

An aerial photograph of ocean waves, showing the intricate patterns of white foam and the deep blue water. The waves are breaking from the top of the frame towards the bottom, creating a sense of movement and depth. The lighting is soft, highlighting the texture of the water and the foam.

# Off Center

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# A Letter From the Editors

## For Such a Time as This

In one of the more famous Bible stories, Esther, after seeing her country overtaken by Persia, is turned into a queen, at which point her uncle says, “Yet who knows whether you have come to the kingdom for such a time as this?” (Esther 4:14, NKJV). This is a story of great resilience in a time of turmoil, ending with the restoration of the Jewish nation thanks to the work of Esther from her place in the royal palace.

The writers who have contributed their artistry to this edition of *Off Center* have been through a lot. Whether they are students in their early twenties or fathers and mothers of older children, the last few years have displayed levels of upheaval not seen for nearly half a century, whether it be political, social, biological, or militant. Many, when faced with such circumstances, would be apt to throw in the towel and ride out the tragedies of the modern world. Some, however, like those whose material one will find in this magazine, have fought through it all, producing lovely works which encompass the many emotions which can come into being on a day-to-day basis while also showing nuanced reflection upon those things which have been instrumental in their present person.

What is clear through all of this material, however, is that no matter how horrid the world can get, there will always be resilience. It is when the day is foggy and the storms of politics are at their worst that the color and sunshine of art are needed most. Although there may be discussion of loss, of heartbreak, or even of death, each piece reflects a step towards a future where the mistakes of the past become the building blocks of a greater person. Mistakes are a part of life; it is what we do with them that makes us better.

As we hopefully see the slowly-approaching end to the COVID-19 pandemic and the rise of political tension across the world, it is tempting to believe that we are being robbed of our present life and, perhaps, even of our future. Instead, however, the works within this magazine tell a story of recognition and belief in a better outcome than just the tragedy of the current stage of the world through a reflection on what is most important in life: love, family, and truth. We are all products of what we have gone through, but perhaps we, too, have been born for such a time as this.

Nash Meade

Kelsey  
Tabb



Hobbeard

Kat Kolby

← Acrylic on canvas →





Dew  
Kelsey Talbott





# Chapter XII

Kelsey Talbott



*...Hallward sees Dorian and in a few moments Basil's hand was on Dorian's arm. They converse in the fog of London in the direction of Dorian's home. As they reach Dorian's door, Basil tells him he's going to be gone to Paris for six months but needs to speak to him before he goes. Dorian is still resistant and trying to get rid of Basil, but finally lets his old friend in. Basil quickly gets to the point of his visit and confronts Dorian about the horrible things he has been hearing about him, none of which he can bring himself to believe about this man that he believes is so pure and innocent. Dorian gets more annoyed as Basil continues his line of questioning about Dorian's influences until he finally tells him, "take care, Basil. You go too far."*

Basil can feel a shift with Dorian. He hadn't noticed it before, but Basil finally senses something different about the man that was once his muse. He feels something in the pit of his stomach—something is wrong. Basil checks his pocket watch and mutters, "You know, Dorian, it really is getting late... I should get going."

"Yes, Basil, that sounds like a good idea. Let me show you out."

"Thank you. I will send a letter when I have settled in Paris. Take care, Dorian."

"You too, Basil," Dorian retorts, sounding a little bored.

Basil quickly makes his way down the steps and crosses the street, putting distance between himself and Dorian as quickly as possible without raising suspicion. Basil ponders the interaction that had just taken place and what had been different about Dorian. *Are the things people are saying true? Could this sweet, angelic-faced man have turned into something so ugly and corrupt?* He isn't sure he can accept that yet, but he had seen something dark and sinister flash across his friend's face.

Basil arrives at the train station just before twelve. The fog is still heavy and thick as he passes through the gate. People around him are focused on their tasks: a man dragging a trunk, another digging through his pocket for his ticket, a woman saying goodbye to her sister. He boards the train and makes his way to his cabin to settle in for the trip. He passes a woman carrying a crying baby, but hardly notices them. His brain is as heavy as the fog outside the window. He reaches his compartment, places his coat on a hook, and falls deliberately into his seat. The thoughts swimming through his head weighing him down. He pulls out a sketch pad and a pencil to pass

the time as he has the entire cabin to himself, but as he places the tip to the paper, he finds himself lost in thought over Dorian. *Has he really done the things people are whispering about him? Could such a still youthful face bear the weight of the deeds accused?*

He is still lost in thought when someone knocks on the door. He drops his pencil as he looks up to see a man sliding the door open.

“I’m sorry! I didn’t mean to startle you,” the man softly says to Basil.

Shifting his things, Basil stands to greet the stranger and retrieve his lost pencil. “No, it’s fine. I was just a little distracted.”

“Artist?” the man asks, nodding towards the paper as he makes his way to the empty seat.

Still a little preoccupied, Basil nods. He shuffles his papers back into his bag and looks up at the stranger for the first time. He’s... beautiful. His wild, wavy, copper red hair frames his bright green eyes perfectly; his smooth, fair skin dusted with freckles; his smile warm and comforting. Offering his hand towards the stranger, he introduces himself. “How rude of me! I’m Basil.”

“Rowan. Pleasure to meet you,” he responds with a smile.

Basil cannot help but drink him in, and as a result, almost forgets to let go of his hand. He feels a tinge of warmth—of happiness—he hasn’t felt in a very long time.

“So, what were you drawing?” Rowan asks, tugging Basil back into the moment.

“Uh... that, um, nothing. I was just passing time.” He can feel his face flushing.

Rowan laughs, “Ah, so it’s a secret, then.”

Basil tells him that the sketchpad is new and still blank. The conversation shifts to their travels, where Basil discovers that his new friend will also be staying in Paris too. They agree to get together in a couple days for coffee at Le Café du Peintre.

.....

Sunlight trickles in through the sheer white curtains. Basil smiles as he hears a soft snore. He opens his eyes to see a mess of copper hair splayed across the golden pillowcase. It reminds him of a field of sunrise-red pom flowers in autumn. He watches Rowan’s chest slowly rise and fall.

Basil’s mind begins to think back to the blond man he once called his muse. He wonders what has become of Dorian Gray. *Did he fall victim to the gossip that surrounded him? Did he ever fall in love and marry?*



When Basil arrived in Paris a month ago, he couldn't bring himself to reach out to Dorian. He was still frightened of what he saw in that beautiful face. He couldn't get past the feeling that crept over him that last night he saw him.

"Good morning," Rowan whispers as he leans over and brushes his lips across Basil's cheek. "What were you thinking about?"

"Breakfast," he replies with a grin.

Rowan playfully rolls his eyes as he sits up on the side of the bed. Basil watches as the sheets slide down his torso. He takes in every muscle and every curve. He watches him get up and walk over to the small table before lifting the large, white pitcher to pour a cup of water.

"Will you be spending the whole day painting again or can I steal you away for a walk through the park?" Rowan asks as he takes a sip from the cup.

"I think a little fresh air would be nice. We can stop by that small café we like for lunch, Le Café du Peintre."

Rowan smiles in agreement for the day's plans and goes to get dressed. Basil stays in bed for a few minutes contemplating this new life of his. His time with Rowan has made him realize that he deserves much more than the life he was living in London. He deserves someone who adores him as much as he adores them. He deserves the love he found on that train that foggy night.



Thoughts of Dorian continued to grow scarcer as time went on. Basil no longer mused over that young man with golden hair he met so long ago. Dorian's spell over Basil had been broken. He didn't have any influence over Basil anymore. Basil was free to live the life he was meant to live, not consumed with feelings for a man who didn't even care for him. His thoughts were now filled with Rowan, his paintings, and this happy life he hadn't realized he was missing out on.

*Author's Commentary:*

I chose to rework chapter twelve from *The Picture of Dorian Gray* by Oscar Wilde because it quickly became my favorite work we read in my literature class. The main thing I wanted to play around with was an alternate fate for Basil. I am not really a romantic, but I felt that Basil deserved more than the crappy card he was dealt. While I am not totally appalled by him dying in the novel because you have to realize Dorian was going to have to snuff out the only “light” in his life (ahem, Basil), I wanted to play with the idea of him meeting someone new and having him move on from Dorian and his friendship with Henry.

I tried to stay parallel to the writing of the original and not make it too modern and/or disconnected from the original. I wanted to make it seem like this was actually an option that could have happened within the book and expand on the life that Basil would go on to live when he left for Paris. I also chose his new lover to be distinctively different from Dorian’s character. I planned the descriptions to be different so as not to confuse them or insinuate that the attraction (for either) was solely appearances. I wanted to keep the idea that Basil saw something deeper, something in their soul. I gave him someone that was still beautiful/handsome but had more light or fire inside them. Hopefully Rowan and his flaming hair can be the change that Basil needed to live a happier life.



# Bubbles on the Knoll

Kelsey Talbott



# Seven Idylls

Nash Meade



I.

A sea of blades bends in a breeze—  
A hypnotic trance which pines  
For stained clothes and children at ease,  
As footsteps impress their trailing lines.

It tickles tiny toes with absent glee,  
Till laughter spreads across the glade.  
The rolling tide of green calls the free,  
Hoping hapless bards whistle with its blades.

These emerald plains kiss the summer day,  
Which beckons cowards and the brave  
To banish winter's biting gray—  
All heroes guarding hairs on Whitman's grave.

Why transcend the jade-clad spears  
With philosophy and idle chatter,  
When lovers lay upon it all their fears—  
Finding the truth in the matter.

II.

Legless scales slither beneath the green  
As wayward wanderers between dancing feet.  
They lurk in shadows, creeping unseen  
To their muscles' undulating beat.

Scaly wisdom is swiftly crushed by fear,  
Which springs from an ancient garden.  
In sunlight she crawls—a dazzling paint smear  
Who, beneath the cover of night, will harden.



Bound to earth by a curse from above,  
Endowed with the wisdom of the clay.  
O, how you must envy our love of the dove,  
Watching us through the month of May.

I shall love you, accursed to accursed,  
Ye who must hide from most.  
Coil around me, a lover of the worst—  
Allow me to be your cordial host.

III.

A shadowless heart illuminates the faces  
Of strangers who have found their rest.  
Heat burns away any melancholy traces  
Left from their journey to the blest.

Consumer of anguish, creator of passion,  
Endow your disciples with eternal flame.  
Give us your sparks in dazzling fashion,  
Till the shadows cover our shame.

The roar of fire hides the sweet nothings  
Passed from ear to ear.  
A face—shining like a half moon blushing—  
Steals a kiss before it's ensnared by fear.

Between the light and the dark the bodies lay,  
Sleeping around their journey's end.  
The pain and the suffering slip away  
While Hestia smiles as she tends.

IV.

The sun's softer love lends her silver  
To the sleepless and the broken.  
Her children blink in idle chatter around her,  
Till one sends streaking a wishful token.

Emotions rise and fall with the tide  
Beneath her loving sight.  
She beams on the hopeless lovers with pride  
As they feverishly write sonnets at night.

Wisdom lies within her dimples too,  
Causing minds to wax philosophical.  
A Socratic moon rises just as true—  
For those caught up in the illogical.

As steady as the tide she forms,  
The moon guards her quiet domain.  
She watches after those in violent storms,  
Giving us hope after the rain.

V.

The sun chases after his playful love,  
Taking his throne in the sky.  
Loving people wake to the cooing doves,  
Glad that their tears have run dry.

The dawn calls for the hefts and heaves  
Of those stirring from their rest.  
But as hands intertwine cups of steaming leaves,  
One stands on the Isle of the Blest.



The blushing sunrise gives up his chase,  
As darkness hides beneath the trees.  
Warmth emanates from his still-blazing face,  
Which beckons the play of the breeze.

The birds begin their symphonies of song  
For the risers between six and eight.  
Parents listen as the children dance along,  
Cut loose from the strings of fate.

VI.

The people come streaming to the steeped hill  
For their dose of faith on the first.  
Some come for comfort, some for the thrill—  
While others quench their painful thirst.

Grandiose gestures overtake the preacher  
As he rains brimstone upon their heads.  
The wailing and anger the blessed feature  
For those seeking their weekly bread.

Everything and nothing is caught in time  
As faith is built and shattered.  
Some will leave wondering if, like a rhyme,  
Anything within ever mattered.

As prayers rise to heaven's gates,  
Comfort settles fluttering hearts.  
Do not disparage faith's lifting of weights,  
Though some souls seek a different start.



## VII.

Rows and rows of crumbling stones  
Entrenched across a silent hill.  
They stand resolute, these sojourners of bones,  
Till earth reclaims them as till.

Tears watered the upturned dirt  
As bodies were laid in Earth's womb.  
Tragedies rendering faith inert,  
Until flowers upon them bloom.

Death visits the graves with lost souls  
And points to the stone's crumbling face.  
The dash between dates measuring lives whole,  
As bodies become flowers without a trace.

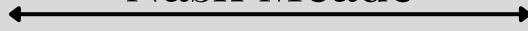
Each moment lived is a moment to gain,  
Till God claims one for the afterlife.  
That dash between dates contains laughter in rain—  
A moment immortalized to memory for life.

### *Author's Commentary:*

I wrote "Seven Idylls" as part of a bookend for a larger collection. Each Idyll is meant to be a picture of everyday life without any kind of moral judgement upon it: a picture of living in the moment. The serpent is just that—a serpent—and church is just church. At the end of our lives, each of those "moments" are the type of memories we will keep, which is what I wanted to emphasize. What is "great" is oftentimes nothing more than a good cup of tea with one's significant other on a cloudless morning.

# Rust

Nash Meade



# The Stuff of Man

Daniel Williams



Behold, I am the stuff of man,  
Unfettered and unchained  
When wisdom can undo the atom,  
And I shall do the same

The breaking forth of fury and  
A sigh that rends the sky  
Outshines the sun, upends all faith  
And countless shadows die

All desolation of the past  
Becomes you, all and one;  
Behold, I am the stuff of man,  
unfettered and undone

## *Author's Commentary:*

I started writing this poem not with a topic in mind, but with a set metrical structure. The lines alternate between tetrameter and trimeter. You could also think of it as a split-heptameter rhyming couplet, since I wanted to make sure the second and fourth lines of the three stanzas all followed a strict rhyme. I found as I was writing that I let my own psychological word associations dictate the words that I chose within those parameters.

As the poem came together, it became clear to me that the imagery I used reflects my anxiety over the threat of nuclear weaponry—a threat that has only been made more tangible in the light of recent international events. It is my belief that poetry should speak to what the author believes in, and I hope my piece brings people to search for paths to peace and de-escalation from conflict.



# Icy Branches

Kelsey Talbott





# Lisa

## Richard Vigorelli



Welcome to my office. Either you are here because you want my help with something that goes bump in the whatever, or you want to do what I can do. I warn you; this is not for the faint of heart. What I do is serious and very dangerous. But everyone starts somewhere. This was my first event.

When I was a kid, I was scared of the dark. Well, it wasn't exactly the dark I was scared of, it was this lady that I saw in the dark hallway that connected the living room to my bedroom. Everywhere else I was fine with low light or even full darkness, but just this one place terrified me. The lady that I saw looked like my mom, but her face was pale, her lips were blue, and her eyes were bloodshot and bulging. Her belly was big too. Whenever I would go to get ready for bed, I would see her and she would always reach for me.

Every night from the time I was four years old I would see her. I just didn't understand why this was happening or what she was. My parents used to yell at me, and my big sister would make fun of me and call me names because I was terrified. Then one day when I was six, I think, my dad asked me what I was seeing in the hall in the night.

I described the lady, and he sat back with a very concerned look on his face. He called his priest that night and everything was safe for me for a few months. I turned seven and my little life was at ease. That is, until the first snowfall of the year.

I was in my bed when I woke up and saw her in my room. She was smiling at me. I screamed as loud as I could and called for my mommy and daddy. They came rushing in and turned on the light. The lady disappeared before they could see her. With tears streaming down my young face, I told them what I had seen. My sister was furious with me.

"Mike," my mom said, "you said this was taken care of. You need to tell him what is going on and why he can see her."

"Jane, he's too damn young. He won't understand."

"I don't care how old he is, I have a midterm tomorrow and I need to sleep!" my sister snapped as she went back to her bedroom.

"Mike, get it done."

My mom then left the room, leaving my dad and me alone.

“It’s okay, Sport,” my dad said. “I believe you; I’ve seen her too. But we can’t do anything right now. Let’s go to my room and you can sleep in my bed. I’ll keep you safe.”

He then picked up my tiny boy body that was now tired from crying and set me between him and my mom. I slept safe and sound.

“I need to tell you what we are,” my dad said as soon as my sister had left the following night for her date with her boyfriend. “Our family is really good at seeing ghosts. We have been fighters for centuries. We have been the ones that keep the world safe from evil. I can do this, and so can you; you’re just coming into this very young.”

My mom was at work, and it was just me and my dad. The TV was off, which was very rare. That is how I knew this was important.

“So, who is that lady I see? Why is she always reaching for me?”

My dad sighed with sadness.

“That is my first wife. She died here before I met your mother.”

“What are we going to do?”

“We’re going to help her,” he said as he took my small hand in his. “C’mon, son.”

It was just me and my dad. He took me into the hallway and kept the lights off. He stood behind me with his big strong policeman hands on my shoulders. Somehow, I knew I was safe.

The lady was standing there looking at me with very scary but loving eyes.

“Hi Lisa,” my dad said to her with a slight choke in his voice.

“Jaimie, sweetie, come give Mommy a hug,” she said in a hollow voice.

“No!” I cried. “You’re scary.”

“Dammit, Jaimie, I’m your mother! Come hug me!”

“Lisa,” my dad said in his calmest tone. “This isn’t your son. This is my and Jane’s son. His name is—”

“You cheated on me with that slut! That is Jaimie and you are turning him against me!”

“No, Lisa. Things have changed. Jaimie doesn’t live here anymore; he is with his dad now. You have been dead for ten years. You need to leave; you need to cross over.”

I never saw her again. The hallway was quiet and I never had another problem. A few years later, Lisa came to my mom in a dream and apologized for her haunting. As for me, I got over my fear, and now it is the dark that is afraid of me. Both my parents presided over my initial training until I was old enough to learn on my own. Now I face the world of magic and monsters as a paladin, for lack of a better word.

So, is that why you have come to see me today? Do you wish to do what I do? It's fine if you can see things and do stuff; welcome to the club, I guess. It also doesn't pay that well, so you are going to need a side gig, or make this your side.

Now, there are certain rules. Once you are in, you are in. It's not like quitting the Tastee-Freez so you can work at the truck stop. You will be marked. Even if you are not actively doing this work, things will just come up and you will have to fight, and you might lose. I've been beaten a few times, but I managed to survive; others haven't been so lucky. Maybe I will tell you about them later.

So, what do you say? Do you want to do this?

*Author's Commentary:*

This story is based on a true event in my life. I changed the names and some of the specifics to make it more interesting. This is a lead-in story for a series that I came up with a few years back. Basically, it's Doctor Who meets Dresden Files. Most of the stories are about 1000 words, give or take 200. My narrator and main character will never be named. Each story is a recollection of the narrator to what I imagine as his student or friend. The stories are not necessarily in chronological order, but there are no contradictions in them.



# Call of the Void

James Vest



The call of the void. A phenomenon about when a perfectly sane human being is afflicted at the sight of a high vantage point. They might have a thought to jump in this mass emptiness below not knowing what is beneath them. Though as the man thought these words to himself, he didn't seem to have the feeling to jump off this cliff.

The fresh air entered his nose as he softly breathed, taking in the sight of the mountains that still had snow on top of their peaks. He stared in awe as the sun was perfectly positioned between two peaks, piercing the sky with its bright yellow light. The clouds swirled around it gently, trying not to cover the heavenly sight that was in front of the man as he slowly exhaled. He stood up and slowly walked to the edge of the cliff. He slowly looked down to see the void below. He could neither see the bottom nor could he make out how far down it might go. He started to turn away before he heard it. He heard the siren's call of the void. He swiftly twisted his head back towards the empty drop.

The inky black abyss seemed to take shape and form to what looked like a group of shadowy figures. He watched as the figures slowly extended a black finger, urging the man to join them. Their high-pitch screams continued, freezing the man in place... until he was face-to-face with one of the figures. It stroked his cheek. Its jet-black lips came close to the man. It whispered in a calm but sweet tone, "Join us," as sweat beaded from the man's face. He quickly pushed the woman-like figure back into the empty void. He silently stood back, feeling the sticky goo on his ear before getting one more good look of these "sirens."

The man slowly sighed before looking away from the figures and walking away from the cliff, never coming back there. In fear. In fear of the siren's call. The siren's call of the void.

## *Author's Commentary:*

I wrote "Call of the Void" after I read a fun fact about looking at mountains and learned about this phenomenon where you would want to jump off, even with no mental problems. So, I decided to write a story about a climber looking off a cliff, but then I had the idea of putting sirens at the bottom as if calling him to jump down to join them, making it where it had a creepy tone. I chose a horror-esque style because I've never written a creepy story like this before.

# Depths

## Percy Verret



Rivers run deep  
but Oceans run deeper  
though giving less sign of  
inner currents  
until their Depths are  
so disturbed that they  
rise in crash to  
lash upon the craft  
that ventures on their  
Surface—  
impenetrable indigo  
turned guardian of its  
own colossal  
consciousness;  
monstrous midnight  
turned avenger of its  
own tumultuous  
trauma—its  
own inarticulable  
injury;  
when a river is riled,  
it roils its surface—rushes  
to batter and bruise;  
when an ocean is awoken  
it swells—  
and swallows whole.



### *Author's Commentary:*

While driving through the city one night, I found myself reflecting on the differences in how personalities respond to trying circumstances: some rising immediately in loud protest and others bearing—or simmering—under those circumstances quietly. Because the former personalities react more aggressively to affront, we tend to regard them as the more powerful, the more capable; yet as I reflected, I realized that it was the latter personality—the ocean spirits—that I had seen more often weather out and survive trying circumstances before which “rivers” ran dry—and also break forth in actual doom once they had finally reached their limit. With this metaphor clearly engrained in my mind, I wrote the poem at red lights all the way home.

# Effective Writing Not From a Writing God.

Morgan Stence



I am not a writing god. I do not know all of the grammatical rules. I do not know the strict rules of MLA, APA, or Chicago by heart. I do not know the ever-changing grammar rules, or even if the Oxford comma is still relevant. I've watched the dynamically different styles, the variation of spelling, and the evolution of an individual's English over time. Even within myself.

When I was in pre-school, I learned the alphabet. I learned the individuality and the variation from A to Z along with the tune of "twinkle, twinkle, little star." I learned that sometimes the letters were BIGGER than others but at times they were almost level through it all. The colors that the alphabet included didn't really matter, but they did make for a nice visual to my world of color.

I am regularly asked by my mother why I begin a sentence with a conjunction. And, if I am being honest, I have no clue. It is the way I speak, and the way I speak filters into the way I write. I am not an expert in the sense that I can be the one to judge rules based off of what I know of the English language. All I can say is that every writer is different, never being the same.

In the third grade, I was told to use certain words in a sentence. Simple words such as "dog," "cat," "apple." I always formulated some form of story. "The apple fell from the tree. I ate the apple." "I have a dog and three cats. Their names are maddy, chloe, ixby, and shiling." I did not know the rules of a Proper Noun, I did not care.

I am always gifted a journal for either Christmas or my birthday. My grandmother has provided me a lot of such journals. Journals that I fill with poems, diary entries, and short stories, though observational writing had never been my style. In addition to the plethora of journals come the grammar handbooks. I have a total of three. Three books that I only touch when asked but am expected to have memorized overall.

The sixth grade was my most hated year in k-12. My teacher struggled so hard to teach us the rules of punctuation. Periods go at the end of statements. Commas have one of several uses. “Tell me what a coordinating conjunction is.” The day we did not understand the different types of sentences, she took her black dry-erase marker and smeared it across the smart board: Stunning her class into silence.

I have put every single one of my papers through a grammar check since my senior year of high school. I have had several people look at every paper I have written in an attempt to obtain the false notion of “a perfect paper.” I often did not care for the topics I wrote about. I did not care for whatever argument I made. I wanted it to be grammatically correct and the formatting to be textbook. I had lost my spark for writing.

I did not like to write until an assignment in the eighth grade. We were told to write a one-page story in the style of a Greek myth, but in this myth a god was supposed to learn a lesson. I wrote a three-page story where I blended the idea of "Beauty and the Beast" with Aphrodite, goddess of love and beauty. I received an “A,” and was told that I have a real gift. My spark was ignited that day.

It was at the end of my sophomore year of college when I had had enough. I decided that writing in any form was a valid way to communicate ideas tell stories and share feelings. I was tired of writing papers that didn’t motivate me, that made me address something as objective as the color symbolism in Flannery O’Connor’s Writing. So, I developed what I deem as my creed, my guiding light for writing, my principle:  
I decided that “To Hell with Correct; I Want Effective.”

*Author's Commentary:*

This piece I wrote as an assignment for my Advanced Composition course in the spring of 2021. It was a blending of different writing techniques (mainly Oliver Sacks, Gloria Anzaldúa, and Ted Chiang) to form my style. It had originally started as a poem that just wasn't working, no matter how hard I wanted it to. So, I tried out creative non-fiction and made it sort-of a personal essay. This way, I was able to let out my own personal frustrations with the way writing is portrayed. I wanted something that I could communicate to the people I was seeing become more and more frustrated by writing and at the same time show a bit of my personal writing story. This piece has slowly become my own personal writing creed, so I decided to share it.



# Modern Vintage Photography

Sarah Hicks



# Shoulding All Over Myself: Meditations During Autopsy

Joshua Baker



There is blood splashed on my face shield from when I removed the left lung. One little spot is located perfectly in my line of vision. Not only do I have to compete with the fogging of the face shield, but now I have to look down my nose to avoid both obstructions for the majority of this autopsy. I knew I should have pulled that lung out a little more slowly. I should have been more careful separating those adhesions. I could have...

“Stop. Yesterday was a good day,” I whisper matter-of-factly to the decedent I have gotten to know very well over the last 10 minutes or so.

The morgue is nothing like what is depicted on those true crime shows. There is not just one table with a body covered by a sheet in a dimly lit, ominous brick room. Instead, fluorescent lights illuminate a large room with at least 12-15 bodies on tables—all completely naked without a sheet covering them. Some have taken a shotgun to their own face. Most have succumbed to the opioid epidemic that accounts for the majority of Middle Tennessee’s caseload. Each body has an individual story to tell. Sometimes I wonder what they said to themselves in that last moment, if they said anything at all. As I consider this situation, I peel away the capsule that encases the kidneys.

The other day I had a run-in with a brazenly rude individual at my neighborhood Publix. This person clearly had a vastly different idea of personal space than I need. The older I get, the more separation from strangers I require. Stack that on the top of an active pandemic and space is more than a preference—it’s become a way to protect myself. Both reasons for space could be a means to protect myself.

In hopes this man is reasonable, I ask him to give me some room. Nope. No reason or logic exists in him. Apparently asking for a little more than 13 inches of space between us was an undeserved request.

“It’s a free country.”

Ah, yes. The all-encompassing, unchallengeable retort of the logical thinkers in our society. So many judgements ran through my head. There is probably a caricature peeing on a Ford logo on the back window of his truck. I should have had a better comeback than brushing him off. I should have roasted him based solely on

his looks. I should have thrown an upper-cut and then followed up with, “But, it’s a free country,” while he spit teeth out. I should have...

“Drop it! You’re shoulding all over yourself,” I think to myself as I cut the aorta away from the spinal column.

Yesterday, I went for a run. The greenway near my house is never crowded and relatively flat. There is a stretch of the route I take that is canopied by oaks and other trees I do not know the names of. On a sunny day, beams of sunlight make it through the foliage and cut across me every other stride. The album *Give Blood* by Bane is playing and it reminds me of simpler times in my 20s. It reminds me of the days when all I had to do was wash dishes and jump in the Atlantic after clocking out for the day. Those days when working at a country club was all I had planned. I wish I was listening to that album right now as I lean into the viscera to get a comfortable, functional angle for removing the liver.

My ex-fiancée and I are reconciling after ten months apart. Infidelity and an insatiable desire for reassurance from others outside the relationship on my end fracked that relationship. It poisoned the waters of trust for many months. Those waters are just now getting clean. There is still work to be done. Good things do not come easily, and this rekindling most definitely will not. It is worth the work. It is worth the difficult times of reassuring her and working on myself. I knew I should have gone to therapy sooner in the relationship. I should have been a better partner. I could have done this or that differently.

“You are now,” I say in my regular speaking voice.

I look around to see if anyone has heard me. Fortunately no one did as someone is using the autopsy saw on the other side of the morgue to cut off the top of a skull. After a glance around, I begin peeling the scalp down over the decedent’s face to expose the skull. My left hand locks up at this point. After 1,400 or more autopsies, overuse syndrome has started settling in. I am excited to leave here and start my graduate program. No more hand cramps. No more autopsying decomposing bodies found wrapped in tarps in the Cumberland.

“Hey, doc. No hemorrhages. Go ahead and cut the skull?” I call out.

The droning of the saw is mantra-esque. I like to try to hum the same note that it projects. There is the suction sound of a skull cap separating from the rest of the skull while I expose the brain. The pathologist glances back from the cutting board

where she is cutting through the liver like it is a baguette to confirm there is nothing abnormal. There are no subdural or subarachnoid hemorrhages. That is always a good sign. With a few flicks of a scalpel cutting through the optical, trigeminal, facial, and other numerous nerves, then finally the spinal cord, the brain falls right out into my hand.

It has taken me thirty years to realize who I am, who I want to be, and where I go from here. I think back to those decades of my life when I drank myself to negative balances and used words that people still think of when they are unlucky enough to hear my name. All that chaos because I just could not allow myself to be okay with my mistakes or stop undermining my accomplishments. I should have had more confidence in my abilities. I should have listened when a good friend said that drinking should not be both choices at a fork in the road. I should have been kinder to myself. I should quit shoulding all over myself and I should do it now.

As I walk the brain over to the scale, I replace those thoughts with how I will miss being able to fart freely. This flatulence of freedom is a sentiment echoed by other technicians and doctors at the office. If you time one when rolling a body on his or her side, even if your fart makes a dreadful sound, you can always just look down at the body with a shrug. When I leave, I will miss being able to be so liberated to release bodily functions. If I do, I will not be able to blame it on the dead anymore. So much to think about as I move onto my second autopsy of the day.

*Author's Commentary:*

A familiarity with evisceration is expected after 1,400-1,500 autopsies over the last three years. It was over the last year or so where I began using this time as a meditation. I'm either practicing mindfulness or clarifying any thoughts that may be holding me back from personal growth. This piece flowed quickly and steadily out of me. I wrote a draft the day before and revisited it the next day with any necessary add-ons or edits. The idea for this piece began as an idea to regularly contribute similar stories to whomever may have me. It is an idea that I may still pursue, but it'll have to be in between semesters as working 40+ hours a week, completing 13 credit hours, finding time to play guitar, and beginning an undergrad research project has been eating up my time—which I am grateful for.



# Plutonian Plume

Percy Verret



Dark omen of Plutonian shore  
—watch it rise—  
a thing of wit and wings;  
burning beak  
of hellscape bleak  
coat of coal with flirt of fire  
see the feathers spark!  
as glinting they the subterranean  
atmosphere transverse  
piercing, plumed—embered evil  
bird of ominous yore;

Poe knew you well—were you that she  
he harbored close in life—  
Returned to love in death?  
Or are you me—unknown as she,  
unloved in every death—  
Returned to haunt in life?  
Ebon beak of brilliancy,  
She—or me—attending—He—

Hie us to the poet's chambers  
there to flit and flutter round  
his poor beleaguered brain  
as it on Romance seeks to sate itself  
against rank Melancholy  
the which he takes us, in his  
baleful mood, as portents of  
sprung forth in sinister sleek;



Am I morrow—am I sorrow?  
Or am I now and warm—  
Am I weary, am I dreary?  
Or do I smirk and charm—  
Do I haunt with grim intent?  
Or do I ply my wits in bent  
Towards a fiendish comedy  
Myself alone holds key to prize;  
Poet misinterprets me!—  
Are we two surprised?

*Ah great Raven, who are we  
of whom the many poets sing?*

Do you and I pierce hell's  
arch-caverned skies—  
only to glimpse him?  
or is it Gilead—  
from which we take our plunge?  
are we—transversers of the three—  
modernity's Persephone?  
inhabitants of all worlds  
heaven and hell and  
haunts of earth where those  
who harbor both within  
their selves reside?



Let us go rapping, tapping at the mind;  
Let us go flirting and subverting at its lattice—  
Let us find its crevice cracks and—devious—  
slip in

*we are rapture of poets' pens;  
through rupture of syntax's sins*

Let us coax them in with stately mien;  
Let us transfix them with midnight sheen;

I am magic, Pluto's pet  
grim and ancient  
thing of night—  
coat of coal with flirt of fire  
balm of laden brain  
omen, demon, angel bright—  
whisper of a watching night—  
haunting—"evermore."



*Author's Commentary:*

Just about everybody who knows me knows I'm writing my thesis on Edgar Allan Poe. It's gotten to the point where people spontaneously bring up Poe themselves every time they see me—and sometimes even text me "Happy Birthday to Edgar Allan Poe!" when his birthday rolls around. After a conversation with a fellow poet in which they expressed how difficult it is to write about ravens without referencing Poe, I thought to myself, "What if, instead of trying to avoid Poe in a 'Raven' poem, I instead took the association head on—writing a poem that self-consciously situated itself within the mythology of Poe's 'Raven'?" Given that my own penchant for wearing all black has occasionally earned me the nickname "Raven," I decided to write a poem that gradually integrates the narratorial figure with Poe's Raven, an integration that allowed me to "muse" on the nature of "muse-hood." I had so much fun toying with Poe's language and rhymes that now I kinda just want to create a series of poems writing myself into Poe's canon.

[untitled]

Sarah Hicks





# An Unimportant Distinction

← Luke Kautzky →

Ted and Sam walked past yet another ransacked storefront, pausing momentarily to look for more supplies. Not long ago, the mall they were carefully navigating had been a hub of activity, the heart of a bustling downtown shopping complex. Now, brainless monsters ambled along its halls, hunting for flesh to satiate their unnatural hunger. If there was some sort of metaphor to be found here about the perils of consumerism, it was probably lost on the duo.

Ted stopped and held up his hand. “Wait,” he said, “I think I hear something up ahead.”

Sam crouched and looked around nervously. “Again? Man, I really don’t want to deal with any more zeds today.”

Ted nodded. “Yeah, my knife got stuck in that last one, so it’d be better to sneak around. Stay here, I’m going to scout ahead and see how many there are.”

Sam gave a nervous thumbs-up as Ted started to sneak away. “Be careful, man! Even one zed is a problem.”

Ted paused and let out a sigh. He turned back to his companion, a tired expression on his face. “Ok, you know what? We need to talk.”

Sam cocked his head, confused. “About what?”

“You’ve got to stop calling them zeds, man. They’re zombies. Just call them what they are.”

“What does it matter?” Sam asked.

Ted rolled his eyes. “You tell me why it matters, because no matter how many times I call them zombies, you keep on with this whole ‘zed’ thing.”

Sam crossed his arms. “You’re being rude. Besides, why do you get to decide what they’re called?”

“I didn’t decide,” Ted retorted. “They’re zombies; they’ve been called that forever. And why do you get to decide what they’re called?”

Sam threw his hands up. “Look, all I’m saying is that ‘zeds’ makes more sense.”

“Really? How so?”

Sam paused momentarily to consider the question. “Well, a zombie is like, undead, right? But in some of those movies, they’re just called ‘infected’ or something because they’re not actually undead, they’ve just got some kind of crazy virus. We

don't know if these zeds are still alive because of magic or science. 'Zed' is a neutral term; it could go either way."

"That's... not a horrible point," Ted relented, "but you're trying so hard to make 'zeds' a thing, man. It's weird."

"It's not weird, it's the better name! Also, it's got a tactical advantage."

"Tactical advantage?" Ted parroted incredulously.

"Yeah! If I rounded a corner and a zed was right there, I could yell out 'Zed!' real fast. But if I try to say 'Zombie!' it might get me before I finish."

Ted rubbed his temples, frustration building. "I think if I heard you yelling, I'd just assume there's a problem. And most problems are zombie problems these days."

"You mean zed problems," Sam corrected.

"You know what man? Why don't you —"

The sound of glass crunching underfoot made the two stop their bickering. Looking back at the storefront they had just passed, they saw a woman emerge, gun in hand, with her sights trained on the pair.

"Hands in the air," she said, tension evident in her voice. "Now, get down on the ground, real quiet-like. I don't want those biters up ahead to hear you."

Ted and Sam complied. "Biters'—that's a stupid name..." Sam muttered under his breath.

The newcomer pointed the gun at Sam. "You say something?"

"Yeah, I said that 'biter' is a stupid name for a zed!"

Panicking, Ted tried his best to defuse the situation. "I'm sorry about my friend. He's having a bit of a rough day. Let's just move this along, uh..."

"What?" the newcomer asked.

"I don't know your name," Ted replied.

"Does it matter?"

Ted shrugged as well as he could while lying on the floor. "I mean, a little."

The newcomer sighed. "Fine. It's Catherine. Now, hand over your backpacks."

"Ok, backpacks are coming off," Ted assured her, awkwardly shimmying his off. "And for the record, I don't think 'biters' is that bad a name —"

"What?!" Sam exploded.

"I mean, they bite! It's what they do! It's descriptive, at least," Ted replied.

"Keep it down," Catherine whispered harshly, taking their backpacks. "What are you two idiots going on about?"

“Ok, settle a debate for us,” Sam spoke up. “Which is the better name: ‘zombies’ or ‘zeds?’”

Catherine stopped ransacking their bags, taken aback by the question. “I don’t know. They’re both fine.”

“Ok,” Sam continued, “but surely one is slightly better?”

Ted made his best effort to kick his companion in the shin. “Would you cut it out already? Stop bothering the nice, reasonable woman with the gun!”

“You’re just scared she’ll pick ‘zeds’ because you know I’m right!” Sam replied, voice rising.

Catherine looked around nervously. “Fine, ‘zeds’ is better. Now, keep your voices down.”

“Ha! I knew it!” Sam cried, triumphant.

Ted rolled his eyes. “Grow up. Besides, she’s just saying that so you’ll pipe down!”

“No, she’s not,” Sam replied defensively. He looked at Catherine. “You’re not, right?”

Catherine shrugged noncommittally.

Sam deflated. “Come on, man!”

“Why do you care so much?” Catherine asked, torn between annoyance and curiosity.

“He says it’s a good, neutral term,” Ted explained.

Catherine raised an eyebrow. “Neutral?”

Sensing an opportunity, Sam interjected. “Ok, hear me out: We don’t know if the zeds are reanimated because of magic or science, so we’re not sure what to call them. Actually, wait, do you know what reanimated them?”

Catherine narrowed her eyes. “How would I know?”

“I don’t know, have you seen them do anything vaguely magical?”

“What does ‘vaguely magical’ mean?”

“Like... getting back up after you shoot one in the head? Science can’t explain that.”

Catherine tapped her chin while considering the question. “Well, maybe, but I don’t know how biters work, ok? I don’t know if that kind of thing is because of magic or science. Why does it even—”

“Uh, guys?” Ted interjected.

Sam and Catherine paused their discussion to look at Ted. Slowly, Ted moved to

point behind Catherine. Turning to look, the trio saw a zombie/zed/biter ambling along, seemingly oblivious to the group. Ted and Sam exchanged worried glances while Catherine moved to pick up their backpacks. Suddenly, the creature let out a guttural growl, turned and lurched in their direction, accelerating to something akin to a slow jog. Catherine steadied herself and fired, hitting her target right between the eyes. The creature hit the ground with a dull thud.

“Why would you do that?!” Ted asked, ears ringing from the shot. “That’s way too loud!”

“Relax,” Catherine replied. “I only heard one nearby, and that must’ve been it.”

Catherine’s optimism was immediately contradicted by the echo of not-distant-enough roars. The trio heard footsteps, faster and more numerous than they would have liked, approaching. Cautiously, Ted and Sam moved to crouch and looked intently toward the escalator at the far end of the concourse. “I don’t suppose you have any extra guns, do you?” Sam asked. Turning to address their new acquaintance, Sam was dismayed to find only empty air; Catherine had absconded with their supplies in their moment of terror. “How does she move so quietly?” he wondered aloud.

At that moment, dozens of the ravenous creatures tumbled down the escalators, and Ted and Sam broke into a run in the opposite direction. Despite their best efforts, the growls behind them seemed to be getting closer as they sprinted into a nearby furniture store. “They’re too fast; I think they’re science zombies!” Ted yelled.

“Magic could make them fast, too!” Sam yelled back, guiding the two of them toward the stock room. Bursting through the door, he quickly looked around and saw a table sitting nearby. “Give me a hand with this,” he ordered.

“What does it matter if they’re powered by science or magic?!” Ted asked as he obliged, lifting the table and placing it on its side in front of the door.

“We can’t fight back against magic, but we can understand science!” Sam explained, looking around for an exit. To his dismay, there was not another door in sight; they were trapped.

The monsters grew closer outside, and Ted braced himself on the table in an effort to hold the door. Sam followed suit. “How would we do that?” Ted asked. “Neither of us are scientists!”

The door buckled as the first of the horde arrived, slamming into the other side



and flailing wildly, but the makeshift barricade held for the moment. Grunting from exertion, Sam turned to address his friend. “Look, man, I just want to say, you’re a pretty good guy. You’ve honestly made the last couple of years in this apocalyptic wasteland pretty alright.”

The banging on the door became more frenzied and powerful. Pushing back with all his strength, Ted sighed, accepting the hopelessness of their situation. He was about to return Sam’s sentiments when something occurred to him. “Wait, ‘years?’ The zeds only appeared about five months ago.”

“Really? It feels like it’s been a lot longer. Also, you do realize you just called them —”

With a crack, the barricade broke. Ted and Sam tumbled forward and landed hard, too distracted by the force of the impact to immediately register the horde descending upon them.

Not too far away, a woman watched the mall entrance with a pair of binoculars, waiting for her traveling companion. It had been a long time since Catherine had gone in — too long. As the woman weighed her options, a voice spoke up behind her.

“Hey Trish, I’m back,” Catherine said.

Trish jumped ever so slightly. “Don’t sneak up on me like that, C! Where’d you come from, anyway?”

“I had to use a different exit. A horde of biters showed up.”

Trish relaxed somewhat. “Well, I’m glad you’re ok. Did you get anything useful?”

Catherine grimaced. “Not much, unfortunately. I got some supplies off a couple of morons, but it’s barely enough to trade with the bandits.”

Trish began to pack up her gear. “Well, at least someone will put this stuff to good use. Also, I think they’re more like scavengers than bandits.”

Catherine frowned. “What? They look like *Mad Max* villains. They’ve got leather and spikes and everything. They’re clearly bandits.”

Trish stood and began to walk away, Catherine following behind her. “Bandits kill you for food, they don’t barter for it,” she explained.

“Ugh, why do you feel the need to be right about everything?” Catherine groaned.

“I am right about everything, so you should listen to me more!”

Catherine snorted. “As if! When we get there, I’m calling them bandits.”

"Even if they are bandits, and not scavengers, I don't think they'd appreciate you calling them that," Trish said, turning to face her companion.

"So, you admit they could be bandits," Catherine replied, grinning.

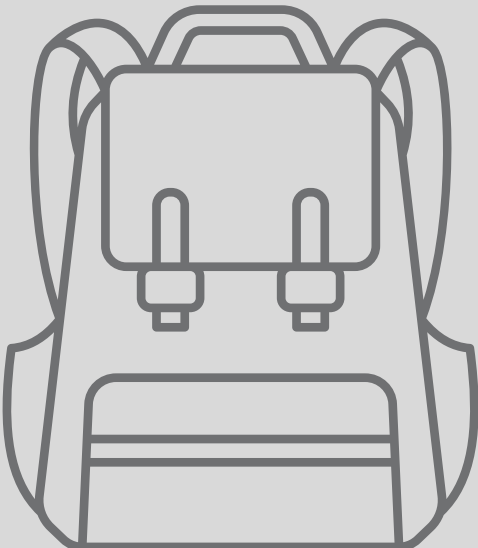
"Ugh," Trish replied simply, stomping away as Catherine trailed behind. With the matter tabled for the time being, the duo set off toward the bandit/scavenger/whatever-they're-called encampment, as uncertain about their future as they were about what any of this post-apocalyptic nonsense was actually called.



*Author's Commentary:*

This piece was inspired by every story in which a new and terrifying creature or concept is discovered and, apparently, everybody in charge had time to agree on a name for the thing and inform others what it was supposed to be called before the situation deteriorated. Also, I enjoy writing arguments in which people take a trivial matter entirely too seriously, which definitely isn't inspired by my own more irritating (or endearing, depending on who you ask) tendencies.

I had a very loose process while writing this story; I had the central concept and a vague idea of the structure (Catherine's interruption and the ending), but aside from that, I just tried to write the discussion as I thought it might happen. There wasn't a detailed outline or multiple drafts. If I get too bogged down planning something out, it isn't as fun, so I try to avoid that.



# Amber Waves

Nash Meade



# In the Space Between Fingers

Nash Meade



Invisible, indivisible,  
Those incomprehensible  
Little parts of the world,  
Where infinite space is  
Contained in a moment.

The cosmos expands—  
Great shadows swallow distant suns—  
Till all will fall into the cold.  
Yet here, on this marble  
In a bag of bowling balls,  
The infinite is contained.

Defining the indefinable,  
Trapping thoughts  
Like distant noises  
From outer space,  
Just waiting to be heard.

Humanity becomes conqueror,  
Believing it has conquered the unconquerable  
In defining the limits  
Of an unfathomed reality—  
Of an unseen concept.

Divinity defined  
In the limits of creation.  
God is love; God is judge—  
God is both nature and above it.



Yet we still sputter,  
Tripping over words when  
Standing beside that One  
Who freezes a tongue in its place.

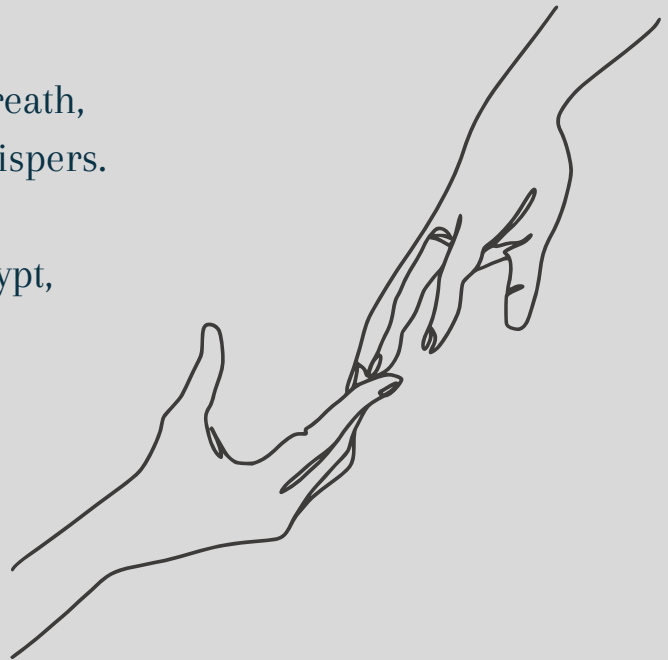
What is this metaphysical mystery  
Left unchanged by history?  
A million people have spoken of it;  
It lies in a gaze, existing for a moment  
In the distance between faces.

Darcys and Elizabeths laugh in gardens,  
Letting it exist in sidewise glances  
And snide comments under their heavy breath,  
Their hearts pounding louder than the whispers.

Cleopatras and Marc Antonys dance in Egypt,  
Caught in rapturous beauty—  
Figures carving curvy colonnades  
In the evening sky.

People like you and I continue on,  
Playing this little game  
Because the mind cannot understand  
The music of the heart.  
We dance to uncertain tempos,  
Hoping that we don't embarrass ourselves.

We have traded castles for coffee shops  
And theatre for theaters,  
But all who have tasted it know it nonetheless.  
Heads resting in the crooks of arms and shoulders  
Contain all of mankind's seeking  
Within them.



What is this thing that exists  
In the space between faces and fingers,  
Between two hearts in an embrace?  
It is undefinable—  
That four-letter word means nothing  
And everything in the moment.

Six words in Greek could not contain it;  
The gods themselves were under its weight.  
The Absurd meets its match,  
And atheists kneel at its invisible altar.

A taste of divinity on the lips of others—  
Heresy tastes sweet to the tongue.  
God is love! The declaration states—  
But perhaps it has been backwards all along.

*Author's Commentary:*

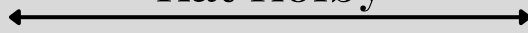
I wrote this poem as a reflection upon the different ways in which love manifests in traditionally Romantic ways and how important it is to us. No matter how far we progress as humanity, love will always elude our science and philosophy. It is something beautiful, diverse, and complicated—perhaps even more complicated than a theology that equates it with God Himself.

# Looking Up Morgan Stence



# An Abridged *Phaedrus* Parody: Socrates is Bananas

Kat Kolby



## **Preface:**

*Phaedrus*, from Ancient Greek philosopher Plato, features the characters Socrates, Plato's teacher and prominent persona in most of his dialogues, and Phaedrus, a young man unfortunate enough to like rhetoric and be anywhere near Socrates. The original dialogue is atypical, however, because Socrates dominates throughout, while Phaedrus seems like an incompetent mannequin and merely agrees with everything that's thrown his way. There is a mysterious lack of the back-and-forth traditionally associated with the dialectic method—arriving at truth through logical arguments between two or more people. Philosophy and rhetoric have a long-standing animosity that this piece highlights, featuring a very vehement Socrates who persuades his young friend that sophists, or rhetoricians, are the worst possible kind of person and philosophers are, like, totally the coolest.

Ironically, Socrates does this through absurdly long speeches that include many linguistic techniques now considered to be heavily rhetorical. It can be argued both that Plato is for and against rhetoric by analyzing this dialogue closely. Either he agrees with Socrates's notions that orators are snake-oil salesmen with no real knowledge, or he's using these speeches that successfully convince Phaedrus in the end to demonstrate the actual power of rhetoric. Either way, after my third reading of the piece, I've concluded that *Phaedrus* presents a Socrates without his marbles. Using constant, almost nonsensical analogies about trees, crickets, souls, space chariots, gods, insanity, and more, Socrates can be seen as hilarious for any contemporary reader. I have, out of scholarly frustration, created a parody dialogue that represents a surface reading wherein Socrates's absolute lunacy shines brightly, and Phaedrus is more than a nodding scarecrow with at least a shred of agency.



*Phaedrus is walking along the city wall, smiling to himself as he holds a precious scroll from a recent visit with Lysias. A surprisingly fit old man, wearing a sheet and shouting to the sky in an incoherent babble, notices him and approaches.*

Socrates: Hey, dumb kid, what's up?

Phaedrus: Rude... I just came from Lysias's. He just came out with a pretty cool speech... you don't—

*He clutches the scroll to his chest, trying his best to ask in the most off-handed way.*

Phaedrus: You don't want to hear it, do you?

*Socrates groans, scoffs, and is, generally, dramatic. He throws his arms in the air before responding in a barking shout.*

Socrates: NO BUT YES!

*Phaedrus hesitates, looking over the perplexed man with a quirked brow before shrugging. He proceeds to summarize a basic, yet still compelling argument that romantic love usually involves jealousy and, thus, is less appealing than the love of friendship which often brings mutual support.*

Socrates: NO! That's so badly done.

Phaedrus: How so?

Socrates: Because reasons. Lemme tell you a better one.

*He proceeds to ramble on, proving the same points with way more words and strange metaphors for no reason. When finished, he smugly looks at Phaedrus for judgment. Phaedrus tries to hide that he's been backing away slowly.*

Phaedrus: Okay... that was pretty goo—

*Quickly cutting off his young companion, Socrates's face grows red with rage and turmoil as he begins loudly backpedaling on his own monologue.*

Socrates: NO IT WASN'T! Because now I have to tell you an even longer story about the real truth!

Phaedrus: Oh dear...

*Phaedrus braces himself as Socrates takes what looks like the deepest breath possible before the following waterfall of nonsense:*

Socrates: Okay, so once upon a time, there's a transcendental realm and winged horses and a chariot metaphor, and your soul is immortal, and love is a god and thus way cooler than friend-love 'cause I said so based out of a mythic story that feels like I just made it up but totally didn't because it's definitely truth. Yep. All truth. See? That was a way better speech.

*Phaedrus has been staring at a nearby squirrel. Socrates reaches out to snap in front of his face.*

Socrates: Well?

Phaedrus: Sure, sure. Whatever you said. Brilliant.

Socrates: AND FURTHERMORE! Your soul gets recycled every ten thousand years and there's rebirth and philosophers like me are literally the best kind of person.

Phaedrus: I figured you would say that... but what about the lover compared to the non-lover? That was a primary point before. Weren't you talking—

*Phaedrus grumbles "rambling"*

Phaedrus: about how the lover is so awesome, but you didn't address any counterpoints.

Socrates: Yeah, because it necessarily follows.

Phaedrus: What does? From what?

Socrates: Logic. Duh.

Phaedrus: But—

*Socrates, again, cuts him off.*

Socrates: ALSO! You should really know how stupid you are. I'll teach you—

Phaedrus: I didn't ask you—

*Phaedrus tries to slide away, but Socrates's hand shoots out to grip his shoulder and force him to sit by a tree before beginning another rant.*

Socrates: Madness is the same as prophecy! There are so many kinds of madness, and they're all valid!

Phaedrus: I—

Socrates: Wings are important here, shut up and pay attention!

*Phaedrus begins to fall asleep. Many minutes later, he groggily opens an eye to Socrates touching his heart and staring at the clouds.*

Socrates: Thanks, Eros. You've helped me reveal reality in a way nothing like those deplorable sophists. This is philosophy, damn it... gotta use analogies and appeals to divinity. That's logic.

Phaedrus: Wait, what was that?

Socrates: Were you SLEEPING?!

Phaedrus: ...No?

Socrates: GOOD! Because I was just about to get into writing and language and rhetoric!

Phaedrus: Finally!

*Phaedrus crouches on his heels, leaning closer to Socrates in genuine interest.*

Socrates: So, about crickets...

Phaedrus: Oh, for fuck's sake...

*Phaedrus slumps and leans back against the tree. Socrates begins another long, strange, and roundabout discussion with himself about the nature of arguments for the sake of persuasion. Many fallacious avenues of storytelling and broken metaphors later:*

Socrates: ...Some cool guy in Egypt made up letters.

*Phaedrus has written “Yes, I agree” on his forehead and drawn eyes on his eyelids. He has fallen asleep again. Socrates nudges him with his foot and looks down expectantly.*

Phaedrus: Why are we talking about Egypt?

Socrates: TREES COULD TALK!

*Phaedrus pauses, waiting for him to continue. Socrates remains silent, bouncing on his heels with his hands behind his back as if he had just succinctly proven the meaning of the universe. Phaedrus’s mouth opens and closes several times, punctuated with small, exasperated sighs before he speaks.*

Phaedrus: ...Okay... that guy with the letters sounds interesting.

*Socrates nods to himself and begins pacing in front of Phaedrus.*

Socrates: Yes. Yes, he does. So, you agree that writing isn’t better than knowledge?

Phaedrus: I think that both ha—

*Socrates whirls around and slashes the air with his hand, his eyes glazed with fury.*

Socrates: IT’S NOT BETTER! Writing is easily changed! My TRUTH is perfect!

Phaedrus: Sure, but you asked me—

Socrates: Soul speech!

Phaedrus: Wait... like an individual’s soul or...?

Socrates: Knowledge’s soul.

Phaedrus: I...

Socrates: Would a dude plant seeds in arid soil?

Phaedrus: Wait, what?

Socrates: NO!

Phaedrus: ...

Socrates: So, he’s gonna write with water and his soul-word-seeds, naturally.

Phaedrus: Where is this even going, man?



Socrates: Letter gardens.

*Phaedrus groans, his head sinking into his hands.*

Socrates: It's a metaphor.

Phaedrus: For WHAT?!

Socrates: For the doo-doo head, Lysias, who doesn't know everything about everything. That, and that rhetoric is trash. Also, I am way smarter than sophists. Soul seeds are the perfect analogy.

*Phaedrus stamps his foot to emphasize his words, while gripping his hair in vexation.*

Phaedrus: I. Am. Not. Following.

*Socrates, convinced of his genius, ignores Phaedrus and performs a celebratory dance.*

Socrates: Yay me! I know all the truths! Philosophers RULE! Now, go and tell THAT to Lysias!

*Phaedrus composes himself to catch hold of Socrates by both shoulders, turning him so that they can lock eyes. Breathing heavily, he attempts to continue conversation.*

Phaedrus: So, what about Isocrates? He entertains notions from both rhetoric and philosophy. How would you define him?

*Socrates pauses to think this over, tapping his chin. Phaedrus nods expectantly, feeling he has brought this old man back from the precipice of lunacy.*

Socrates: That is a pickle. I think that I would rather hide behind my own sense of self-importance and be mysterious and condescending about him.

*Socrates returns to his happy prancing as Phaedrus throws his hands up and screams.*

Phaedrus: WHAT!?

Socrates: Let us pray.

*Phaedrus is now crying, stumbling after Socrates's strange appeals to Pan.*

# Coffee and Ink

Percy Verret

coffee and ink

I sometimes wonder which  
I write with  
and which I drink

I taste black on my teeth

and deep in my stomach  
the blackness wells upward—  
I taste it behind my tongue:  
the metal tang of words  
begging for their moment  
in my mouth  
thick and staining  
unfiltered and uncapped—  
prepared to blot

and in the pit of my pen  
grain mingles with its juice  
the words it drips are  
undiluted—brewed  
through heat of feeling—  
blend of bitter, sweet, and bold,  
giving of life  
rich residue of mind  
crush of its roast—  
piping hot

Coffee Art  
Kelsey Talbott



coffee and ink

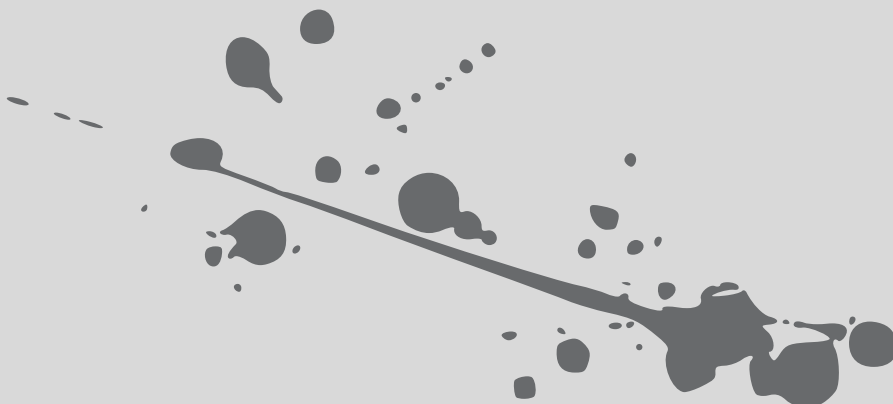
I sometimes wonder which  
I write with  
and which I drink

I taste black on my teeth



*Author's Commentary:*

One day, while reflecting on the creative process, I realized how much of my art is funded by two black liquids: coffee and ink. Since coffee often provides me with the energy necessary to create my art, I realized that, although coffee never touches the pages on which I write, the words I write are, more or less, written in coffee. As I pursued this metaphor, I realized that the converse was true as well; that although ink never touches my tongue, the words that take their life as ink do well up in my brain, my throat, my mouth. Having established this basic conceit, I then asked myself, “In what ways do the words I write on paper convey the scorch of the coffee I drink—in what way do the words that spring to my mind channel the tang of the ink with which I write them?” These questions produced a flood of phrases that I then shaped into what I regard as a joyfully synesthetic celebration of my creative process.





# Winter Scene

Kelsey Talbott



# Trees

## Adalynn Cash



I want to be a tree.

Brilliant

Beautiful

Broken

Bent

...just a little bit.

Split by the storms of life with roots so deep they touch the center of the Earth.

So steady and solid that nothing can shake me to the core, but things can shape me, mold me, and wear me down. Sometimes even split me in half.

Situations arise, and I change. I grow. I may look different, but I am the same. At my core. At my soul. The wellspring of life.

Touching other people's lives with a bit of my heart. The truest, purest essence of me.

### *Author's Commentary:*

Trees fascinate me.

I'm quite a curious soul and love nature.

I wrote this poem while grieving several losses.

I felt completely broken, yet there I was—still standing, still moving forward each day. Some part of me, deep in my soul, wasn't shaken, so that's what this poem symbolizes for me.

Trees are strong because they withstand time.

They're sturdy but can still break.

If we try to change them, they are less unique.

People are like this too.



# Becoming

Kat Kolby

← Acrylic on canvas →



# Feed the Bird

## Catherine Berresheim

I'm sorry, Pretty Boy, for letting you die. I neglected you, forgot about you, leaving your pretty blue-and-white-feathered body to wither away. You were a hand-me-down parakeet, given to me by a neighbor I used to babysit for. You were old, even then. She had grown tired of the burden, her five unruly children disappointed that you never learned to talk. My mother granted permission to take you in, I'm still unsure why, except maybe at twelve years old, it was time I "learned about responsibly."

Thinking I was being kind, in a *Born Free* spirit, I let you out of your cage to fly around in our basement, where you promptly disappeared into the pool table hole. My hand could not reach to capture you, so I tried to chase you out with a cue ball. Why you didn't die then, I do not know. Clearly, I wasn't ready for the responsibility of a living creature.

Guilty, I never did that again.

I smoked my first cigarette butt in that neighbor's house, stolen from a bedroom ashtray found when snooping for copies of *True Story* or *True Confession* magazines. The tobacco burned my mouth, but the nicotine vapor made me dizzy more than the second-hand version of my parents' addiction.

They divorced just three months before you died. We moved from Chicago to a Podunk town in Tennessee where the kids thought I talked funny. Mom was a mess. Two moves in three months and we had our own house just off a busy highway. You were my sole responsibly. By then I was a new thirteen and grieving my father, my real home, my friends, the absence of a present mother to remind me of things: brush your teeth, do your homework, wash the dishes, feed the bird.

I found you when I finally remembered to look under the towel I draped over your cage to mimic night. By morning light, you would chirp to request a breather. On this morning, I noticed the quiet. I found you flat on the bottom newspaper, stiff and hard, lying in the scatters of husks from seeds long ago eaten; the water bottle dry

and crusty with white lines laced around the edge of the rubber nipple. I couldn't recall when last I filled either the dish or the bottle, or when I last heard you sing, or what I was doing that was more important than your life.

Death doesn't care about excuses or reasons why. That is the lesson learned about responsibility—we have to own our crimes.

Guilty, I alone buried you in that backyard. Sorry, so, *so* sorry I neglected you—to death.

Such a pretty, pretty boy.

*Author's Commentary:*

This flash piece developed from a prompt while reading *Flash Nonfiction* by Dinty W. Moore, the editor of the online blog *Brevity*. I began with the directions "Write an apology, to someone in your past. Focus not purely on the emotion, however, but on an event, and on a specific image." Pretty Boy's image sprang to mind first, and I followed. I used the pronoun "you" as a direct address to Pretty Boy. I hope the work captures that childhood first understanding of not only how big the responsibility is for caring for another living thing, but also how the residue of shame lingers when we don't meet those obligations. My intention, of course, was self-forgiveness.

Mr. B's  
Catherine Berresheim

a lunch counter long with filthy men  
slurping their coffee  
contrary to the way their mamas taught them to do  
making hideous sounds, smacking lip against stained cup.

their eyes examine my young breasts  
16 and jailbait,  
but that won't stop them much from slapping my ass when I pass  
and worse.

it's 4 a.m. and the smell of hot grease and Pine-Sol cleaner  
penetrates the aroma of hot biscuits and gravy  
getting ready for the morning rush,  
getting ready to punch out and count the tips  
to see what my body earned me tonight.

here I play at being a grown-up  
while the fluorescent sign blinks and sputters—bulbs broken or missing,  
nevertheless, welcomes  
the truckers in for a meal, and a fix.

the tired joke, "No, I'm not on the menu."  
If I had \$3.00 for every time that was said  
I could pay for a years' tuition.

the August night half-moon gives way to a rising sun,  
glazing the air like a stale Honeybun  
reminds me that school will start soon  
and I can be little again.

wonder if they'll smell it on me.

*Author's Commentary:*

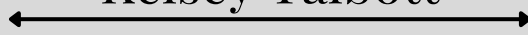
This poem also began as a prompt while attending a workshop. I don't recall the exact wording from the instructor, but we were exploring how to create a sense of place in an uncomfortable setting. I remember the instant thought of using my experience of being a waitress at this rundown truck stop for the subject.

Later, when I revised, I focused on each word choice, being mindful to place the strongest words at the end and the beginning of each line. My intention was to rely on sensory details to create the emotion of what working there was really like for 16-year-old me.



# Omphalotus illudens

Kelsey Talbott



# Tornado

## Sydney Robertson



Like the ocean

No

More unpredictable

Like a hurricane

No

More irrational

Like a tornado

Yes

Quick and ruthless and harsh

That's how I love you, darling

The steadiness, the companionship

That's for later when the rain slows down

But now I love you fiercely

With thunder in my chest

Lightning in my eyes

Alluring in a strange way

Like you have to stop and look

Intensity is malleable between my fingertips

For your laughter and pleasure, darling

I'd tear apart anything in my way

With all the breath in my lungs

A love that darkens the sky

Whipping and fearless

Loving you without inhibition

I promise to dissolve into a drizzle

But until then

Darling, you make me a tornado

*Author's Commentary:*

I have always lived in a place where tornadoes are the worst of our inclement weather. Quite honestly, I hate them, but when I wrote this, I was falling into a love that was very tornado-like. Sometimes that happens—a relationship that is quick and that you know will be over fast, even from the beginning. The beginnings of long loves can be like that too, but sometimes it's worth it to fall into a tornado-like love and move on. In this poem, I wanted to encapsulate the whirlwind type of love that tends to happen in youth.



# Blanket of the Night

James Vest

←—————→  
I stand here to think

Though my thoughts don't sit  
They grab my ideas and expand them  
Briskly bringing me to the idea of the future

Odd how they will quickly bring us  
Bring us to the vision of the unknown  
An unknown future we may want  
Or one we would never want to happen

As I watch the sky slowly walk  
Walk away from its bright blue color  
To a burning orange  
Then quickly to a mysterious purple  
Before being enveloped by the midnight veil

The plain blanket covers the sky  
As if it was a child in the cold of winter  
The blanket soon grew speckles  
Speckles of bright twinkling snowflakes  
That lay suspended in the veil

As I sigh a breath of relief  
As my thoughts slowly drained away  
Letting the image of this fall night  
Burn in this memory before  
Walking away in the dead of night



*Author's Commentary:*

I wrote “Blanket of the Night” while stargazing at the parking garage on campus. I stood there for what seemed like hours mulling over what I wanted to do that night, until I finally got the idea to write about what I was doing in the parking garage. I chose to write it as a poem because I thought about writing about nature and the night itself. I just described what I thought and imagined that night and wrote it out on the page.





# Art

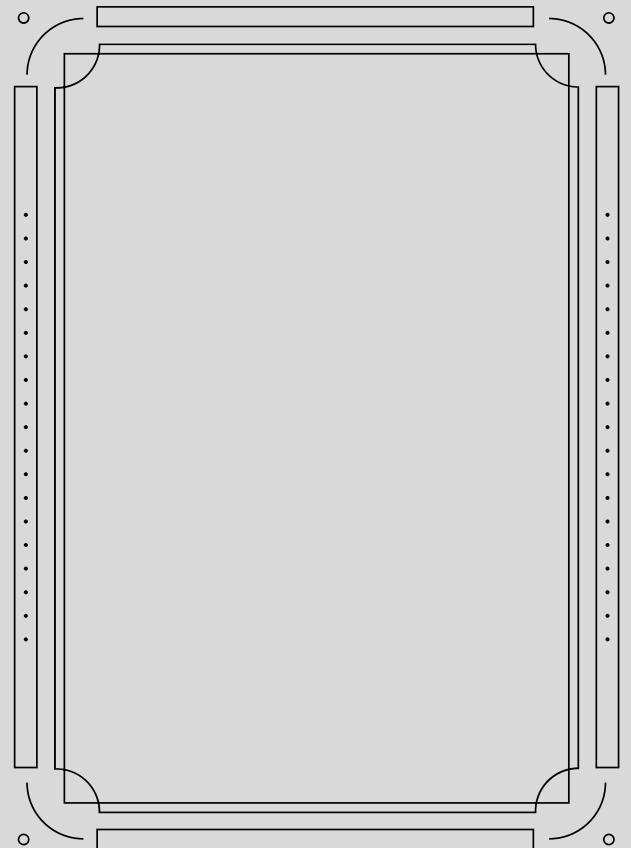
Percy Verret



I think it is not in my best interest  
To continue to go with you to museums  
To pay the exorbitant fee  
To gain entry thereunto  
To view the art of the ages  
When all I do when once we are entered  
and pace before paintings, sculptures,  
artifacts of humanity's lease in the cosmos—  
Is stare at your face  
As it ripples across with the beauty you  
perceive in the exhibits we behold  
By having projected it there  
through your own beauty

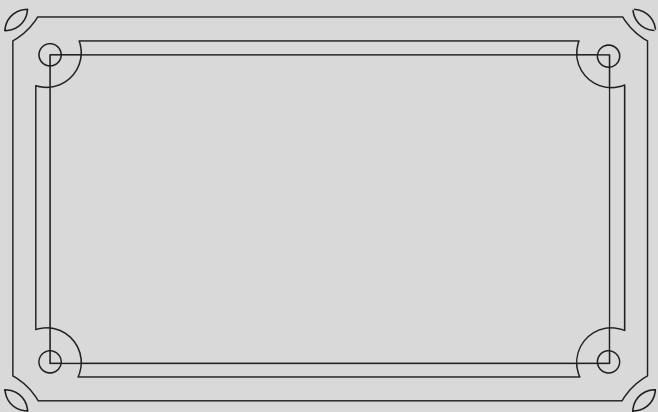
Or perhaps it is this that I am paying to see;  
The many adaptations of your beautiful face  
To the beauty it perceives only in its  
Natural habitat  
you Arch-divine of Art

Theme and variations.



*Author's Commentary:*

This poem is a rumination on the difference between doing activities alone and with another person—and how, when we enjoy doing things with another person, it is, in a sense, our experience of the other person—our experience of them in the context of the activity—that we actually enjoy. In this sense, the person is the core element of the experience; the settings and activities are mere incidental details to the theme of the individual person. As I continued brainstorming this idea, I realized that the musical concept of “theme and variations” was the closest metaphor that could even begin to express the idea I had in mind. A “theme and variations” is a musical composition in which the composer establishes the piece’s melody at the beginning of the song and then spends the remainder of the piece reimagining that melody—expressing it in various ways with different chords and styles all while maintaining the core theme. Having selected this metaphor, all that remained to do was select a setting that allowed me to explore this idea of “variety upon a theme” succinctly. The act of strolling through an art gallery, in which the various pieces of art evoke a variation of reactions in the countenance of the individual with whom the narrator wanders, leading that narrator to realize that it is their partner in wandering that is, themselves, the true incarnation of beauty of the scene, fit my needs perfectly. A poem was born.



# Un-Beautiful

## Sydney Robertson



I appreciate beauty in all of its forms

The night sky

A masterful sculpture

Men of all shapes and sizes

Women of every color and kind

All of those beauties

Were wrapped up in you

You walked into my life and tore it apart with grace

My gaze was fixed on you

So I didn't even notice

Your eyes were the riverbed

For the flow of my dreams

Your hands were soft

And your legs softer

You crossed my wires while I wasn't looking

There was a lot I didn't notice

How you consumed me

How deep my love went

How you didn't much care

I was blind

That's how I didn't see it coming

You didn't even stab me in the back

You looked me in the face

Took out your knife

And I never thought of fighting you

Your knife worked its way slowly into my heart  
I probably thanked you  
Because you had deceived me  
Though the blame can't all fall to you  
Isn't it the target's fault that it gets hit?

It was impossible to look past my love for you then  
I was drowning in it  
But my hand was always outstretched to help you  
Even though your fist remained clenched  
Slowly but surely, the beautiful became un-beautiful

The knife was mostly in by the time you left  
It was that one final shove that woke me  
Shook me out of my hazy stupor  
Opened my eyes to the malice lacing your freckles  
And I sobbed on the way home from the airport

The thought of you makes me sick nowadays  
You'll never know that  
You know I loved you  
But I was deeply and wholly in love with you  
And you'll never know that either

Late at night I still wonder what your lips might have felt like  
I wish I knew what you sounded like with my hands on your skin  
All those times you told me you loved me  
I knew it wasn't the same  
Now I know your words were backed by nothing

I know what it feels like for your nails to turn to claws  
I know what you sound like when you spit venom  
Constantly tracing my fingers over the scar you left  
Just to remind myself of the pain  
It's disgusting

In times like these when you're back in town  
Bile rises up my throat unexpectedly  
I swallow it down and stop poking the scar  
You knew a person who is no longer me  
This me I will not let you touch.

*Author's Commentary:*

This poem was written in the wake of a friendship that fell apart. I often write when I'm feeling too much to think about and this was one of those times, probably late at night. I believe I had just heard that this person was going to be visiting and this was one of the first times I evaluated how I felt about our broken relationship. I don't feel all of these things now, but I appreciate having them written down so I can remember how I felt at the time.



# I Had Not Told Them About You

Rima Abdallah



I had not told them about you  
But they saw you in my eyes  
I had not told them about you  
But they saw you in my smile  
I had not told them about you  
But they saw you in my talk  
I had not told them about you  
But they saw you in my written words  
Who said that love can be concealed  
How your love can be hidden and it is the sunlight that brightens up my life  
How your love can be covered and it is the window that gives me hope and life

Later,  
I had not told them about you  
But they saw you in my pain  
I had not told them about you  
But they saw you in my sadness  
I had not told them about you  
But they saw you in my sorrow  
I had not told them about you  
But they saw you in my failure  
Who said that illness of love can be healed

Then,  
I asked my words, my happiness, my smile, my laugh, and my talk to return back to me  
But,  
My pain, my sorrow, my sadness, and my failure  
Refused.  
Who said the scar of love can be concealed!

I never wonder why lovers die of love but I'm amazed how those who fall in love can remain alive

لم أقل لهم عنك  
ولكن استطاعو رؤيتك في عيوني  
لم أقل لهم عنك  
ولكن استطاعو رؤيتك في ضحكتي

لم أقل لهم عنك  
ولكن استطاعو رؤيتك في كلامي  
لم أقل لهم عنك  
ولكن استطاعو رؤيتك في كلماتي المكتوبة

من قال ان الحب يمكن أن يُخفى  
كيف يمكن لحبك ان يخفى وهو النور الساطع الذي يأتي من المسجد ليعطيني الامل و  
الحياة

،فيما بعد

لم أقل لهم عنك  
لكن استطاعو رؤيتك في آلامي  
لم أقل لهم عنك  
لكن استطاعو رؤيتك في حزني

لم أقل لهم عنك  
لكن استطاعو رؤيتك في في كربني

لم أقل لهم عنك  
لكن استطاعو رؤيتك في خذلاني  
من قال ان علة الحب يمكن ان تشافى

سالت كلامتي ابتسامتي سعادتي ضحكتي و كلامي ان تعود لي  
لكن  
آلامي، حزني، خذلاني، مرني رفضت ان تعيدها لي  
من قال ان جرح الحب يمكن ان يخفى

لم اتعجب يوما ما من الذين ماتو من الحب و لكن اتعجب من اولئك الذين حبو ولا زالو  
أحياء.

# The Ladybug

Ray Steelman



The magic show, high in the skies, reflected in the little boy's eyes,  
Of marshmallow clouds lazily dancing, over our heads while passing by.  
With hands tightly cupped, he carefully plucked the ladybug up from the ground,  
And placed her, very sweetly and gently, in a cashew jar that he found.

Holes were drilled safely in the top of the jar so she can get some air.  
Broom straw and twigs, and blueberry leaves, positioned inside with care.  
“Papa,” he asked, excited and fast, “Can I take her home with me?”  
“We’ll have a talk when your Mama gets home and I guess that we will see.”

A petite ladybug staring back at us, living captive in a cashew can.  
It was easy to see how happy he was with her in his little scuffed hands.  
A whisper proclaimed, called out my name, “Papa, thanks for my ladybug.”  
I held him close, that bright little smile, earned him a big Papa hug.

Fingers so tight, knuckles of white, maneuvering Papa's hand drill.  
The look on his face, simply displayed sheer determination and will.  
Breadcrumbs inside served to provide, some food in his cashew jug.  
Countenance alive, heart of full of pride and love for this boy's ladybug.

Balance bike, and Skittles, tall tales and riddles and that day a pet ladybug.  
Skinned knees and elbows, goodbyes and hellos, warmth of his Papa's hugs.  
I watched him play, and I knew that someday, he soon would leave me behind,  
For treasures to discover, goals to uncover, and many high mountains to climb.

“We’ll call her Lelia,” he suddenly declared, displaying a big beaming smile.  
His dresser top, by his bed in his room, was where she would live for a while.  
Then one dreary day Lelia went away, and life for us would not be the same.  
A popsicle stick at the head of her grave, that day, bearing sweet Lelia's name.

With deep-felt words, from quivering lips, Lelia was launched on her way.  
Tear-filled eyes, with hands holding tight, we united our hearts and prayed.  
We knew sad days were now on their way with Lelia no longer around.  
Matchbox closed, Lelia inside, we placed her in the cold-dark ground.

Balance bike, and Skittles, tall tales and riddles and goodbye to his ladybug.  
Skinned knees, and elbows, goodbyes, and hellos, warmth of his Papa's hugs.  
As I had projected, I knew and expected, my little man, soon left me behind.  
On his journey he's seeking life's hidden treasures, that I pray to God that he finds.

When I am examining, weighing and balancing, the twists and the turns of my life,  
Sifting through time, balancing spreadsheets of the victories, downturns and strife.  
A memory I tote, that brings a lump to my throat and gives my heart strings a tug,  
Is Papa's warm hug, a bright little smile and the love he had for his pet ladybug.

## The Spotted Lady

Alyss M.



### *Author's Commentary:*

This Ladybug poem was written about an event and a relationship that I had with my grandson, Langston. Time marches on and children fade and finally disappear before our eyes. Memories, on the other hand, stay with us forever, and bring bright sunshine on the darkest of days.

# Astraphobia

Mary Burst



As a child, I was terrified of storms.  
The moment the breeze would pick up,  
And dark clouds began to form,  
And the air became sticky, thick, and warm,  
I would run.

I would hide in my parents' closet,  
My semi-safe shelter,  
A cramped walk-in with no windows,  
Breathing in the comfort of my parents' clothes.

The day my fear began to settle,  
My father explained the science of a storm.  
I was enthralled by the clouds full of water with nowhere to go,  
The crackling, zapping electricity in the sky,  
And the all bark, no bite rumbling thunder.  
Now that I understood it,  
I didn't fear it anymore.

When my father passed,  
My fear of storms began to transform.  
Now, I wasn't looking up at the sky,  
I was looking inward.

My storm is messier and less logical.  
The water in my eyes has nowhere to go,  
Beyond my stained cheeks and my friends' tired shoulders.  
Anger zaps throughout every part of my body,  
Always ricocheting but never landing.  
The rumbles of anxiety cannot harm me,  
Yet it's what harms me the most.

I simply cannot understand it.



*Author's Commentary:*

This piece was inspired by my father's death in the summer of 2021. I use an extended metaphor to compare my grief to a storm. While I have been able to overcome my astraphobia, I am unable to overcome my grief. All of the things that brought me comfort as a child during storms (like my parents' closet, the smell of their clothes, and my father's ability to calmly explain things to me) are tied to something I no longer have. I was able to logically understand storms, lessening my fear, but grief is not something that can be fully explained or mapped out. I had been writing bits and pieces of this poem in my head for weeks, but I finally decided to pour my thoughts out and edit it from there. For me, writing this poem was a means of emotional catharsis.

# Stele

Nash Meade



# Ode to Thanatos

Sydney Robertson



Born and raised in darkness  
Under cover of heavy velvet blankets  
Hands bloody the day you were conceived  
By your mother of the night  
Why couldn't you be your brother  
Caressing mortals courting death  
Rather than drowning in it  
Your face is chiseled from the definition of beauty  
Compiled from ideals of a millennia of human minds  
But your dark eyes are far from human  
Great wings farther still  
You do your job with diligence  
Snipping of the scissors of the fates  
An eternal echo in your ears  
You still flinch  
Every single time  
You are the last face all of them see  
A burden on the consciousness of humans at their end  
An angel  
The devil  
They see what they choose  
Some rest their head against  
Your solid, strong shoulder  
Some claw at your skin  
Fighting a battle they won't win  
The unceasing flights from Hades occasionally marked by  
The golden blood of a god  
Dripping from man-made cuts  
It hurts you  
But gods should not hurt  
You see humans at their most human

## Mortality

An unattainable enigma you will never touch

You are the most human of the gods

Dear Thanatos

Laying your lips against the foreheads of children

Wiping away tears with kind hands

Ripping iron grips from your wrists

Stone-faced dream of the condemned

Gods don't know hurt

O Thanatos

You have no power

You messenger, deliverer

You pawn

Another monster for heroes to defeat

But you get up again and carry helpless, lost souls

Down to their death

Teeth gritted

You cannot stop

An end must persist

You carry on, Thanatos

You carry on

### *Author's Commentary:*

This is the third poem of a series I am writing titled *An Ode to Dead Gods*. I have always been intrigued by Greek mythology, and Thanatos, the god of death, is a particularly interesting figure because of the evolution of the connotations he carries. Much like the grim reapers of other cultures, he has been seen as both a gentle figure and one of pain and fear. I love to allude to other myths in these poems. "Another monster for heroes to defeat" refers to Hercules's defeat of Thanatos. "Why couldn't you be your brother/ Caressing mortals courting death," references Thanatos's brother Hypnos, the god of sleep. There is nothing new under the sun, so I thought it might be refreshing to humanize these ancient myths.

# My Mother's Wounds

Sydney Robertson



The world would be empty without mothers  
Void of love and warmth and life  
Void of too-close anger and suffocating beliefs  
The love can be aggressive  
Shouting and face in hard lines  
With a heartbeat of care bursting underneath  
Care for and protect the ones they gave life to  
Priorities of good mothers  
But too many times taken too far  
The cause of the very tears they wipe away  
An offering of dinner that cannot be denied  
The hug needed in the worst moment  
Calloused hands bandage the wounds they inflicted  
There is no me without her  
I am not me with her  
A juxtaposition of the harmer healing the harmed  
But that's how mothers and their children operate  
So I thank her and love her all the same

## *Author's Commentary:*

This poem was composed at a writers' workshop and I can't even remember what the prompt was now, but obviously it inspired me. I must give the disclaimer that I have a really wonderful mom and I love her so much. But there is always going to be this push and pull with people you are close to. As I've grown up, we've had our differences. I felt that other people would relate to these emotions and the ups and downs of familial relationships.



# For Cay

## Sydney Robertson



Alive

Like the sunrise

Breath in your lungs

Reaching every corner of the world

Tears

Like the ocean

Pouring down your face

Washing over the earth

Blood

Like the magma core

Pulsing through your veins

Heating from your heart

Nuanced humanity

Sacrificing and saving the planet

To ambition, to adoration

People hating, loving daily

Hearts thumping against rib cages

A smile, a laugh for the ones you love

Blues and greens and a breath of fresh air

Alive, so alive

I'm glad you're alive

Stains on the ground

Stark leftovers of the living

Scrubbed from hands

Blood

Outpouring of emotion  
Like the cleansing rain  
Dripping from the chins of the mourning  
Tears

Desperate for every moment  
Sustained and cherished  
Eyes open, heart beating  
Alive



*Author's Commentary:*

I wrote this poem a while ago for a friend. They told me they loved poetry, so I couldn't help but write one for them. I was inspired by the idea of life, the feeling when you pause and take in a deep breath, that emotion when you laugh really hard with a friend. People are fragile, yet tough, and that is part of the reason we live the way we do. You must have joy and heartache to live on this planet. I am glad that I and anyone who reads this is alive.

# My Memory Quilt

Heather Parker



I am trying to make sense of the contents of this forgotten drawer. These archival pieces of my past sit scattered across the floor in a random mess. Posed images of loved ones and once loved ones lay next to birthday cards, a memorial pamphlet, and answered letters written to Santa. I sit here wondering, where am I in this eclectic mess? Am I the one addressed as *Daughter, Mom, and GiGi*? Am I the subject in the image, or more often, the photographer? Am I the magic inspiration behind Christmas wishes and traditions? Am I more than a generational label? Then I realize the only common thread that stitches these blocks together is me. I exist in the space between the pieces. I am the binding like the lattice of a quilt.

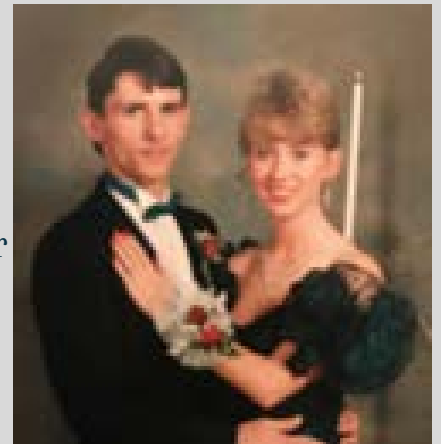
As a child, I sat under quilt frames in the winter, watching the needles of my matriarchs fabricate warm hugs for a bed. I never learned this craft, but I feel like a quilter piecing these blocks of memory together. Like any quilter, to begin, I must choose a center block. The memorial pamphlet from my grandmother's funeral has the image of a quilt on the cover and reads, "In Loving Memory." It will be the center block but not for the memory of my grandmother or the quilt image. The phrase is what brings it to the center. If I venture into self-exploration, I need a reminder to reflect lovingly on who I was. In the past, I have offered love and understanding to the people around me, reserving little for myself. I have unfairly held myself to a standard I would never place on anyone else. I suspect my motives of self-destruction will reveal themselves as I needle through memory. For balance, I need the reminder to stay "in loving memory" of who I was and how I became the woman I am today.

There is a quilting term called "easing." It is the act of pinning and using your fingers to adjust the joining units of uneven lengths of fabric to match them for sewing. I struggle to ease the centerpiece into the next couple of blocks because they do not go with the "loving" sentiment. This first uneven image captures me with the father of my children attending Senior Prom. The year between purchasing this sequined gown for Junior Prom and wearing it changed the course of my life. The week after dress shopping, I discovered I was pregnant at seventeen. My guilt and my parents' disappointment isolated us from each other. However, I found the isolation better than the many moments spent comforting my mother. I reassured her that she

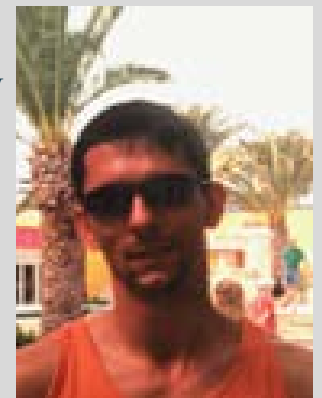
was not a failure, dried her tears, and suppressed mine. I needed a hug and reassurance, but it was not available. A distance grew between myself and my friends too. While I sat with them at school, I often sat in silence on the edges of their conversations. Our daily struggles were no longer the same, and I was alone.

My daughter was born in October of my senior year. For six months, when the last bell rang, like Pavlov's dog, I rushed home to breastfeed her. I embraced this maternal bonding because I wanted my baby to know I was her mommy, not my mother who kept her while I was at school. My motherly devotion meant I could not participate in after-school activities or hang out with friends. The sound of that bell screamed to get home fast! Prom was the one exception. I wanted to dance and have fun with my friends one last time. The dress was in my closet and I purchased the tickets; all I needed was a babysitter. I asked my mom, and she agreed. I was going to my first and only prom!

If you look closely at the photo in this memory block, you will see the image of an eighteen-year-old girl who spent that entire day crying. My mother thought attending prom was selfish. She accused me of being an ungrateful daughter and a terrible mother. Yes, I physically attended my senior prom, but well-timed guilt cut me mentally and robbed me of dancing. If I could go back and talk to that young mother, with tear-soaked eyes who needed reassurance, I would tell her she is the strongest young lady I have ever known. And the mother that she chose to be was anything but selfish. I would assure her that seeing their mother have an enriched life will allow her children to know her as a person and not just a title with responsibilities. I would tell her to take every opportunity life gives her to dance.



The needle that stitched the next square held the thread of my toxic relationship with my mom and the deafening silence of my father. No longer feeling welcome in my parents' house, I got married after graduation. Not long after that day, the fibers of his fabric changed. The hope of happiness I once saw in his eyes shifted to darkness. The change in him and the evil that came along with it caused my edges to fray and put me in a constant state of mending. I apologized for doing, and not doing, for not being and simply being. "I'm sorry"



became my mantra, my daily meditation of inadequacy.

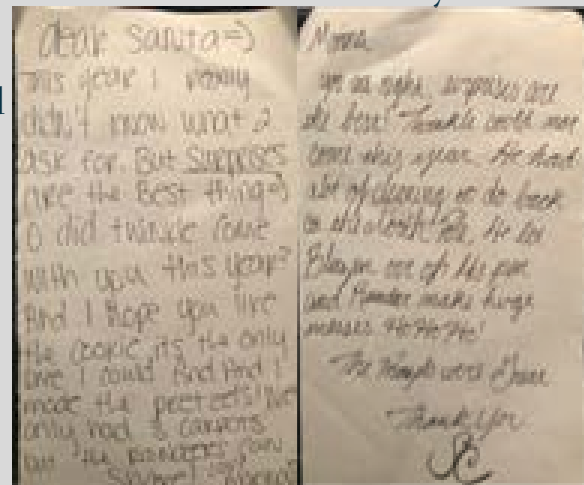
If I stay too long on this portion of my memory quilt, its weight will drag and distort the finished product. The block I attempt to ease is an image of my ex-husband, my nightmare, who I misrepresented as a fantasy for self-preservation. When you are in an abusive relationship, your brain tries to protect you by focusing on the good and blurring the bad. I blurred life for nineteen years, and the distortion makes it difficult to remember who I was. My voice held strangled, alone, and quiet. I became an unreliable narrator of my own story.

If I could have made orphaned blocks of any of these squares, it would have been my ex-husband. Everything is better when you focus on the positives. Right? However, if he is not in these quilted pieces of memory, neither are my children nor who I am



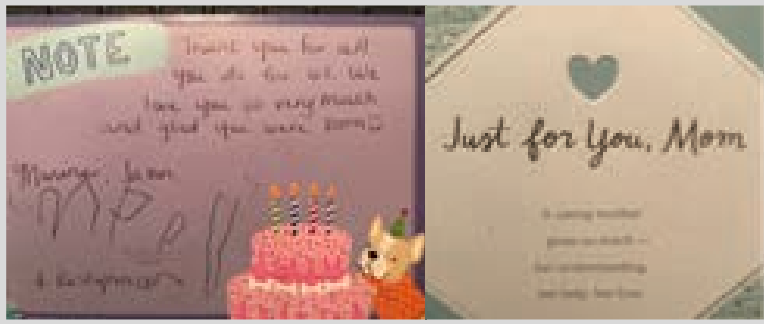
today. We had two other daughters, and from all outside appearances, we were a successful, happy family. I became a professional photographer and was rarely in front of the lens. The block in the top row and center shows me better than any captured image in this patchwork. These four people were the center of my existence. I worked tirelessly from the outside to keep them framed together and focused

on the positives. I started Christmas traditions like the letters to Santa that I let my oldest daughter answer each year as SC himself or “Twinkle the Elf.” A couple of these letters were included in this archive and are now a part of my memory quilt. They remind me of our marshmallow snowball fights and baked cookies for Santa. I worked so hard to give my girls happy memories, but it never balanced out the bad. His abuse frayed all of our edges. The space I occupied became stretched too thin, and I could not hold it all together. If you look closely at this photo, there are no smiles behind their eyes as they sit in the presence of their father. My daughters were also creating false narratives and learning the mantra of apologies and the skill of mending.



The relationship with my girls is ever evolving and remains strong through love. They are my legacy and my proud contribution to the world. The birthday cards on the top right and left blocks of this quilt are little reminders of their love for me. The





sentimental notes inside the cards are thanking me for putting up with their “smart-ass mouth” and “for all I have done for [them].” The signatures now include sons-in-law and grandbabies. To them, I am Mom, Mother-in-law, and GiGi. To me, I am

finally finding my voice outside of being a wife and a mother. I am learning that the imperfect frays of my fabric add a textural element to this memory quilt and the stories I have yet to tell.

Along with being a mother, in-law, and GiGi, I am a daughter and a granddaughter.



Five generations are stitched into two blocks of my memory quilt. The love in these photos helped mend my past, but the generational labels do not depict who I was. During this time, I was a woman selectively picking up the pieces of a failed marriage and bankruptcy. I was finding my inner strength without apology. While I will never see a 50th Wedding Anniversary, I am the first of these

generations to become a successful entrepreneur and the first to move out of my small hometown and start a new life. I am the first woman in these generations to live independently. In December, I will be the first woman in these generations to earn a college degree.

These random items found their way into this forgotten drawer at various times for the likely purpose of clearing a surface. No other scenario would bring me to quilting them together as I have today. The self-exploration between these blocks of memory has brought smiles to my face and tears to my eyes. I no longer allow others to rip and tear my fabric because I have reinforced my seams and embraced my pleats, puckers, and frays as design elements. This archival memory quilt is now a source of healing and forgiveness. I give this quilted hug in loving memory to that teenage mother who needed reassurance so many years ago. It comes with a whisper to embrace her imperfections as part of her story that will one day create this beautiful quilt of memories.



*Author's Commentary:*

In her Feminist Rhetorics class, Dr. Kate Pantelides challenged us to find an archive in our house to explore through composition. During the pandemic, I purged most cluttered areas to simplify my life. To my regret, there was one forgotten desk drawer that held an eclectic mess from my past. This mess became the inspirational archive for this composition.

I chose to use a quilt metaphor to stitch this archive together in honor of my grandmothers. Exploring my past is emotionally draining, and during this creative process, I found myself unable to see through the tears. However, this writing prompt showed me that there is an embodiment of power when you give voice to your past. While it was not easy, completing it became a source of comfort and healing.



# Falls

## Nash Meade





# Don't Feed the Koi

Sara Hicks

