

MOSTLY CIRCULAR

ENL 3850: INTERMEDIATE CREATIVE WRITING

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FALL 2024





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Introduction

Fall Cento

*all lines borrowed from or inspired by students in
Fall 2024's Intermediate Creative Writing*

Remind me, in this heaviness,
of where to begin. With the storm
howling across my chest or with
the scent of jasmine on the vine?

One scorching orange day
in autumn, it twists through wires,
twists through walls. The news
like a fish held up with pride.
And we're caught in the spin. We are
the lives attached to the match
that has been set aflame.

There is love somewhere,
I am sure. In the soul of a deer,
in the soul of a stray, in the river
that sings each time it dreams
of sailors passing by.
This isn't reading between the lines.
There is love somewhere, I am sure.

Somewhere there is tinsel
on every tree. And in every one
there's drawn a clean, black wing.
The wind can't stop playing Für Elise.

There is love somewhere,
I am sure. Must be right, right?
that sometimes from the spinning
there comes singing. And that fat fish
gets skinned and stuffed,
gets set up and is soon forgotten
on some shelf. There is love
somewhere, I am sure.

It is riding nearer, and it can't stop
singing. A love that is mostly circular.
And in its curve we find ourselves.

*Stacy Gnall
December 2024*

Echoes of Souls

Mahmoud Alhamwi

I. The Roots of Earth

Beneath the roots of olive trees,
The soil speaks ancient whispers.
A mother tongue older than my breath,
Grains of sand cling to my skin,
Remind me of where we begin.
In Syria's hills and plains,
The wind carries the scent of jasmine vine,,
and the pulse of forgotten streams.
Here, my heart grows roots—
Deep, tangled, and unbroken.

II. The Fire of Love

In your eyes, I see universe
Not far away stars, but flames of the near and sacred.
Love blooms like a jasmine vine,
Fragile yet strong,
Twisting through walls,
Finding cracks where no light dared fall.
You carry sunlight in your hands,
A warmth that burns
But never scars.

III. A Resilient Song

When the storm howls across my chest,
It reminds me of a song
my grandmother sang:
A melody sharp as Damascus steel,
Soft as a whispered prayer.
Though winds break branches,
The trunk remains
An unshakable legacy
To seasons passed.
each scar becomes
A story written on the leaves of time.

Echoes of Souls

V. The Artist's Hand

With every line drawn,
Every shadow cast in pen and ink,
I reclaim my story.
The painting is a mirror
Not of what is seen,
But of what is felt.
Between colors and light,
Between what I was and what I am,
I find peace.
The world bends to my design,
And in its curves,
I found myself.

VI. The Eternal Dance

Life is a spinning wheel,
A storm that spins in endless motion.
We dance between the stars and the dust,
Between laughter and tears.
Through it all, we leave behind,
poetry, songs, dreams,
Pieces of love
That endure time.
As long as the echoes appear,
we shall never die.

The cut is deep, but the scar must be shallow.

Maria Bitar

In the home of my adolescence,
there is a heaviness.
In the room of my childhood,
there is a sadness.
In the backyard of my youth,
there is a heartache.
Through the ripped screen window,
and the black granite floors,
in the glow of the suburbs,
there is love somewhere, I am sure.
But I do not know it.
I know the words that bite,
the pressure for perfection,
and the slap of the wooden spoon.
The home diminished my spirit,
for my own benefit, I am sure.
Pain, every day,
remarks, every night,
every second, spite
from the hurting hands that should have helped.

11:47 PM

Hannah Burdinie

The world outside my windshield is steeped in a drowsy darkness, blurred by the in-between glow of streetlights. My eyes cling to the green dashboard light, letting it spill over my face and cast me in its glow. I can't help but wonder if this light makes me look different.

It's silent on these back roads, each house a solitary gift wrapped in its own square of light, adorned with brick accents like decorative bows. My headlights sweep over one hill, a house coming into view with dainty white curtains and walls the color of autumn leaves. Just as I slow down, the curtains' part for a moment—there's a woman standing there, just barely visible. I catch a glimpse before she pulls the fabric shut, closing herself in.

I know her, I think. She reminds me of the woman I saw at the supermarket that Thursday—yes, it must have been a Thursday. She was standing by the apples, her hand hovering over a bright, unblemished red one. I remember the way she paused there, looking at the rows of fruit as if searching for the one that would feel right, that would last past the week. It's a struggle, isn't it? Finding things that endure in a world so quick to decay?

Yes, I'm quite certain it was her! Her hair was tied back then. I could've sworn she sensed my gaze. Or maybe it was only in my head. Maybe it was the flower section where I saw her, just down the aisle. Holding a pale and delicate bouquet of lilies. Tracing a finger over the petals before lifting them to her perfect nose and inhaling with a soft smile.

But then again, maybe not. Maybe that wasn't her at all. So many women share that same shiny hair and pink-tinted nose.

I push the wheel right, guiding the car onto the highway and sliding myself into the nearest empty lane. The speedometer climbs as the asphalt blurs by—a rush of white lines, unfinished curbs, orange and white lights. Lately, every time I see the color orange, I'm reminded of that one scorching week in October. The sun felt mocking—glowing so fierce, so improbable, at the end of Fall, no less! As if it was reminding the Earth what warmth is supposed to feel like. As if it wanted us to know what we'd soon lose.

The dashboard light is still there, imprinted on my retinas. How have thirty minutes passed by? Maybe I should pull over. Take a rest. I lift my fingers to the radio and turn the knob, hoping for a voice, but the car fills with nothing but faint static and crackles. I think I'll leave it on, just in case something comes through. The static syncs with the car's hum, and I can feel my body loosening, my eyes squinting against the glow of the dashboard again. I force them back open and blink hard, fighting off the heaviness.

My eyes open to a new light in my vision. Just like the squares of light from the brick house on the hill! But this light is sharper, more real—two bright beams, even! I squint, trying to make sense of them, fixated. They remind me of her windows, cozy and inviting. Could it be

her, out on a drive of her own? The woman from the market, with that smooth, shining hair and the lilies cradled in her arms? Maybe she's somewhere out there, thinking about those same glossy apples under the fluorescent lights, wondering if the one she chose is still fresh, still sweet. And what about the bouquet of lilies? Did she place them in a vase on her kitchen table? Or perhaps she tucked them into the corner next to those lacey curtains.

The light's getting brighter, they're moving closer! The woman. Yes, it must be her! My heart races, and my foot presses down harder on the pedal, flattening it to the floor. The yellow lines blur and vanish as I cross them, moving into her path, and my pulse rises with the thrum of the engine. I can see her now, just as she must see me! I must drive towards the light.

My car veers forward, and the static from the radio crescendos, louder and louder, mixing with the pounding in my ears. Her car grows clearer, hurtling toward me. I can almost see her now, almost reach her, as if she's waiting just on the other side of this blinding light. All I have to do is drive faster, move closer! She'll be there, just as I remember, with that calm smile, her delicate fingers brushing over lily petals.

But the lights are violent now, hotter and closer than I'd thought. They burn, fierce and bright, like that October sun. For a split second, I feel warmth— radiating through the windshield, swallowing the green glow of the dashboard, flooding the car with searing heat. Yet the radio still crackles, and I leave it on, straining to catch a voice that might break through the noise.

Self-Portrait as a Tube-Man-Air-Dancer

Melissa Converse

The sun rises on commerce
as I rise from my bed of concrete
gray and cold, a little gravelly voice.
Should anyone listen hard enough
slow blow; blowing so—a wind so constant
as to be ignored by the
whizzing ones and the
galloping ones and the
listening ones deafened with their buds
they would hear
 my smile whoosh
 my dance swoosh
 my vinyl countenance sloosh
But alas I am but an anchor-tailed kite
holding firm to a choice I did not have
Bought, soul-less:
 a look at me
 a laugh at me
 a stop and snicker as I'm caught at me
But do not fret for me
I see all, until
deflated with hopes of a new day dawn
tomorrow to do it all again
lest I be unplugged

Survive

Melissa Converse

“We’re prepped for this, Bobby. We’re ready.” Joshua’s face is calm. Controlled. His voice deepens to a hush with hopes that his demeanor will keep the storm at bay long enough...

“Ready? How can you say that? Ready?!” Bobby can feel the spiral beginning and is too exhausted to find the hand brakes for the rope he feels tightening around their reality.

It is October 2026. Fall came early. The leaves have been scorched various shades of brown from a late few days of unusual heat followed by rain. Fitting, this autumn is; feeling out of whack during a season of absolute dystopian flavored fears being served.

“Bobby. What have I always said? Even before this hellscape started to form around us?” Joshua always has a saying, a motto, or a mantra to fit a situation.

“Hell, if I know Josh. We don’t have time for your...”

“Stop. Yes. We do: Luck favors the prepared, Bobby. And WE have prepared.”

“Yah. Luck.” Bobby has never known this level of fear. He’s never imagined how this situation would feel even while preparing for it. It’s easy to make lists and buy supplies.... fun, even, to play with all the new gadgets and tools meant for survival. Fun: until survival is not just a plan but is actually on the line.

They finish loading the truck bed in silence: Joshua, hoping he calmed his partner. Bobby, knowing he did not. They leave when it gets dark. Because, that’s the plan. This is what they’ve prepared for. And now it comes down to luck holding up its end of the bargain.

Joshua takes the first shift behind the wheel knowing it will be hard for Bobby to physically drive away from the place they’ve called home for nearly a decade. Their beloved dog, Rutgers, is buried under the elm tree near the shed. Joshua planted tulip bulbs around the pudding stone used to mark his grave. And every spring since, just as when Rutgers was alive he would suddenly burst into the yard to chase the first robin returning from the south, those tulips burst from the ground, seemingly, overnight. Joshua and Bobby know, once they leave, there is little to no chance of returning. The grief is thick; suffocating. The truck feels like a coffin in which they are locked inside, hoping to go unnoticed long enough to emerge to breathe freer air. They approach the US/Canadian Customs, ready with their passports... and their fresh powder blue star tattoos on the webbing between their right middle and ring fingers—as instructed by the modern application of an underground railroad.

“Evening fellas. What brings you to Manitoba tonight?” The Canadian border guards have a friendly reputation – but since crossings have increased, that reputation is declining.

“Just getting an early start on deer season, officer.” Bobby is the smoother talker under pres-

Survive

sure, something Joshua always found as endearing as odd knowing how anxiety takes hold when they are not under scrutiny. Joshua had always likened Bobby to a sunflower – hanging its head in the dark, seemingly in despair, but as soon as the sun puts a spotlight on – there's Bobby in all his performative glory. Joshua can't help but grin at this, now.

"How long abouts will you be in Canada?" The officer is eyeing their passports now that Joshua handed over, careful to keep his fingers together to conceal the powder blue star.

Bobby wasn't prepared for that question. Joshua slides his hand next to him on the bench seat of their old Chevy truck, his pinky finger lightly brushing against Bobby's finger as a signal that they are together: they are going to be ok. Bobby takes a breath faking a yawn – a move to seem nonchalant.

"Oh, I doubt we'll be here longer than 5–7 days. Work and all. But, don't worry about us – we've packed enough to last longer should we get stuck." Bobby forces his body to relax, concentrating on his jaw first, then neck, chest and on to his toes.

"Well, gents, we've put in place a few extra steps and questions – I'm sure you understand with the current – uh – situation on your side of the border."

Joshua feels his stomach tighten knowing Bobby is having a hard enough time with the plan. Something outside of that? Now? He decides to intervene in the convo, as he's been a silent partner in this border patrol exchange until now.

"Oh, officer? Something fun, like a riddle or puzzle? We love a game." Joshua's weak attempt at a joke does not lighten the mood as hoped.

"We just need to see each of your birth certificates. Need to match them to your passports, you know, as was announced a few weeks back." The officer is not being cantankerous. But that doesn't ease the stress for Joshua. Bobby gets into the travel packet to retrieve their birth certificates. Joshua knows his birth certificate is not in there. He knows it was lost. He had ordered a replacement. It had not arrived in time...not before the threat level was on their quaint street. Bobby's face freezes as his fingers do not find both birth certificates; he fights tears of panic. They must get into Canada. Tonight.

"Well, officer, you see...." Joshua's voice is trailing as he searches for words. "...ah... you see, I misplaced that cert years ago and only recently realized. A replacement is on order; I could call the township in the morning... Get it sorted out then. Do you have a fax machine or email?"

The officer is suddenly suspicious, restating that this new requirement had been publicized far and wide on both sides of the crossing. And then Bobby sees it! *Officer Canada*, as he's decided to call him since he couldn't read his badge, has a powder blue star between his fingers.

Bobby takes the chance and makes his matching tattoo obvious, too, when handing his birth certificate over. The officer's eyes widen, slightly.

"Fellas. Ah.... I wish I could help...." The officer's face is suddenly not militant but instead soft. Friendly. And sad.

Joshua sees two other border guards making their way over, no doubt wanting to help their compadre out with the two wayward Americans. Not wanting to endanger Bobby's chance of survival, he opens the door and steps out – offering to head back on foot. Back home. Back to the homophobic nightmare that certainly awaits.

"Josh! What are you doing?" Bobby's performative confidence is cracking.

"Bobby. Take this. I'll find you. But you need to go." Joshua slips a *Tranquility* engraved stone into his hand... the same stone Bobby had given Joshua to keep in his pocket as a worry stone years ago.

"No, Joshua!" Tears are welling. The guards are nearing. Officer Canada understands the assignment and ushers Joshua away from the truck with forced stern instructions for Bobby to take the wheel and go. Now.

"Bobby, GO," Joshua pleads, with full intentions of finding his way to Bobby. Eventually.

Bobby's foot is on the gas, his eyes on the rearview mirror and his heart in his throat. How did they not plan? Not prepare? Miss out on luck? The engraved letters of "Tranquility" press deep into his palm. Powder blue stars can only get them so far. Always stronger together, now they have to go it alone... for a while, at least. But they both know.... survival is only the goal, not the promise.

Self-Portrait as Art

Crysta Croud

The finish on a painting
Results of the unfinished sketch
Red. Blue. Yellow
Covering the grayness
and the white empty space

Straight to the point
trapped with no other thought
Underlining deeper meanings
hidden within the abyss

I am the person behind the brush
painting the colors of the life I lead
Or submerged inside the art
looking out at reality

One stroke, two strokes
three strokes on a blank canvas
Is it starting to feel more alive
the more the black and white fades away
and the color returns back to my face

What does the art mean?
Where do I fit in?
Can I be fulfilled by the happiness of the colors?
Or will I forever be stuck in the white empty space?

Your Favorite Digital Girl

Hannah Cunningham

In the screen's neon glow,
I unfurl myself,
costumed in likes
and colors of approval.

I am curated
just for you.

I want to be
your favorite digital girl.
I want to be
the one you login for,
whom you yearn to see
on the computer screen.

I dance,
a jester of ones and zeros
for crowded rooms
of digital faces.

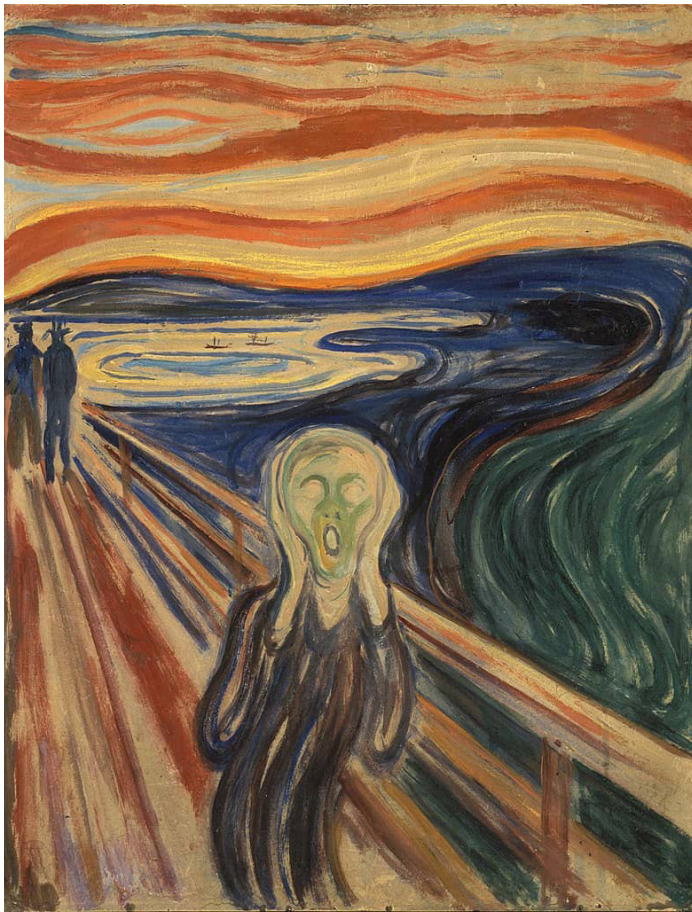
I pirouette for algorithms.
My laughter is hollow,
just a data stream of echoes.

Who am I
when the computer turns off?
Who am I,
Unplugged, unfiltered, unseen?

Would I still be whole
when the glow of the computer
dissolves?

I glimpse fragments of myself,
scattered in pixelated shards.
I am the ghost of a connection,
I no longer know how to reach.
It fades in the void,
the endless expanse
of the internet.

Oh tell me if you still
wish to see me—
your favorite digital girl,
or just the shadow I've become.



Defeated

Myka Davis

Here we exist as beings
That produce pain with no one
To grab us and help.
As a leech, it sucks us dry until we are nothing.
Nothing but an operable carcass
that had a name and a story.

Yet, stands out is that carcass
that lives within the dreaded.
You watch.
You sit there and watch
Them hoping the pain will go away;
Watching them turn into self-inflicting killers.

They scream for help.
They plead for help.
But you being just like those figures in the back,
We are surrounded by the looming disgust
of others who rather watch
Than extend an empathetic hand.

Oh, that sky.
An ironically bloody orange.
The water, an eerily calming fear ridden blue.
The God's that live in such
Bloody of a sky,
You wonder, how could they?

How could they
Listen to the screams and sit?
How could they watch the
Pain engulf one like a flame to dry brush?
The expression of defeat,
How could they?
I wonder,
If the operable carcass were in the water
Flowing with the rhythmic waves,
Would it then be sought for?
Like a fish to be held with the pride,
That exerts those who catch "the one?"

You,
You who watches those suffer,
Why? Do you worry your pain will come to light
When others are healed?
Or do you feed off the attention
That is taken from those who need it?

Why can't you just listen to the
Painful message in
Those screams,
Rather than focusing on the
Pitching pain
It brings to your ears?

Self-Portrait as an Error-Filled, Fatherless Daughter

Myka Davis

I'll be forward, emotionally damaged, naive, stupid, whatever you must call it, I am.
I despise the thought of trusting a man.
The thought of a man caring for me? Impossible!
You couldn't do it, dad, so how can a random stranger?

I love(d) you, but because of you, I am an emotionally damaged walking error.

I open the door for men, not the other way around.
I pay for the bill, refusing their money.
Any attempts to relinquish them of their power, I try.
Men like you dad, forced me to become the way I am.

I listen to their truths but like that of the lie, they're all the same.
But when I listen to their lies, I weirdly fall for it.
What is wrong with me?

As I recognize men and their sinful existence,
I can't help but yearn for it.
Wish that through the lies and deceit,
They will love me.

Cause hey, dad, that's what you taught me through *your* actions. Must be right, right?

One thing you did teach me,
Was that I was merely a miscalculation of your Valentines Day pleasure.
I'm the error that has nightmares of you staring at me in that white cushioned oak casket.
Staring at me, even in death, as if I'm still in the wrong.

How could you?

I sit here, allowing mental fatal blows from men.
That's all I know.
It's all you showed me.
It's all you displayed.

You got to escape your errors, but here I sit, explaining mine.

Burn it Down!

Tia Ellison

You can only set a flame to what's standing,
Houses, stores, and people.
35 square blocks of a neighborhood,
Attacked, burned, and destroyed.
Not on our watch Burn it down.

You can only set a flame to what's standing,
Churches, schools, and people.
18 hours of roaring flames.
Soaring, roaring, and exploring.
Not on our watch burn it down.

You can only set a flame to what's standing,
Love, culture, and history.
300 black residents.
Attached, lit, and ignited.
All on your watch is history and lives attached to the match that you set aflame

Self Portrait of a Spinning Vinyl

Tia Ellison

I am the gradual spin,
needle threading through the grooves,
lyrics stamped into my skin
but I'm never complete.

I stay in the snap,
before the first note
wedged between sound and silence,
a breath being held for far too long.

I rotate stories with a touch,
dusty fingerprints left upon me,
and every scratch, every hop
are broken fragments of me.
I only replay, no rewinds allowed
dying a little each time,
yet I still sing, still I'm spinning
rewinding back to the start of my making

The (once) old soundless colonial house

Tia Ellison

And there it was again, a loud crunching sound, that played against the side of her door.

Evie heard it 3 nights ago, on Friday night, after coming from her favorite bar. She heard a gentle, pulsing tapping that could be heard against the door connecting her kitchen to the outside. Evie stepped away from her kitchen sink and lay on her couch as, the cool spring air from her cracked window breezed through the empty house. This was a normal thing for Evie, a new normal, now that she was forever alone in an empty house. The once sound of steel toe boots and “honey I’m home” was no longer the voices of the wall. Her wife had died 2 years ago and, no matter how much time had passed she couldn’t bear the thought of living without her; The days got longer, and her heart grew colder. Some days, her absence would carry so heavy that most days she expected her to walk through the doors with a box of pizza and her favorite chocolates, laughing about how their periods would sync up and their house would be hell on wheels. She deemed that Grief was the worst thing one could experience.

But this scrapping was very real. Evie couldn’t be convinced that it wasn’t because for three days she stood in front of her kitchen sink, listening and waiting for the sound. The scrapping was very familiar, like the sound of fallen old leaves rustling underneath shoes. The sound of the brushing was continuous pattern, 1 drag of the foot, pick up the other, 1 drag of the foot, and pick up the other, then stop. On Friday, Evie even went outside her patio door to check but, all she was met with was the cold air of the fall breezing against her thighs. Yet, before she retreated into her soundless barrier of grief, she paused, and with one last look she wrapped her arms around the University of Wisconsin T Shirt.

Yet still, she was restless.

Saturday came around, and Evie decided again to deny her friends invites to go out to their local bar feeling heavy and consumed. As usual the colonial home was silent, but something was different this time around. So, Evie kept pacing back into her kitchen time after time again, hoping to hear the sound she grew all too familiar with. Evie would cook for the first time in months just to stand in the kitchen a little longer even if it meant doing her least dreaded thing of washing dishes. Later in the night, once settled in her rightful spot on the couch, she decided to turn on the television.

But late hours in the afternoon, her once soundless barrier was released from its slumber with the rustling of the leaves.

Evie sighed, sucking in a large breath. She sat up fast, looking around the dark room in fear but the rustling was back.

Yet, a new sound became paired with it.

This sound was inside her house, the creaking of the hardwood floors could be heard beneath her head. Remembering her wife's instructions in case there was an intruder, she reached over and opened the side table drawer to grab her pepper spray. However, she took a deep breath and listened afraid that if she followed her wife instructions, that she would again be engulfed in silence.

And as she predicted the silence welcomed itself back,

Saturday went by quickly. Evie ate very little and jumped at every sound, living her life like a ghost. Normally a place of comfort, the house felt guarded like a military base. She tried to ignore the noises—the rustling, the creaks of the floors, the hum of the refrigerator—by staying up as late as she could, but at 2 in the morning, she fell asleep, her head resting on the couch arm.

When she woke, it was Sunday, and the house was silent again. She decided to try something different. She packed her duffle bag, grabbed her wife's hoodie, and booked her favorite lake house. She drove to the house that her and wife spent most of their time during college and every year on their honeymoon, the Lakehouse was her and her wife's favorite, with a huge lake and big trees. She constantly thought about turning around and returning back home—but instead, she turned to the nearest motel, old but livable.

“Room for one please” replied Evie to the motel receptionist

The motel host passed her the keys with a huff before saying “What are you doing here”. As no one ever came to the practically abandoned space.

She felt chills but passed it off as the weather: cold, windy, and moody. She stepped inside, seeing the wooden bed and single desk in the corner lined by green flower wallpaper. Dropping her bags on the floor, taking them in the room once more with thoughts of her wife, her laugh, her voice, their beautiful home, and more than ever that rustling of those leaves outside her door.

And right on time

The rustling could be heard again. This time closer than it has ever been. Ava turned around looking out her door, her chest tightening as she saw nothing but darkness.

“Who's there?” Her voice called out, masked by the cracking sound of both fear and darkness.

The crutching stopped. She held her breath, waiting. Her eyes then searched the room. She felt it, whatever it was, it was waiting.

The (once) old soundless colonial house

Then, her phone lit up and her voicemail turned on—a brief pause started before speaking to her. “You don’t get to be here, LEAVE now.”

The voice wasn’t evil nor kind, but it made her shiver. Her heart could’ve fallen out her chest, she reached down and grabbed her bags. She was rushing to leave when she heard it again; the 3 words written.

“Please please, just go on” the voicemail said before cutting out

Evie thought about her wife from their petty fights to their joyous laughs and cuddles, feeling the weight of her past lay upon her shoulders. The anticipation of rustling leaves stopped destroying barriers.

Without fully understanding why, she whispered, “Ok, I’ll leave now., I’m sorry”

As she rushed to her car, turning around to go back home, and with one last look at the motel, she knew that her ghosts that had haunted her these past days were never coming back and for some odd reason, she was okay with that.

Because, for the first time in forever, she knew that she would be ok, sooner or later. As she took her rightful place back at the old soundless colonial house.

Always a Bride

Asha George

Ria Rosewood has been married four times. First divorced, once annulled, then widowed, and as of eleven months ago, on the dot—divorced again. Technically her last name isn't even Rosewood anymore. According to the state of North Dakota she is still Ria Fitzgerald. The name is one of the only gifts she received from her most recent ex-husband Elias. After they divorced, she practically burned everything he touched. The only reason she didn't go back to her third and late husband's last name is because she's been rather *occupied*. Ria Rosewood—or rather Ria Fitzgerald has been married four times, and as she sits in a short A-line white dress, she's about to make it five.

Ria takes a deep breath before she smooths her hands over the soft fabric. She's standing in the mirror, facing what looks like an airbrushed version of herself. The makeup artist made her skin look flawless. Delicately contoured cheekbones, a clean sharp black wing, and a soft lip that complimented her skin so perfectly she could have mistaken herself for a princess. With how beautiful she looked, even a passerby on the street could tell she was getting married today.

Still staring at herself in the mirror, Ria says, "I changed my mind. Take it off."

Or not.

Ria starts reaching toward the back of her dress trying to undo one of the million tiny buttons that cage her inside. She's moving so aggressively; she almost rips one of them off. It only remained in tact due to her best friend Penelope, who is oddly extremely fast in heels, running over to slap Ria's hands away.

"Ow, ow," Ria whines and pouts before crossing her arms like a child. "Bitch."

"You are insane," Penelope scolds, before she positions her hands on either side of Ria's shoulders and pushes her down onto the chair behind her.

Penelope adjusts her pantsuit before leaning on Ria's armrest. She then calmly strokes her friend's hair as Penelope begs, "Please don't say it."

"You're right. *This* is insane—" Ria says, beginning to spiral.

"I told her not to say it," Penelope groans.

"Pen, am I making a mistake?" Ria asks, looking up at her with sad, pleading eyes. "...again?"

"Like I said on your first three wedding days, you are never making a mistake when you are following your heart," Penelope tells her. "Now your fourth marriage—that was definitely a *huge* mistake but—"

Always a Bride

Ria jumps to her feet and starts assaulting the buttons on the back of the dress once more. "Get it off me! Right now!"

Penelope yanks Ria back down in her chair, then rests a hand on Ria's bare shoulders to hold her down.

"The only thing insane about having four weddings is running away from the fifth one. That's like walking off in the championship game," Penelope says as Ria lets out a small snuffle.

Penelope stands and rushes over to the vanity to grab Ria a tissue box and a handful of Q-Tips. Penelope takes the Q-Tips and lightly dabs them in the inner corner of Ria's eye, stopping the tears before they even fall. After a few touches, Ria slowly pushes Penelope's hand aside.

"What am I doing?" Ria asks, suddenly serious.

"What do you mean?" Penelope asks calmly.

"I mean I am thirty-four and this is my fifth time walking down an aisle. And that's embarrassing even with excluding those other two engagements that didn't even last to the save the dates. That's not normal," Ria realizes.

"I know, it's really impressive actually."

"Pen, I'm serious!" Ria all but shouts then instantly covers her mouth hoping no one outside of the bridal suite heard. "This feels right, this feels so right. But so did Benjamin and he cheated, and Josh felt right too before he left his mission trip and literally never came back. Cedric felt right, he felt so right and then he had a heart attack on our honeymoon! What if I kill the next one too? What if there's something wrong with me where I just can't be happy? And my detector for bad relationships is broken? Hell, I thought Elias was it and he's Elias—"

"But you're not marrying Elias again," Penelope interrupts. "I would have helped you get that dress off if you were."

Penelope's joke earns a small laugh from Ria which gets Penelope to smile herself.

"Your fiancée is perfect for you okay, I have never seen you look so comfortable, so free, so yourself," Penelope says. "Because let's face it, every one of your other marriages was a compromise for what you want and who you are. This is your happy ending, I can feel it."

"But do I deserve it?" Ria whispers. "I'm not even sure if I should still be wearing white."

"Well white is clearly your color," Penelope compliments nudging Ria lightly. "And it's your wedding day, where you are finally receiving the love you emanate and I cannot think of anything you deserve more than this."

Ria smiles as tears well up in her eyes once more. Penelope is quick with the Q-Tips and once again softly dabs the inner corner of Ria's eyes.

"Thank you, for always putting up with me—" Ria begins to say but Penelope shushes her.

"No need for that, there's nowhere I'd rather be," Penelope assures her.

Both women rise to their feet and envelop the other in a tight hug. Penelope pulls away before she starts to cry herself and puts on a brave face.

"Now, let's go get you married," Penelope says.

Ria nods. "Fifth times the charm."

The pair walk out of the bridal suite—what was really Ria's bedroom then carefully walk down the stairs to the first floor of the house. There waiting for them in the living room is a tall man with a tuxedo who gasps when they come into view.

"Ria you look incredible," the man compliments as he reaches out his hand to help her down the last few steps.

Ria smiles and takes his hand, letting go once they reach the bottom of the staircase. "Thank you Peter."

"Second best bride I've seen all day," Peter teases and Ria's eyes light up.

"Is she ready?" Ria asks eagerly.

"In the back," Peter says winking and Ria rushes down the hall as fast as she can.

"Be quick with gushing over each other! We still have to get to the court house," Penelope calls after Ria, not sure if the message was heard.

Ria reaches the other side of the house, where the guest room is located. She impatiently knocks on the door waiting for the go-ahead to burst in.

"Come in!" a soft voice instructs and Ria wastes no time twisting the knob and entering.

All of Penelope's hard work to keep Ria's tears from ruining her makeup almost goes to waste when the couple locks eyes.

"Oh my," is all Ria can say as she nervously chuckles.

"Come here," her fiancée instructs, holding out a hand that beckoned Ria closer.

The couple sat on the edge of the bed and laced their hands together. Ria says, "you look beautiful Kamila."

Always a Bride

“So do you, baby,” Kamila compliments with the brightest smile Ria has ever seen. “Ready to be a wife....again?”

Ria rolls her eyes, laughing softly. “I’m ready to be yours.”

Ria thought it was impossible, but Kamila smiles brighter. “Then let’s go get married.”

The women in white giggle as they leave the bedroom and make their way back to the front of the house to join their friends. The four of them all pile into the same car, where Peter makes sure only wedding themed songs are heard on the aux.

It’s halfway through a nineties wedding album when Ria has the same thought she did before her previous weddings. *Dear, God please let this be the last one.* Ria’s not sure if he finally listened to her pleas—or if it was Ria who finally started listening to herself. But when Ria Rosewood—technically still Ria Fitzgerald—gets married for the fifth time to Kamilia Astor it is the last time someone slips a wedding band on her finger; and Ria never took it off.

Inheritance

Sam Gillmore

1.

In another life, they would have made you a shaman.
In this one, you are nothing but an echo of the boy I trail behind.

2.

The schoolbus that rattled up the hill came and left you,
keyless yet resourceful and you broke
down the door to the basement to let yourself inside.
It came apart like like cups stacked for sport
because the jamb held faultlines like your white skin carries a bruise.

And that was the door that we knew not to touch because
the knob had so stained our mama's heart with the memory of
that night when her father, our papa, had his youngest boy arrested while
covered in the shrouded dusk of the basement
by policemen who used to stand behind that thin blue line alongside
the man they cuffed that night.

But you dug your shoulder in the fraying wood with such forceful courage
that it was never opened again.

The ceiling was stuffed with garbage bags full of beer cans
our uncle collected in his youth and the first
forged prescription he ever made by himself that you kept
in your desk drawer because you knew that for some reason,
our uncle thought it was worth preserving. You remembered it for him.
You knew mama would have trashed it with those stinking, rotting cans.
Still, no matter how many times the door frame was repaired,
It was never new again.

And no matter how many times the youngest uncle was rehabilitated,
he was never clean again until finally the cancer spread like kudzu and
by the blood of Jesus he was, God-willing, born anew.

3.

The story goes: I was meant to be a daughter so I could be a baby sister like
my mama before me who held at arm's length so dearly
her older brother who did everything right.
But, no, you favored her younger's troubles.

Except for the night we sat out on the porch when you passed me a clear bong and

Inheritance

in the smoke you looked like more a cowboy from those westerns,
the ones our papa used to covet, and we clicked the trigger of
the antler-trimmed pistol that lives in the frame on the wall above the stairs
without fear because it hadn't been loaded in decades.

I used to try to make sense of the voices you heard in the creaking vents and I mopped up
the blackness that seeped from your pupils as the sun powered down
but lately, you say I have been wearing their faces and even though the story says
I was made for you to have someone to protect, I think the story is wrong.
I was made to bear witness to you.

A Sous Chef's Dance

Sam Gillmore

At my father's instruction, I pull the red onions out of the flimsy plastic I had wrapped them
haphazardly in at the grocery store. "Dice the onions while the wok heats up," he had said,
excited to use his favorite pan, the one nobody else was allowed to touch. He had gone to put
on a playlist, a mix of songs that didn't quite fit together but were no doubt going to fill the
inevitable silence between us as we worked side by side to make a dinner that would likely
serve as his breakfast and lunch for the next few days.

I never knew how many layers you were supposed to peel off the onion before you started to
cut into it, but I knew that he wouldn't correct me on it either. It didn't matter, so I peeled and
sank the knife into the onion when I grew bored of removing layers.

"You want to make sure the wok is super hot before you put anything in it. It's what helps
everything to cook evenly," My Dad said, pouring us both a few fingers of whatever bottle he
had stashed in the cabinet. I didn't feel a need to respond; he likes to pretend he is teaching
me how to cook even though both of us know I will not absorb any of what he is saying.

If I were to retain his cooking expertise, he would have nothing to offer me. So I allow him to
keep his knowledge, and he allows me to work quietly beside him. It is the only time neither
of us is waiting for the other to pounce. It has always been like this.

I know how to dice an onion perfectly, and quickly, but I move slowly even though that
means the sting of the aroma will fog up my sinuses. He surveys my work, and a brightness
flickers in his eye when he sees my sloppy and uneven cuts. I wait for him to criticize me, but

I know it isn't going to come. For each uneven chunk of onion I offer him, I am also offering him power over me. See, my shoddy craftsmanship says: *I still need my Daddy to make me food.*

He needs to feel needed. Even though he can verge on monster, he is still just a man.

"I'm surprised you were craving lasagna. This is the first meal your mother ever made for me, you know." His voice is light, almost affectionate, but I know better. His love for her is never too far from his love of himself—he misses who he was when she still loved him more than he ever loved her. I don't let my frustration at hearing him speak about her play on my face, carefully pulling out the rest of the ingredients as I probe for more information the way he wants me to.

"Wow, really? I never knew that," I say as sweetly as I can muster. I honestly did not know that, but it feels disloyal to hear about her (their) old life from him.

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"She asked one of my old coworkers for the recipe. God, she was so nervous about it," He laughs. I think of my young mother, fretting about the kitchen, trying to do something nice for her new husband. I can see her, soft and openhearted, hoping this night's labor will earn her some of his approval. I doubt it did. And I hate him for that.

"Was it good?" I'm holding my breath, hip on the wooden counter, drink in my hand, waiting for him to make her the punchline that will unravel our little unspoken truce.

"It was okay," he said almost smugly, the fluorescent light in the kitchen deeping the appearance of the wrinkles in his forehead that have accumulated over the last few years.

"What, it would have been better if you made it?" I ask him, barely able to conceal the snark from entering my tone.

He doesn't take the bait. "I didn't say that. Could you taste the sauce for me? I want to see if it needs anything."

I breathe and move closer to him, putting my indignation back under my tongue where it belongs. He hands me the spoon, watching my face carefully as I try to guess what exactly he put in. This is his favorite part: I never guess correctly. That's okay though; for tonight to go smoothly, he needs to see the reflection of himself he desires most in my eyes. It's easier this way.

My phone buzzes quietly in my pocket, and I know who it is without having to check. I have a new boyfriend who is still in that text-you-every-few-minutes stage. I haven't told my dad about him, and probably won't. He doesn't need something shiny and new to dangle over my head when I inevitably say something he won't like.

Plus, this guy is nice to me. He doesn't need to see the shitshow I came from. I knew how men operate: he will either want credit for *saving* me from it or, worse, he will think it's okay to start treating me like I'm damaged. It took months to train him how to treat me properly. I'm not risking losing that part of my life just for the sake of having something to talk about with my Dad.

"I can definitely taste the garlic," I say drily, even though the sauce is *perfect*. It's almost melting down my throat, and I have to stop myself from filling another tasting spoon. "I prefer sauce to have a little more bite, though."

"I always forget how much you like spicy foods," He says, handing me crushed pepperflakes to mix in. For a moment, I take comfort in our parallel bodies as we let the sauce simmer, and the lull of almost-safety that is him humming quietly and padding back and forth between the counter and the stovetop. I know he is drunk, but he moves with this strange grace that I am primed to move around like any good sous chef. When I was little, he would spin me around the kitchen to horrible 80s punk bands while we waited for the timers to go off. Now, he just tops off the glass I hadn't finished.

You're not an alcoholic if you can handle your liquor, he used to tell me. I try not to drink around him, but when I am out with my friends, I make sure to swallow the foreign sensations along with whatever burning substance they have handed me. My boyfriend drinks, but it makes him silly like a little kid who hasn't had a nap. Sometimes I pretend I'm drunker than I am around him just so he doesn't feel badly about how much of a lightweight he is.

I smell the slightest acrid fume, and turn the stove down before the sauce can burn.

"You're going to want to keep the heat medium," He corrects me, not realizing I had already done that. He had the heat on high. My dad normally would have caught the almost-mishap himself, but he reeks of booze, and I don't think he can handle a burned dinner tonight. I debated letting him ruin his own meal, but I don't think I can handle his frustration either. "You want the sauce to thicken."

I ignore his instruction, but pretend to fix the knob anyway. He is the expert, after all.

He cries out, and I jump harder than I meant to.

"I got my finger on the cheese grater," He supplies gruffly. "I didn't mean to scare you."

"You didn't," I lie, pulling the first aid kit I got him out of the cabinet. Laughing as he gripped his forefinger tightly, I ask, "When did it become amateur hour?"

"Shut up," He says lightly, holding his hand out for me to bandage. "Thank you. I'm glad you're here."

"It's a nice night," I smile at him, crumbling the wrapper into the trash and turning back to the food that is still cooking. "Tell me what we need to do next."

From Whom Love Stems

Isabella Goolsby

“But what does it *mean*??”

Martha held up the flower stem to her friend Jasper. There was no flower, just a stem. A bright red flower petal clung to the end of it for dear life. She had found it when she opened her locker and it fell to the ground, looking like it was hastily shoved in there before school.

“It means your boyfriend will keep finding new ways to redefine ‘bare minimum’ unless you set him straight.”

Martha thought for a moment. “Maybe it had a flower, and the flower came off, and he couldn’t find it but wanted me to know he still got it for me and left the stem!”

“Sure. Why not. Very romantic.”

“Unless... he purposefully ripped the flower off as a sign that he’s unhappy and wants to stop seeing me! Like some sort of symbolic gesture!”

Jasper gave her an unimpressed look.

“If you’re so worried about it, just ask him!”

She fiddled with the zipper of her leather jacket, twiddling it with her fingers and zipping it up and then down absentmindedly. She hardly ever noticed she did it anymore, until someone snapped at her to cut it out (usually Jasper). It just gave her something to do with her hands. Martha sighed deeply.

“You know it’s not as simple as that. Zach gets all flighty whenever I try to bring up our relationship. The last time I tried to tell him I loved him, he nearly threw up all over my car and bolted.”

Jasper looked at her for a moment, readjusted his backpack strap on his shoulder, and shook his head. “I don’t know if I’ll ever understand you. You’re one of the most sought-after girls in the entire school; you’ve got people throwing themselves at you left and right, and yet you decide to fall for the emotionally unavailable wizard boy.”

Hiding a tiny chuckle at the long-used nickname, Martha clutched the flower stem to her chest and sighed wistfully. “The heart wants what the heart wants.”

“Whatever. I gotta get to class. Call me after school today and let me know if love is dead or not.” He turned and walked down the hallway.

Martha called after him down the hall. “Wait! What if it *isn’t* a breakup, and then me asking about it is a sign I don’t understand him, and THEN he breaks up with me!”

It proved rather difficult to focus on the rest of her classes. Of course, there was only so much one could focus on as they tried to prepare themselves to receive earth-shattering news.

Martha started thinking about all the things that would happen should they break up. Would their friend group dissolve? It was just her, Jasper, Zach, and his twin brother. Would things be too awkward?

What do you do when you get dumped again? You... you give them their stuff back! That's right. Did she have any of Zach's stuff at her house still? Pretty sure she still has the spare toothbrush he uses when he stays the night. Would he even want that back?

Oh, and his old hoodie he gave her. It was an old, powder blue hoodie that definitely didn't fit Martha's usual color scheme or aesthetic. But Martha loved it all the same. It was slightly bigger than her, engulfing her tiny body. It was like a giant hug from him. She especially loved wearing it to bed, where she could smell him and feel him encompassing her with his love. Would he let her keep it, to remember the times they shared?

Martha felt tears threatening to form in the corner of her eyes, but she blinked them back. *No*. She was getting ahead of herself. This could mean literally nothing. They would just be able to talk about it, laugh at the misunderstanding, then they would leave school together and go to the library, and then Martha could go home and spend the rest of her night bundled up in that wonderful hoodie.

The green tip of the flower stem poked out of her backpack pouch, mocking her. Martha started playing with her zipper again, earning her a few confused and slightly annoyed looks from her classmates. She didn't even notice.

The final bell rang, and students filed out their classrooms and out of the school building. Martha let herself be mindlessly swept away with the wave of people, delicately holding the lone flower stem, and stopped when she saw a familiar figure propped up against the stairwell railing. His stormy blue eyes met her emerald green ones.

Zach gave her a small, sideways smile. The kind that always turned her insides to mush. "Hey there."

Putting on a brave face, Martha gave him an earnest smile back. "Hey, you! How was your day?"

"Ah, the usual. Nothin' special."

Zach's gaze drifted downwards, noticing the flower stem grasped in Martha's hand. He rubbed the back of his neck, an unconscious habit he did when he was nervous. Martha, in turn, continued fiddling her zipper. After a moment, Zach met her eyes and spoke up again.

"Can we talk?"

The lone petal finally fell to the ground, unnoticed by either.

The Match

Kumba Jallow

The Match Keep out of reach of children
Like medicine overdose to children
Like hiding poison to avoid contact with children
A blaze it sets the stove where we stir our tasty meals
A blaze it sets our wood to keep our house warm
The match is very generous, it makes our lives better
But cruel it can be when it falls on wrong one's
A blaze it sets our house when little Amy plays with it
A blaze it sets our hay, and burnt every harvest we had
The little box costs us all we had
Very useful is the match, and very evil it can be
When purchased from the store
Store away to the highest shelf
Keep out of reach of children

excerpt from

Sky Walk

Kumba Jallow

I walked a long distance high up in the sky. It was kind of chilly up there, but not unbearable. I don't know how, but I was defying the rule of gravity. I walked for a long time in the air, but did not feel tired. I even sat on a cloud, but realized that it was pouring rain showers down on earth, and then I got up from it. During my long walk, I came across a lot of air creatures. Some gave a weird look and soared high up and some said hi. Some looked like they were on a journey towards the north as spring is close by. As great as it seems up there, some looked like they are facing challenges like we face as humans sometimes. Hey, I may be imagining it wrong, yet I have no clue about what they say to each other while in the air. I can't even tell if they are old or young. I heard birds don't age, or grow grey. That must be cool. I am sure humans would pay anything to discover the secret of the flouted age the birds have.

The Mollusk

Brendan Lizak

I am the calendar cycle
Tumbling, turning,
Marking the month with indifference
I am black lunged
And suffocating on the day
Until night should fall
And burdens become untethered.
My mind and bones coagulate
And every morning like clockwork
I'm spread thin to the crust
Every rose I've ever grasped,
Crushed till the petals fall.
I am disillusionment
Gallivanting life away,
Now the blisters crack
With every step
Like the breaking of day
Upon your skin
A mollusk on the brim of the sea
With a shell like a parched mouth,
Dry and stumbling to the end.

Stigmas

Brendan Lizak

after "Stigmas on the Body of Air" by Ekaterina Derysheva

Shame graces the morning air strung out
Like popcorn tinsel on a christmas tree. The wind whispers
Names faintly remembered
To a speaker too involved to listen. Look at the trees
How they sway in the
twilight of indifference,
The river how it ripples
To avoid bitter reflection.

Mimetic

Brendan Lizak

after "Poem To Be Read and Sung" by Cesar Vallejo

Out there, someone walks searching
Boundlessly walking wandering with palm in hand

I feel her shoes, the soles of her feet.
Does she know that I myself don't exist as faintly
As the dust bunnies behind the kitchen counter do?

The complexity of many pieces immersed into one,
Many days the oblong sides stick out and make it
Impossible to ignore, but she always returned solid
As stone. A day late and a penny short, nobody
Had ever valued her a dollar.

It's easy to tell the days apart, it's the weeks that blur
The sun escapes me every time my eyes finally dilate
The universe rolls over in bed and we watch the
Wheels go round and round, still I feel your warm hands
Touch the water and I stand to your side as if to say
No one can walk on you and I hold you up
So you can't walk all over yourself.

A cat sits and licks her arm and purrs and springs
To her bowl of water.

I've seen her on the corner
In her dress black as night and
I've called her name but she wasn't able to
Look back

But she does look for me.

Thursday, October 10th, 2024, at 9:00 am

Charlie Lipka

Dear Cousin,
How did you feel that night?
When you bound her limbs so tight.
Upon setting your sullen eyes upon her,
Did your mind not falter?

When you took the knife,
Did you feel that familiar high?
Was it still not enough?
Another, and another, why?

Watching her lay there,
What details did you imbibe?
For them to go on and describe
What you did as “nothing short of torture”

Did you start panicking?
You took her keys, driving
to your dead grandmother’s cabin.
At the end of this ordeal,

Oh, Cousin,
What do you feel?

Composition

Charlie Lipka

This squiggly landscape
The bendy cardboard,
The flaky pastels
creates

The cobalt sea.
Carrying a single craft, is
Illuminated by
The stockinette sky.
The striated seaweed,
Sways in a constant stream.

I witness from the boardwalk.
I lean as
I soak in the waxy, oily scene.
Then,
The silent scream.

Art. History.

Ronan Mansilla

I am standing in a large room full of paintings of men in hats. I am guessing that “men in hats” is not intended to be this room’s unifying theme, but it might as well be. At four-something in the afternoon on a rainy Thursday, I am happy to report that the art museum is almost entirely empty. Just me and the paintings.

My professors are always telling me that there’s a lot to learn from the Old Masters. Techniques. Chiaroscuro, perspective, color theory, and the like. That’s all fine and good, but education is not what brings me to the museum today.

Before I say anything else — and before you have the chance to judge me too harshly — I want you to consider my roommate, Maris, who decides whether to swipe right or left on a guy’s Tinder profile based solely on whether his pecs are showing, and if so, on how “good” they are. Yes, “good” in quotes. No, she’s not elaborated on that.

The real reason that I am here is to find myself a husband somewhere in these paintings. I realize, of course, that I cannot *actually* marry the men in these paintings. Many of the people depicted were mere figments of the painters’ imaginations, and those that *did* exist are most certainly dead at this point. Rather, what I am seeking is the Platonic *form* of a husband — a theoretical perfect spouse that I can carry forth into a world of imperfect derivatives. Once I’ve found my ideal form, I can compare all of the guys I meet against him.

So, I guess I lied earlier. I *did* come here to learn from the Old Masters — just not how to paint.

Anyhoo, back to the hat room. I do like a man in a hat. So far, the man in the blue hat holding an astrolabe is the most compelling to me. He’s adventuresome, well-traveled — a refined gentleman. The neighboring portrait of Mr. green hat is also intriguing. Look at that rakish grin. However, green hat isn’t holding anything, nor are there any objects of interest in his room, which reveals very little about him. On the opposite wall, the man in the red hat is brandishing a sword at me. He has a stern expression, a humorless glint in his eyes. He strikes me as overaggressive. Competitive. *Ugh*, he reminds me of Simon, who dragged me to sporting events every other weekend, always thoroughly soused (him, not me — well, sometimes me).

...but I wonder, Mr. blue hat, what journeys you have planned? Without meaning to, my attention keeps returning to you and your astrolabe. May I accompany you? Will we see the world? Paris? Barcelona? I think I’ll swipe right on you, but don’t get your hopes up. There are still quite a few bachelors I’ve yet to meet.

Art. History.

Exiting the hat room, I am greeted by a veritable congress of statues. It's a strange exhibit — the multitudes of busts crowd out the floorplan, yet the staggering height of the ceiling lends the room a cavernous presence. The barren beige walls aren't helping, though I suppose there's not really a good way to hang a marble statue on a wall, is there? All around me, the edges of the room are lined by men and women in various stages of undress, and a few more clothes-optional folks consort in the center.

The first statue I pick out individually is a chap with a Roman nose and glassy eyes. If I'm being quite honest, I am not getting the sense that much is going on behind those eyes, and if that's the case, we'd be an untenable pairing. I need a *conversationalist*, somebody who will still have interesting things to say once our 67th anniversary rolls around. Sorry to trash you again, Simon, but I'm not looking for a redo of you.

I pry my eyes from that empty gaze and find myself looking at Hercules, over on the western wall. He's holding one of the hydra's writhing heads, and not to sound like Maris, but his arms are *very* muscular. I would give that alabaster bicep a feel if not for the alarm that would almost certainly be triggered by doing so. *But alas*. I take one last gander at the rest of the statues, but what with all the open togas, I think I've seen *quite* enough of these men. I give Hercules a sober nod as I wander into the next room.

The layout of this museum perplexes me. Leaving behind the crowd of ancient statues, I am greeted by modern art. Blobs of color on white canvases, canvases painted entirely one color, and canvases left entirely blank. I wonder if they go together somehow. As "art history major" as it may sound, I've never understood these types of paintings. Maybe I would if I read the plaques, but I never do — inexcusable, I know. But in my defense, I'm pretty sure Monet didn't stand by his paintings all day, explaining them to people. I guess I like the "art" part better than the "history."

The next room is ancient Rome by way of Renaissance Italy, and I think I've found my next swipe-right. It's an oil painting of Apollo with his lyre and golden curls. While getting involved with the Pantheon is never a good idea, I think I'd be willing to ignore the red flags for a hot musician. Look at him, perched nonchalantly on a tree stump. I bet he'd woo me with all manner of romantic songs.

Despite never reading plaques, I can't help but notice the name of the next portrait's subject. Printed in bold letters: Publius. Standing by a colonnade, poor old Publius is draped in a toga, staring wistfully off into the distance. I want to swipe right for him solely because, with that name, a lot of women would not. What are your unspoken dreams, Publius? What secrets do you long to share with a girl who would give you the time? I've learned from experience that bad names do not bad boyfriends make (looking at you, Elmo).

Oh, Elmo. You always come back to me at the strangest times. I think we could have made it, the two of us, but you picked a college on the other side of the country. So much for that, I suppose.

The next room is cubist, and I suspect that some of these paintings are of men. There's something to be said for quirk, but these guys seem a little rough around the edges. Swipe-left. Through the next doorway, and I'm back in the company of Old Masters, and there, staring straight at me, is my weakness: the emo Byronic type. Look at that foppish lock of hair, that half-finished manuscript on his desk. While there's nothing quite as sexy as a tortured artist, I've found that they're almost always better from afar, where I have the space to imagine the kinds of deep thoughts going through their heads. As a rule, they're always insufferable in conversation.

What are you working on, Angus?

I'm not "working" on anything, babe. If I let profit motives tarnish my art, it would cease to be art.

I allow myself the fantasies, but that is all. I adjust course towards a more sensible candidate: a Spanish king with a cocker spaniel by his side. Pets are a must, so I take this as a good sign. There is a sheathed rapier at the king's waist, which suggests to me a quiet, prudent strength. I like this man's vibe; I swipe right.

On the adjacent wall, another king. Henry VIII, I would recognize you anywhere. Grim as it may be, I am willing to set your history aside because I believe that people can change. But here and now, there is a look of boyish impudence upon your face, and I fear that you would prove to be a manchild. Sorry, Henry, but I have no patience for that kind of immaturity. So long.

The next room is pottery. Then furniture. Then swords. A few rooms follow with human subjects, but no right-swipes among them. With my legs museum-sore, I take a seat on a hard wooden bench positioned before a large painting of ships in a harbor. I pull out my phone, flipping through the photos I took of the swipe-rights. I'm surprised to find that there are only four: Mr. blue hat, Apollo, Publius, and the Spanish king. While they all have their charms, only one can be my muse. I look at them each again.

Apollo must go. As much as I'd love to date a musician, I simply don't have the time for the accompanying drama. This was not a terribly difficult choice, and I delete his photo from my phone without hesitation. No looking back.

Blue hat is also out. While I'd love to travel the world, I do need some degree of stability. I fear that my wanderlust would pale in comparison to his, and then where would we be? A certified dog person is definitely the safer bet.

Art. History.

But Publius... I can't get him out of my head. He reminds me so much of Elmo, and not just in name. I didn't make all the connections at first, but now I can see that they share the same way of standing. The same dreamy expression. The same eyes.

Sorry, Spanish king. Deleted.

Rising from the bench, I trek back to Publius's room, where he is waiting for me. His countenance seems lighter now, as if he has seen, in the distance, whatever it was he was looking for. *Maybe it was me.* I stand before his frame and snap a photo of the two of us. Just as I'm about to send the picture to Maris, I stop. Digging through my notes app, I find the phone number that I deleted so long ago, and after a moment of hesitation, I send the picture. *Hey, Elmo,* I type. *Thinking of you.*

Faded

Tara Miyo

He was swimming
when he came upon a shark,
with not a second to spare
he floated down to the ocean's floor.

One blink and then another,
and suddenly he was six again
sat at the old kitchen table
eating his mother's three-day old spaghetti.

The salty water has begun to burn his nose,
but there's the shark swimming
circles around him,
waiting to snatch its next meal.

One blink and then another,
soft, wrinkled hands are holding
his little face, brushing his tears
and holding him close.

The clear blue has turned scarlet
and his mother's voice has begun to fade,
as the golden string of his life is cut.

Falling

Tara Miyo

2 P.M. sunlight. The plane is falling,
straight out of the sky. The horizon is clear,
allowing the glittering gold high above
to flicker against the silver of the aircraft.

The bodies float out,
Weightless against a sea of blue.
half conscious, but knowing,
there is no return home.

Death draws near,
the sparks of life slowly fading
and turning cold against the sky.

The people are full of movement,
their flailing limbs hoping to gain some traction.
2 P.M. blistering sun, no clouds.

Match

Jeniffer Rodriguez

I let my thoughts run wild and around.
Leaving me with the fire alone to figure out
the uncertain future that is for me to shape, but
as of right now, I don't even know myself.

Burning down to pieces, letting others try
to guide me, but I am left with the question
if I can handle things that I
may not thrive on.

But what else can I do?
I let myself burn like a match,
But no matter how much it hurts me,
I give the light to those who need me.

As I'm the one to rely on.
As I'm the one they count on.

Dancing palms

Jeniffer Rodriguez

From a crystal ball, I still can see my past life.
Passing trees and bright blue skies, family united to pass time.
Sitting in the grass watching clouds pass by, with nothing in mind.
How happy was I!

What once was a view, now is a thought seen from inside.
The sudden change leaves me in awe.
Voices and laughter converted into chirps and silence.

Leave me with nothing, but to navigate the big ocean within my mind.
From streets full of life and dancing palms, the warm summer breeze
brings back memories.

The Red Button

Aldo Tricoli

Between me, you and this red button
lies the key to DEFCON 1.
You stare at it
as curious as a newborn baby.
I stare at it
with fear in my eyes.

Between me, you, and this red button is
the key to that bulkhead door
with the steel body of a dove
the key to a happy future
with you. Oh, what shall we do?
So clear is the button's purpose.
So clear is the button's risk.

Between me, you, and this red button are
drawers filled with memories
like closets filled with clean clothes from the wash.
Each file is its own piece of glass.
The files shine as bright as this night
but are as dark as the day in this filing cabinet.
It's 1:55 A.M., and everything's bright orange.

IT'S DEFCON 1!

It's DEFCON 1.

Self Portrait as a Mirror

Aldo Tricoli

I will never lie to you
I'll always tell you what's on my mind,
though your perception may be different than mine.
Even if I wanted to, I can't hide anything from you.

I'm always facing forward—towards the present
while reflecting on the light passed to me
and refracting fragments through my cracks
that you see based on the angle you move towards.

Though I may shatter easily on the inside,
good luck destroying me completely.
You'll have to corrode my metallic frame first.

My supports prop me up for all who walk in,
often leading to more attention than I'd prefer,
but all those I help make it worthwhile,
especially those who look in earnest.

There is a lot I could say and give,
and a lot I could learn from you
if you would be kind enough
to take the time to look through me.

stigmas on the mind

Allena Williams

after "Stigmas on the Body of Air" by Ekaterina Derysheva

Shame graces the morning air strung out
Like popcorn tinsel on a christmas tree. The wind whispers
Names faintly remembered
To a speaker too involved to listen. Look at the trees
How they sway in the
twilight of indifference,
The river how it ripples
To avoid bitter reflection.

Dear Author

Allena Williams

When the leaves were laughing as they fell while we sat drinking coffee on that Saturday

Did you want to tell me to thank the author?

The one who bought the broken record that's been playing on repeat like the noise of a cacophony of flowers singing in the place where the elves and fairies meet in the woods

Did you want me to find that author?

The one who could make the lake reflect the universe with its breath shattering star dust that danced in broad daylight

Did you want to call that author?

The one who couldn't stop playing Fur Elise or some other childhood melody on the ceiling piano while we sat below

the one that haunts your mind like the unconscious streaks of a painter's paint brush on an invisible canvas

Did you want to write to that author?

The one who always called your mismatched socks Freudian slips or zebras in a classroom learning the ABCs or who always remembered to tell us to find meaning in lost things

Would you like me to locate that author?

To tell them everything you didn't tell me that Saturday when we were drinking coffee as the world fell upwards and we sat watching?

Or to simply thank them for the memories, and how we wish we could turn back the clocks

unless we're the clocks and time is what we're running from, as the author taught us

and maybe nothing is as it seems like crumpled photographs printed on burnt butterfly wings

Chicago

Gabriela Zavala-Jungo

Behind the alleys,
there's the soul of a deer
Behind the branches,
there's the soul of a stray
Altogether, we get a river of souls;
a bloodstained river that sings
By the suburbs, it chants,
and is it copper, dirt, or wind
in the dawn of Chicago
There are killings every day
The river of distressed souls,
flows like a waterfall
This is Chicago, not hell
Weep and grieve but I beg you,
do not trip and fall behind

Self-Portrait as Gratitude

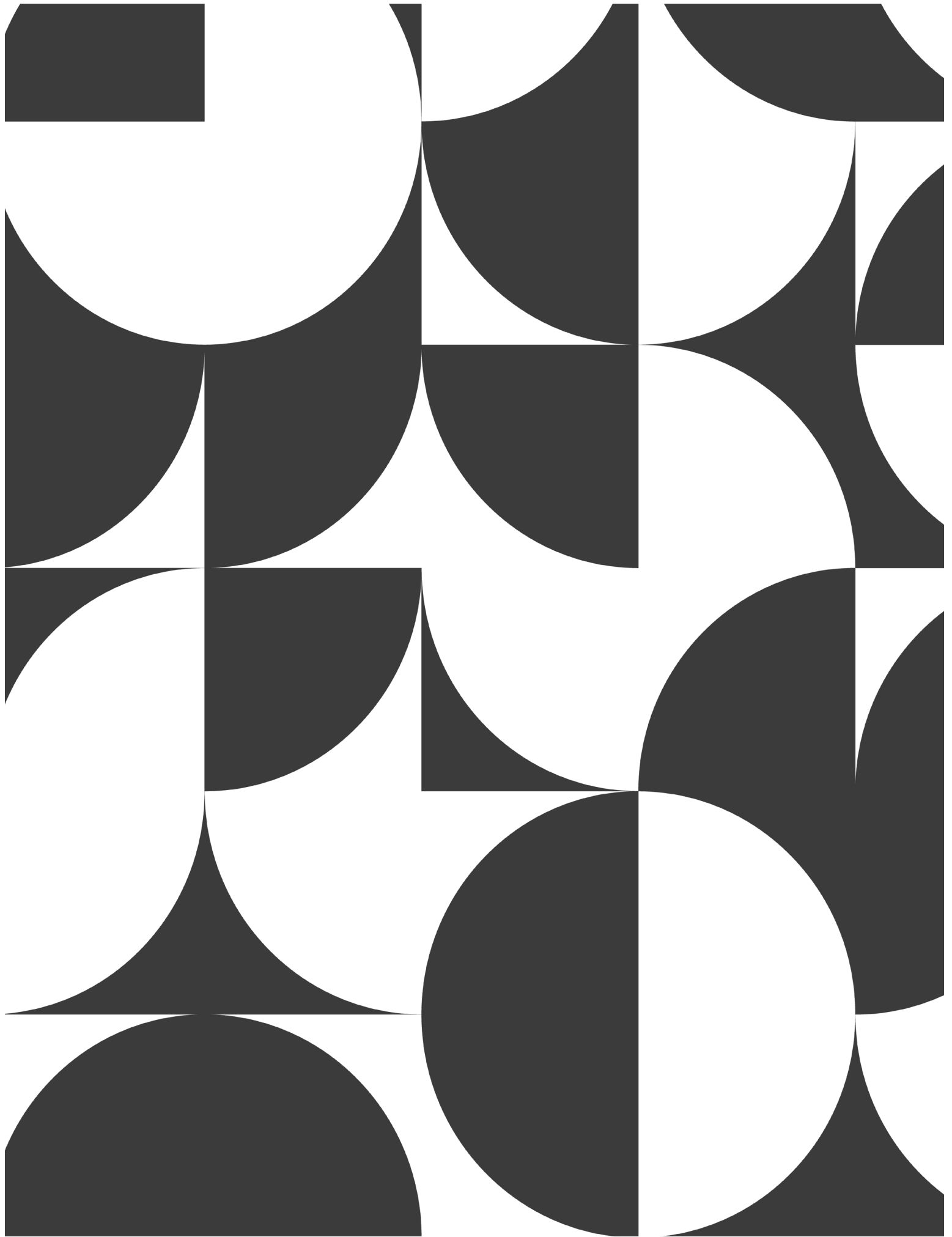
Gabriela Zavala-Jungo

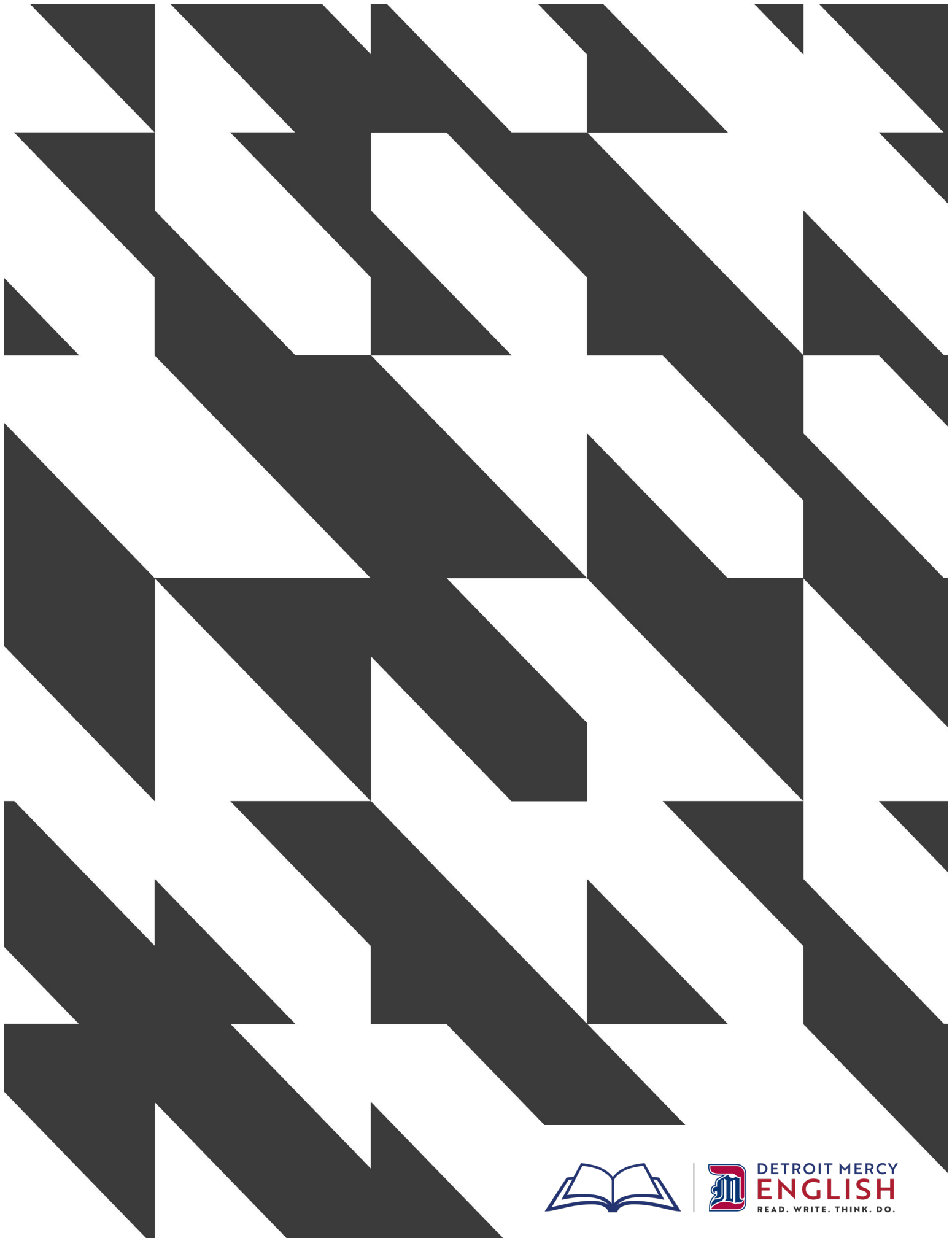
Eat your vegetables, and you'll grow healthy and strong
Strong as a siren's chant when the sailor passes by
Drink the milk for your teeth and bones and go along
Parents lived by this, and it wasn't a lie

But it was, it was a lie
Big lies as politicians' promises when election time rolls around
Fixing the wound would take a miraculous try
yet, any attempt would not go unnoticed,
If anything, it would forever be cherished
Now, at the young age of 11, I was uncovered and thrown to the ground
Yet, my mother gently picked me up and cradled me in her arms,
repeatedly assuring me "everything will be alright"

Overhead lights, white walls, and that same clean smell
The friendly nurses sometimes would ask
"Would you like bubble gum or mint scent?"
Needles sharps and deep as death by a thousand cuts
In and out, I could feel my eyes sting and swell
The colorful band-aids always waiting to comfort me
with a candy or two beside them as well
When would I again be able to ride the yellow school bus?
I sat in the waiting rooms, reading and hoping

Time began to pass, one year, three, five, ten
Doctors then began to blur into one another
as raindrops that melt together in a window
I'd like to breathe, but I can't if I'm being smothered





DETROIT MERCY
ENGLISH
READ. WRITE. THINK. DO.