

Right Up to the Bell

ENL 2050: Introduction to Creative Writing • Professor Stacy Gnall • Winter 2025



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ENL 2050: Introduction to Creative Writing

Professor Stacy Gnall

Winter 2025

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Right Up to the Bell

Students of ENL 2050, Winter 2025

A Note from Your Professor

Stacy Gnall

To the students of my Winter 2025 Introduction to Creative Writing course, I dedicate this poem by Mohja Kahf. May *you* stumble upon this book on some future date, and may the words of *your younger self* then “be / the mislaid key / to your greatest need.”

With love, always,
Stacy Gnall

Finding Poems for my Students

Mohja Kahf

from E-mails from Scheherazad

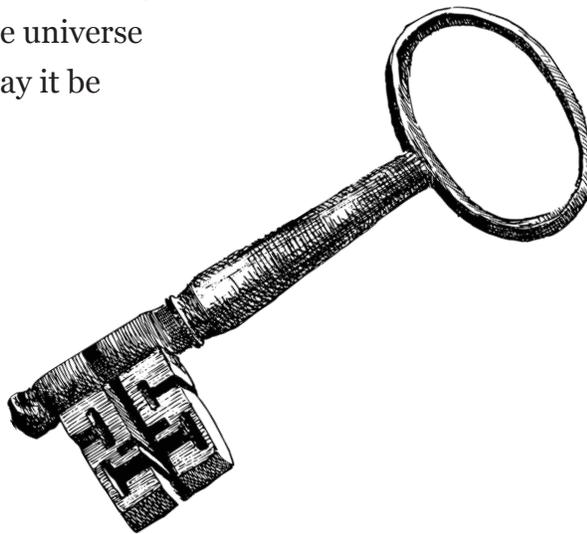
O my students,
I scour the world of words
to bring you poems like the rocks
my girls dig up in riverbanks
and come running to show me
because the notches in them
say something true, something
that an ancient Wisdom
wanted us to see.

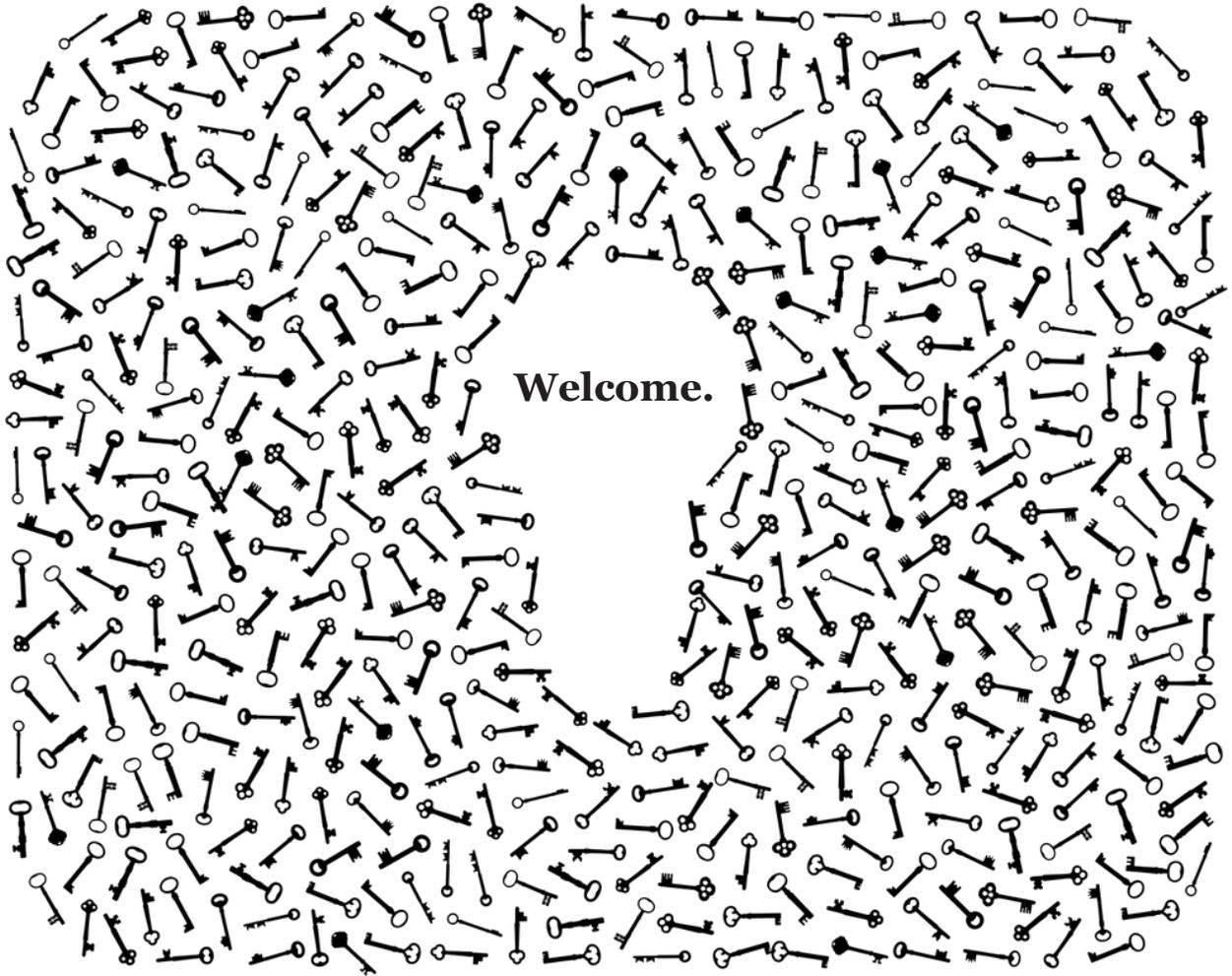
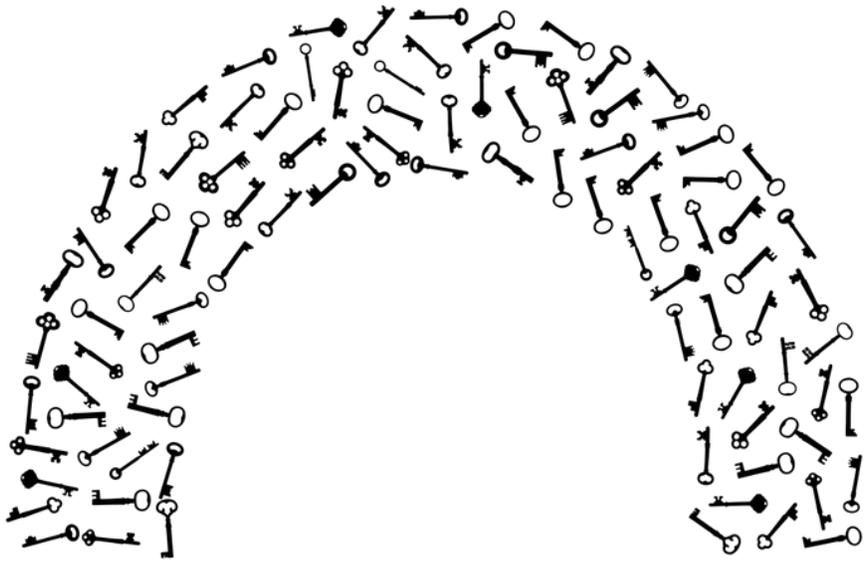
I run to you, pockets full of poems.
I select: This poem will help you pass a test.
Here is one that is no help at all,
but it is beautiful; take it, take it.

Finding Poems for my Students • Mohja Kahf

O my scroungers after merely passing grades,
I bring you poems I have hiked high
and far to find, knowing
they will mostly end up like the rocks
my daughters find, tossed in drawers
with old batteries, mislaid keys,
scraps bearing the addresses
of people whose names
you no longer recognize or need.

Your current glazed-eye indifference
doesn't bother me. One day,
when you are either cleaning house
or moving (and sooner or later
everyone must do one or the other),
you will shake the drawer and the poem
will fall out. And may the poem be for you
the one phone number in the universe
you were looking for, and may it be
for you the mislaid key
to your greatest need.
On that day,
you will read.





Stress Reduction Youssra Ayashe

Hands forced softly beside skin—
warmness, not a comment.
Inhalation held, then released,
Like an assurance,
like a secret spread
in the soundless room.

The rhythm underneath fingertips
beats gentle, sturdy—
a soft rhythm that expresses,
that states, I'm here.
It's in the lifting,
the touching,
the steady vibrates of relation,
the heaviness of existence.

A hand grip another—
Strong, yet gentle—
it's the attitude that we embrace,
not to repair, but to lessen
the ends of aching pain.
Each touch a rhythm,
each hint a tune.

Carefulness is a heartbeat,
a gentle, balanced beat
in the area amongst us.

The Unspeakable

Youssra Ayashe

There was nothing on the shelf.

Knowing that the shelf was empty but still wasn't processed by me after an hour of staring at it. Nothing and nothing were not the same thing, and I couldn't quite recognize the difference. The shelf, a plain wooden object, was an afterthought that appeared across my apartment's wall without any excitement or obvious explanation.

But for some reason, it was taking up all my thought today. You realize that there was no reason to pay attention to it. It had nothing on it. Not even dust. An endless stretch of shining wood. It was just a feature of the space, an object of a decorator's design that I had never even thought of as a shelf.

It seemed to be the only important thing in the room now.

I looked at the kitchen counter's little clock. Time didn't matter. Neither did today's date matter. It was one of those times when it seemed like nothing related to anything else. My thoughts returned to the shelf. Even the shelf seemed boring. It had the kind of look that one might not be able to describe. No, this shelf was the most plain and simple shelf of them all. Not low enough to be overlooked, but not high enough to be seen as an important object. It was exactly in the center.

But here I was, thinking about it.

I got up and stood on my feet and moved towards the shelf, leaning closer. I ran my finger along the edge of the smooth surface. I thought about how weird it was that I was so focused on something so...nothing, as a drop of sweat ran down my neck. Maybe it was a hidden reaction against what was normal? A mental crisis caused by something as harmless as a shelf.

I wasn't sure.

The world changed while I stood there, lost in my thoughts. Even though I didn't hear it, the shelf wasn't empty when I looked up again. It was full.

Books. Tiny leather-bound books, with yellowing pages and damaged covers. Many of them, all about the same size, all the same shade of brown, all neatly placed. Every book had a title, but I had never heard of them before, and when I read them, I found that they completely had no meaning to them. "All That Was Certainly Not Said in a Dictionary." "How to Discover Time by Overlooking It." "The space between the existing and the upcoming."

I took a step back and blinked.

The shelf was not empty.

The Unspeakable • Youssra Ayashe

I had a feeling that was indescribable, I just couldn't explain this feeling. The feeling was as if the books were talking to me. It was same as speaking. Like the books were trying to tell me something. From the shelf, I took the first one. It was strangely light, too light for its size, and the world turned again the moment my fingertips touched its cover.

I was standing on the edge of a huge, endless desert instead of my apartment. There was no heat, but the sun was burning in the sky. It wasn't sand at all, the sand beneath me was strong and big. No landmarks or signs of life. As far as the eye could reach, there was nothing but the flat land.

And there it was another shelf in front of me.

The wooden frame of this shelf was old and sturdy, and it was taller than me, reaching high into the air. The same little, leather-bound books with very long titles were all there. I knew they were useless without having to read them. I just knew.

I was unsure of the source of the deep, calm voice that was heard at that moment. It wasn't from anywhere in the desert, but it wasn't in my imagination either.

"You must decide," the voice said. "You will be described by the shelf you choose. There is no turning back."

I paused. I wanted to ask questions for me to understand what was going on, but I was unable to do so. I simply stared at the shelves instead.

The books on it shined, each title pulling at the edges of my brain in some way. As if it were attracted by an invisible thread, I moved in the direction of the shelf. I grabbed a book with a strange title as I reached my hand.

"A Path to Missing Your Place in Time."

The desert disappeared as soon as my fingers closed over the book, and I found myself back in my apartment, facing my own bookcase.

However, I still held the book. I cracked it open.

There was nothing on the pages.

Flipping through the book, my heart racing, I was searching for anything that could help me understand what I've been experiencing. I became more aware that the pages weren't just blank as I continued to turn them. They were moving. They seemed to be attempting to create words to speak for themselves. However, they never did.

The Unspeakable • Youssra Ayashe

I held the book for a while as I stood there. And the longer I held it, the thicker the air became around me, like if something I couldn't quite understand had filled the room. I sensed the world's edges weakening and the lines separating time and space started to blur.

Then there was another change in the middle of the room. It wasn't the shelf this time. The whole room was changing. As if the air itself were twisting into strange patterns, the walls started to stretch and bend in strange directions.

I tried to go and make an escape. There were no doors of any type when I tried to escape. No way out of the room. There was no end to the shelf.

With the book held in my lap, I took a seat.

The shelf had been there all along.

Now, however, it was filled.

I looked up again for the second time. The shelf stayed, but it was alive now. And it was waiting for my response.

However, there was just one book. The one I'm holding. It was also empty.



I Willed It Maria Bitar

My grandpa is dead. Well, he just died— like five minutes ago— but that’s a good thing. He was old, and I mean *old* old. Like concerningly old to the point where you question how he had a twenty-year-old grandson. I don’t really care that he’s dead, he barely spoke to me, and he was kind of an asshole. Every time I tried talking to him, he would brush it off, he’d say he was too busy or too tired, but that lazy hag was just watching TV all day. That was important to me though. I wanted to bond with him so badly. My dad was never in the picture, he left before I was born, but all I’ve wanted was a father figure who would care about me and talk to me and maybe like throw a baseball at me or something— I don’t know how those things even work. But my grandpa never cared, and it killed me. I always saw him talking and spending time with my other cousins, so-called perfect Bethany and Winston. I don’t know why he liked them so much because looking at the big picture, I’ve always been the perfect grandchild. I did well in school, I was the president of the student council, I volunteered at the shelter, and I got accepted to a good college with a scholarship. Bethany and Winston did none of those things. Actually, they kind of sucked. But Bethany and Winston are not gay. And I am.

I don’t care that he’s dead, I was actually waiting for him to step his last foot in the grave because I changed his will so that I’d inherit almost everything. I know what you’re thinking, I’m such a bad person and how could I ever take advantage of a poor old man. Honestly, I thought the same at first, but when you think about it, it’s kind of my God-given right. I mean, if my grandpa doesn’t want to talk to me because I’m gay then my compensation should be to get most of the money in his will. That sounds fair to me considering the mental turmoil he’s put me through. Plus, my grandpa was crazy rich, the type of rich where you ask what he does for work, and he just says “business.” A bit sketchy if you ask me, but I’m not complaining. You might be wondering how I did it, but it was ridiculously easy. I mean the guy was so old, he lost half his vision, I just put on a deep voice and pretended to be Winston, and he did it. I didn’t give myself everything though, so it wouldn’t raise suspicion, but I guess everyone else was eager for my grandpa to die because now all eyes were on me.

Oh my *God*. I have never heard that many people talk over each other at once. My grandpa only had three kids, my mom, Winston’s dad, and Beth’s mom. His children got a good sum of money, so the adults didn’t say too much, just some complaints from my uncle about how the money was split equally (which I also changed because why was my grandpa going to give my mom less money? Not on my watch). But Beth and Winston rushed up to me and the questions did not end.

Winston had the most questions, “Sam, did you see the will? Why did grandpa do that, he didn’t even like you.” Do you see what I mean when I said that they suck, like who says that?

I Willed It • Maria Bitar

“Yes, I saw the will and it makes sense to me. Grandpa liked me, he just didn’t show it in front of you.”

“Are you serious Sammy? We know he didn’t. He gave me and Winny only 100,000 each and you got five times that. Does that make sense to you?”

“Uh yes, it does. Why is that so hard for you to believe? You think I don’t deserve the money when I’ve made more of a life for myself than any of you? I’m almost done with my bachelor’s in business. You don’t think Grandpa would want me to take over the business?” I should’ve been meaner. I wanted to tell them they are bums and all they do is sit around and mooch money off their parents, go out, smoke and drink, come home and do it all over again. If my grandpa actually liked me, it would make a ton of sense for me to get the most money. I’m the only one who has a job, goes to school, and works hard. I didn’t think it would be this hard to convince them, but Winston kept pushing.

“I’m telling my dad. This cannot be right maybe there was a typo.”

“It was handwritten, moron. There’s no typo but sure go ask your dad to see what he says.” So, he did that, he asked his dad, and his dad didn’t care. Because I knew he wouldn’t care. Because no one actually cares about Winston and Bethany.

“Come on Sammy, tell us, did you do anything? Did you change it?” I wasn’t too worried about her being onto me, Beth was never the brightest of the bunch.

“Change it, are you kidding me? Are you seriously accusing me of that? I know you’ve never been fond of me, but I never imagined this from you Beth. How could you ever accuse me of this?” She had every right to accuse me of that, I definitely changed it. But hold your applause, I know I’m a great actor, thank you. Beth looked a little sad after I said that. She’s always been a bit nicer to me than Winston was.

“I’m gonna investigate this. I know something is wrong, he never spent time with you.”

“Winston, do whatever you want. But the reality is, he’s dead. Maybe you should sit there and pretend you’re upset about that for even a moment before you run off and do all this for some money you’ll blow in a week. The truth is Grandpa liked me. He did and that’s the end of it. Even if he didn’t show it as much, you know he loved all of us.” Winston didn’t look too convinced, but he kept quiet.

“The inheritance lawyer is coming soon, Sammy, so we will just wait for that.” So, we waited. The insurance lawyer finally showed up, she sat down and read the will carefully before she spoke.

“So, what’s the problem here?”

Irises Maria Bitar

after Vincent van Gogh's *Iris*es

Dancing flowers,
sway with me.
Your blues and whites,
delicate, how I used to be.

I remember running through
that vibrant field.
I didn't want to go far,
until I saw those grassy greens

The flowers stepped,
following my feet.
Left and right,
to the rhythm of my heartbeat.

We waltzed and we twirled,
until my eyes shut.
Then I lost the tempo
I once loved.

Dancing flowers,
stay with me.
Your beauty reminds me
of who I used to be.

Irises (1889) Vincent van Gogh



In Your World Maria Bitar

I lay beside you
and wonder how
when I reach out
the palm of my hand,
yours fit in it.

Your cold hands cracked
and bleeding,
like dry clay
that I must craft.

I glance at your nose,
then your eyes
brown and green,
like the Earth's ground,
deep enough to be its core.

Your heartbeat soft
and familiar,
like a welcome mat
that has seen many souls.

Your chipped tooth
and crooked smile
invite me in.

Lurking in the Shadows Emma Boucher

It started with a flicker, a barely noticeable change in the way the shadows stretched across the pavement. At first, I thought it was my eyes playing tricks on me, that I was too tired, or the light was affecting my vision. But as the days passed, I saw it more and more. At first, it was the man walking his dog down the street. His shadow was dragging a limp, distorted version of the leash he was holding while his real hand held it taut as the dog trotted. Then, it was a woman laughing at a friend's joke, but her shadow stood stiff and silent, with its arms crossed. Next, my neighbor, a friendly old man, waved to me from his porch, while his shadow turned away, hands deep in pockets with his shoulders slouching in disinterest. I told myself I was tired, overworked, maybe even a little stressed and that what I was seeing couldn't be real, but the next morning, I saw it again. And the next day, and the day after. The shadows didn't match. They weren't reflections like normal, they were something more, almost like the shadows were revealing something.

After a few days, I convinced myself I was dreaming. That I'd wake up, rub my eyes, go about my life, and tell myself that shadows don't do these things. But every morning, I saw the same thing, the shadows weren't matching their owners, they were moving by themselves. I started watching people more closely, trying to understand why their faces said one thing, but their shadows revealed something else entirely. The more I watched, the more I was forced to see the new reality. First, at work, my boss talked confidently about teamwork and cooperation, but his shadow stood with its arms crossed in annoyance. Later that day, in the coffee shop, a barista smiled warmly at the customers in line, but her shadow rolled its eyes and silently screamed. On the way home, I saw a mother cooing at her baby in a stroller, seemingly happy, but her shadow slumped in its seat, face buried in its hands. I blinked hard each time I saw the shadows, hoping these were just illusions that would go away, but they wouldn't leave. The more I noticed them, the harder it became to ignore the shadows moving independently.

I was going crazy, I had to be. I stopped sleeping and started taking long walks at night, thinking the darkness would fix my mind and erase what I thought I was seeing. But even the low glow of the street lights couldn't remove the shadows that acted with unsettling independence. After a while, I started avoiding eye contact with people because I couldn't stand seeing the disconnect between their actions and their shadowy truth. I found myself watching the clock as I worked, ready to run out the door before I had to see the janitor mop the floor with his shadow standing motionless behind him. I even travelled home avoiding people in the parking lot or walking the street, fearing what I would see following behind them. At some point I started walking through the grocery store in a daze, straight past people as they chatted about the weather while their shadows lingered with boredom.

"How could no one else see it?" I thought constantly. "There has to be someone else seeing this too. I can't be this crazy, right?" With these thoughts looming on my mind, I tested the waters once at work. I asked my friend Jess if she ever thought shadows looked...

Lurking in the Shadows • Emma Boucher

strange. She laughed at me, shaking her head. “You need more sleep,” she told me. But I couldn’t help but be focused on her shadow that didn’t laugh. I felt like I was unraveling, going completely mad. I began to question if I had started losing my mind, or if something had actually changed, something only I could see. During these past weeks, I wanted to scream at people, to grab them by the shoulders and force them to look, to see their shadows, but I knew that no one would see my reality.

Eventually, I locked myself in my house for three days, avoiding the sunlight and my own reflection with the fear my shadow might be the same. Maybe if I ignored it, this whole shadow problem would go away and the world would be fixed. Maybe if I stayed away from the world for just a few days and got enough sleep, I would wake up and everything would be normal again. I wish this were true, but, when I finally stepped outside, the situation was worse. The shadows weren’t just different from their owners, they were walking around completely separate. At first, I only saw a man jogging down the sidewalk, headphones in, with his shadow around the corner behind him not attached behind the man. But then I noticed it more. Across the street, two children played with a soccer ball while their shadows lingered near a lamppost playing another game entirely. It was like the shadows had broken free. They no longer stayed with their owners, they wandered with their own will.

I thought to myself that this couldn’t be happening, that I had truly lost the last bit of sanity I had left, but I swear one shadow looked right at me. “This has gone too far for it to not be real right?” I said out loud like someone would answer, “What if this was actually happening and not my imagination?” As I wandered around, I began to see them moving with their own autonomy more and more. They waited at crosswalks, climbed stairs, moved through crowds with their own rhythm, some even mimicked human gestures, mocking their owners. The shadows seemed like they weren’t just revealing feelings anymore, they were acting out their own will.

The more I noticed, the more I started wondering if they resented us. If years of hiding behind us, mimicking our every move, had filled them with rage. For all our lives, the shadows had watched us lie, fake smiles, repress everything real inside us. And now, finally free, they wanted us to see what we really are. That night, I watched from my window as a cluster of shadows gathered beneath a flickering streetlight. No people in sight. Just the shadows, standing shoulder to shoulder, facing the same direction like they were waiting for something. That’s when I decided I needed to know if my shadow was still with me. I did not want to look behind me, but I needed to know if my shadow was still there. I slowly turned, ready to learn my fate, and that’s when I saw my shadow was gone. I stood frozen, not sure what to do.

Lurking in the Shadows • Emma Boucher

“No,” I thought, shaking my head. “That’s not possible. Where did it go?”

At first, I tried to ignore it and forced myself to go to bed, but when I woke up, the shadows weren’t just moving freely, they were gone. I ran outside, and nothing was there. Every person outside was missing their shadow. The mailman, the dog walker, the mother pushing the stroller. No one had a shadow anymore. Where did they go? They just... left.

Any Dog's Game Emma Boucher

Smoke lingers, thick and low,
wrapping around the green felt table,
where seven dogs sit in silence,
watching, waiting, playing.

The Bernard's ears sit alert, listening
to the clatter of shifting poker chips.
The Bulldog chews his cigar as
he slides cards into his paw,
passing them to his pal to the left.
The Collie squints, unreadable,
his eyes heavy with thought,
Calculating his next move.

Across the table, the Dane
barely breathes as he
waits for someone to fold.
Meanwhile, the Mastiff sits steady,
proud of the cards in his hand,
ready to raise the stakes.

One must make a move.
Who will it be?

A single chip slides forward.

Any Dog's Game • Emma Boucher

The Dane watches.

He flicks his gaze to the Bernard

Who has a small twitch. A nervous habit.

Then to the Mastiff, who tightens his jaw.

Do they have a strong hand?

He glances at his own cards once more.

Then, slowly, pushes his entire stack forward.

The room tenses.

No one speaks.

The bet weighs heavy on the table.

A Friend in Need (1889)

Cassius Marcellus Coolidge



Yellow Chair Alexander Comer

after *Annabella* by Linda Le Kinff

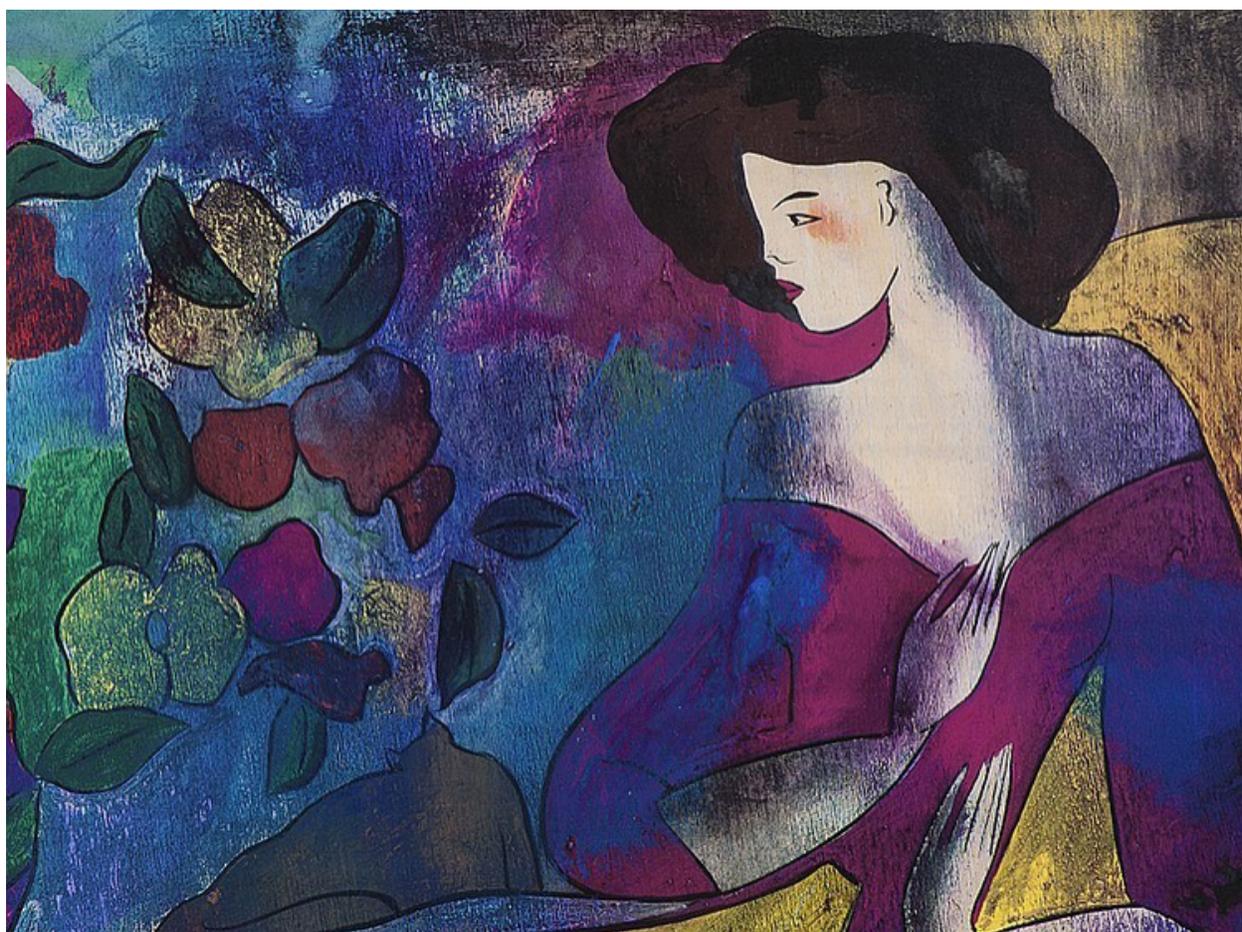
Dressed in a suit whiter than milk,
Laughter swept through the night slick as silk.
The tablecloth had a glow that danced,
Swirling a bubbly drink while conversation advanced.

Brass notes filled the air.
Guests asked their partners to the floor with a stare.
My eyes began to dance around the room,
There she was – elusive.

She was sitting alone in a yellow chair
She gazed off into the distance.
I wondered what she could be looking at,
How could she think about anything but here?

She did not hear me when I asked for her hand,
She was the only being in the universe.
I gave up, I still wanted to dance.
She had the world in her yellow chair.

Annabella (2007) Linda Le Kinf



Mind the Monster

Alexander Comer

Tossing turning
The night unfolding slowly
Sweating shaking
It creeps from the crypt of my mind
Waking rising
Moonlight from the window guiding my steps
Searching descending
A glass of water may close the threshold
Gasping shattering
Seeing the creature that lurk
Scrambling bolting
A flash ignites a picture is snapped
Freezing capturing
Surroundings begin to swirl
Falling succumbing
Sunlight opens my eyes to an empty frame

Blue in Green

Alexander Comer

I remember the bass was smooth and deep. The other instruments were trying to wow us. Nothing came close to that bass until the trumpet came in. Our bodies twirled as the record spun. We twirled so much that we ended up on the floor. As we sat there on the floor, laughing, I reached out my hand and touched my wife's belly. She smiled back at me and said, "We are okay. You and I are used to spinning. Our baby is not, but I promise she's okay."

I smiled and then stood up. I offered her my hand, and she took it and stood up.

"I know," I said, squeezing her fingers gently. "I just wanted to hear it."

"Could you get us some drinks and meet me on the sofa?"

"Sure thing," I said as I approached the kitchen.

"Quincy, I want a mocktail."

"Right, no drinks till she's twenty-one."

I heard her laugh. As I continued making the drinks, I listened to the music stop. I glanced over at my wife. She had put on Kind of Blue and was shuffling towards the sofa. I walked over, sat beside her, and placed a drink in her hand. My wife started laughing to herself.

She said, "I think it's funny that the only things we unpacked were the drinks and the records."

"Well, this move has been stressful, ya know I..."

"Quincy, you need to relax, okay? I know things have been challenging lately, but let's not think about those things. I mean, I know you're worried about me, your first day, this new apartment, and our baby. But you've got to realize, I put on your favorite record, we are having a drink, and you're sitting next to me."

"You're right, Cleo. You always know what to say." I looked Cleo in the eye and placed my hand on her belly. "What should we name her?"

She smiled at me and laughed. "We are definitely not naming her after a jazz musician."

"So Miles is off the table?"

"Come on, be serious," Cleo said playfully. "What if we name her... Quincy?"

"Quincy. Quincy!"

I half jumped, half fell out of my chair as my coworker banged on the side of my cell of a cubicle. "Quincy! I asked for those copies an hour ago! This can't be every day man!"

Blue in Green • Alexander Comer

“I’m sorry, I’ll get them right over, and keep your voice down.”

“This is unbelievable.” He threw his hands up in the air as he stormed off, “Right employee of the month,” he muttered as he left.

I sat there for a minute, I ran my hands through my hair out of frustration. “I need to snap out of it.” I then stood up. I needed water. I then slipped out of my prison cell and stalked down the hall. I walked past my coworkers in their cubicles. They all worked in irregular rhythms. Some walked around, their footsteps hasty, others kept the printer busy. Oh, and the keys. I could barely think about anything else with all the clicking ringing about. The rhythm of the office was irregular, but everyone kept in time. When I got to the water cooler, I grabbed a plastic cup. Two of my coworkers were standing in front.

“Hey, did you hear about the merger with that new tech company?”

“Yeah, but no one seems to know the name.”

“I just hope their guys aren’t stuck up.”

I tapped my foot impatiently on the floor.

“Oh, hey Quin, we didn’t see you standing there.”

“It’s Quincy.” I tried to say as dryly as possible.

“Oh, did you want a drink?” He smirked. “Let me get that for you.”

“No, actually, I’m not thirsty.” I snatched my cup back and walked off.

“What’s his problem?” I heard them chuckle.

“Why do I even try to get water?” I said under my breath. Everyone keeps in time, even them.

I turned around to glare at them. They both looked at me, then at each other, mocking me. I let out a breath, clenched my jaw, and marched back to my cell.

I rubbed my neck and sighed. When I finally looked up, I saw Lawrence, my boss. There he was, dressed in a clean suit. His hair was slicked back, and he always looked proper. He was leaning against my desk. In one hand, he held my family portrait. It bothered me that he was holding it, but I did not say a thing; he held too much authority.

“Quincy...” I felt arrested. I began to sweat. The walls of my cell began to draw in closer. I knew why my boss was here, I knew I was in trouble because normally he wouldn’t be so serious. He loved to joke. “I took care of those copies for you.”

“The copies?” I croaked.

Blue in Green • Alexander Comer

“Yes, Quincy, the copies. That’s actually why I’m here right now.”

“Sir, I-” He held up his empty hand to silence me.

“I came down here to clean up after you, Quincy. Maybe you should also think about cleaning yourself up. At least wear a tie, get some sleep, or show up on time.” His tone was without malice, He was still studying my family portrait. He tapped his fingers on the glass as he spoke. Each tap precise. He kept his eyes fixed on our smiling faces trapped behind the glass. “Lovely family,” He murmured. He finally met my gaze, “Quincy, straighten up, turn your work in on time.” He then placed the portrait face down. He stood up and strutted to the opening of the cubicle. He paused and straightened his tie. “For the record, Quincy, you were our best employee. I believe you’ll find yourself again, and remember, keep in time. We will not have this conversation again. Always a pleasure, Quincy,” he said without looking. There he went down the hall.

I rushed towards the portrait. I placed it back in its place ever so delicately. My wife. My daughter. Me. All three of us smiling. We were caught up in some better moment. “Who am I to sit here and waste everyone’s time?” I whispered back to them.

I leaned back in my chair and breathed out through my nose. The truth is- I kept time. I kept time every night. Not for the firm, not for the deadlines, not even for my boss. I did it for my wife and little girl. They curled up on the couch as I played by the window. I never told anyone at work. I knew they wouldn’t understand. But to me, when I improvised a ballad, and could see my family’s reflection through the dim light in the window. That’s when I knew I had the whole world.

Tonight would be a bit different. I had the itch to play for a crowd. I wanted to play in a band again. The club on 56th Street had live music every Friday. Maybe I’ll go and see if they have an opening for tonight. I looked at the clock, it was five minutes until my shift ended. I grabbed my coat and my briefcase, I packed it recklessly. I had to go home and get my trumpet.

“Maybe I should run it by Cleo first?”

When I finally reached my apartment, I took off my coat, removed my shoes, and put my key on the hook. I heard my wife yell from the living room, “We are in here!”

I drifted into the living room and saw my wife sitting on the floor while our daughter sat between her legs as she finger-painted.

“I think I want our daughter to be a painter, ya know, like Picasso, or even some other washed-up artist no one has ever heard of. She might end up poor, but at least she would be happy.”

Blue in Green • Alexander Comer

Her eyes widened, “Quincy, she’s two... are you alright?”

I hesitated, but I had to say something, “Cleo, I love jazz. You know how good I am; you heard me play the night we met. That’s what made you approach me.

She sighed, her hands gently caressing our daughter’s head as she painted. “I know Quincy. I remember.”

“I have been thinking about playing again for months. When I wake up, I think about it, and when I sit in my cubicle staring at the gray walls, I have to play again. Not just in our apartment after work, not just for myself. I can’t work in my cubicle anymore.

Cleo closed her eyes and began to shake her head. She finally met my gaze. “Quincy...” I knew she was trying to be careful with her words, I knew she was afraid. “We have a daughter.”

I nodded, gazing down at the finger-painted mess on the floor. “And what if she grows up watching me give up on what I love? What does that teach her?”

Cleo’s body stiffened. She was still caressing our daughter’s head. “What if she grows up watching you struggle? What if she watches you fail?”

I didn’t answer.

In the silence, our daughter yawned, she pressed her head against Cleo’s chest. “I need to put her to bed.”

I watched as they vanished into the darkness. Up the stairs they went, their footsteps growing fainter. I sat on the floor surrounded by pages smeared with color. The record had stopped. All I could hear was static. I reached over and lifted the needle. I settled it on Blue in Green. The trumpet came in warm, it filled the whole room. I sat there listening, waiting. For what, I wasn’t sure.

Fog Between Us Jada Davis

Most people are not aware of what happens on the island of Ashmere.

The island is just far enough away that it's easy for the town to ignore. No one really asks any questions; there have been rumors but nothing that has been proven. It is just a place that lives in the back of people's minds, such as a dream that is forgotten as soon as you wake up.

Some members of the town will tell rumors such as, there are aliens or something unnatural hiding or, that a boat vanished when it became close to the island. These stories seem very strange to the normal individual. But the members of this town have lived through many terrifying events that have been forgotten or no longer spoken of.

A rumor that is often talked about is of a factory on the island of Ashmere. It is known to town members that some children are raised in the factory. The age of the children, where they come from, why they are being raised there are all constant questions for the majority of people. Some say that the factory takes girls and raises them until they are old enough for some kind of surgery. People say they have seen girls before they go, and after they return and it is two completely different people.

Ones that have met a girl that came from the factory say that all the girls look very similar. In addition, they all act the same, very quiet and strange. Not many people go out of their way to talk to these girls as they all seem like robots or trained in a certain manner.

There are many versions of what takes place in the factory circulating throughout the town. Some say the girls are given pills to keep calm and controlled. Others claim that they are never allowed to see the light of day and are kept in the factory. There are wonders of how long the girls are there for and is the factory their whole life?

The most popular rumor is about the surgeries.

The girls that come from the island do not look normal.

Rather they look as if their face was not theirs.

It is rumored that at the age of sixteen, their faces are traded. Not only traded but swapped out to an older aged woman. These vibrant young faces on old women did not appear in the town by the island. On the other hand, they had seen the young girls come from the island with a much older face than their body fits.

Though there has been much speculation about this occurring, none of the girls protest or cry out for help. They seem as though they have accepted this life and nothing can help them. Whatever they are doing in the factory has worked in their favor.

When they come back from the factory, they have imperfections they young people should not have already acquired. These include things like wrinkles and saggy skin. Their smile

Fog Between Us • Jada Davis

seems to be practiced, not because they are happy, but because they are trained to act in this manner. Their bodies are unharmed, which makes the surgery look so unfitting.

Town members have witnessed planes flying to and from the factory. People don't know what to think as some believe it is a government operation, or a secret mission that can't be known to the public.

Meanwhile, there are older women are touching the ground looking their age, then leaving the factory looking to be someone else. Their faces look as if they've been untouched, as if the skin was perfect and had no damage, which is highly unlikely for women their age.

When a girl comes back to the town by the island people don't tend to ask questions. They just nod, pretending not to notice how strange this all looks.

"I know what happens there," Old Joe, the town's most well-known restaurant owner tells anyone who will listen. He stands at the end of the bar, tapping his cup nervously. "They take them. Every year and bring them back looking like something unknown. Something stranger than we think is going on."

Joe doesn't mention what he believes about the rumors of drugs being involved, but everyone knows about them. Some say that the pills make the girls calm, others state that it makes them lose their memory. Old Joe believes that the pills keep them quiet and make them forget what they have been through. There is no structural evidence to clarify what the case really is.

As the town talks, Old Joe gets into contact with a young man that came from states away.

"Hey, I'm Jake. Is this the famous Old Joe?"

"Well yes, it is young man, what brings you in today?" replied Old Joe.

Jake takes a deep breath. "So, I've heard that you believe there is more going on at the island of Ashmere." Old Joe nods. "Well, ya see, my mother came back home from a trip a couple weeks ago and she just doesn't look the same." Jake speaks with desperation.

"Well, what do you mean?"

Jake explains that his mother has looked younger than ever before, he includes that she said she was visiting his town but when he heard about the mysterious island, he had to check it out. Jake was very worried about what his mother had gotten into, looking to Old Joe for guidance.

After days of bouncing back ideas of where to go to find out more about the island, Joe and Jack decided to hire a boat to get to Ashmere.

Fog Between Us • Jada Davis

“There has been rumors of boats going missing you know?” explains Old Joe

“It is worth finding out the truth, whatever is going on is not okay.” Jack said sternly as the boat goes from side to side.

As they began to get closer to the island the fog seemed to thicken. The air felt heavy and moist. The captain was worried that he was not able to see the shore.

“Just keep going we have to see this!” Jack says.

The captain sees a light coming from within the fog. “We are almost there” says the captain.

Then suddenly they are at the end of the fog, and they are back at the dock that they came from. All in confusion still wondering what happened.

This kept them and the town wondering forever.



The Restless Twin

Michelle Gomez-Angeles

I am not me without the tremor,
I fear the hush, a weightless tremor.

In the lull, I dissolve to air,
Only unrest can shape my tremor.

A shadow lingers, stitched to my step,
Even light cannot unmake my tremor.

In silence, I drift, unbound, undone,
Stillness unspools, unweaves my tremor.

No color, no shape, no pulse remains,
Until the dark hums back my tremor.

Beneath a Clear Sky

Michelle Gomez-Angeles

The sky is open—clear, endless—
but beneath it, a storm is rising.
A bridge, a river of bodies,
wrapped in green, white, and red,
hands gripping banners like lifelines,
words painted in urgency:
“In the Name of Humanity.”

A helicopter hums above,
watching, circling,
its metal gaze pressing down,
as if history hasn’t already tried
to silence voices like these.

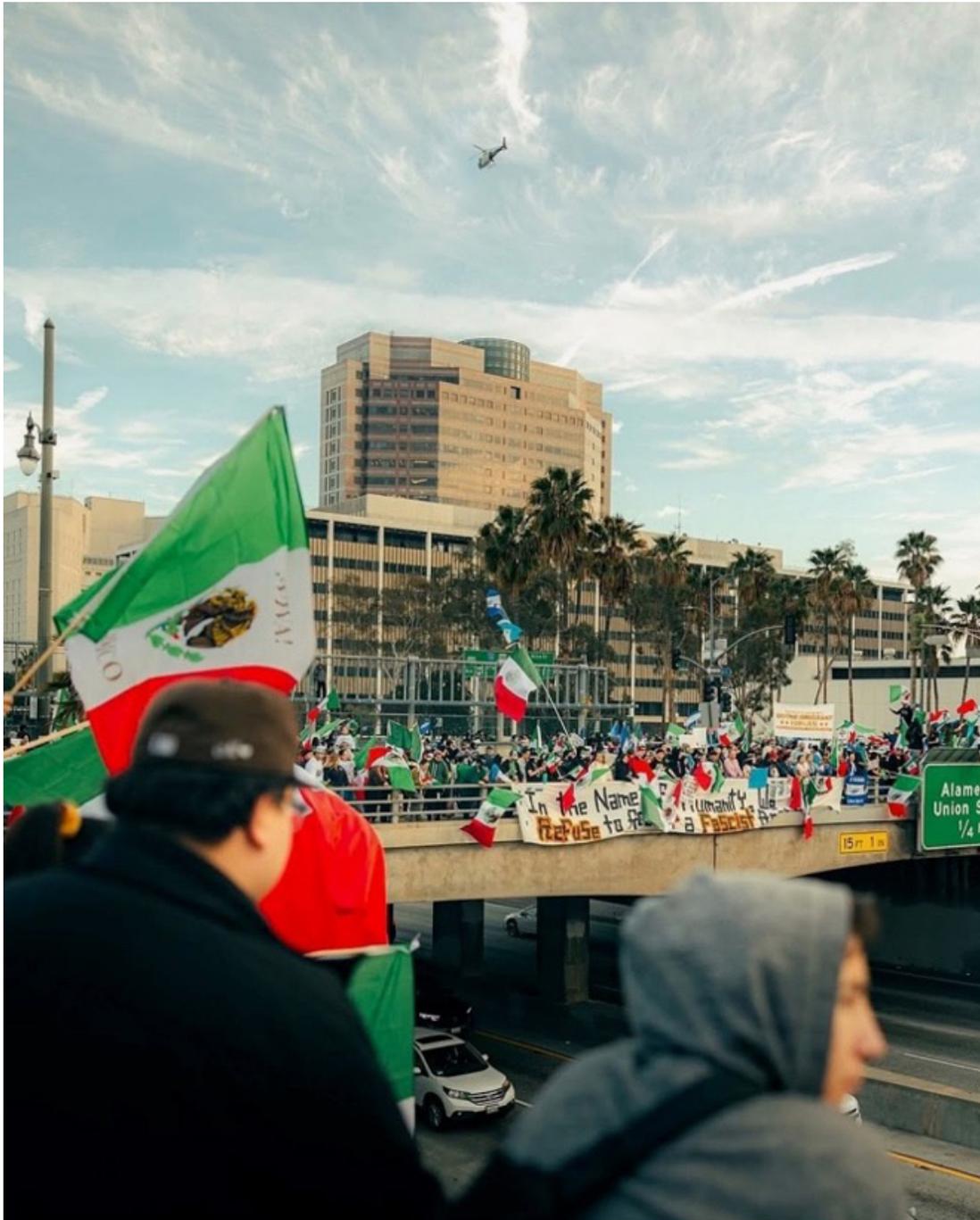
Do they feel the weight?
The echoes of generations before them?
The way hope and defiance
twist together like braided rope?

Red spills across the scene,
not of wounds, but of will—
the color of those who came before,
who fought, who bled,
who dreamed.

White, the unity they swore to break,
green, the victory yet to come.

The bridge does not crumble.
It carries them forward.
And the sky, no matter how clear,
cannot drown them out

A Day Without Immigrants Protest (2025) Jake Crandall



Thoughts that Led to a National Disaster

Sofia Groshko

I killed him...What do I do? Jesus I killed a person, GOOSH what do I do now? I'm sorry man I can't, I gotta run... I came home and it felt like they were watching me... but it's not me it's them, why are they speaking, why is everyone speaking...

Two weeks before Carson has committed a crime, he lived a regular life in Chicago, had a cat, worked as a financial advisor, was looking for a girlfriend; you know that normal middle class life. Well one day when Carson woke up for work his routine didn't change until he stood up from his bed. "I need to pee" "What? Why did I say that?" Yes yes, Carson had just said what he thought in his head. He didn't think much about it, still half asleep ran to the bathroom to complete his morning routine, being late to work he grabbed his bag and ran to catch a cab.

"Late again, ugh"

"Well Good Morning sir, you talking to me?" An older Indian cab driver replied

Carson didn't realize that his thoughts were not only in his head but also had reached the cab driver in front.

"No sir, just thinking out loud" "What is happening I didn't mean to say that, I thought it though." Carson said.

"Boy you got to stop muttering, I can't hear you, are you talking to yourself again?" "What are you one of those?" The cab driver added

"One of those, what the hell did he mean?" Before he could ask what the driver meant, the man continued: "Some people are more vocal than others, but you, you just let it all fly out, huh?"

Carson made an effort to keep quiet. His entire attention was on thinking in private, yet as soon as he attempted to silence a thought, it still managed to get out.

"Why does he have that look on his face?"

The driver snorted. "You see? You said it again."

Carson looked down and quickly scrolled his Social Medias, The News apps. In search of any news about this shooting of thoughts into the world. Was this only happening to him? A virus? Some kind of physiological games? Serious medical condition? Check the calendar app, is it April Fools? "What is going oooooooooooooon?" Carson said in annoying state.

Thoughts that Led to a National Disaster • Sofia Groshko

“Man I can’t take this no more, here walk the next two blocks, you can’t shut up for your life.” Angrily said the cab driver.

The building was filled with competing voices when he got to his office. The place was normally filled with of whispers, keyboard clicks, and lifting coffee cups. It was a chaotic day.

“Have I left the oven running?”

“I’m late to this deadline!”

“She’s really gorgeous. I wish she would simply notice me.”

“I hate my boss!”

Carson waited silently to get into the elevator to get to his office and gather or should I say vocalize his hidden and jammed thoughts. The doors to the elevator opened as if to a Sesame. Allie his colleague was in there, Carson stepped into the elevator, pushed the third floor button. When all of a sudden words came out of Allie’s mouth...

“I really need to use the bathroom and number two!!!”

Allie’s eyes became larger like in slow motion as the words left her mouth. “Oh my god. Did I say that out loud?”

Carson nodded. “Me too. It’s happening to everyone.”

Carson worked in his office for the rest of the day trying to avoid everyone in there, avoid his thoughts too, even though they were running out his mouth like a person on a treadmill. The city was falling apart. As servers revealed that they hated serving customers, restaurants began to empty. As partners admitted to hidden annoyances and crushes, couples split up in an instant. Every planned act was now known to the public before it was ever done, and by the end of the workday, police sirens echoed through the streets as crime increased tremendously.

Carson quickly ran home past the accidents on the road, the police cars, crazy people screaming at each other. While he was almost by his apartment he told himself.

“This is crazy, what has the world turn into, in a day, not even..”

“Really? No way? We didn’t notice!” Angrily replied to him a passing by stranger on the road. It seemed as if he wasn’t even sorry that his mean thought has slipped out of his mind right onto Carson.

Thoughts that Led to a National Disaster • Sofia Groshko

Walking up the stairs he encountered his neighbor, and old, nice, always smiling Mrs. Kadri. He decided to just walk by and smile, he never spoke to her either way so, it wasn't like hiding something.

"I never liked Carson. He's so quiet, probably a drug user and a serial killer." Said Mrs. Kadri in her old raspy voice, while clutching her purse for keys.

"Thanks, Mrs. Kadri," Carson mumbled. "God this is a disaster, our whole world was built on a lie, thousands and thousands of lies!" Carson spoke to himself, or that he thought of.

"Ah you stupid human, I'm hungry, stop talking and FEED ME!" His cat Berry blinked at him and frowned her face in anger

"Jesus Berry, since when do you speak?, or should I say: you speak too?"

She licked her paw. "Always could. You just never listened."

Carson dropped his bag on the coach, fed Berry, and tired physically and mentally he threw himself on the coach before a TV. "Let's see what the news say, this should be funny, or not." Carson muttered while turning on the NBC News channel.

"Scientists cannot explain what is happening," the newswoman stated, her teeth clinched. "A national emergency has been declared by the White House."

"I think this is the best thing to ever happen," shouted her co-reporter, a middle-aged gentleman. No more bullshit. No more two faced people."

Horrified, she turned to face him. "You cheated on your wife, who are you to talk about two faces." She put her hand closing her mouth as if forcing her mouth with clenched teeth was not enough now.

Carson shut off the TV. He looked up at the ceiling and let out a deep breath. "Society would never be the same if this doesn't get resolved . Governments would fall apart. Wars would either stop right away or lead to the end of the god damn world . The framework of human relationships, which was based on delicate opinion, lies , and the ability to keep some thoughts hidden, was now blown apart."

"What if I killed someone?" he said, "Would I go to jail in this circumstances?" he didn't know why he thought that, he didn't know a lot of what was happening in the moment. As he tried to find answers to his weird, uncontrolled thoughts and words, the sound of police sirens swooshed through his window, smell of smoke in the air, felt like there would be no tomorrow. The world was ending and Carson didn't know what to do about it, just like everyone else.

God is Greater Hadi Harb

Loud and clear,
The microphone fuzzled a little bit,
But it cleared up.
The sun began to decline,
Everyone rushing from the sinks
Finding their people to sit next to
All at the same time
All in the same place
All, including the scholars,
Under the tent of Imam Ali.
“Allahu Akbar Allahu Akbar”
Indeed God is greater,
Hence, it is possible to hear small gusts of wind.
The pigeons sat on the balconies in groups
Looking down on us in awe
Shocked to see the unity of the believers.
“Allahu Akbar Allahu Akbar” called again,
This time, only the bodies
Of the believers were Present in Najaf,
The souls rest in peace and tranquility
In the beautiful call for adhan.
The golden dome shined,
The scholars’ faces glowed,
But the unity
The unity of the followers of Imam Ali
Was the epitome of “Allahu Akbar”

A Brighter Future Hadi Harb

The world, dark in color, and the souls darker,
The blood of the innocent and the martyrs glistening red,
The tears and the depression rise like the temperature from winter to summer.
For thousands of years, many people have given up on hope,
But some have received, inherited, the true resilience from Zaynab,
Their faces radiating unseen light like Fatimah Al-Zahraa,
Their battle cries and morale pushing them through famine and drought like Hussayn,
Their only task at hand to persevere, even through trials like drought and famine,
A drought and famine so deep that they had gone without sufficient water and without food.
The world, dark in color, and the souls darker, yearning for the help they've always needed,
Until the light coming from Mecca has emerged, standing tall, thousands surrounding him,
Spirits rose to life, depression dropped dead, tears nowhere to be found.
The blood of the innocent and the martyrs that once glistened red,
The blood that was shed by the tyrants who were once upon a time untouched,
All that blood had been avenged.
The world, now bright in color, and the souls shining even brighter

The Promise I Carry Mariam Homayed

Each night, I pray for love, a home where I will stay.
But life is a winding path—some dreams feel far away.

I promised my father, “One day, I’ll make you proud.”
Yet every step feels heavy—so much stands in the way.

I fall, I rise, I move again—no matter if it’s slow.
I trust in Allah’s timing; He won’t lead me astray.

My father’s voice still guides me, though I can’t see his face,
His name floats in the silence—I miss him every day.

The road is never easy, but Allah makes me strong.
No storm will ever break me—I fight, I work, I pray.

A house, a hand, a family near, a future shining bright,
No fear can take this dream from me—I’ll build it, come what may.

Mariam, your path is written, and Allah knows what’s ahead—
Let doubt fall like the autumn leaves—your spring is on its way.

Where The Sun Rests Mariam Homayed

The sky melts like a quiet prayer,
soft gold fading into blue.
Here, in the arms of the mountains,
where the air is full of stories,
I breathe in Lebanon for the first time.
This land, my family's pride,
holds me close like it always has.
Even after the war, after the change,
it still feels like home,
in the stones, the trees, the way the sun rests here.
The sunset slows my thoughts,
wiping away everything but peace.
Nothing matters except the view,
the warmth, the quiet,
the feeling of truly being here.
This moment—this perfect moment—
stands between who I was
and who I want to be.
Beyond the horizon, something new waits,
bathed in the same light that fills the sky.
God made the sun, made the earth,
made this stillness, this beauty,
and for the first time, I just feel it.

The Beauty of Lebanon (2022)

Mariam Homayed



Lamenter CJ Harris

I once saw people as people, individuals with life and purpose who could choose to grow and change for the love of others under a long-dead system in a frozen world, no longer guided by the light of the sun, but blinded by it, only using the idea of sight to move them forward in their clouded minds. I once saw people as people, a tower that stands against the test of the stars and moons, the titans of time, only for the love of each other. I once saw people as people, a template for which we all were made and doomed to fellows. I once saw my people as my people brave and strong, turned into cowards and thieves under the eyes of evil and the voice of man, made into tyrants who could only save a dream that held no facts or hope for others, only dreams, only sensation. I once remembered my people as my people living and strong, but now all that remains for this frozen world is the cold sting of frostbite on my hand, the falseness of heat, the memory of my home, the memory of my people. I no longer see my people; I only see the thing that they wished to be.

Nosferatu CJ Harris

The one unnoticed by the eyes of the creator, the putrid foe of the light, stalks in the dark, destroying the understanding of peace and sanity. Its darkness smothers the soul with the power of a moving current and the hunger of a growing void. Fear, agony, and pain, the first feeling of its new life, are now the lessons that it wishes to baptize us in, the crimson priest, the consumer of purity, the parasite of royalty, the demon, the plague bringer who seeks the will of others for power that comes from the body of man, to give itself strength from the victims. Poor and rich turned into bones and muscles at the call of its voice, believing it to be some kind of being of great power, the foul they are. This is no divinity, this is a corpse that rots in life, this is a coward that ran from death, this is the Nosferatu.

Getaway Sestina **Nick Johnson**

Summer's shine beating on my face
My toes in the sand along the coast
Not a care in the world in my mind
Everything covered in amber
Free from every single responsibility
Just for this one moment in time
Even though I don't have enough time

Summer's shine beating on my face
Hot rides parked and painted amber
This cannot come to an end it's not yet time for responsibility
Waking up late and heading to the coast
fun times and laughs play in the back of my mind

I'll just return to my sunset if you don't mind
I want that summer back, I wish to turn back time
I must take more and more responsibility
Some type of fun-sucking parasite chose me on the coast
Summer's shine beating on my face
Turn my back on the sun as I'm surrounded by amber

The palm trees making indentations in the amber
There are tons of old pictures to keep in mind
For when I end up missing the coast
Summer's shine beating on my face
Some things are capable of stopping time
But still remains the fact that I must take responsibility

Getaway Sestina • Nick Johnson

Mother nature teaches me responsibility
With the passing of seasons on my mind
Summer's shine beating on my face
Fall and winter will have their time
Through it all I still see the amber
And feel the warm weather from when I go back along the coast

I only have so much time left out on the coast
While I'm young and free from responsibility
There's only a limited amount of time
Unless you live in the moment and preserve it in the amber
I like to keep the feeling of it in mind
Summer's shine beating on my face

Summer's shine beating down on my face, what a magnificent time
My oasis the coast, the temporary eliminator of my responsibility
A place where the rays of amber, can put at ease my mind.

The Medal **Nick Johnson**

Not just any piece of metal
One that is there to show for years' worth of dedication
To show for the injuries and the setbacks

The mental torment
The plateaus
The personal bests

There it sits in its room
All by itself, other medals surrounding it
But not of the same merit
Unworn by the one who has earned it

Surely one can relate
Having worked so hard to obtain something
Only to lock it away in solitude
Where it may never observe the shimmer of the sunlight

3 Man Job Nick Johnson

Row By Row

Column By Column

The Rolling

Of The Lawnmower

On The Grass

The Whistling Of

The Blades Underneath

The Big Drum

The Snip Of

The Green Being

Split Into/Two

One Brother Coming

With The Weed Whip

The Other Coming

With The Blower

Sweat Trickling Down

Our Brows On

This Scorching Day

Locusts In The Distance

Singing Their Seasonal Song

The Price to Pay Leona Korkis

I watched the knob twist, the cracked white door swinging open. The red wine in my glass shaky, matching the motion of the door then closing.

He stood tall, slouching his black briefcase onto the expensive, brown wooden floor, his presence heavy as ever. I didn't know he anticipated what was to come, or my anxiety reflecting onto his aura. He passed me a cold glance, his eyes trailing to the other glass of red wine on the coffee table.

"Wine on a Tuesday," he said, his tone mocking but hidden with a wide smile on his face. It did not reach his eyes.

I nodded, forcing a smile back as I usually did, "Why don't you have a seat with me, Jay?"

"After I shower," he unbuttoned his navy blue blazer, "where are the kids?"

"My sister's," I hesitated before grabbing the file beside me and softly placing it onto the glass coffee table, "have a seat, Jay."

He finally sat without arguing, understanding my stern tone, "is everything okay, Ang? What are these?"

I took a sip of my wine, the bitter taste burning my chest before I spoke, "we need a divorce."

He sat still, calm—too calm—while I felt suffocated. That was one of the many things that bothered me. Never had he a sweat of fear, a hint of shock or surprise. Just the same, dark, soulless eyes that unraveled me.

"Don't be silly, Ang—"

"Does it sound like I'm joking?"

His plump, pink lips, curled, showing his deep dimple. He was amused, like I was a clown in a circus.

"No, Angela, it does not sound like you're joking. I'm sorry. But let's talk about this."

"What is there to talk about?" He reached for my hand, I flinched, but allowed him to grab it.

"Us. Our home. Our family. Talk to me, Ang, what is leading you to make this rash decision?"

Although I had a list of reasons, I couldn't seem to spew one out. His energy was choking, silencing me.

"I'm not happy," was all I managed to spit out.

"Why not? We have this beautiful home," he looked around, pointing out our bright, grand chandelier that hung between the white, marble double-staircase.

"Beautiful things," he played with the staked, 24-karat gold jewelry resting on my wrist.

The Price to Pay • Leona Korkis

“Beautiful family,” my eyes met with the seemingly happy faces of our family pictures. Our three, precious children who had my auburn smooth hair and pale skin, with his dark almond eyes and pink plump lips.

“The other women,” I shot back, “your late nights at the casino, your shirts smudged with cheap lipstick, the whiskey bottles that are empty after one night, the white dust capsules I find in your briefcase,” I paused, glancing at the slight cracks that tarnish the beauty of our doors and walls, “your temper.”

I thought I finally left him speechless. That he would have mercy, making this process easy for me.

“I work hard, Ang, I get stressed. But we’re going to therapy, right? I’m fixing myself for you, for our family, you know I love you.”

I love you. Although there was no longer depth within the phrase when it left his mouth, they still struck my heart like daggers. I sat quiet, leaving me speechless as always. I mean, who could argue with an attorney like himself?

He was no fool, he knew the effect he had on me. Yet, I still fought, I couldn’t throw another white flag just yet.

“I signed the papers. It won’t be messy, I promise. You’ll keep your money, your house, your reputation. You’ll see your kids,” I pushed the file toward his direction, “it’s your turn.”

He didn’t do as much as even look at the file. His gaze focused on me, a spark flickering in his eyes for less than a second. I couldn’t decipher if it was sadness, anger, or defeat.

“It’s been 15 years, Ang. Don’t let it go down the drain. Don’t let our children grow up without a healthy, happy family.”

I felt a knot form in my throat, “nothing about us is healthy, Jason. They hear us argue, they notice you not coming home. What, we have a big house? With all the nice furniture, it’s still empty.”

“I’m not perfect, but I still care for you. Everything I do, all the hours I work, that black Porsche you drive, it’s all for you,” his hand cupped my cheek, his thumb stroking, “I raise my voice and get angry because of the passion I feel for you. You know that, Ang.” His hand moved to my lower back, pulling me inches away from him.

“Let’s go pick up the kids,” his breath, mint with a hint of Jameson, “And we’ll schedule another therapy session for tomorrow.”

For the last time, he silenced me.

I Could **Leona Korkis**

I could still feel you, the lengths of your onyx hair, similar to the feathers of a crow.
The weight of your glossy eyes piercing me,
your face, smooth despite the acne scars you yearned to remove.
The tips of your soft pink acrylics, through my knotted hair like a lioness grooming her cub.

I could still smell you, the mix of liquor and Chanel perfume filling my room as you kissed my
forehead after a night out.
The cinnamon scent of my favorite chicken roasting in the oven.

But I could not see you, your stained white T-shirt moving through the kitchen as if you were a gust
of wind.

The arch of your tattooed eyebrows after I spilled my juice on the carpet.
The sparkly red dress that looked so beautiful, still you squeezed your stomach that once held me.
I could not see you in the closed casket, my chest so heavy as if I was the one in there.

I may smell you as I spray your same perfume every morning.
I may feel you as I run my fingers through my hair at night.
But I can never see you, no matter how many pictures I look back at
All I have are the onyx feathers of a crow to reminisce.

The Coat

Garrett Landry

Do I need you?

Feels like I can never decide

For that exact reason, you are always there

I have never looked back and seen you not there

There are always times when you are the only thing I need

Putting you on fills me with Joy

It seems that hanging on the hook never gets old

As I look across the room there are 10 of you

I worried that the coat would be too much

Did it make me look fat

Did it match my shoes

I feel bad, I do nothing in return

You always provide what you know I need

You never let me down.

Everyone's a Critic Eliza Makhdoom

after Félix González-Torres's *"Untitled" (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)*

On the cold floor of a museum
You die once more

Picked apart by the people who don't know you
Crows to a flock, they come

"I could make that"
They claim

But could they?
Could they see how you were left behind?
They become one with you,
but understand none of what you are

Unnoticed, unclaimed, unappreciated
Again
Weighing the endless small candies
To the perfect weight of one 75 lb
Ross Laycock lives again in Chicago

“Untitled” (Portrait of Ross in L.A.) (1991) Félix González-Torres



Dream Another Dream

[This Dream is Over] Joey Mansour

In the quiet of the basement, under beams of fading light,
he finds them—balls lined like trophies, each a chapter,
a boy's script written on faded leather, worn and gripped.
One, marked by a winning strike—its seam
curves like the smile of his father, watching from stands,
where cheers blend with lessons on grit and grind.
Another, a wild pitch, dirt-stained and scuffed,
whispers of dust-ups, of rising after falls,
the tough love of a dad molding a man from the mound.
And here, an 11 K shut-out from the Old Tiger Stadium,
leather faded like the innocence
of those endless summer days, echoes of a golden heart
pounding under jerseys too big, and dreams too wide.
Each ball spins a yarn of sweat and dreams,
of a small boy with a giant's will, hurling curveballs
into the twilight of youth, his father's hopes stitched
into the very fabric of the game, bound by seams of love and loss.
Now, as shadows stretch and the field lies empty,
he folds away the old joys, eyeing horizons yet to play—
a last look back, as new dreams call his name.

A Traveler's Psalm Joey Mansour

Footfalls murmur truths upon ancient stones, liberty's song unchained,
His withered shoes trace circles on paths steeped in Bavarian lore.
Mirth flows like streams of golden Helles beneath an autumn sky,
Velocity blurs on the Autobahn, his heart echoing the hurried beat.
Bound for Rome, where age-old secrets linger amid ruins and dreams,
His hand casts a coin into Trevi's depths, binding silent hopes.
The Colosseum stands, steeped in silent, epic tales,
While Saint Peter's radiates holy light, sanctifying heaven on earth.
In Prague, the Orloj murmurs, each tick a note suspended in eternity's hymn,
The city beneath the castle walls sings a mysterious, haunting tune.
Wandering through Barcelona's streets, each turn weaves a fresh tale,
Bewildered—he lifts a fordrunken stranger, guiding him onto his feet and steadying him
toward a waiting taxi.
Under London's vigilant gaze, his glasses watch history reflected into the present,
From the crafted stories of Saville to the rhythmic steps of Abbey Road.
The Eiffel Tower ascends into the blue, a scaffold climbing dreams,
While whispers of Notre Dame soar, a phoenix from historical embers.
Each city unfolds like a psalm, each alley resounds with tales of old,
Yet the melody hesitates, incomplete, a symphony yet unfinished.
Pursuing liberty, holy scriptures in grasp,
A vast chorus of choices fills the air, echoing with truths from afar.
Solitude performs a quiet dance in forgotten places,
A tranquility found in aloneness, yet the fellowship remains veiled.
He walks on, a seeker with no end,
Praying for a lover, a friend.
To share the vista, the valleys, the peaks,
For alone is an echo, together—it speaks.

To Be Me **Joey Mansour**

In the early light of graduation day's glimpse, He stands, the young man with dreams once confined. Cap and gown aligned, tassel swaying with every move, His face alight, Promises of roads yet to choose.

Not for the classes endured, but for the life he aspires to lead,

A parchment that commands respect, yet nurtures his humility. A diploma grasped, His golden ticket in this game called life,

A cap-tossed warrior amid the ceremonial display.

Through rows of peers where pride shines, A relic of knowledge, he traces the lines of dedication, counting down the clock's final tick,

Aware that time's a mentor both stern and quick.

Expectations loom like Atlas' burden—From family, mentors, peers—a circuit That flashes in steady, unyielding pace, Yet in this milestone, he finds his place.

To pause, to celebrate, and to dream,

Embracing flaws—his human theme,

Acknowledging imperfections in the quest for growth,

He finds strength in what he's promised, both.

Not flawless, just sincere in his pursuit to rise, A scholar who aspires, who falters, yet flies. In the silence of the gymnasium's collective breath,

He understands that to be earnest, and merely himself, is his path to success.

It's Not My Time Joey Mansour

Ant sat under the shadow of a gnarled olive tree, his rifle laid beside him, a pen poised above a crinkled sheet of paper. He began to write, his handwriting jagged and hurried, much like his thoughts, which raced back to Nez. Miles away and worlds apart, his heart straddled the fine line between the battlefield and the sanctity of home.

My dearest Nez,

As I write this, the sun dips below the horizon here, a sight quite unlike our sunsets at home. It's peaceful in this brief moment, and I find myself wishing you were here to see it—well, the beauty, not the desolation that follows.

Today was less harrowing than most. I managed to find a small reprieve between patrols. Believe it or not, I even stumbled upon a wildflower, a stubborn daisy pushing through the cracks of war-torn earth. It reminded me of you, resilient and bright amidst chaos.

Yet, amidst these fleeting moments of beauty, the reality of our situation remains ever-present. I must confess, the shadow of mortality looms larger each day. The thought of my mortality—of the fragility of life itself in this unforgiving conflict—haunts me. Each day we march, and with each step, the thin line between remaining a memory or a presence in your life grows ever so faint.

I know you worry, my love. I feel your anxiety across the oceans and mountains, through the endless expanse that separates us. But please believe me when I say that I am safe. Our encampment is secure, and the camaraderie here is a steadfast shield. Each day, us soldiers support one another, share stories of our loved ones, and speak of future plans that fuel our hope.

We spoke of love today—how it transcends all, even the fury of battle. It's our love, Nez, that keeps me grounded. It's what I cling to when the nights grow cold and the shadows play tricks on our minds.

The thought of holding you again, of embracing our future together, makes every hardship bearable. I'm holding onto that thought, carving it into my heart alongside your name. We'll get through this, just as we've surmounted everything else—side by side in spirit, if not in flesh.

Tomorrow, we march northward, towards a village in Bavaria said to be a crossroads of conflict yet a beacon of hope for many. I promise to be cautious, my love. With your image etched in my heart, how could I not be?

It's Not My Time • Joey Mansour

Stay strong for me, Nez. Keep sending your letters; they are my sanctuary. Tell me about your days, the mundane details, and the trials, all of it. Your words are my respite, a reminder of the world I fight to return to.

With all my heart,

Ant

Sealing the letter with a kiss, Ant couldn't shake the unease that nestled itself deep within him. He knew his words were a mix of truth and necessary fiction—a shield to protect Nez from the harsh realities that no amount of prose could beautify. The night's silence was a stark contrast to the distant thunders of artillery, a reminder that safety was but a fleeting shadow in the pervasive glow of war.

Back home, Nez clutched Ant's latest letter to her chest, the paper slightly dampened by her tears. His words painted a picture of serenity amid chaos, a narrative she desperately wanted to believe. Yet, doubt lingered, an unwelcome guest whispering fears she dared not voice.

The room felt colder than usual as she sat by the window, her gaze lost to the starlit sky. "He's safe," she whispered to herself, trying to stitch his assurances into the fabric of her reality. But the night offered no replies, only a silent expanse that mirrored her growing solitude.

She drafted her response, her words a mixture of hope and hidden dread:

My love,

Your letters are my stronghold, your words the pillars of my days. I hold onto them, onto you, with every shred of strength I have. Here, surrounded by the familiar, I fight my own battles—a war of worry and waiting. But I stand resilient, buoyed by the promise of your return.

Stay safe, my victory, for your safe return is the destiny I yearn for. Until then, I remain wholly yours, in waiting and in love.

Forever yours,

Nez

Lonely

Brandon Quintanilla

I found myself on the scene of a worldwide production for a film called “Jonah’s lunch break”. Just as the title says, it’s about what Jonah had for lunch. The only issue is that I’m Jonah. That’s how my life has been for a few years now. I remember it clearly, I was sitting in my boring, typical high school math class, where the dorks sat in the front and everyone else did anything other than pay attention. There were bleacher incidents, teacher scandals, loooooong bathroom breaks, fights, and all the other necessary high school dramas. When one day, I woke up to a loud cheer outside of my window.

“Jonah! Oh, Jonah please wake up! Just one glimpse is all we need!” What on Raeth is happening outside? I haven’t received a wake-up call like this since my 16th birthday, when my cousins started clanging pots and pans. As I begin to walk towards my window, my parents burst into the room with French toast, cubed fruit, and bacon. I’ll always remember the last time I saw my parents, when I heard a door being slammed open against a wall.

“Jonah! I’m so glad to see you awake. I just want to say I’m very proud to be your mother. Your father feels the same way.”

“You know Jonah, I think it’s about time we play some catch. What do you say son?” Why are my parents pretending to care so suddenly? My dad never came to my games. Picked me up after school. He didn’t even show up to my graduation. I hardly have time to think when a thousand people are piling up right outside my window.

“Dad, we’ve never played catch, in fact I can’t remember a time you wanted to see me outside of dinner. Do you mind giving me a moment to deal with whatever that crowd is outside.” I say this, fighting back tears. What I would do for his affection. Looking back, maybe if I started bawling and shut myself down, I wouldn’t have to deal with the zombies anymore. They could have, well, maybe I’m getting ahead of myself. One more step and I’m at the windowsill, with a full view of my town bullies, the gossip girls, average jockeys, neighbors, and elders filling in the back.

“Well now Jonah, I don’t know what you’re talking about. I’ve always loved you so much and just want to be as close as possible.” I finish opening one lock as my dad slowly approaches.

“Your dad’s right Jonah, we just want what’s best for you – always have.” The second lock rings as I push it open. I can hardly stand my parents’ prank and consider jumping out to the masses. I can hear my parents saying something more, but I do my best to block them out. There’s a small path against my window I would take to look out at the stars from my roof on clear summer nights. Before I finished my plan, my feet took me halfway across the condo.

“Everyone look, it’s Jonah! Oh, my goodness. I can’t believe I’m breathing the same air as him.” A loud cheer screeches out from the girls upon my sighting. I imagine only some famous pop singers have had this welcoming before. For a moment, my mind gets lost in the

Lonely • Brandon Quintanilla

cerulean, blue roof. The rough edges and withered drain. The large chimney which seems big enough for a person of considerable size to fit through. My quietness is short lived as I see I am officially trapped. More people had begun to surround this house completely. In fact, I noticed the entire road was filled with parked cars as far as I could see. I thought up the only plan I had left.

“Good morning, everyone!” Words came out but I was no longer present. Like watching a reenactment of some guy that looked like me. “I am very glad to see you all coming out, however, I would love it if you simply went home.” Complete silence followed my last sentence. It was eerie how such a large group could drop dead in unison. One skyscraper of a man stepped forward through the crowd and turned to face my entourage.

“I know you all want to talk to Jonah, but we’re all going to have to share our precious Jonah. It should put you at peace to know the rest of the world can get to know our lovely Jonah.” It’s now that I realize they’ve always talked as if they were somehow close to me. Knowing everything about me like we’ve been buddies since kindergarten. Some sort of acknowledgement of agreement came across the faces I could see in the front rows, so I took my chance. Hoping I understood their motives correctly I came to the following.

“I’m so glad you all want to be my friends, but in order to reach the largest amount of people, I need to make it to our film capital to be broadcast to the world.” An eruption of cheers broke the silence, and a path formed in front of me, splitting the sea of red faces in half. And that’s how I’ve ended up like some sort of famous celebrity family, living life in front of constant camera coverage. Back to the present, I have just finished lunch, and it’s about 1pm where I am now. Well, it’s 1pm everywhere actually, but really, it’s only actually 1pm in my time zone.

“Good evening my guy. I have important news to announce! English has been recognized as the worldwide language and is being taught in every school across the globe.” The one person I have come to trust is Udit, a slim Indian man in charge of managing all my needs.

“The zombies really love me huh. It’s weird knowing half the world knows me better than I know myself.”

“Ha ha ha. Always the jokester aren’t you big dawg. Well, listen, you have a big day planned ahead of you.”

“Every day there’s something important I’m doing. Meeting the rulers of every country. Addressing CEOs and celebrities. Attending networking parties with the global elites. I mean who is left to meet.”

“Well, I think you will be quite pleasantly surprised to know you will be connecting with everyday citizens today.” Oh, isn’t that just wonderful? I’ve noticed that most of the regu-

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lar people are harder to connect with. They have less internal value and ego holding them together and have become a conglomerate of Jonah lovers.

“Well let’s hurry and get this over with. I would like to watch a movie tonight and go to bed early. I don’t feel so well.”

“Of course, a short one-hour flight, thirty-minute drive, and approximately three hours of socializing is planned. The private jet is ready to take off whenever you are ready my brotha.”

“Well let’s get going then.” These short breaks between my days are the only time I can feel like a sane person. Frankly, I am uncertain how much longer I can keep this up. If I try and sneak out to simply bathe in the moonlight of my childhood, cameras quickly follow in pursuit. If I’m lucky no one will approach. More often than not, I find myself in conversation with the camera crew wanting to spend some bonding time with me.

I tried to take a nap in the car after the flight, but my body kept twitching on the flight and now it’s keeping me from being able to rest. The people conversing with me in the car are hardly a distraction as I have grown accustomed to ignoring them. I had to or I would never sleep at night. It took every ounce of strength I had to keep them from sleeping in bed with me. Goodness. As I looked out the window, I noticed a slight change. The city seemed to be more deteriorated than normal. An abundance of homeless people filled the streets. Power seemed to be off in many areas. Remnants of car crashes were still present, seeming to have been lingering for months now. Other forms of media have ceased to exist. A nearby sports stadium was completely deserted. It reminded me of some great dystopian novel, the type you were forced to read in school but ended up loving because of the compelling worlds developed in the eyes of amazing writers.

“We’re here big bro, are you ready?” Udit really knows how to catch a guy in thought.

“Ready as ever man.” We begin walking around, talking with the people. I don’t recognize anyone in the crowds, which is odd. Normally I can tell someone apart, after all I have been meeting people every day for years. A few planes fly by, giving me a quick distraction from the formalities. A little boy who must be about three approached me as he noticed I was watching the planes just like him.

“Hey, you’re Jonah, right? I’ve seen you on TV. All my parents do is talk about you. I think I lost them a little bit ago. Hey, can I ask you one question? Are you my big brother? I just ask since my parents seem to love you a whole ton.”

“I’m pretty sure we aren’t related. But aren’t you worried about where your parents are? Do you need me to help you find them?”

“I actually snuck off since I heard you might be around here today. A friend told me that

Lonely • Brandon Quintanilla

I should come and say hello. His name is Jonah, but people never believe me when I say I am friends with someone named Jonah that's not you."

"Well, where is this friend of yours? I would love to meet him and see if he could help us find your mom."

"He's been here the whole time. He's standing right next to you. Actually, he kind of looks like you hehehe." No one was present. And in fact, this kid acted differently than everyone else I've talked to since that day.

"Yeah, you're right he does doesn't he. Hey, do you know any kids around here that are the same age as you?"

"No, my parents said you are the only friend I need. And I'm not old enough to go to school."

"Well, I must say, you are very advanced for your age." Perhaps due to the neglect of his family, he was forced to grow faster than a regular child should have to. I wanted to keep talking with this kid; however, I saw Udit approaching.

"What's up champ. It's about time we headed out. Stop just talking to that one kid, everyone wants to greet you and catch up."

"Do you think we could find his family and take him with us. You know I never ask for much." Udit pulled out a walkie talkie and within ten minutes his parents were found in the crowd and a car was prepared to take them with us on the plane back "home". "Thank you so much Udit, you have no idea how much I needed this."

"Anything for you best friend. Now we need to leave, or you won't have time to watch that movie." I was unable to sit with the kid on the car ride to the airport. And I realized I never asked his name. It was a long drive as I felt excitement for the first time in years. Who was this kid? Why did he behave so differently? Oh, how I couldn't wait for him to grow a little older. He may just be the one thing to keep me from going crazy in this world.

Finally, we arrived, and I could talk to the kid once again. The plane took off shortly after.

"So kid, sorry I never asked but what's your name."

"Jyon. My name is Jyon." The twitching of my body finally seemed to stop as I spoke with Jyon. I must truly be insane if I'm making friends with a three-year-old but it's all I can get in this situation.

"So how do you like my "home?" It's not much like my old place. My real home no longer exists."

"It's really, really big. The grass goes all the way to the sun. Why is this not your real home?"

Lonely • Brandon Quintanilla

“It might not make much sense to you. But I used to live with my parents like you. Went to high school, had some friends, and lived a normal life. Normal as in simple. The streets were filled with people. Most places were kept clean, and there was so much to do. Sports and movies and, sorry if I lost you.”

“I see. Maybe you could show me sometime. I have never played a sport before.” Who would have thought that sports would die out? Something that united people across the globe ceased to exist. I guess I shouldn’t be too surprised.

“Well why don’t we go outside and throw a ball around. I should still have a couple mitts somewhere.” I put everything on pause. We found some of my old stuff and went outside. Oh, how warm the air felt. The sweet scent of flowers filled my lounges. And I watched Jyon tossing the ball around with his hand. I had to find a smaller rubber ball with a little more padding.

“So, you just throw this back and forth?” Jyon smiled a little. He was excited to play a new game and tossed the ball over to me. It flew up high, matching the stars. We played until it was completely black outside. It reminded me of my old friends. Laughing for the sake of having fun. And the last time I saw my father. Jyon filled a hole my dad opened and continued to grow as I slowly lost my mind.

“Nice throws Jy. When you get tired why don’t I show you one more thing.”

“That sounds good. That was super fun but I’m tired now.”

“Well come and sit down with me, I set up a blanket on the hill.” Today could not have been better. The summer constellations were fully visible. I curled up in my blanket next to Jyon. And watched as we danced in the sky, melting in the bright white stars fading away all darkness, and embraced by the love of creation itself.



A Quiet Lake

Joel Ramirez

Splash, splash

That is all you hear while canoeing in a lake

The gentle breeze going through the leaves

Surrounded by trees

Far away from cities

The lake flies hovering around you

The fish swimming in the deep blue lake

Sunlight glittering on the water

The gentle waves being formed by your paddle

Splash, splash

The birds fly over, looking for food

Ducks skimming the surface for food

The lake is quiet

Yet so much is going on in the water

Splash, Splash

A Choice at Sunset

Joel Ramirez

The sun began setting over the city, casting long shadows across the park where Alex and Jamie sat on their favorite bench to hang out. The air was crispy with a gentle breeze giving you a sensation of relaxation. Alex had been quiet for most of their walk, which was unusual. As Alex was an extroverted person who always had something to talk about.

“What’s up Alex?” Said Jamie. Alex sat there in silence. “You’ve been quiet all day? Everything ok?” Jamie said, leaning back.

Alex hesitated to talk, staring at the ground. He kicked a pebble and watched it skitter across the asphalt path.

“I need to ask you something,” Alex finally said, in a hesitant voice, “But you won’t like it.”

Jamie sat up and looked at him. “That’s not really reassuring, what is it?”

Alex took a deep breath. “Remember that thing we talked about a while ago? That one idea that you called crazy?”

Jamie’s expression shifted from curiosity to disappointment. “Oh no. You’re not still thinking about that are you?”

“Hear me out,” Alex said cutting Jamie off, leaning forward. “I’ve thought about it...a lot. And I think it might work. But I can’t do it alone. I need your help.”

Jamie groaned, running his hand through his hair. “Alex, come on. That’s not simply crazy, it’s... it’s reckless, and dangerous, and probably illegal, depending on how you look at it.” “It’s not illegal,” Alex said defensively. “Not technically. And it’s not reckless if we plan it out safely. I got it all figured out. I just need you to trust me.”

Jamie stared at Alex, searching his face for some sign that this was a joke. But Alex’s was dead serious. “Why are you so convinced this would work?” Jamie asked. “What’s in it for you?”

Alex looked away, his jaw tightening. “It’s not about what’s in it for me. It’s about... doing something. Something big. And I know you’ve always wanted that too. You just won’t admit it.”

Jamie opened his mouth to argue but was speechless. He couldn’t deny it, he always been drawn to the idea of breaking free from the ordinary, of doing something unforgettable. But this? This was on a whole different level.

“What if it goes wrong?” Jamie asked quietly. “What then?”

Alex’s eyes met Jamie’s, steady and unwavering. “Then we deal with it. Together. But it won’t go wrong. Not if we’re careful.”

The two sat in silence for a long time, the weight of Alex’s words hanging between them.

A Choice at Sunset • Joel Ramirez

Jamie's mind raced, torn between caution and curiosity, between fear and the thrill of possibility. Finally, Jamie spoke.

"I need time to think about it," Jamie said. "This isn't something I can just say yes to."

Alex nodded; However, Jamie could see the disappointment in Alex eyes. "Fair enough, just... think about it, okay? Really think about it."

As the sky began to darken and the streetlights turned on, the two friends sat side by side, each lost in their own world thinking.

Jamie slowly stood up and said "I have to go" with a thigh voice. "I need to clear my head and think about it more."

Alex did not argue with him and just nodded. He started wondering if it was even a good idea that he brought it back up. He started at Jamie as he slowly walked away in the sunset.

Jamie turned around and said, "Same time tomorrow?" "Same time tomorrow," said Alex.

The question lingered in the air, unanswered, as the world around them carried on, oblivious to the choice that could change everything.

The Driver's Mind Joel Ramirez

The lights stand still.
Engine idling ready to release their power.
Teams doing final checks.
Tension building up on the track.
Drivers focused on the bright red lights.
Each millisecond counts.
“It’s lights out and away we go!”
The tires screaming trying to grip on the asphalt surface.
Drivers look for any gap to get overtake.
Leaving inches of space for one another
Any small mistake can cost them the win.
A gamble at every move
Going through sharp and intense corners
Every maneuver must be precise.
Confidence must always stay high.
Lap by lap the tires wear out.
Decreasing performance making you slower
Your opponent using any vulnerability they can.
Drivers fighting for 1st place.
Car side by side
Moving rapidly as the engine roars down the track

Each corner turns into an opportunity to outsmart your opponent.
A chest match goes over 200 miles per hour.
Each blink must be timed perfectly.
The white flag waves as the final lap begins.
Two drivers, 2 cars competing for first place.
A couple of corners left.
One mistake and victory are out of mind.
One final corner to defend or overtake for the win.
Crossing the line, they feel defeat or happiness.

Everyday Cleanse **Giovanni Romero**

Enclosed yet comfortable enough to be free.

The constant stream
of a man-made waterfall.
Tuned to the usual touch of a warm hug.

White noise,
outside invited in.
Steam floating curiously, as does the mind.

Ripples, Trickle, Burble.
Muffled background vocals,
whooshing in my ears in darkness.

Short enough to be prudent.
Long enough to cleanse everything.
Patting the exterior dry to complete.

Demolished Attempt Giovanni Romero

after L.S. Lowry's *Blitzed Site*

Standing upon the rubble,
from the once wall that hung a loved one's frame.
Laid out were the dreams and memories
pinching to wake up.

With nothing, but a gaze
and an open floor plan,
existed the jaw dropped and widened eyes
of the passed down homeowner.

In confusion they all stood in unison.
not accepting, but understanding
the reality that came to be.
Unknown of the next steps or
where to begin,
matched the worries from across the street.

Cracked foundations beneath their ten toes,
they let go of what once stood—
a house, a life, now just a story,
covered in dust and the fading echoes of footsteps.

Blitzed Site (1942) L.S. Lowry



Survivors Villanelle Giovanni Romero

I cruise through the night like the world is ours.
My movement piques their interest,
Not letting go of the dark hours.

Rejecting the reality that is against us,
To continue is the only circuit of life.
I cruise through the night like the world is ours.

The fact I'm not dead is a plus.
I hear the noise from the distorted chime,
Not letting go of the dark hours.

Shattered ears prick up— the sirens cuss.
I correct my posture, lean on what my life depends on.
Cruising through the night like the world is ours.

Uniformed men cast shadows of doubt.
Smearred lies target mine.
Even so, I don't let go of the dark hours.

Surviving is a consequence
And while all odds are against me,
I still cruise through the night like the world is ours.
I won't let go of the dark hours.

Room 115 Giovanni Romero

The bell rang for the first day at Big Pine High School.

RING RING RING

Like routine, Xavier (A) showed up to his junior year, this time he was heading towards the west side of the building. Walking towards the end of the empty hallway, he hears noises from the other end, forcing him to hide behind a storage room. Trying to listen, he recognizes the voice of Cristian (B) and the principal.

“Cristian, I believe you can be better. I know you had a rough patch last year, but I don’t want you slipping up again. Junior year is the most important year of your high school career” Principal Brown stated looking ahead.

Hearing that a million times before the first day, Cristian discreetly rolled his eyes away from Dr. Brown. He noticed the new tile and fresh paint surrounding them as they both walked.

Responding with a tired tone. “I know, you’re right Dr. Brown. I won’t let distractions conflict with my studies again.”

“Good, you have a lot of potential. I don’t want you wasting that.” He said seriously. “I wanted to show you this area that’s currently being remodeled. It will have new individual and group study rooms for students this year.” Now facing Cristian, he says softly “Hopefully this will help your situation.” Principal Brown says before getting interrupted by a call.

As Dr. Brown answers the phone, Cristian looks around and spots Room 115 a few feet away from them.

“Okay, sounds good. I will be there in five.” Interrupting Cristian’s train of thought. “I need to go help someone. Go to class now, this is a restricted area and don’t forget what I said.” He yelled as his voice fades into the distance.

Cristian stands in the middle of the hallway and pulls out his phone. After opening the message’s app, he followed Xavier’s’ strange instructions that were sent the night before. *When the first bell rings, pass the locker before the end of the hall, go into Room 115, push the left-hand siding of the wall 2.5 ft after the doorknob and shut the hidden door behind you.* He hurries to Room 115 and pushes the door open. He reveals an empty storage room and follows the instructions carefully.

In the dark and chilly stairwell, Xavier smacks his lips. Mumbling at the entrance, “Where is this dude?” It echo-whispered throughout the five total levels. He reaches for his phone out of his baggy pants to text Cristian. Sending the message—a push to the back of his head knocks him a couple steps before he can look up.

“Dawg, I’m right here. Quit tripping” he laughed, watching Xavier stumble into balance.

Room 115 • Giovanni Romero

Before Xavier could ask anything, Cristian questions him, “Where did you bring me?... And Why?” side eyeing the creepy and mysterious concrete stairs.

“After the remodel to half of the building over the summer, I watched them reconstruct and leave this stairwell hidden.” Xavier said excitedly. “It leads to the roof, but the better part is..., there’s a secret room that I was able to set up over the summer.”

Cristian laughed and blurted out “So instead of paying attention to summer school, you decorated a restricted room... for what exactly?”

“Just follow me and you’ll understand,” Xavier replied with a slight smirk.

As they both walk up the stairs, the sound of shoes moving on concrete and drops of water landing in puddles fill the air. They get closer to the third floor, and they stop at a metal gated door blocking a secret room.

Xavier opens the door with a makeshift key, revealing a squared room. It looked like a hidden man cave.

Cristian stepped inside, looking around at the dimly lit room. Posters from old action movies and basketball banners covered the walls. A string of LED lights flickered in the corner, casting a dull purple hue over a mini-fridge and an old stereo. The couch had seen better days, but the whole vibe was strangely... cool.

“What is this place?” Cristian asked, still unsure whether to be impressed or concerned.

Xavier plopped onto the couch, grinning. “This... is the spot. I call it The Vault.” Cristian raised a brow. “The Vault?”

“Yeah. Throughout summer school, I figured out how to sneak in here through the back construction access. Spent my days after class cleaning it up, wiring electricity from an old maintenance panel, and even rigged a fan system. It’s chill now—literally and metaphorically.”

Cristian gave a half-laugh. “You built a secret hangout in the school? For what? So, you could nap between periods?”

Xavier leaned forward, dropping his voice. “It’s more than a hangout.” He reached behind a loose panel in the wall and pulled out a small briefcase. Opening it revealed a deck of cards, stacks of poker chips, and even a scoreboard scribbled on a whiteboard behind the couch. Cristian’s eyes widened. “Wait... you’ve been gambling?”

Xavier nodded proudly. “Every Friday night. Me and others from my class show up. We’ve got a rotation. Real stakes too. You wouldn’t believe how many people will risk their allowance on a hand of blackjack.”

Room 115 • Giovanni Romero

Cristian stepped back slightly. “Bro... this is wild. Like, suspension-waiting-to-happen kind of wild.”

Xavier shrugged. “Only if someone snitches. But no one will. It’s a brotherhood, man.

Everyone’s cool, and I’m not trying to get caught either. I’ve been careful.”

Cristian stared at the poker chips and then at Xavier, unsure what to think. This wasn’t just skipping class or sneaking out—this was a whole hidden life; one he didn’t even know Xavier had.

He leaned against the wall and sighed, “I don’t even know what to say. I thought we were just coming up here to chill... now I find out you’ve been running an underground casino all summer?”

Xavier laughed. “It sounds worse when you say it like that.”

Cristian shook his head, half amused and half concerned. “You’re crazy.”

Xavier tossed him a chip. “Maybe. But I’m winning.”

Cristian caught it, staring at the small, round symbol of trouble in his hand. He didn’t know if he was ready to join in—or if he should be the one to pull Xavier out.

The second bell rang faintly from somewhere far below, but up here, in The Vault, everything felt different.

Her Mistress Raeden Round

I think that my girlfriend smokes too much weed
She's always with her, no break
She says it's a want but I know it's a need

She's stuck in her lungs, she's the stomach she feeds
There from the second she wakes
I think that my girlfriend smokes too much weed

It's worry, envy, you choose her or me
How you look for her, sheets raked
She says that she wants her, I know it's a need

Night drives to see her, then she sits in my seat
And come home high, baked
I think that my girlfriend smokes too much weed

It's your green mistress, she's making me bleed
She's making me bend and break
She says that she wants her, she knows it's a need

It's me and your mistress, or just you and me
She's plastic, and herbal, and fake
I think that my girlfriend smokes too much weed
She says that she wants her, she's saying she needs

A More Primal Grief Raeden Round

Trees, forest, lush greenery and woods, rivers running through them, salamanders resting in their beds, sunlight dotting the ground as it shines through the spaces in the leaves. Here it seems every day is equated with this sun-dappled paradise here, where birds never seem to stop chirping and the rodents of the forest all chase tails and scour for berries. Where the fish in the river are always plentiful and the trees littering their shorelines are stickered with brightly colored fruits. Where snow never falls to silence the footsteps of what's calling these woods home and ice never takes the life of the great flowing river running through them.

Yes, if anywhere could be paradise it would be this forest.

A small fox traverses through the forest brush, leaves stirring up behind it and small branches crack under its feet. The fox is looking for its burrow hidden amongst the leaf litter, nose pointing to and investigating everything that makes a sound in search of home.

Snap

A branch breaks, a large one, the fox whipping around to try and find the source of the noise.

Crunch

Something on the other side of the fox is making its way, something crunching through the path of dried leaves making up the forest floor.

The fox, circling itself and letting off a low growl, holds its ground and prepares for dinner when—

Whoosh- crunch- snap!

Something pounces on the fox- something big- no two somethings now.. And in this paradise, the life is drained from the fox's eyes- Snap- and something big is getting dinner.

“Did you see me? Did you see me pa? I was so quiet that fox didn't even hear me comin' it heard youuuuu!!”

The smaller of the two things is skipping through the underbrush of the forest, hopping on and off every stone, spinning and singing and blabbering all the way.

“Yes yes I saw you! You did very well on your first hunt,” The larger something has the fox slung over one shoulder, it's blood coloring the large animals back as it drips down to leave a trail on the forest floor behind them.

A More Primal Grief • Raeden Round

“And are you gonna tell them all pa? Tell em’ how I caught us the dinner tonight?” The smaller something has taken to cleaning the fox blood of its paws and from its face, “Oooo! Pa you have to let me tell them I wanna tell everyone!!” Still turning about and jumping along the trail.

As the pair approaches a clearing we see their pack spread out before them, a small group awaiting their meal to return,

“Go tell them then!” and with that the smaller thing takes off like a light, racing to the pack and the other small things to recite their gory details from a first kill. Specks of blood still decorate its paws, teeth, and muzzle as the other small things listen on with jealousy and excitement in their eyes.

The large things form their own small circle on the other side of the clearing, with the bloodied fox laying between them,

“So how did she do?” one of the things ask as it begins to pick the fur off of the fox,

“Better than me! She’s so quiet, and damn that kid is fast! I was scared I’d lose her out there,” the largest thing, beaming with pride, begins to reposition the fox,

“I mean look at what she did to this thing! I’ll never worry about her going hungry, that’s for sure!”

The thing pulls back the fox’s fur, now dry with blood and stained dark next to the fox’s vibrant orange coat. Its neck is mutilated, puncture wounds and flesh torn, blood stained and destroyed. An ankle bent, twisted, and shattered- a rib just the same from the force of the things pounce, the more fur removed from the damaged fox the stronger these things seem to glow.

“I always knew she’d be just fine!” Another of the larger things chime in, “I grew up without my mama too and it doesn’t make you any less a’ fighter!”

“Yeah we all knew she’d be the toughest just like her pa!” The largest thing is clapped on the back, and a sad smile is on his face when he replies,

“She kept saying how excited she was to tell all you guys about this,” Looking off into the woods, behind the huts and beyond the trees to the river, “I just wish she could come home and tell her mama too.”

A More Primal Grief • Raeden Round

The rest of the daylight is spent with the big things cleaning off the fox, reminiscing, laughing, crying, and cooking. Little ones chase, run, and wrestle as the earlier scene from the forest is reenacted over and over again. Cool air begins to settle over the forest and the sun kisses the horizon, and a large fire brightens up the clearing and brings the warmth right back to these things.

Cicada hums and mosquito buzzes fill the air, little ones are filed off to bed, big ones soon following behind, except for two, the hunting pair. As the biggest and littlest things sit side by side, the air stills for just a moment.

“Pa?”

“Yes?”

The littlest things shifts side to side on the ground, “I heard you guys all talking about mama earlier.”

“I’m sorry sweetie—”

“You don’t have to be sorry Pa,”

The air feels heavier now.

“Do you miss mama?”

And tears fill the eyes of the largest thing,

“I miss her every day, I wish she could’ve seen you out there earlier. You’d be making her so proud.”

“I miss mama too,” and the smallest thing, crying with her pa, still forms a small smile as she looks up to him, “but I’m happy I have you Pa. You teach me to hunt and to run fast and to find my way through the forest!”

And the largest thing can crack a smile now too.

“Yeah I’m glad I have you too.”

The pair sits together in the clearing, soaking in the silence, until the littlest one dozes off, and the largest carries her to bed, ready for tomorrow

The Bird in the Air Pump, and the People at its Table Raeden Round

looking at Joseph Wright's *An Experiment on a Bird in the Air Pump*

A mother unable to look,
A daughter who cannot look away
Gossips and the intrigued and the hidden
And the help and the contemplative
And the one behind it all and
The bird

In a bubble

In a glass bubble,
In the bubble of eyes,
With no air.

A mother unable to look,
At the price nature pays to man
For science,
And discoveries.
A daughter looking to the bird
A small piece of history, a recent path to be tread
A Sacrifice to the Gods
For science.

The one behind it all
Looking to us,
Do you see what man was made to do?
And the daughter,
Looking to the bird,
Is this what man was made to do?

An Experiment on a Bird in the Air Pump (1768) Joseph Wright



Left to Wilt

Bethany Sanders

Before me lie what was once
A wondrous garden.
Vines from sugar snap peas
Wrapped delicately around white lattice.
Tomatoes bulged with
Delectable flesh and soft seeds.
Squash sat proudly atop the
Fertile ground below it.
Green tops of carrots poked
Playfully from the soil.
... Now,
There are no vines climbing or
Tomatoes thriving.
No squash slumping or
Carrots sprouting.
The only remnant of the once
Glorious garden is the
Rotting chunk of lattice
Standing raggedly in the dirt.

Swans

Bethany Sanders

The swan atop the pond
Was not bothered
By the sweltering heat.

It swam delicately,
Swaying swiftly.

Its silky form
Savoring the serenity
Offered by the cool pond.

A serenade of rippling water
Soaked its sleek feathers.

It sauntered sweetly
Toward another.

Their silvery bodies
Circled one another.
They glided away,
Past the swaying reeds.

Candy

Bethany Sanders

Caroline skipped through the rain cascading over her neighborhood. She held an umbrella, but the wind made sure she couldn't keep dry. She smiled at her yellow rain boots, satisfied at finally having a chance to wear them to match her yellow-star barrettes.

"Caroline, dear," Mrs. Wilkens called, "we could have picked you up. I thought your mother would drive you in this weather."

Caroline stepped into the Wilkens's home, stomping her feet on the door mat. "It's okay, I love the rain. And look, these boots worked so well!"

Mrs. Wilkens smiled but didn't respond. She was already answering a call and walking toward the kitchen. Caroline knew the Wilkens were always busy—she had babysat for them all summer. She didn't mind, though. She got along better with Delilah and Max than the kids at her school.

"Caroline!"

Delilah raced toward her, clinging to her leg while Max stumbled behind, giggling.

"You be good while we're gone," Mr. Wilkens said. Mrs. Wilkens called, "Love you!" before they frantically hurried out the door.

"Let's play castle again!" Delilah said, swinging her princess doll.

"No, let's play dragons," Max argued.

Caroline crouched and took a handful of candies from her jacket, "Let's eat these and watch a movie first."

The kids never had objections to candy. Once settled on the couch, Delilah abruptly sat up. "Oh! Should we invite our new friend, Max?"

"Hmm..." Max laughed before saying, "we already got candies from Caroline, though."

"Who're you guys talking about?" She wondered if Mrs. Wilkens had hired a different babysitter for mornings.

"The one in the basement," Delilah answered. "He gives us candy sometimes, too."

Caroline scoffed. It was obvious they were playing one of their games. "Basement?"

Max pointed to the door beside the TV. "Down there. You've never been."

Caroline hesitated. She had been babysitting the Wilkens for months, but she had never gone to the basement. It wasn't all that weird, lots of people didn't like to go into their own basements, but it still made her pause for a moment. "You mean an imaginary friend?" she asked, unwrapping a piece of candy to keep her hands busy.

Candy • Bethany Sanders

Max shook his head dramatically. “No, he’s real. Really real.”

“And he gives us candy,” Delilah interjected, “Just like you!”

Caroline glanced between them, amused. She laughed and asked, “And what’s his name?” She liked humoring their imaginations.

Max and Delilah both looked at each other as though waiting for the other to answer. Delilah broke the silence with a whisper as though she were sharing a secret, “He doesn’t have one. He just smiles at us.” She ended with a giggle.

A shiver washed over her, but Caroline quickly forced a scoff. Convenient that there’s no name the kids could agree with on the spot. “Don’t you think that’s a little creepy?”

Delilah grinned and shrugged, “A little.”

Max had already lost interest. He grabbed a candy from the pile sprawled on the couch and got comfortable. Caroline found herself still staring at the door. Was this supposed person part of a game that the kids played with one of their relatives? Or just with each other? Now that she thought about it, she had never seen the Wilkens go anywhere near the door. They had never brought up decorations or storage bins from there. She looked at the back door of the house. There was a storage shed in their backyard, so what was even in the basement? The kids seemed convinced that something was down there.

Delilah cut off her thoughts, “I dare you to go see him.”

Caroline smiled. “And if I do? What’s in it for me?”

Max grinned. “A candy!”

“How tempting,” she laughed. She wasn’t going to let the kid’s game scare her, so she made her way to the door. Just as she reached for the doorknob, Delilah’s voice stopped her.

“Just don’t talk to him unless he wants you to. He won’t like that.”

“What?”

Delilah cocked her head to the side, “Just saying.”

Caroline’s stomach twisted, and a chill crept down her neck. She scoffed, shaking it off. “There’s nothing down there, kids. Let’s just play upstairs.”

Max jumped up eagerly, “Okay!”

Delilah looked at Caroline warily, “I didn’t believe Max at first, but he’s real. Honest to God.”

Caroline stared at Delilah. She opened her mouth to ask why she was being so serious about a joke when Max pounced on his sister.

Candy • Bethany Sanders

“Stop! I’m gonna get you back, Max!” Delilah said, her words covered in laughter.

Caroline stood alone now in the living room. With sudden urgency, she moved away from the basement door. She followed the kids upstairs to their fort. As she settled in, she thought she heard something—a thump like a boot on a step. She froze and waited to hear the next step, but the sound of the kids playing drowned out whatever noise there might have been. She told herself it was just the house settling, or whatever people say. Not some mystery friend in the basement.

Yet when the kids sent her downstairs for snacks, she found her eyes drifting toward the basement door, her heart pounding in her chest with a question she wasn’t sure she wanted answered. As she walked swiftly by the basement door, a glimmer caught her eye: a candy. She paused and stared. It didn’t match the candy that she had brought. Perhaps the kids had fetched something random from the house. Or, maybe, the kids were telling the truth.

She felt cold chills roll over her. She dashed toward the kitchen and turned on the light. She tried to slow her breathing. All this was her just her letting the kids get to her. But then, a crinkle. The undeniable sound of a candy wrapper. Caroline felt her face pale. She stood in the kitchen, trying to listen despite the thundering sound of her heartbeat.

“Caroline!”

She jumped, “Wha- oh, kids...”

“Hurry up, let’s go play”

Caroline let the kids pull her up the stairs, her breath ragged as she glanced past her shoulder. The candy was gone.

Maybe one of the kids picked it up? Or maybe they kicked it aside as they ran into the kitchen.

That’s what she desperately wanted to believe. She really tried to convince herself. But when they reached the top of the stairs, a sound echoed from below—a slow, clear crinkle, like fingers unraveling a new wrapper.

Caroline’s grip on Delilah and Max tightened.

“Caroline?” Delilah blinked up at her, confused.

“Yeah,” she said, forcing a smile as she led them into their fort. “Let’s just stay up here for a while.”

She wasn’t scared. Not really.

But when she tucked the kids in later that night, she made sure to lock the basement door.

Field of Flowers Ana Tymchyshyn

Two kids in love,
Once talked about marriage and kids.
They once ran up and down the fields picking up flowers
And it seemed like nothing could stop them.

But then one night everything changed.
Bombs in the background, ruins, where once was a house
now there is only the remains of broken foundation and dreams.
The fields they visited are now filled with ashes, flowers no longer there
These kids are now left with only hope and unanswered questions.
They changed. He changed.
His uniform wears blood and tears of those who once dreamed of peace.
Her dress white, innocence still present on her face.
But her heart isn't, it has already been broken, her dreams crashed and burned
Just like their village.
After the photograph is taken time keeps ticking, she keeps walking him to the train.

At night she keeps praying for him to come home,
So that their dreams will come true.
He keeps her photograph close to his chest.
As a reminder that no matter what happens, she was always with him.

Who knows whether they ever saw each other after that,
If they ever got to taste the tears of their lips again.
Was she ever able to walk down the isle in a white gown?
And whether they were able to say "I love you" ever again.
Who are they? Where are they now?
Nobody knows.

Breathe

Ana Tymchyshyn

Gloomy autumn day
clouds hover over me,
releasing water like tears

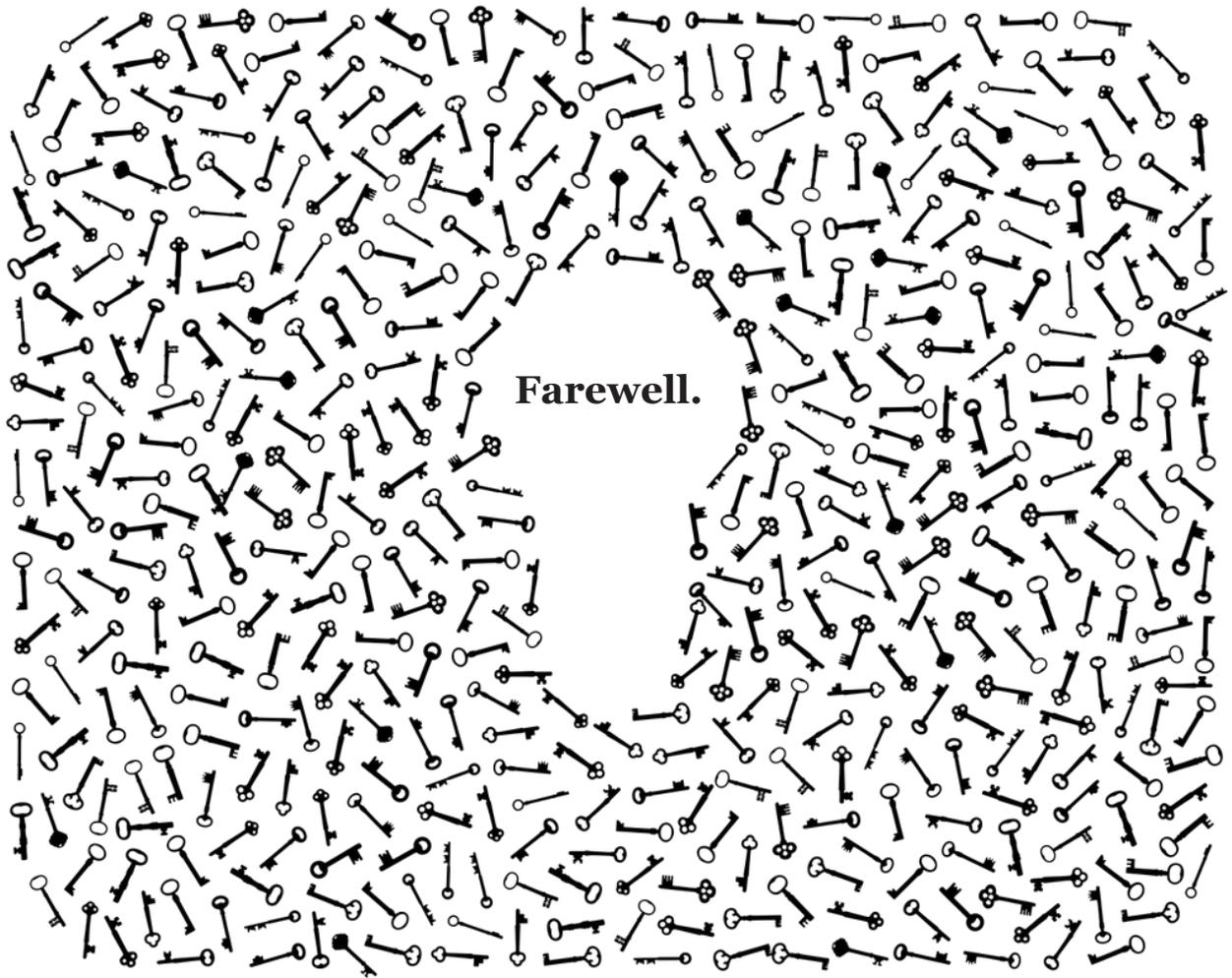
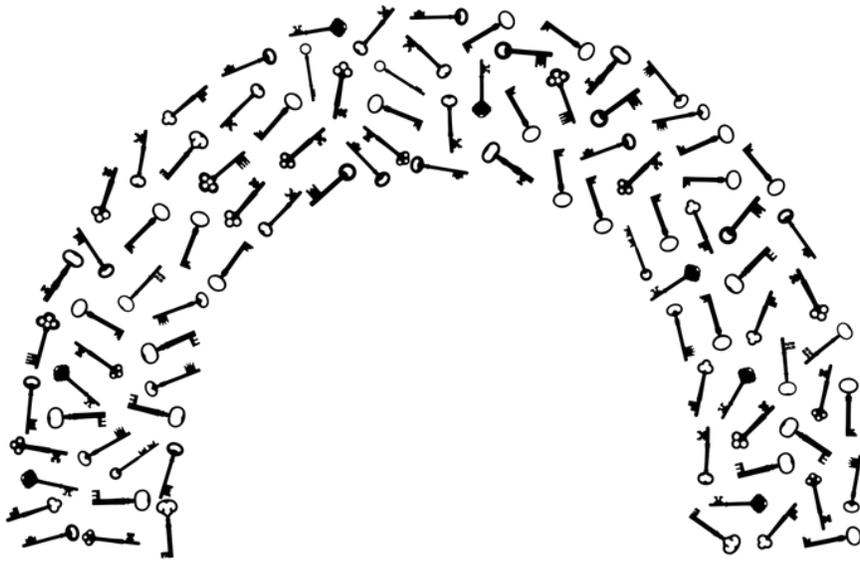
drop drop drop.

The whole world went silent,
seems like everything is dying.

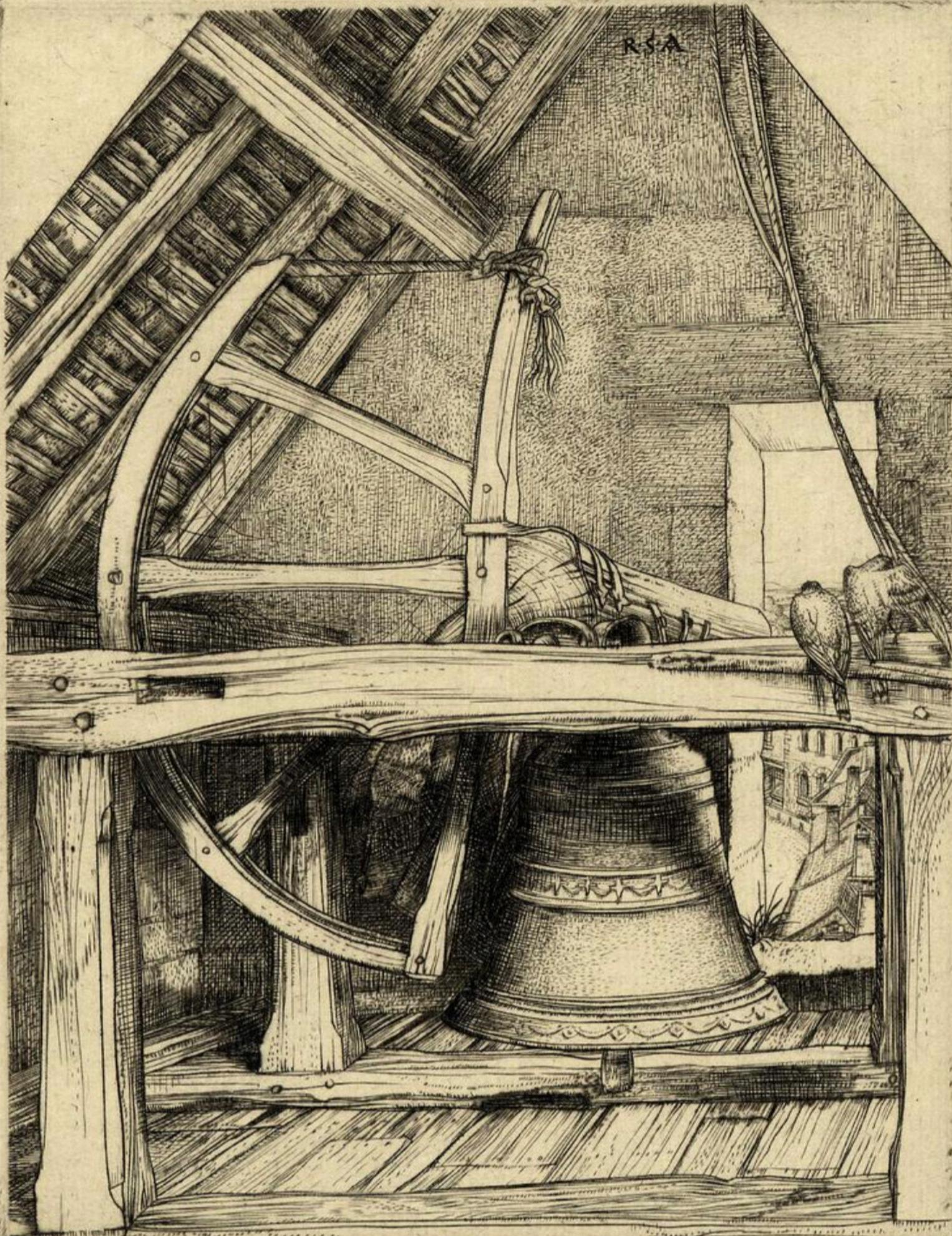
But then,
somewhere in the distance
a bird sings its beautiful lullaby-
putting everything around it to sleep.
Everything slows down
and you have a moment to just

breathe.

Breathe.



RSA



M. T. Austin 1866