboarding and respect built from scars. It's hard to love a man who grew up in Calgary with men who worked in kitchens and on construction sites, where feeling was not an option.

But it does get easier. It gets easier to patch the language barrier of love between father and daughter, and when that happens, he wipes tears from his eyes at his ex-wife's dinner table, listening to Cocteau Twins.

POETRY

***Untiltled* (2026) by Grayson Schleuning**

Sculpted From a Memory

By Mac Dare

I can see you now, in serene stone
So much kinder than your flesh and skin.
Twisting vines caress your naked form,
My callow whims diligently plant the garden.

You may rest forever in the safest place.
The home of all thoughts that soothe and delight.
I'll keep other statues around, though you'll hold the center
For different shades of thought and tunes of emotion.

Your hair gently curves, fallen plainly around the face,
That I never got to cup between these wanting hands.
That privilege has become a pastime of mine,
But the stone leaves me scarred with callouses.

The only thing I can't seem to stand,
Is how tight the line of your smile was carved.
Too far, is that mouth from your common mirth,
The laughs that I so wish I could've held in rock.

Running my hands around your imitation,
Made imperfectly true by a mason's hands,
I learn all the folds, the edges of this perfect you
And wish to all angels that I had never chased it away.

CST+13

By Zih-Lei Ho

You were thirteen hours ahead when you decided to light up my blue screen
in the middle of the night saying *Why haven't you called me? Don't keep me waiting*.

I thought you must have known that I was asleep, so I didn't reply until
thirteen hours later, dead set on keeping you waiting.

Maybe it was guilt I felt when I finally picked up your call,
in my head I pictured you by the telephone, waiting.

Have you ever felt guilty of making me wait?
Waiting for love, waiting for patience, waiting

for reconciliation and recognition. You were telling me something
I should care about, and I was waiting

to tell you about the two dead squirrels I saw
outside of my apartment that waited

to cross the road but still got hit by a car. You'd say
The nut is greener on the other side but I'm still waiting

before we both ran out of time. I wonder when I will run out of time.
When the knife got too close to my wrist I pictured you again, waiting

by the telephone. I'm making spicy cucumbers the way you taught me.
After salting I put them in the fridge to wait

for a night, the night you lit up my screen saying
Why did you never call me? Why keep me waiting?

You are so far away it's easy to forget. I had convinced myself that I exist in a vacuum, where dead squirrels are still alive and knives are never too close to wrists. Would you wait

with me before crossing the road to get to greener nuts?
Come on! Don't keep me waiting.

Now I'm lighting up your blue screen in the middle of your night.
You pick up and say **何紫蕾**, *I was just waiting.*

Bodies Bursting Bodies

By Zih-Lei Ho

When you give a body too much love it
bursts. I learned that from women making dumplings.
They mixed minced meat and cut cabbages,
scooped a spoon and placed it in the center of a
rolled-out dough. Then a weathered palm
wrapped around my hand as I wrapped
the skin around the meat, shaping and molding and
pinching, imprinting a signature.
They do not have names but leave behind
fingerprints in my stomach.
    Skin always covers the meat

I like to watch raw dumplings plunge into
hot water. They bubble and boil and bob up and down,
turn sideways and stumble over each other, and burst
when they are in the pot for too long. Meat
exposed and skin shredded. A perfect body now
swelling and oozing soup.
    Skin should always cover the meat or it becomes a burden

I bit into glossy white dumplings and thought of how easy it is to
break soft skin. One whiplash and it splits
open, slits ripping, skin
should always cover the meat or everything spills
out of the body, can't scoop it back or pinch it close,
a puddle of uncontained love pooling at my feet.
But I am bent and pressed by fingertips all over.
What's left after bodies burst, bodies mend and grow.

***Sombrella* (2026) by Alyssa Gibbs**

Clair De Lune

By Brianna Jackson

Silky white gown, glossy over her skin,
her arms dangle over the balcony
as the hushed breath of moonlight fogs
aging window panes,

carrying the cerulean shades of the sea
Lamenting chords ring across the tide, skipping
like ivory stone, gently swallowed

His sailboat quietly sinks into the night, the
starboard, a fusion of bleak gray shadows
and silver constellations cast in worn net

She closes her eyes and listens
to the swell of crescent waves cruising the shore,
the pianissimo beats of moonlight that twinkle the signature

He used to play

Mindlessly, his curved fingers would drift into a passage of rubato
Time, white noise to ripples of melody
Arppeggiated notes glitter blue

Their composition simmers
as the major chord diverges
into two luminescent halves

Of memories they take

His piano sings like
Moons echo

Self-Portrait

By Brianna Jackson

Motionless in her wheelchair,
The old woman sits Back.
A headache pulsing
Like the beeps of a heart monitor
Cold as IV fluids flushed through her veins

She stares at the row of paintings,
Contouring the parchment white walls
In a hazy palette

Some landscape pieces

Of warm meadows spotted with violets,
A honey labradoodle sprinting with its pink tongue–
Flapping in the breeze, kids racing on bikes down a
Cobblestone path that winds up a hill to a house
The color of a Goldfinch egg

Some portrait pieces

Of a young woman with chestnut hair,
Rippling down her slender back,
Oval eyes, the color of a sunlit creek,

Dragonfruit lips smiling a bright
Set of white teeth,
Midnight dress twirling as
Her handsome partner directs her hand
Almond brown eyes smiling as
Brightly as the woman's lips

The old woman cried,
But why?
Tears swirling over the landscape of
Her wrinkled cheek
Exhausted ribs rattled in her chest,
And her lungs wheezed
For unsanitized air

Almost as if she knew the woman,
The man, the dog, the children, the home,
In a faraway meadow, memories drifting
Wayward in tall grass, trying to find their way

Triptych on Smuggled Things

By Rowan Tate

I. Crossing

My mother slipped her good earrings
into her wool socks and rolled
her blouses into tight spirals
as if folding them any other way
might wake the walls.

Outside, the laundry lines sagged
with rain-heavy sheets.
The neighbor's radio muttered
from three houses away,
distorted, as if ashamed to be heard.

She took only one photograph:
her brother laughing, eyes shut,
palms sticky with plum jam.

No one said goodbye. Only, "Go now,"
like a recipe called out mid-step.

At the border, the Communists ripped
her documents. She carried our village out
like a smuggled lung—
brick dust, cabbage steam,
the squawk-strangled echo of chickens
pinned in the throat of the dawn.

Hurling 30,000 feet into
strange space, she cried remembering
the way the neighbor's dog barked
at nothing for hours.

II. Settling

In the new apartment,
the carpet smelled
like someone else's dinners
and the kitchen tiles
were the color of old teeth.
It was the biggest room
my mother had ever slept in.

She found work
delivering bread to gas stations
and learned English
by circling coupons with stolen pens.

In Romania, she paid for the plane ticket
by working in a cannery,
fingers puckered from brine.

When I sign birthday cards,
I pause, feeling for which version of my name
is mine: the one with too many consonants
or the one that fits in mouths
like a coin.

My mother gave me a name she
couldn't pronounce
so that everyone else could.

III. Staying

In a supermarket in New Jersey
I'm watching a man bag peaches
with the same carefulness
my mother had for her Romanian spoons

and I think of her in a bathrobe,
opening windows in April
even when it rained, as if the air
needed to be reminded
of itself.

The cashier mispronounces my name
by pronouncing it correctly
and I know where he comes from.

I say, only my mother
used to call me that,
and it sounds like a prayer
caught in the throat of a border
bread breaking itself open
for no one.

AUTHOR & ARTIST BIOGRAPHIES

***Company* (2026) by Adi Bender**

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

Tessa Arnzen is currently a junior at Emory University studying English & Creative Writing.

Isabelle Hammond is a writer and designer from Minnesota. She graduated from University Wisconsin River Falls with degrees in Creative Writing, Graphic Design, and Stage and Screen Arts. She was on the production team for the UWRF student-run literary magazine, Prologue. You can find her in local coffee shops around the Twin Cities working on her latest projects.

MacKenzie Rogers is an undergraduate student at Murray State University, majoring in Creative Writing and Journalism. She is the Associate Editor of The Murray State News and a recipient of numerous journalism awards.

Trinity Snyder is a writer, artist, and musician.

Brianna Arnzen is a master's student studying English at Southeast Missouri State University. They have a bachelor's degree in English education. They also teach an introductory composition course at Southeast and work as a tutor in the university's writing lab.

Davey Long is doing an undergraduate degree in Writing and English at the University of Victoria. Her work has been published in the UVic Community Campus Garden journal, Sundew, Wayfarer Magazine, and 149 Review. She serves as Creative Nonfiction Editor for The Warren Undergraduate Review.

Mac Dare is a second-year undergraduate Honors student at Ohio Northern University double majoring in English and Creative Writing. He writes both prose and poetry. Spending time in the worlds of epic fantasy novels is one of his favorite pastimes, and he also wouldn't mind carving his name into the stars.

何紫蕾, Ho Zih-lei, or, as her friends call her, Renee, is a 20-year-old writer born and raised in Taiwan. Despite her native tongue being Mandarin, she ultimately decided to pursue her passion for creative writing in a language none of her family members speak. Her writings are often inspired by her childhood growing up on the island and a guilty nostalgia towards her motherland. She is currently studying English with a concentration in Creative Writing at Vanderbilt University. When not writing, she likes to spend too much time crocheting while her cat Freya chews on her yarn.

Brianna Jackson: I am currently a junior college student at Bradley University, majoring in English with a concentration in Creative Writing, who loves to read and write fantasy. I primarily enjoy writing long-form stories, but also dabble in poetry as a form of expression. My preferred style of writing is lyrical surrealism with elements of deeper themes. I am the Prose Editor of the Broadside Journal at Bradley University, who enjoys reading through countless submissions and offering feedback, but is also currently in the process of writing a novel of my own.

Rowan Tate is a Romanian creative (poet, essayist, visual artist, songwriter). She reads nonfiction nature books, the backs of shampoo bottles, and sometimes minds.

ARTIST BIOGRAPHIES

Adi Bender: My name is Adi Bender and I am a junior at Mercy Academy. I love experimenting with ideas and mediums in all of my artworks. I love to portray concepts and emotions through surrealism and strategic use of color. I love working with acrylic paints the most, but I enjoy working with whatever medium fits my mood the best! I see myself working with Art History and Art Education in the future while pursuing my art to the fullest.

Alyssa Gibbs: I'm Alyssa Gibbs I'm 17 years old and a senior at Mercy Academy. I'm on my schools bowling team and am also the oldest out five girls! My favorite mediums to use are Posca markers, clay and pencils and I like to draw in a cartoonish style! And when I graduate, I plan on pursuing a career in art therapy, and I intend to continue to make art outside of school as well.

Gulshabnam Alisher Kyzy: I'm Gulsha, and I'm 18 years old this year. I have been doing art since 2nd grade and oil painting since sophomore year. The medium I use the most is oil paint. I see myself as an artist in the future.

Mario Loprete is an Italian artist who has distinguished himself in the contemporary art scene through innovative use of materials and a unique vision of urban art. His work lies at the crossroads of painting and sculpture, exploring themes of memory, identity, and urban transformation.

Araceli Sánchez is a current student at Mercy Academy. She enjoys creating art with different mediums and techniques at school and outside of school during her free time. She plans to continue branching out and practicing different styles to be able to create a wide variety of art with her skills. As an art student she hopes to continue to improve these skills and mastering techniques to grow as an artist.

Grayson Schleuning is an artist from Louisville, KY dedicated to creating accessible functional art that lives on the body or in a home. With a background in both 2D and 3D art, her goal is to create movement and fluidity through use of color interaction and unconventional materials to understand how we seek comfort in our everyday lives.