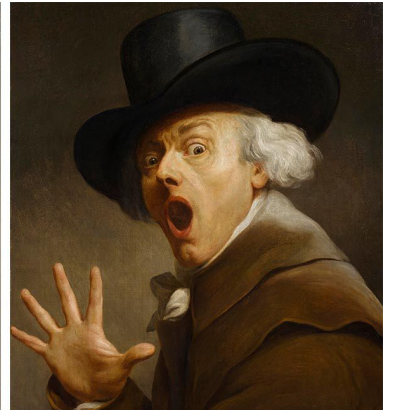




Silent Thinkers: Quiet But Deadly

ENL 2050: Introduction to Creative Writing • Professor Stacy Gnall • Winter 2026





Silent Thinkers: Quiet But Deadly
ENL 2050: Introduction to Creative Writing
Professor Stacy Gnall
Winter 2026
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Silent Thinkers: Quiet But Deadly

Students of ENL 2050, Winter 2026

A Note from Your Professor

Stacy Gnall

To the students of my Winter 2026 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

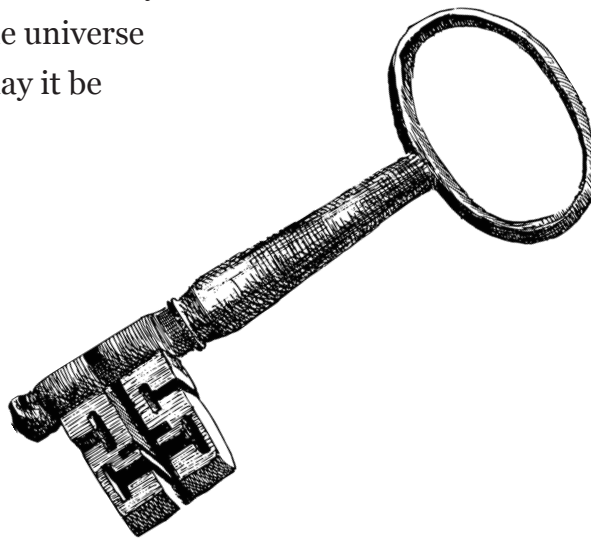
O my students,
I scour the world of words
to bring you poems like the rocks
my girls dig up in riverbanks
and come running to show me
because the notches in them
say something true, something
that an ancient Wisdom
wanted us to see.

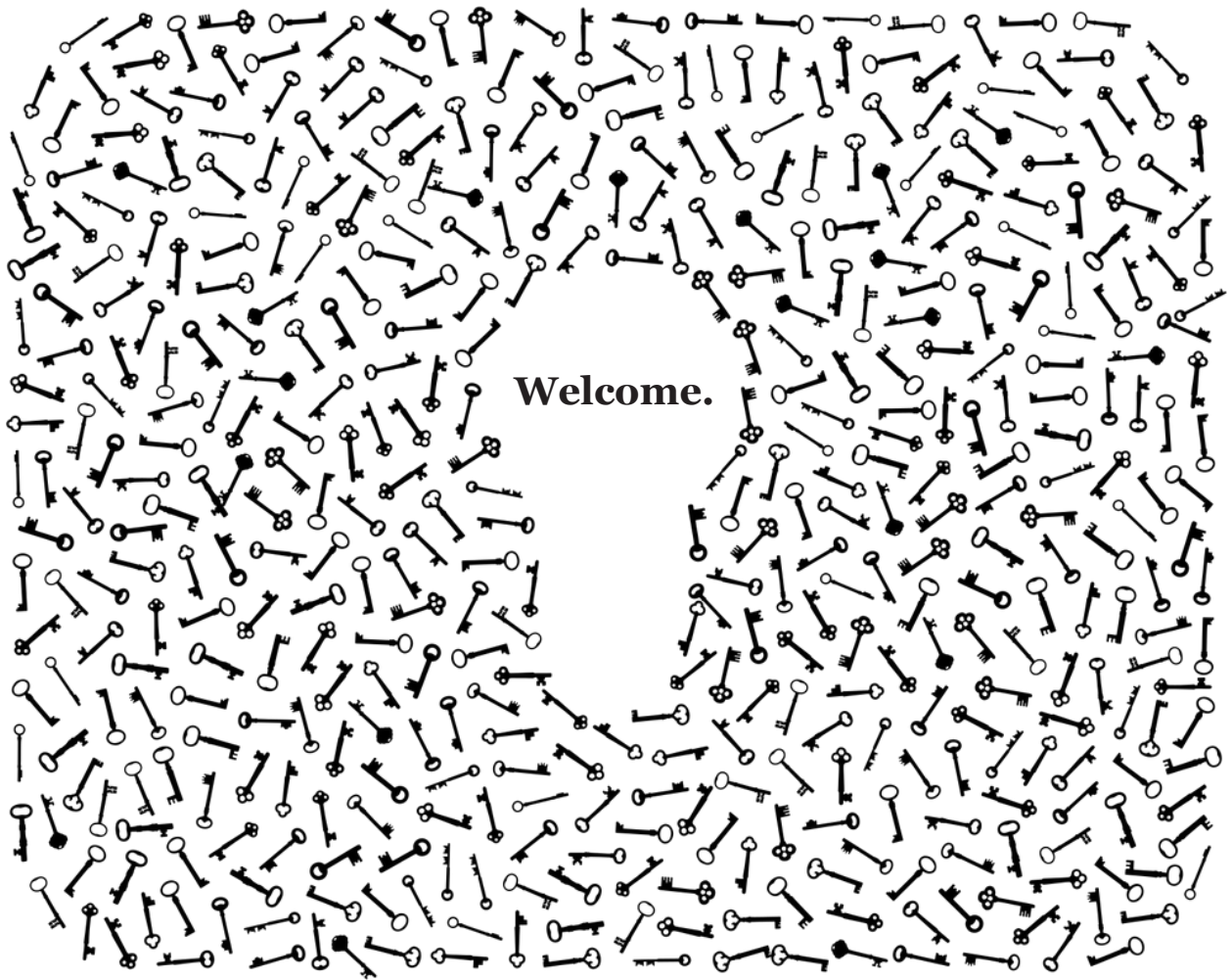
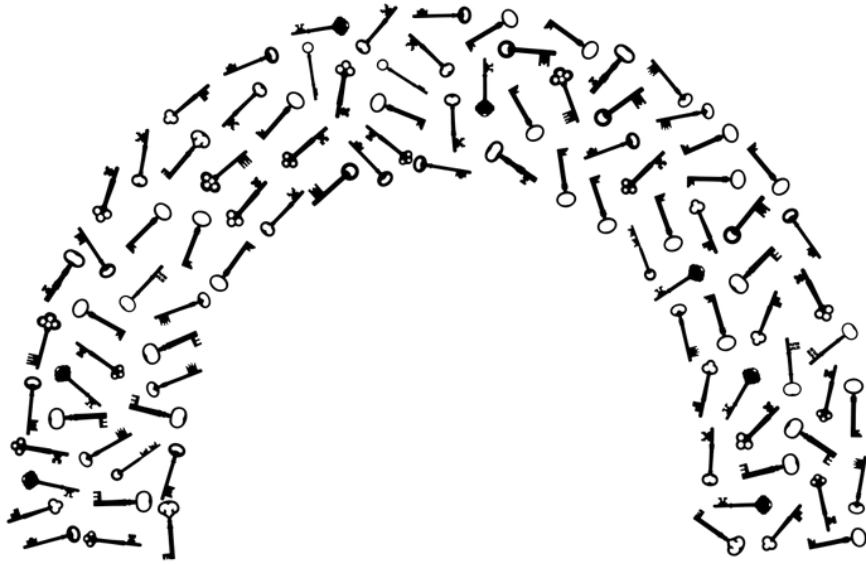
I run to you, pockets full of poems.
I select: This poem will help you pass a test.
Here is one that is no help at all,
but it is beautiful; take it, take it.

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.





When I Saw the Bird Perched All Alone

Amna Almussa

When I saw the bird perched all alone
in a cage with rusty bars,
I stopped walking.
It had lifeless eyes that barely moved,
and unevenly feathered wings
held tightly against its body.
The store filled with the scent of hay and dried pet food,
with barks of dogs and squeaks of hamsters
somewhere in the back.
We stayed in an unusual silence.
When I noticed the tag hanging from the cage,
brittle from wear and faded,
I wrapped my fingers tightly around the cold metal bars,
as if letting go would kill the bird.
I carried it to the counter,
the cage feeling light in my hands.
Outside, the air felt new.
I opened the door of the cage.
The bird hesitated,
then started flapping its wings without looking back,
leaving the rusted cage behind.
I took a deep breath
and walked to my car.

Piece of Cake **Chris Blicharz**

Everyone said it would be a piece of cake,
which is how I ended up alone in my room at midnight,
holding an actual slice,
still boxed, still breathing sugar.

It was my birthday cake,
creamy chocolate, overloaded frosting, and my name misspelled.
I tried to lift it with one hand,
the way in which confidence is supposed to work.

The plate shivered.
My wrist shook like it knew something I did not.
Frosting smeared my thumb,
cold and too sweet, suddenly embarrassing.

I thought about how often we say things are easy
when we don't plan to be the one carrying them.
The cake warped, cracked a little, stayed together anyway.

I laid there licking icing off my skin,
realizing effort doesn't always look heroic
sometimes it looks like not dropping
what everyone else insists is light.

The Hollowed Helm **Shane Cheek**

An entity riding atop a horse with a shadowy mane,
Plates of warped steel clamoring with each frightening trot.
Roads once lively lie as a desolate fog,
An entity forgotten, with a presence that lingers.

Plates of warped steel clamoring with each tiring trot,
A soldier who has lasted beyond his expiration.
A presence forgotten, an entity that lingers,
mental pathways now shrouded in an unyielding haze.
A soldier who's met their mental expiration,
a terrifying entity which haunts one's thoughts.
An unyielding haze which shrouds one's mental pathways,
A soul forever troubled by one's past.

A terrifying entity which haunts one's thoughts,
riding alone and unknown.
A troubled soul forever trotting pass,
A haunted entity riding atop a horse with a shadowy mane.

The Eternal Masquerade

Shane Cheek

A room filled with ceramic faces,
Faces that maintain seraphic enchantments, which lie so delicate
with their harmonizing gleam.

Bodies sway in a rhythmic dance
Matching the shifting melody at every beat,
A dance so methodical with each step holding an apprehensive grandeur.

Musicians play with blessed Harmonia
A ballad which feels as though it eases one's soul,
An Orchestra with each instrument perfectly tuned.

Then

All At Once

Strings pop

Performances topple

Enchantments fade

and

the

Ceramic

Faces

lie

broken.

Uprise Hedayetul Chowdhury

What art thou, life?

Sometimes, a sharp blade to the heart

Heart heedless, full of holes

But there is a light breaking through

Sometimes, a sharp stab into the heart

Living the pain in a bitter mouth

But there is a fluorescent light speaking

The mouth stuffed full of swallowed regrets

Living the pain of regret

Rope held by its last thread

The mouth stuffed with memories

But we rise through the thick and thin

Rope on its last string

Heart heedless, restless

But we rise through the hollow world

What art thou, life?

Lovesick. Amaya Echols

A supposed love story and a big apology.

The roads are slick and hard to see as Shauna toys with the thought of her boyfriend.

Maybe, the weather just knows how she feels, and it knows that now is the time to wash away unwanted and unnecessary emotions.

She thinks about the boy she had once loved, how he was no longer the same person she had fallen in love with. Trey had once been her lifeline, her best friend, but it didn't feel like that anymore.

At one point she thought he just needed time, to be apart from her, to be certain that Shauna was the person he wanted to be with for the rest of his life.

But two weeks apart had turned into a month now, and she wasn't even sure where their relationship stood.

She couldn't keep convincing herself to love him if he didn't want to do the same.

Just as Shauna is considering the implications of leaving Trey all together, of ending a six year long relationship that has consumed most of her childhood, her phone begins to ring from its spot next to her in the passenger seat.

The weather makes her think twice about immediately picking up the phone to answer; she figures whoever is calling will leave a message if it is important.

When the ringing stops and the song playing over the car radio continues, Shauna lets herself be led home by her instinctual muscle memory.

The winding highways seem longer without Trey sitting next to her telling stupid jokes and singing along to the music loudly. She doesn't even play their shared playlist, too afraid of the feelings it may stir up, instead she has chosen a playlist of music that Trey never really liked.

It's full of Pop and Electronic music that she was never able to get the curly headed boy to listen to, and she can remember the concerts that she attended without him because he never got into Techno.

Shauna had never faulted him for it because truth be told, she never quite enjoyed Death Metal despite telling him that she *did*. But she always liked effort more than anything else.

After she had been to two different Death Metal concerts, in which she learned several songs for, and he had brushed off her many invitations to raves and house par-

Lovesick. • Amaya Echols

ties that hosted a lot of the small artists she enjoyed, Shauna didn't like that Trey never put in any effort.

She wasn't materialistic in any way, but Shauna did appreciate when there was clearly effort put into a date night between the two or when he got her a gift or two.

Shauna wasn't materialistic but when every gift consisted of the same thing, flowers, hair products, jewelry, candy, and she thought that Trey could still do *more*, she felt like she was.

The sound of her phone ringing again startles Shauna out of her thoughts because this time it has played through the car's speakers, a feature she forgot even existed because it only worked half the time.

She takes the next exit on the highway, it isn't her's, but it isn't too far off that she cares too much, and as she does so she presses the little green accept button on the car's stereo screen.

While trying to keep her eyes on the road and prevent a severe accident, she hadn't even looked at the name on the screen she just simply pressed accept, so when the voice that had once been a comfort starts to play through the car speakers she jumps a little.

"Shauna?"

There is a long pause that is followed by shuffling on the other end that signals Trey is lying in bed, something he never did at three in the afternoon, and he sighs before continuing.

"Auna, baby... I'm sorry," Trey says hesitantly and Shauna can immediately recognize the tone of his voice.

He's been crying.

As her heart kicks a beat, she realizes that Trey has begun speaking again even though she is still silent.

"I love you, y'know? I know I don't show it, but I do. And over this past month I've just been thinking about you— Shauna I've been... I've been thinking about marrying you and the thought of that scares me, y'know? Because I've always been terrified of ending up like my parents. But then I realized that— I realized that I already have; I'm eighteen years old and in love with a girl way outta my league, that I don't do enough for— I'm sorry Auna. I'm sorry— I can't—"

Lovesick. • Amaya Echols

The end call beeps are the signal Shauna gets that Trey has hung up the phone; she's too stunned to start her car back up and move from the parking spot in the Target parking lot between her house and Trey's.

She suddenly remembers a conversation she and Trey had when they first got together. In Mrs. Harold's sixth grade class, semester two, they had been joking around about marriage and family.

The joking around was about marriage between *them* and when Shauna had said she could picture herself marrying Trey when they got older, he had looked at her like she was insane.

She can remember his pre-puberty voice telling her, "You wouldn't want to marry into my family Auna, we're definitely cursed."

Though he hadn't used the word cursed when they were younger because his english wasn't the finest, Shauna had asked their spanish teacher what '*Malo*' meant and the warm lady had asked concernedly where she had heard it before explaining what it meant to Shauna.

When she asked what he meant by calling his family *evil*, Trey had offered no other explanation and simply asked if her parents were married.

After she told him that they *weren't*, he simply smiled at her like he knew something she didn't.

And maybe he did.

Oh, Sweet Detroit Amaya Echols

A whiff of burning timber.

Your liveliness torn apart by corrupt souls — oh sweet Detroit.

The Michigan rain—so adamant— can't wash away the corruption.

—Oh, sweet Detroit.

Your touch doesn't bite and you nary a fight.

—Oh, Detroit sweet.

The Deviant Hunter—Oh, sweet Detroit— How you've become human.

You've grown. Like a flower blooms in the spring. Like a tiger cub learning from your mother.

Do you show mercy? Oh, sweet Detroit— how you shouldn't.

Oh, sweet Detroit— how you have been so blue and so out of view — and yet I stared and I stared.

—Sweet Detroit—

—Oh, sweet Detroit

The drab grays of your cityscape, crawl into the memories of your visitors. The drab grays enough to melt away your true colors.

And yet, I stared and I stared.

Because I remember the cry of the peacocks, of your colors. So bold.

Yet— I stared and I stared.

heart monitor Amaya Echols

the steady rhythm of the heart monitor—
and the sound of my prayers
are the only sounds in the room.

i'm not religious.
but i spoke to god anyways.

he did not answer *my* prayers
did not stop the rhythmic beep—
of the heart monitor

he did not make it more

err

atic.

or more human than machine.

but i'm sure he heard you
because your prayers sure
were LOUDER.

LOUDER than the rattle of the
ventilator and heart monitor—

LOUDER than my messy

ramblings.

heart monitor • Amaya Echols

my

ramblings.

of a quiet prayer

and pleads for just

one.

more.

day.

behind hiccuped breathes

of my last storytelling

to.

you.

i am not religious

and yet i prayed.

prayed for the heart monitor

to stop—

Ramadan After Maghrib Sayoon Elwaseem

Ramadan After Maghrib

Dry hours stack like plates

we won't touch yet.

The clock hums. The stomach

ticks.

Prayer lines us up

shoulder to shoulder,

feet finding feet.

Bow. Rise. Bow again.

Verses echo through the room

Later

coffee. Dark. Necessary.

Cups clink at 12 a.m.,

Laughter soft so it won't wake

the angels writing.

slow and steady,

until dawn calls us back

to fast again.

Attachment of Humankind

Sayoon Elwaseem

Attachment of humankind
Mediocre days end too fast
I wish life would just last
Everything must be left in the past
Wake up! Go to class! Work! Cook! Study!
Dreams and goals become a thing to outlast
Mediocre days end too fast
Memories become skeletons of the skeletons you once remembered
Haunted by the good old days where sleep was punishment
Everything must be left in the past
Mortal and punished. oh, how children of Adam have been preserved
Waking up to live the life of the day before, we have some NERVE
Mediocre days end too fast
Every head marked by a DEAD-line
Oh, children of Eve, why strive to succeed
Mediocre days end too fast
Maybe one day will be the last day
On that day you can happily say.. Today ended differently
Mediocre days end too fast
Everything must be left in the past

the human exhibit

Sayoon Elwaseem

when we first got there they didn't call it a farm

They called it a preparatory habitat which sounded like something you were supposed to be

grateful for. like a program or a place that was going to make you better somehow. There were

signs everywhere with smiling vegetables and soft colors that didn't match what the place actually was

things like grow with purpose and calm humans are better

no one questioned it at first

we were kids

we thought adults just knew things

Every morning we lined up and got measured. height, weight , temperature. they wrote everything down like it mattered a lot but not in a good way. more like we were objects that

needed to be tracked

rabbits did the measuring. always rabbits. They worked fast and didn't look at us much. wolves

handled discipline. they wore ties which made it feel more normal than it should have

i was seven when i asked where the older kids went

the rabbit didn't even pause

"upper lots"

"what's that"

"progress"

i didn't ask again after that

not because i understood but because something about the way he said it made it feel like i wasn't supposed to

we had classes too which still feels weird to think about

One was about posture and smiling. not really smiling just... looking calm. they said fear made

things worse but didn't explain what worse meant

Another class was about food but not cooking. More like appreciation. They talked about herbs

the human exhibit • Sayoon Elwaseem

and flavors and pairings and everyone just wrote it down like it was normal
once the teacher said rosemary works best with younger ones and no one reacted
we just kept writing
kids disappeared slowly
not all at once
just enough that you noticed if you were paying attention
twelve beds turned into eleven then nine
they said those kids advanced
that word again
advanced
no one ever came back from it
i figured it out when i was thirteen
There was a storm and the gate didn't close right. One kid ran. i don't remember his name
which i think about sometimes because i feel like i should
Everything got loud after that. alarms voices wings dogs
i ran too but not really on purpose
and then i saw it
it wasn't upper lots
it wasn't progress
it was a butcher shop
hooks scales knives labels
an elephant standing there talking like it was nothing saying the younger the better they
taste
and the butcher laughing
like it was normal
like this was just how things worked
i didn't cry
i just understood
and i wish i didn't

the human exhibit • Sayoon Elwaseem

they caught me the next day
weighed me
ninety pounds at sixteen
“small” one of them said
“still usable” another answered
i remember that more than anything
not the fear
just how easy it was for them to decide what i was

then everything changed all at once
a car crashed through the wall
like actually through the wall
glass everywhere noise shouting
someone grabbed me and pulled me and i didn’t fight it because i didn’t know what else
to do
we drove fast
no one explained anything
at a checkpoint we slowed down and i thought this was where it ended
but they let us go
just like that

they took me underground
it used to be an aquarium which felt strange in a way i couldn’t explain
there were people there
real people
kids adults people who looked tired in a way i recognized
and animals too but different ones
ones that didn’t look at you like food
“mr cow we got the child”
i remember thinking that sentence made no sense
but he just walked over and looked at me like i was a person

the human exhibit • Sayoon Elwaseem

not a number
not something being evaluated
“what’s your name”
i didn’t answer at first
“...any bee”

i didn’t talk much after that
but i listened
that’s how i learned everything
that humans were almost gone
that places like the farm were everywhere
that some animals chose not to be part of it
that there were others like me
i met lio who never took off his jacket
sana who didn’t talk about her family at first
twins who could break into anything
kids who flinched
kids who didn’t
which was worse

training started slow
i was bad at everything
shaky hands couldn’t focus couldn’t stop thinking
but mr cow kept saying you’re still here
like that meant something
eventually it did

the missions started small
breaking people out
stealing things

the human exhibit • Sayoon Elwaseem

learning systems
then they got bigger
we stopped hiding as much
started fighting back

i don't know when i changed
it wasn't one moment
just a lot of small ones
opening a gate
helping someone walk who couldn't
not freezing when something went wrong
still being scared but moving anyway

the war took years
it wasn't clean or simple
sometimes we won sometimes we didn't
sometimes it felt like nothing was changing at all
but slowly things started breaking
systems failing
places shutting down
people getting out

when it ended
or when we thought it ended
no one really celebrated right away
it felt strange
like something was missing

then we found the zoo

it was huge

the human exhibit • Sayoon Elwaseem

not in a dramatic way just in a way that made you feel small
the walls were so high they didn't even look real
we went inside expecting emptiness
but it wasn't empty
there were humans everywhere
walking around like normal
talking laughing living
there were buildings paths benches lights
it didn't look like a prison
that's what made it worse

we didn't talk much at first
just stood there trying to understand what we were looking at
lio walked up to the glass
i stayed back for a second
but then i moved closer too
i had to

there was a little girl inside
chasing bubbles
laughing like nothing had ever been wrong
she stopped when she saw us
looked confused but not scared
then she walked over and put her hand on the glass
just like that
like this was normal
like we were the strange ones
"they don't know anything" sana said
but she didn't sound angry
just tired

the human exhibit • Sayoon Elwaseem

i stepped closer
closer than i meant to
she was still smiling
waiting
like this was part of something fun
i raised my hand a little
not all the way
just enough
she smiled more

i didn't
i couldn't
not because i didn't want to
just because i didn't remember how

people behind us started talking
what this meant
what we should do
how big this place was
how long it would take
but it all blurred together
because it didn't feel finished
it felt like we had only understood part of it

i stepped back
looked at the walls
the glass
the way everything was designed to look fine
and i realized something that didn't sit right
this wasn't hiding anything
it was just making it look okay

the human exhibit • Sayoon Elwaseem

i shook my head a little
more to myself than anyone
“we can’t leave it like this”

no one argued

and that was it
not an ending
just where things changed again

Bite the Bullet Lokesh Gummadi

There is a bullet
Between my teeth
The metal is
painful

It feels so heavy even though
it isn't

My jaw starts to shake
The bullet
presses into my gums
It tastes like rust and is
unpleasant

Then I get used to it
The pain was
temporary
I learned to
adapt
I closed my eyes and
I bite
And it's over
Silence follows

I reflect
It wasn't as bad as I thought
I got used to the taste

The Bus Stop **Raneen Hanna**

The bench is cold even in the sun.
Paint peels off in long thin strips.
Someone carved a name into the wood,
then crossed it out.
The trash can lean to one side,
stuffed with cups and paper bags.
A schedule hangs loose on the pole,
corners curled, times hard to read.
People come and stand apart.
No one looks at each other for long.
A woman checks her phone again and again.
A man shifts his weight, sighs.
When the bus finally comes,
the bench stays empty,
still holding the shape
of everyone who waited.

Walking on Eggshells **Raneen Hanna**

I wake up and the floor is white.
Not tile. Not wood.
Eggshells everywhere.
They crunch under my feet.
Sharp edges cut my socks.
I move slow.
Too fast and they break louder.
I hold my breath with every step.
My arms stick out so I don't fall.
The shells slide away from me.
I think about turning back,
but the room is full of shells too.
There is no safe place to stand.
So, I keep walking,
careful, tired,
trying not to hurt anything.

House Party **Raneen Hanna**

Music hits/
walls shake
feet move.

Lights flash
on
off
on.

Someone laughs too loud.
Someone spills a drink.
Bass thumps
thumps
thumps
in my chest.

We shout
so, we can hear each other.

Hands up.
Sweat.
Crowded air.

A song ends/
no pause/
another starts.

Time slips
between beats,
and no one notices.

2 A.M. Yuvraj Kapila

Keys click
click
clack
stop
backspace
back
back
the cursor pauses
waiting
judging
sentence starts strong
ends wrong
I type anyway
clickclickclack
pause
the screen glows
too bright
for this hour
coffee sits cold
forgotten
thoughts lag
hands don't
a paragraph grows
crooked
but alive
I continue

cautiously
still typing
still not done

Gym Mirror at Night

(Villanelle) Yuvraj Kapila

I check again to see if I have changed.
The fluorescent lights hum overhead.
The mirror gives me back the same outline.

The weights are racked. The room feels rearranged.
My shirt lies crumpled where I stood instead.
I check again to see if I have changed.

I hold my breath as if it could be changed.
I widen, narrow, searching for a sign.
The mirror gives me back the same outline.

The glass is clean. The image stays unchanged.
I flex, release, replay it in my head.
I check again to see if I have changed.

Someone else passes. He looks self-contained.
He doesn't linger long enough to pine.
The mirror gives me back the same outline.

At closing time, the quiet feels contained.
The lights click off. I study what is mine.
I check again
to see if I have changed.
The mirror gives me back my own outline.

Saved by the Bell

Yuvraj Kapila

The bell comes by late
dragging itself slowly
down the hallway
brass and scratched
the cord hanging behind it
like a tail
making marks on the floor
as it drags
I'm wallowing at my desk
with my chair glued
to the floor
my paper is blank
and the blankness
is loud
then the bell sees me
hooks its cord around my waist
and yanks me out
ringing into the distance

The Penny

Yuvraj Kapila

I found a shiny penny
Lodged in a filthy gutter
Protected by droplets of rain
Lincoln staring at me sullenly
My hand quickly goes to rescue him
I bring him closer
Now I see
The dents
The small smudges of mud
I show him to my mother
She beams
Lucky penny she says
Pennies mean good luck
I look down unimpressed
I set him on the curb
He shines in his false brilliance
I am not lucky

People-Watching **Gianna Klinkhammer**

Talia is able to see emotions. And not in the way an average person can discern whether someone is angry at them, or if a crying person is sad. No. As of four years ago, Talia sees emotions transform people's bodies into an amplified version of themselves. A grieving mother may turn into a sobbing chubby baby. A football player midgame may turn into a charging rhino. A girl with her eyes locked onto her computer, studying for her big exam, may have eyelids drooping to the table, deep wrinkles making her over 200 years old.

As of four years ago.

That date, she doesn't like to think about often, but today it is hard to avoid. It would feel as if she was ignoring her friend Autumn if she did not think about her. Grieve her. Do the things her friend would have wanted to do if she had been there. Today is the anniversary of her best friend Autumn's death.

So every year on this day, Talia goes to the park to people watch and sketch the "interesting ones", as her friend Autumn and her used to do. There is no one else she would want to go with, even if she could, for she has no friends. Purposely. The girl has given up companionship for a lifetime.

Settling down in a chair and finishing off her slice of pizza, she looks out into the melodic park. There are two ladies deep in discussion. They radiate light, as they giggle and transform into tiny girls with pigtails. This brings a smile to Talia's face as she continues to scans the park. On the other side there is quite the opposite spectacle displayed. A man with his face deep in a newspaper is bright red. Steam comes off of every inch of him fast and traveling into the sky. A normal person would see a furrowed brow. Talia sees a demon.

These sights used to scare her. Even the mundane emotions like curiosity and content. She would think she was going crazy, and maybe she was. But it was the angry ones. The ones who had no control over themselves that kept her up at night. The look of red, the look of death, it all was too much to deal with. The first time she had seen it was at Autumn funeral. So many people, so many emotions. Talia thought that she was just in a bad dream. But the emotions personified continued as she grieved her best friend. And they never went away.

This all became usual after a time. She began to appreciate this "gift" she now called it. It was a distraction, and she needed all the distraction she could get. It was also very useful. Any conversation she now knew how to navigate and circumvent, not that she talked to many people anymore.

So, Talia with the thought of bright Autumn in mind, began to sketch the two pigtailed girls giggling. It was an amazing day out, sunny but not too hot. A bit windy, so she put her phone on the edge of the notebook to keep it from blowing away.

Talia had come to learn that life was never a sure thing. What she failed to comprehend was that certain resolutions cannot always be held, for today there was something or someone ready to blow into her life. And it came in the form of a football.

People-Watching • Gianna Klinkhammer

Whizzing past her head, her heart jumped. She wondered who the hell was trying to take off her skull. A man came into view, sprinting toward her asking if she was okay. She was. She was angry nonetheless. Nothing worth making a deal about though. Not worth talking to this man she thought. She nodded at him, hoping he would take the hint and go on with his day and his football.

The man did not, he instead asked if she was sure she was okay and then proceeded to introduce himself. The nerve.

As he continued to talk there was something came clear to Talia. Her spine went straight when she realized this man looked normal. The surprise of the moment had led Talia to not notice what was happening. There was nothing different about his face than when he started to run over. His face was normal. This man had none of the usual ailments. She got a whole bunch of usuals, but the most frequent when meeting her were big question marks in their eyes and atop their head, or even profusely sweating if they were on the more awkward side and had been nervous to come up to her. But nothing now. Peter had no emotions.

But that could not be true as he seemed extremely sorry about the incident. Talia's mind spined.

He pestered her with questions, as she tried to settle it, then he made a joke about her reaction timing that she did not laugh at. He wouldn't seem to leave, and then he began to look at what she was doing. He seemed to take an interest in it, seeing the beginning of glowing people on her page. He recognized it to be the ladies across from them somehow. He asked if she would mind if he joined her in sketching, for he would come to the park to do this with his mom when he was younger.

Too much in her head going on, she didn't have a good excuse to say no. So this is how she found herself sitting in the park with a stranger.

Any other day she would have had an excuse. Or she wouldn't have minded just saying no. So maybe it was the interest she had taken upon this man who did not display his emotions. Maybe it was the effects of this anniversary on her. Maybe it was the deep want to not be alone today of all days. Maybe it was all of this that led her to agree to get dinner with him the following day.

The one inch Talia gave to this man, he took and he ran. He charmed her. She had forgot what having a friend could be like. Shared interest, and spending time with someone is not something she wanted to even have again. But this persistent man worked his way into her life, and she now could not imagine a life alone like she had been living for years. More so, she could not imagine a life where he had not been in it. Autumn would have liked him.

Years later, sitting at the park as her children toss a ball around in the distance, she looks at the past drawing in this sketchbook. There is a man made of stone with a woman melting into him. She turns the page to see a young boy with stars in his eyes laying out on blanket the same green as the grass. All these images she sees in her mind, and she closes her eyes to think about this time in her life. It has been so long, that she begins to wonder if she really was ever able to see any of it.

The Lone Swaying Figure **Gianna Klinkhammer**

I look at the lone swaying figure out across the glen
And am reminded of a time when
My hair was short with vibrant and mismatched attire
My sister and Barbies beside me, hips swinging to get it higher.

The wooden swing is now twisted and mangled
Twigs stuck in its hair, course and strangled
From the time of its existence, maybe too long
For the materials and love it was crafted to bring along.

When once it was pristine and lively
It was the long days in the sun shining kindly
That the wood seat began to chip
And the old trees' branches began to tip.

Today, the tree above whistles as God's spirit swims past
Pushing the swing this way and that as it desperately holds fast.
Up and up in a flash
It falls to the ground with a crash.

Feeling Down Again Sadie Kondel

As I see all of what I have worked for starting
to fade away I freeze again.

As I step up to the first tee I spot potential dangers
telling myself to not hit in them again.

My psychologist's words in the back of my mind
telling me not to think these thoughts again.

But everytime I think the nerves have stopped
they start up again.

I just want to be able to play freely and
mindlessly again.

But every time I look out at the hole,
a coach is there again.

And when my coach isn't there he is replaced
by my dad shaking his head again.

Dad, do you really think that I meant to
hit in the water hazard again?

In constant fear of something
going wrong again.

Tired of feeling like I am not good enough
despite proving myself again, and again.

Realizing it is all in my head and I can fix it,
so I go seek some help again.

Understanding I am bigger than this game of golf,
I need to find the joy in it again.

And so I will get back up, get my emotions
together, and try again.

New Beginnings Sadie Kondel

I once saw this dog at the pound,
with a silky black coat and
hazel eyes. Above her rusted cage
sat a sign with the words
“Aggressive” instead of a name tag.
I made my way over to this
nameless creature,
but our eyes never met.
Instead my eyes met the spot where
her leg was no longer.
It was as though she was a bee without
its stinger.
As I reached toward her she snarled,
showing off her pearly whites.
But as I made initial contact, I felt no
pain, just peace.
Her face was soft and smooth, her mouth
no longer in a panic.
As I reached toward the part of her leg
still there, she flinched.
But then she stood
using her three legs. She was a soldier,
showing off her purple heart.
And then she smiled.
When it was time for me to go, and I
turned away from her a chill
ran down my spine.
I turned around,
welcome home, Hazel.

The Monarch Measles (01/31)

Kenny Lofton

Coughing, sneezing, sniffing.

My nose filled with caterpillars,

Mucus hanging from my nose like a chrysalis on a tree.

My lungs fluttering ferociously.

My skin the color of an apricot.

Each day I creep closer to the end.

My mother makes a concoction of milkweed leaves and nectar.

Her potion soothes the irritation of my throat.

It makes my nostrils spill like the Niagara.

The end is near.

The end of this spell, or,

The end of it all.

This plague may very well kill me.

As the days pass, I feel freed from the ails of congestion.

I survived;

unlike many.

Myriads of bodies across the world,

all dull and lifeless,

with pigment of a tangerine.

My stomach churns, stirs, flutters.

The final symptom remains.

I'm faced with the regurgitation of monarchs.

I survived days of being ill to be faced with another plague;

though it didn't kill me,

it put butterflies in my stomach.

Ebony, Ivory, and Porcelain (01/27)

Kenny Lofton

The grass sways with the gentle dance of the wind,
each blade greener within her white picket fence.

Her home is beautiful, grandiose;
The opposite of mine.

Mine is boarded;
blighted;
Broken;
Black.

I watch as green as the foliage in which she frolics;
aching for her acquaintance, burning for her invitation.

I loathe her.
A reminder of my despair;
of my skin;
of my status;
of my side of the fence.

She's never alone, she dances with a girl;
a porcelain counterpart in an identical lily white dress today;
a powder pink tomorrow.

I can only dream to have a friend like hers.
She would wear burlap,
her hair slick with Crisco,
her skin bruised;
beaten;
battered;
Black.

Ebony, Ivory, and Porcelain (01/27) • Kenny Lofton

I longed for an answer as to why she never asked me to play with her.
I was a few frolics and a “hello” away.

We’re actually similar.
We love playing outside, pretty dresses, porcelain dolls.

Only she lives within her White picket fence.
full of innocence, full of whimsy.

And I live in a world bedraggled;
Biased;
Burdensome;
Black.

The Oyster Is My World

(01/27) Kenny Lofton

We never leave one another;
We remain; Stacked; Clustered.
Never leaving, never falling.
Enduring wave after wave wafter wave.
Beaten; Hammered; Stolen from our home on a jagged rock
For a pearl; Encapsulated.
A defense mechanism used to neutralize a threat to our fragile bodies.
Something I use to protect myself is merely an accessory to you.
Your symbol of luxury is my trauma.
You catalyze the process of my distress;
to turn a profit from my pain.
White; pure; opalescent.
Crack; Kill; Cook; Serve.
Now a stimulation that requires a reservation.
Once again;
Your symbol of luxury is my trauma.

Paranoia

Kenny Lofton

Black Shirt, Blue Jeans, Black shoes

She smirks at me.

A friendly smile? A predator's warning?

Each of her steps a decrescendo. I'm alone.

Who is that! My head swivels. Am I being chased?

Tracked?

Trapped?

Oh.

That's just my hair.

Steps gets closer.

I'm not alone.

Black Shirt, Blue Jeans, Black Shoes.

Again.

I return to my mission of browsing cheese pizzas.

It's silent. Nothing but the humming of the freezer.

The air stiffens.

Excuse me?

A tap like that of a tactile attack on my shoulder.

The quiet quaked by a quivering voice.

A venerable women with silver hair smiles at me.

The emotion upheaval in my mind dissipates.

Microscopic Heart Kenny Lofton

The pink sunset smiled,
DC feels like a story not yet told.
A picture not yet painted.
Yet the ink of the quill or paint on the brush has run dry.
The newly Reconstructed world.

We are in a muggy limbo between winter and spring.
Hard to know whether I need a sweater in this weather.
Get shivers does my body.
The whip of the wind whistles wickedly.
The newly reconstructed world.

Outside, it smells like dew and rain.
The stalking creeping fog hugs the trees in arms of misty gray.
Next year at this time the fog will return with a vengeance like Anakin Skywalker.
The atmosphere is a puff of secondhand smoke.
The Newly Reconstructed World

The somber mist slithers silently.
Stealing my breath like a cold blooded thief in the late winter day.
I'm chilled
Life in grayscale.
The newly reconstructed world.



Absence Makes the Heart Strong as an Ox. Cristian Lugo

Even though there were always people in the house,
you could still feel what wasn't there.

We were loud sometimes,
we laughed at dumb shows,
fought over the last snack,
and pretended we were okay.

There were shoes by the door,
that never moved,
and a chair that nobody sat in.

I learned to help out early,
how to be okay without asking for anything, and
how to keep moving even when things felt hopeless.

I grew up fast,
still, my heart keeps getting stronger.

Strong as an ox,
in a field that's still empty.

Do You? Cristian Lugo

Everyone says it's normal. That when you think too much, your thoughts start answering back. It doesn't happen all the time, just when you're overthinking or trying to control everything. Nobody really questions it, so I never did either.

I wouldn't say I hear voices. It's not like that. It's more like my thoughts respond. Not all the time, just when I start going too far in my head, when everything feels like it depends on me. The first time I really noticed it was at work. We were busy, a lot going on, people asking me questions, things needing to get done. In my head I kept thinking, I got to stay on top of everything. I got to make sure nothing goes wrong. I got to keep everything moving. And then right after that thought, something in my head went, Do you?

I paused for a second, not in a weird way, just enough to notice it. I didn't say anything though. I just kept going. But it kept happening. I'd think, If I don't handle this, it's going to fall apart. And then right after, Is it?

It wasn't loud and it didn't feel crazy. It just felt honest, almost like my thoughts were being checked. And I didn't really know what to do with that, because part of me agreed with it, but another part of me didn't want to.

I've always been the type to want control. Not in a bad way, I just like knowing things are handled. I like knowing things are going right. I like being the one people can rely on. Especially at work. When my uncle tells me I'm doing a good job, I take that seriously. I want to keep proving that. I want to keep stepping up and be someone he can trust with more responsibility. But because of that, I think I start putting more on myself than I need to. Like I start thinking everything depends on me. Like if something goes wrong, it's on me. And that's when those thoughts come in more.

I'll think, I have to fix this. And then, Why do you think it's all on you? I don't always have an answer. Sometimes I just ignore it and keep moving, but it stays there in the back of my head.

A few days later it happened again, but this time at school. I was sitting in class, not even fully paying attention because I was thinking about everything else like classes, future, money, where I'm going to end up, what I'm doing right, what I'm not doing enough of. Just everything at once. And I caught myself thinking, I need to figure all this out. And right after, Do you?

That one hit a little harder, because I didn't have an answer. I just sat there for a second, kind of stuck in that thought. If I'm being honest, I act like I need to have everything figured out right now. Like I need to know exactly where I'm going, what I'm doing, how everything is going to work out. But realistically, I don't. Nobody really does.

Do You? • Cristian Lugo

I say I have faith. I really do. But if I'm being honest, I don't always live like it. Because if I really trusted God like I say I do, then why do I act like everything depends on me? Why do I stress like I have to solve everything right now? Why do I feel like if I don't have a plan for everything, then I'm falling behind?

That's something I've been thinking about a lot.

One night after work I just sat in my car for a bit before driving. I didn't even have music on. I was just thinking about work, school, money, my future, what I'm doing right and what I could be doing better. And I caught myself again, thinking, I have to make sure everything works out. And right after, Or what?

I just sat there, because I didn't have a real answer. Nothing was actually going to fall apart in that moment. I just felt like it would. And I think that's the difference of feeling like you need control and actually needing it. Those aren't the same thing, and I don't think I ever really separated those before.

To me, it always felt the same. If I feel like I need to do something, then I probably should. But now I'm starting to question that. Sometimes that feeling isn't coming from what actually needs to be done. It's coming from pressure, from expectations, from wanting to be perfect, from not wanting to mess up. And those aren't always good reasons.

I'm still learning that. I'm still working hard that hasn't changed. I still care about doing things right. I still care about improving, about getting better, about building something for myself. That's not going away.

But I'm starting to realize I don't have to carry everything like it all depends on me. I can do my part and trust the rest. And that's not easy, because letting go of control doesn't feel natural. It feels uncomfortable. It feels like you're falling behind. It feels like you're not doing enough. But at the same time, holding everything feels heavy. And I've felt that.

So I'm learning to balance it. Not perfectly, but better than before. Now when those thoughts come in, I don't ignore them right away. I listen. Not because I have everything figured out, but because I know I don't have to.

I still think a lot. I still stress sometimes. That's not gonna just disappear. But now, when I catch myself trying to control everything, I pause. And instead of trying to solve everything all at once, I just focus on what's in front of me, the next step, not the whole plan.

And I trust that's enough.

I still fall back into old habits sometimes. I still catch myself overthinking things that don't need to be overthought. But now I notice it faster, and I can stop myself before it turns into something bigger.

Do You? • Cristian Lugo

I think that's growth, not being perfect, but being aware and choosing different.

So now, when those thoughts come in, I don't see them as something weird. I see them as a reminder that I don't have to carry everything, that I can move forward without knowing everything, and that having faith doesn't mean doing nothing it just means trusting while you do your part.

And for where I'm at right now, I trust God. And that's enough.

Spring Break

Grace Mendola

It was a regular sunny day in Fort Lauderdale Florida. Birds chirping, sun shining no cloud in sight and no signs of bad weather. It was the season of spring break for the town. Many families from the west would come and visit during this time for spring break. The town would be filled with many tourists, and it would be hectic at this time. Many individuals had their spring breaks in early March to the end of March. It was a busy time for Florida. There were nice family subdivision a couple miles from the ocean. One subdivision was called ocean view. This sub was smaller than the rest of the subdivisions nearby. This sub was so small that everyone new everyone. They were all friends and would spend many days together. They would hang out every night after dinner. No one would ever show up a minute late. If someone did, they would immediately call and think something is wrong. One family stood out, they were poor compared to their friends with mansions. They lived down the same street but only had a ranch to live in. The family with the ranch had a wife a husband and their four young children under the age of 16. The other five families with mansion's had only two children. It was a normal week before spring break started for the Florida kids. The families would sit around a bonfire discussing their spring break plans. The families with mansions decided they did not want to travel because they travel every other month and they just wanted to relax at home and not do anything for the week. The family with the ranch was very excited to announce that they would be going on a family vacation for the first time. The husband and wife had told the families that they would be taking a 12-day cruise. They were so happy to hear that from them and was just filled with excitement. They told them they will have so much fun and to take many pictures so they could share with the group when they got back. Flashforward to the night before the cruise. The husband and wife still never told their kids they were going on a vacation. The kids just think they are spending the week at home just to relaxing. The husband and wife were ecstatic to tell the kids when they get home from school. The mom had no idea how her kids were going to react because it was a secret and she wanted to surprise them with a fun family vacation. After a long day of waiting for the kids to get home they finally got home and the husband and wife told the kids they were going on a cruise. The kids were so so happy and could not wait to go. The one kid asked when do we leave. The mom relied with now honey we leave now. Your suitcases are all packed up and in the car. They jump with joy and all cramped into their minivan. It was about a ten-minute drive to cruise port. The mom had a weird feeling in her stomach as the sky turned a little gray, but she did not think much about it. As they are welcomed aboard, they had to sign in. After signing in they were told where their rooms were going to be and that they will not have any internet until they get back home. Everyone getting on the cruise was told that they check to make sure everyone was in their rooms at a certain time at night to make sure everyone was safe. The family thought it was a little weird but tried not to think into it because it was there first time. A couple days go by but nothing out of the ordinary. It is the last

Spring Break • Grace Mendola

night on the ship, and the family was so tired randomly but just thought it was because they have been busy at the pool and waterslides each day. That night it was around the time that the crew members go around checking to see if everyone is in their room. When the crew got to their room, they noticed that there was luggage everywhere and they could hear the shower running so the thought that they were probably just showering or in the bathroom getting ready for bed. It is the following day, and the ship went back to Fort Lauderdale. Everyone was told to get off the ship and thank you for coming aboard. After the crew watch many people get off the ship, they noticed that the room with the family of six had luggage in the same spot and the water was still running. Crew now started to freak out and was confused because they check the cameras and saw that the family left the ship with everyone else but left all their luggage. It is now the next day nighttime for all the families to get together at the bonfire to go over how everyone's spring break went. All the families showed up excited to hear about the family with the ranch. Except they never showed up and were never seen again.

Everything Is Up in the Air Moon Rashid

Everything is up in the air.
My house is floating away.
Look my neighbor, up there in his chair!
Some scones, a tea set and a tray.
Old Miss plum is eating a pear.
I fear I have nothing to say.
There goes a man riding his mare.
I sure hope he finds some hay.
So many birds flock without care.
It's almost the end of day.
So many colors, how the dawn looks so rare.
The sun hides behind the bay.
The Fresh sea dances in my hair.
My house is floating away!
Oh, everything's up in the air.

Brave as a Lion Gabe Shino

One day I wake up feeling strong,
My fur is thick and my chest feels heavy.
I stand on all four legs and I take a stretch.
I look down,
But all I see is paws.
I try to talk,
But all I hear is a roar.
Being brave doesn't mean I'm not scared.
I continue walking like I have been this way forever.
I like this feeling,
The savanna is mine.
The sun's beating down on my back,
and I'm not hiding from it.
I keep moving forward, fearless now.

The Indifferent Rhythm **Simran Sian**

You race past seconds, I beg you to slow.
I am sitting still
in a row of isolated seats,
and yet you beat.

Where do you go?
Even the lead used to fill in tiny circles is dulling.
Why do you tick so fast?

You pass moments I meant to understand more,
slide over answers I almost knew.
How do you keep moving so calmly,
unbothered by the squeak of the proctor's shoes?
How are you so confident through it all,
the good, the bad?

I stare at you instead of the page,
but you never look back.

Summer Precipitation **Simran Sian**

The air has turned thick, smelling of damp earth.
The clouds are rumbling,
And the lightning is striking.
'Tis the season to be jolly,
though the weather's becoming biting.

Thick droplets,
Fluffy to the touch,
Loud thumping to the ear,
Frightening to the sight,
Hairy to feel,
Majestic to smell.
Life awakens,
when it is truly,
raining cats and dogs!

Head Over Heels Auden Stauffer

Red and shiny,
gloss catching the light,
making a statement with each step.

As I walked by,
heads turned
drawn to the kitten heel.

They loved it so much
they never noticed
I was missing a torso
and my neck.

My head rested
directly above
the heel of the shoe.

No one asked who I was,
or how I was holding my head up.

They pointed instead
Praising the heel.

They admired the beauty
without wondering
who carried it?

They assumed I held the world
inside that kitten's heel.

Head Over Heels • Auden Stauffer

Sunrise to sunset,
I remained alone-
just my thoughts
and the shoe beneath me.

They wanted the kitten heel.
but never the life attached to it.

If only they knew

how lonely it is

to be the head of the heel.

Tissot Liam Tenzer

The watch sits on my desk
all alone
its steel face catching the light
like a bright treasure peering out of the water.

Its second hand still sweeping
a small, patient engine,
steadier than my own pulse
the day they gave it to me.

On its underside lay the scars
scratched into its clasp
like memories carved into the sand
on a calm, familiar beach.

Now its ticking follows me
through rooms they've never seen,
marking minutes of ordinary days
they helped make possible.

Clownfish

Liam Tenzer

Swish,
orange colour flicks,
white bar *blinks*,
the green reef inhales.

He sank back into
Home.
The anemone // never the enemy.

When I was small,
you were a spell,
a bright burning flame,
that burnt through the sea.

A flame of inspiration,
of beauty, of great peace,
keeping my head level,
as I navigate the blue unknown.

Even now, you pause me
a child still tugs my sleeve
whenever your orange colour survives
that much blue.

Memesagamesing

Liam Tenzer

On Lake Memesagamesing, the line went tight,
A sudden pull beneath the mirrored sky,
I felt the surge of something wild take flight.

The morning mist still clung to silver light,
The loon's low cry went drifting softly by,
On Lake Memesagamesing, the line went tight.

A flash of green below, a streak of white,
A torpedoed shadow slipping sly,
I felt the surge of something wild take flight.

Its jaws were set with teeth like splintered light,
Its body coiled, a tempered bow drawn high,
On Lake Memesagamesing, the line went tight.

The rod bent deep with all its stubborn might,
The reel sang sharp, a thin electric cry
I felt the surge of something wild take flight.

At last it broke the surface, fierce and bright,
A northern pike beneath the open sky;
On Lake Memesagamesing, the line went tight,
I felt the surge of something wild take flight.

Left Unsaid Cayla Tisevski

It didn't happen all at once.

At first it was just one word, and it happened in the kitchen.

My dad dropped a glass in the sink. It did not shatter, just cracked down the side. He looked at my mom like he was about to say something, like the usual thing you say when something is your fault, but he just stood there.

"I didn't mean to," he said.

My mom nodded. "I know."

That should've been enough, but it was not. Something was missing. It sat there between them like they forgot a step in a routine they've done a thousand times.

My little brother noticed first.

"Why didn't you say it?" he asked.

"Say what?" my dad said.

"The word you say after."

Nobody answered him. The next morning, it still was not back and we kept almost saying it. Like it was right there, just out of reach. My brother bumped into me on purpose while I was pouring cereal. Milk spilled over the counter and onto the floor. He looked at me, waiting. I looked at him.

"I didn't mean to," he said.

"Okay," I said.

We just stood there. Usually that moment would end quickly. Instead it stretched out, awkward, like neither of us knew how to leave it.

By the third day, things were off but not in a big way. Just small things that didn't fix themselves anymore. My dad forgot to call someone back, and my mom burned dinner and just said, "It's fine," even though it was not. My brother knocked over his stack of blocks and got frustrated faster than usual. Nobody could smooth anything over. It was not just the word missing. It was what the word did.

A week later, we lost another one.

This time it took longer to notice. My dad said he'd pick up my brother from practice.

Left Unsaid • Cayla Tisevski

Then he did not. When he got home, he was sitting on the couch, still in his uniform.

“You said you would come,” Eli said.

My dad rubbed his face. “I know.”

But it didn’t sound like anything. It didn’t hold.

“What happened?” my mom asked.

“I got busy.”

That was it there was no explanation, no fixing it. Later that night, my brother asked me, “What do you call it when someone says they’ll do something and then doesn’t? I knew the word, or I used to, but I couldn’t say it.

“I do not know,” I told him. After that, we started talking less, but not on purpose. It just felt like talking didn’t do as much anymore. My mom would say, “Be careful,” or “Don’t forget,” but it all sounded the same, like suggestions instead of something stronger and my dad stopped making plans out loud.

Then one night, we lost a bigger word. It happened quietly. My mom came into my room while I was on my phone. She stood in the doorway like she wanted to say something important. “You know that we...” she started then she stopped and tried again.

“You know that we... we... you know.”

I nodded.

“Yeah.” But it didn’t feel like I knew. Without the word, it felt like she was talking around something instead of saying it. After she left, I sat there for a while trying to remember what it felt like when people used that word. I could kind of remember the idea, but it didn’t feel solid anymore, it was like trying to remember a dream.

My brother noticed it the next day. “Why don’t you say it anymore?” he asked my mom.

She froze.

“Say what?”

“The one you say before bed.”

She didn’t answer right away.

Left Unsaid • Cayla Tisevski

Then she said, “We don’t need to say it every time.”

Eli looked down at his plate.

“Okay,” he said.

But he didn’t sound okay.

After that, things got quieter. We still ate dinner together, but nobody talked much. My dad would scroll on his phone. My mom would clean things that were already clean. My brother would push his food around his plate. I started staying in my room more.

One night the power went out, everything went dark at once. Everyone came into my room. We sat on the floor with a flashlight between us, the house made weird noises when it was quiet like that. Nobody said anything we just sat there in silence. My brother leaned against my shoulder.

“I don’t like this,” he said.

“Yeah,” I said.

“I feel like we’re forgetting how to be a family.”

That word didn’t disappear, at least not yet, but hearing him say it made it feel fragile. My mom reached over and took my dad’s hand. It wasn’t a big moment. Nothing dramatic happened. But it felt like something small clicked back into place.

We didn’t get the words back.

Not the first one. Not the others.

But after that night, things changed a little. My dad started showing up more, even if he didn’t say why. My mom would sit with my brother while he did homework instead of just reminding him. We still didn’t say certain things out loud.

A few days later, my brother asked me, “Do you think more words will go away?”

Left Unsaid • Cayla Tisevski

“Probably,” I said.

“Do you think we’ll forget everything?”

I thought about it, about the missing words. The ones we couldn’t say anymore. The ones that used to fix things.

“I don’t know,” I said.

Then I added, “But I think we’ll still know some stuff.”

“Like what?”

I looked at him.

“Like how to stay,” I said.

He nodded like that made sense.

That night, before going to bed, my mom stood in the hallway.

She looked at all of us, like she wanted to say something again.

She didn’t.

But she smiled a little.

And somehow, even without the word, I understood what she meant.

What's Left of It. Eemi Toma

The dolma was too neat, and Markos didn't say anything about it.

He stood there a second too long looking at the table and Mariam called from the kitchen without even seeing him, "I know, just sit down."

"I didn't say anything."

"You were about to."

He pulled the chair out and sat. It scraped the floor, same as it had for as long as he could remember, same sound, same chair, same kitchen.

He put his elbows on the table and looked at everything. Bread on one side, lamb in the middle, potatoes that were a little burnt on one end. And the dolma, each piece set apart from the others like she'd thought about where to put them.

Their mother never did it that way. She put them in a bowl and that was it, and if you wanted three you took three, and if the one on top fell apart a little when you picked it up that was fine, eat it anyway.

Mariam came in and sat across from him. She still had the dish towel in her hand.

"You used the notebook," he said.

"Some of it."

"How much of it is even usable."

"Maybe half." She set the towel on the table. "A lot of it is just her writing to herself. Like she's thinking out loud. Add more if it needs it. More of what? Needs it how?"

"She never thought anyone else would be making it," Markos said.

"No. She didn't."

He looked at the dolma again. Mariam was watching him look at it.

"I haven't tried it yet," she said. "Before you ask."

"Why not."

She unfolded her napkin and folded it back up. She'd done that since she was a kid, the folding and unfolding, their mother used to tease her about it at the table. "Because we always tasted things together first. You and me. That was the thing we did."

Markos leaned back in his chair. Outside it was getting dark earlier than it should, that November thing where four o'clock looks like seven. "Mariam. That was years ago."

"Four years."

What's Left of It. • Eemi Toma

"Yeah."

"You say it like it's nothing."

"I'm not saying it's nothing."

"Then what are you saying."

He rubbed the back of his neck. "I'm saying four years is long enough that maybe you don't have to do all this."

She looked at him. "Do all what."

"This." He gestured at the table, not trying to be rude about it, just meaning all of it. The setup, the food, the notebook she'd clearly spent real time with. "You don't have to keep doing this to yourself."

"I'm not doing anything to myself."

"Okay."

"I'm making dinner."

"Okay, Mariam."

"Don't okay me like that."

He picked up his fork and put it back down. "I just don't want to watch you be sad."

"Then don't watch," she said, but not mean. Tired, more like.

They sat there for a minute. He could hear the refrigerator humming in the kitchen, a drip from the faucet she'd been meaning to fix.

"You know what I think about?" she said. "I think about how much I've already forgotten. Like I'll be somewhere and I'll try to remember exactly what her voice sounded like when she was annoyed, not when she was really mad, just that regular annoyed, and I can almost get there but not all the way. And every time I try it feels a little further away." She smoothed the napkin flat on her leg. "I can't do anything about the voice. But this I could actually do something about."

Markos looked at the dolma on the plate.

"So what happens if it's wrong," he said. "If it tastes completely different."

"Then it does."

"That doesn't scare you."

"Of course it scares me." She said it plainly, like it was obvious. "But not knowing is worse. Not

What's Left of It. • Eemi Toma

knowing is what I've been living with and I'm tired of it."

He didn't say anything to that.

"You left," Mariam said.

He looked up at her.

"I'm not bringing it up to fight. I'm just saying it." She picked up her fork, turned it over in her hand. "You left and I stayed and we dealt with it in different ways and neither of us was wrong probably. But you being somewhere else doesn't mean the rest of us stopped missing her just as much."

"I know that."

"I know you know it. I just needed to say it."

Markos looked at the table. At the bread and the lamb and the potatoes burnt at one end. At the dolma, all those careful little pieces.

"I called you because I wanted you here," Mariam said. "Not to convince you of anything. You can think this whole thing is crazy. That's fine, think it. I just didn't want to sit here by myself and try it for the first time."

He reached over and took the serving spoon. He held it there over the plate. "It looks right," he said quietly. "I'll say that much."

Mariam didn't say anything.

"The way she folded them at the end, that little tuck." He pointed without touching. "You got that."

"I practiced."

"How many times."

"Enough," she said.

He looked at her across the table. She was sitting up straight the way she did when she was trying not to show how much something mattered to her. Fork in her hand, napkin in her lap, waiting.

He looked back down at the plate.

He put one piece on his plate. Then he put one on hers.

Outside the rain started, just a few drops at first ticking against the window, and neither of them moved, and neither of them spoke, and the food sat there between them getting a little colder while they both looked at their plates like they were waiting for the other one to go first.

Spill the Tea Eemi Toma

I tipped the mug by accident.
That's how it always starts,
not dramatic, just clumsy.
Brown heat slid across the table
like it had somewhere better to be.

The tea didn't shout.
It spread.
It crept toward the notebook,
soaked into old receipts,
warped the corner of a photo
I forgot was even there.

Steam lifted like a confession
no one asked for.
The room smelled too honest, suddenly.
I thought about all the things
people beg you not to tell,
how once they're out,
you can't scoop them back in the cup.

I wiped and wiped,
but the stain stayed warm longer than it should have,
as if the table remembered.

Villanelle: The Calendar Eemi Toma

The calendar says the days will run.
January moves slow with frost and gray.
It feels like the year has just begun.

February ends before it's done.
March brings rain that washes snow away.
The calendar says the days will run.

April opens flowers to the sun.
May forgets how quickly it can stay.
It feels like the year has just begun.

June holds light until night is outdone.
July burns bright through every day.
The calendar says the days will run.

August droops in heavy sun.
September rings with school and change.
It feels like the year has just begun.

October counts what can't outrun.
November fades the sky to gray.
The calendar says the days will run.
It feels like the year has just begun.

amar jaan

Tasnim Uddin

the petrichor of petrol and dewdrops
unrivaled to even the glimmer of Dhakha's skyscrapers

the june monsoon stampedes on the tin roof
the wild child, sliver of my liver, squealing, limbs flailing

hey inside come, the cold will fall

jade of the banana leaves embrace the child sweet
next year at this time they will weep

like they did when Mowgli caught sight of the maiden
for now the child sways on, like the stalks in the bamboo grove

can you taste the tang of innocence?
my child
bundled in cotton muslin, a hollow creek beside
curled against the wet bark, breathing is a form of waiting

By the Skin of Her Teeth Tasnim Uddin

the flesh of her gums
mauve bleeding into sanguine
 I pull
 she writhes
 saturated, molten in my
grip like a vice
tongue tracing the rugae
dipping into the
 dulcet of the uvula
 I bite
 she heaves
 obscene, muffled murmurs
 a clutch around the carotid
mouth slack head tipped back
 I unleash
 she retreats.

sister of the groom **Tasnim Uddin**

Red, heavy brocade, red the glitter, red zari thread, meant to engulf my frame. But my jaw is crooked and my breasts misaligned.

You look ready,

I know she expects me to face her; tilts my chin up, leaving me no choice but to brave her lantern's glow. When we lock eyes, all I can see is their noses identical, aquiline the eagle's beak. I noticed it the moment I first saw them, standing there in the foyer. Cupid's bow full, sharp cut jaw. They were Apollo and Artemis, inseparable.

Ready, how can I be?

The mirror in front of us continues its taunts. Why do you look that way?

This matrimonial costume droops off my shoulders, lacunas of blood pool at my ankles. When I asked him what color, he had told me to pick whatever I fancied.

You look ravishing in red, she remarks, her Mehndhi-stained hands clasping my hips, running up the embellished bodice. I'm having trouble counting my breaths.

Do I?

Of course, there's no doubt about it, each word bounces off the embroidery stitched at my bosom, caging my thumping heart. In and out.

It's a strange feeling that creeps up on me then, tiptoes around my back, tickling my neck. The moniker placed atop my head looks at me and frowns. Bellows out, this girl is an imposter. She is not all adjusted. I swat it away, squash it down, and shove it under the mesh crinoline of my skirt. I shiver, stick my tongue out to wet my dry lips, purse and pout.

Oh, love, don't worry, you'll be alright,

She takes me in then, cradling me in her arms, the arch of her nose pressed to the fabric at my head. I can feel the curve at the corner of her lips. It seeps through my crown, into the groove of my upper palate, down my linea alba. Would he feel this warm?

I take a breath, while we're one. One with the skin at her neck, where she pulls my face close. It's of aldehyde crisp, and light, like the clothes set to dry in the heat of the afternoon sun. Would he smell this sweet?

She pulls back, her calloused palms cupping my elbows. I have a sudden urge to press forward. I a sunbird inexplicably drawn toward the light in her crescent eyes.

You must say yes, take this dress, you look ravishing. As she circles me, lithe as a leopard. I admire her height, just a head above mine; she shields me just so. Back then, in the

sister of the groom • Tasnim Uddin

foyer, when she had stood straight to meet me, face flickering bright, he had slumped his shoulders, eyes flitting to the alabaster walls.

Will you say yes?

The adornments swirling around the gown cease their current, they have shifted into their places, under her word and her will. The gown that had just assailed me so, dotes on me, child in mother's grasp. Kisses my fingertips, pats my head.

See how you look? The mirror soothes.

I glance a final look at the sight before us. The sun from the windows catches in the gaps between her teeth. With her body next to mine now, we make a conjugal portrait.

Oh, you'll look wonderful, it'll be a perfect nikkah, don't you agree?

The vision of my descent down the aisle glimmers within my cortex. On that day, with my veil draped over my eyes and the world a rich, hazy red, I'll come to my rest. The sheer curtain of petals will separate me from my beloved.

When the aqd has been made, I will seal my acceptance. My beloved will come to me, parting the curtain, like the bow of a boat, will lift my veil and gasp at the sight of me, in scarlet with the hand-stitched beads, will tilt my chin, and force me to meet those crescent-shaped eyes. My beloved, the arch of the aquiline, plush of the Cupid's bow, will come to meet the heat of my cheek, and whisper at the mouth of my ear.

You look ravishing, my dear.

I do

The Bed

Josh Wandzel

I lay in bed all day

It is my comfort place,
my home,
My shelter.

Two pillows soften
To the touch of your head,
A soft blanket,
that heats the body,
A sinking mattress,
with the touch
Of your body.

Through every comfort,
Emotion,
Comfort,
The bed has been there for me.

18 Hole Game Josh Wandzel

Walking to the tee box
The wind is whistling by

With one swing
My hands are sizzling,
Like a bonfire

The ball traveling with distance
Passing in the air,
Like a shooting star

Birds chirping from every angle
But not one in sight

The noises can distract
But I play through it all

The round feel like an eternity
Players moving slow
This is absurdly

Counting my score
may take a while.

But driving back home,
I left the course
with a smile.

