



PRAIRIE VOICES

A Collection of College of Lake County Student Writing and Art 2023-24



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Prairie Voices is a collection of student writing and art which is published annually in April. It represents the diverse voices of the student community of the College of Lake County. We accept creative non-fiction, including essays, as well as creative fiction, including short stories and poetry. Please type, proof-read, and double-space each submission, and submit via e-mail as a MS Word attachment to assist us in the editing process. Include your name, address, and phone number, along with a brief autobiographical sketch relating information about your family, interests, hobbies, and career goals.

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The Ride

Rebecca Calloway

The ramshackle barn stood as it always had: a sentinel overlooking the yard and the house like a silent protector. Linda made her way across the yard, dodging chickens that clamored around her ankles, looking for grain. "It's not dinner time yet, darlings," she whispered to them as she passed.

As she entered the barn, she was struck by the afternoon light slanting through the gaps in the walls, illuminating motes of dust which created swirling shapes in the air, almost like dancing spirits. She paused and took a deep breath, taking comfort in the familiar smells of hay, grain, and even manure.

These smells had been with her since childhood. They were constant companions as she grew up on this farm, as she later started her own family here, and they were still here with her now like old friends.

She knew she should probably get to work, mucking the stalls, forking hay down from the loft, and feeding the horses, but she just stood for a time, lost in her surroundings. She'd had trouble focusing lately, and she now found herself drifting through the past. She saw herself playing hide and seek with her brother, Tom, among the stalls when she was seven. She saw herself as an adult watching her own children play the same game here. Life was a cycle that sometimes repeated, she thought with a smile, but sometimes it didn't. She brushed that thought away and moved over to Charlie's stall.

Charlie was a large chestnut gelding, seventeen hands tall. He'd been patiently waiting for months, as she had, for a reunion that wouldn't come.

She sighed and reached up to stroke his nose. It was soft, like velvet. She pulled an apple from her pocket and held it out for him in her open palm and giggled as his soft lips whickered against her hand as he gobbled up the treat. "Such a good boy, you are," she told him and patted his cheek. He looked at her with deep brown eyes that seemed to know. They held gazes for a few moments before she broke away and got his brushes down from the shelf. She groomed him in circular motions, enjoying the rhythm of the work, taking comfort in routine. He seemed to be enjoying himself, too, leaning into her brushstrokes. It had been a long time since anyone

had paid him much attention.

Linda gathered his tackle and brought it to him. He looked at her quizzically. She was not his usual rider. "Easy, boy," she said softly, soothing him with her voice and petting his side. She walked him out into the yard, slipped the bridle over his head, set

the bit in his mouth, and then slung the saddle over his back and cinched the girth. "It's just you and me now, my boy."

She hoisted herself into the saddle and gathered the reins, and with a deep breath she rode him out of the yard into the afternoon sun. She didn't know where they were going, but that didn't matter. They were moving.

She saw herself as an adult watching her own children play the same game here. Life was a cycle that sometimes repeated, she thought with a smile, but sometimes it didn't.



The Death That Made Me Live

Deborah Onajin

I dislike boarding school. I used to be so excited about going to a boarding school until I went. I always complained about everything. The food made me nauseous, my skin had bumps from insect bites, there were so many unnecessary rules, and so I began to dislike my school. Then Jenny died, and everything changed.

I remembered the day I found out about the accident. It was the day after resumption, so everyone was still excited to see their friends and talk about their holidays, but I really didn't feel like talking to anyone so, I lay on my bed engrossed in a novel, when my friend walked in and sat on my bed. I looked up from my book and saw her face. Her eyes were wide and teary.

"What's wrong?" I inquired closing my book to give her my full attention.

Looking straight into my eyes, she blurted, "Have you heard about the accident?"

"What accident?"

"Well, I heard the school bus had an accident and Jenny died," she replied with a trembling voice.

I burst out in laughter.

"Where on earth did you hear that from?" I asked still laughing.

"I heard it from one of the nurses." She looked so serious which made me laugh even more.

"It's not true," I said taking her hands in mine hoping that would put her at ease. "It's probably a rumor. You know how information gets twisted around here. I'm sure everything is fine."

She was quiet for a while before she shrugged

and said, "It's probably a rumor." At that moment, I was happy I had been able to calm her down, but looking back, I don't really think I did anything. She probably didn't dispute my statement because she didn't want to believe it was true either.

Not too long after, the entire school had heard and almost everyone was apprehensive, but I still told myself it wasn't true. Even after the principal gave an announcement that confirmed the "rumor," and more than half of the whole school was in tears, I told myself it could not be true. And I continued to deny it until the day of the memorial.

It wasn't exactly a bright morning. I looked up at the sky and watched as the sun hid behind the grey clouds and I shivered as the cold wind blew. My school jumper did very little to keep me warm. I could hear the voices and laughter of my friends beside

me, and I wondered how they could laugh at a time like this as if the conversation we were having would make us forget why we were going to the chapel in the cold. We couldn't forget. The flags at half-mast, the posters and the gloomy faces of the students and teachers around us were a constant reminder of what had happened. And so, for a moment we tried to forget the signs around us and pretend we didn't feel so miserable which was why we were having this pointless conversation.

We arrived at the door of the chapel and stared at the retractable banner on the stand. It had a picture of Jenny's face and the words "GONETOO SOON" underneath it. I gave a long hard stare at

I could hear the voices and laughter of my friends beside me, and I wondered how they could laugh at a time like this as if the conversation we were having would make us forget why we were going to the chapel in the cold.

the picture; I didn't believe that I would never see her face again. I heard someone sniffle beside me, and I turned to see who it was. The sniffing girl had tears running down her face; her eyes were as red as rubies. Seeing the girl cry made me wince. I felt uneasy and no longer wanted to stay there so I turned back to look for my friends and I realized they had already gone into the chapel.

The chapel was quieter than usual. Another reminder that this wasn't an ordinary assembly. I found where my friends were sitting and took a seat beside them, and I watched in silence as a boy set up and tested the microphone on the stage. When he was done, the principal walked to the stage and ordered everyone to be quiet and at that moment someone began to pass the program for the service. I took the piece of paper in my hands and waited for the service to begin.

To be very sincere, I really don't remember the details of the memorial, but I remember we sang some hymns, we listened to the choir sing, and heard someone preach about death. The only part that really stuck with me were when people started saying the eulogies. Her teachers and friends had to say something about her, and I watched the tears drop from their eyes, heard the trembling in their voices, saw how they paused and sighed, saw the pain in their eyes and noticed how they struggled to speak.

Finally, I had to admit to myself that it was true. If it were still just a rumor, they wouldn't be heaving so heavily. And then I wept. I wept for my friends who were on that bus and weren't back in school yet because of their injuries. I wept for the bus driver who had also died, and I wept for Jenny.

Jenny wasn't someone I would have considered a friend. She was in the year below me and I had only spoken to her once. I couldn't even remember what her voice sounded like, but I cried because she was still so young, and I cried because that one conversation we had was supposed to be the beginning of many others. I had missed out on the opportunity

to become friends with this amazing girl. Then I realized that I was so pessimistic about everything, that I wasn't even trying to enjoy the time I had in school. I wasn't trying to make new friends, and I wasn't exactly a good friend either. I had spent so much time complaining about school and its rules that I had failed to see the fun and good parts of it. I had missed out on the opportunities to create memories. And so, I wiped my tears and made a promise to myself that I would be more optimistic and enjoy everything and every moment. I had three years left in this school and I was determined to make the most of it. And I did exactly that.

I no longer felt heavy-hearted when I had to go to school, I had made the most amazing friends and I looked forward to the good stuff. I loved walking around school in the evenings, drinking in the sight of the tall trees and colorful plants. I loved spending the entire night chatting with my friends, and then struggle to keep my eyes open the next day. I even looked forward to the bad stuff because I realized that when you're surrounded with the good people, you never get to face anything alone. I learned to love everything about school, and I enjoyed the experiences I had. And now, whenever I am melancholic, I read the letters my friends wrote to me, or I simply imagine that I'm back in school, taking a walk and inhaling the sweet scent of the flowers to clear my head.



Confined to my Mind

Maya Kosar

I was sitting in my chair in the house I'd taken refuge in for years. Every window covered, every door locked. Unimaginable death waited just outside my walls. I was the only thing left alive on this earth.

Then, the doorbell rang.

"Mom?" I heard a voice through the door:

Weights on my wrists and ankles kept me in my chair: "How are there more of them?" I thought to myself as quick knocks came pounding through the door, each one louder than the last. I heard the struggle of keys, and in a moment she would find me.

"Hey mom, I can't stay very long, I have to pick up Amy from school soon. Have you eaten yet today?" She strolled through the living room to the kitchen in hurried steps. I stayed in my chair, watching her, but avoiding eye contact. She glanced into the empty sink and sighed a disappointed sigh. She was so tall; she reached the top shelves of my cupboards with ease, looking through every one.

I moved all my things into new places every day. Secret people like her always came looking for my things, rummaging through them. I wanted them to struggle to find whatever it was they were looking for. I assumed it was things they thought would keep them alive on the outside. But nothing ever did. They all died as soon as they walked out my door. The pile of bodies outside my house got bigger every day. Surely, she must be the last one.

The girl found what she was looking for—a pot—and filled it with water at the sink. Instead of

water, thick dark mud sputtered out of the faucet, splashing out of the pot and spraying on the counters. She placed the pot on the stove and turned the dial; the methodical ticking came on and fire erupted from the stove top, shooting past the pot and up to the ceiling. The kitchen was already melting from the heat, but she seemed unaffected.

"I'm gonna make you some noodles. That'll be easy to reheat. Okay?" she turned and smiled at me and I finally looked into her eyes. I never knew what these people came looking for, but they never talked to me or even looked at me. She looked at me like

she knew me, but I've never known anyone. It's always been me in my house and the bodies outside. She walked to the fridge and looked inside, a twisted expression of disgust coming over her face. She pulled out a Tupperware of old pizza, untouched.

"Yeah, I don't like pepperoni either." Disappointed again, she threw the pizza into

the garbage and started washing the box.

I turned away to look at my TV; the screen flickered on without any assistance. I saw myself, wrinkly and old, the skin on my face being dragged down by the weights that seemed to have multiplied and were now all over me. "How did I get so old?" I thought. The TV me stared at the real me intensely, and whispered at me through the screen, "Do not eat, do not trust, do not go outside." I had heard myself say this a thousand times before at that point, and I've heard it a thousand more times since then. The TV me pounded on the screen, the banging getting harder and louder, but still muffled behind

I turned back to the TV at the sound of the glass shattering. TV me was gone, but I knew she'd be back the next day with the same message, and the screen would be fine tomorrow when I woke up, until she returned.

the thick glass. I looked over at the girl to see her reaction, but she paid no attention. She was pouring a box of noodles into the pot, the thick sound of popping bubbles from the boiling mud were making my stomach turn. I turned back to the TV at the sound of the glass shattering. TV me was gone, but I knew she'd be back the next day with the same message, and the screen would be fine tomorrow when I woke up, until she returned.

The girl walked over to me, with a small plate of noodles and a glass of water. She placed them down on the table next to me. I stared at the food and saw worms sliding through the mud on the plate. She squatted down to my eye level and looked at me. I glanced at her, keeping my head turned away.

"I love you, Mom," she said. I finally looked at her again, her eyes were soft, and for a moment I felt I could trust her.

"I'll be back tomorrow, okay?" she paused, "I want to bring Amy, she misses you and she's grown so much since the last time you saw her." I just stared; her words meant nothing to me. I knew she would die as soon as she walked out that door, and if there was an Amy, then she was probably already dead too. I felt sorry for her.

She stood to leave and I reached out for her, but my wrists were so heavy. I tried to speak to warn her of the dangers outside. My voice sputtered and I stumbled over my words. She walked to the door, shards of glass crunching under her feet. She looked back at me, more somber this time.

She said, "I'll see you soon," but I knew she wouldn't be back.

Now that she was gone, I was alone in the whole world, every other thing was dead.

The next day, the doorbell rang, again.







Soul Tragedy

Shameka Ardour

Him feeding me fantasies
Telling me how remarkable I am
Pride caught wind of my insecurities
In love with the outside
Of human flesh
An image that rots
In the meanwhile
My soul would rot
Stuffing all the real feelings down
With Co-dependency
We weaved together perfectly
A Beautiful Storm
Rocked the boat of my inner harmony
I had no peace
Trusting him was easy
Illusions were my specialty
To escape the pain of being awkward and shy
Performed like an actor on set
Dance around in hundreds of clubs
In search of love and danger I met
Never even liked the nightlife
Especially since
I reached a predator in the mix
I thought after this, it was it
He's the one I can be real with
In reality his world matched mine
A fake looking for someone to pretend with
To have fun and sin with
Dismiss the idea of being more alive and healing
We were both addicted to the highs of false living
A comfort zone of many
The truth is my remedy
For this kind of soul tragedy

The Facility

Skylar Carter

It seemed as though the moment after the Ash Wall rose over us, Charles Wesnuck was elected as the Official Leader of Walls. I was seven years old. My parents told me and my younger twin brothers, Richard and River, that this was the start of something better. No more bombings, no more wars between nations. Wesnuck and his soldiers, who never seemed to die, had stopped the Final War. He and his people built the three Walls to protect us from each other—Ash, Platife, and Oxfense—and those who wanted to cross the borders did so only with the proper papers, ID, and status. Everything outside the Walls was not meant for us. I remember that day. My father held his boys close and said to me, “The war’s over, Bria, I’m not leaving you ever again. We’ll be together forever now.”

When I was nine, I heard my father crying in my mother’s arms late at night. Then he said, “I wish I would’ve died in that war.”

The next day, my father went to the Facility, where Charles Wesnuck lives, along with nine other individuals from each of the three Walls. Only three of those ten ever made it out.

I never saw my father again.

~~~~~

I held the letter in my hand and tried not to cry in front of Mom. She was already crying. The envelope was green, just as Richard and River’s had been. Just like my father’s had been. A peaceful color; my favorite color. I wondered if I should take it as a sign.

Maybe this won’t be so bad.

“You’re only seventeen,” Mom sobbed into her hands, over a cup of black coffee.

I tried to think of something comforting to say,

but all that came out was, “Richard and River were only fourteen.”

In my hands were my summons to work at the Facility. The letter congratulated me with expectancy and told me to take pride in the fact that I was serving the Walls. I would be taken by officials at the end of the week, along with nine others, to serve my time there. Every citizen was called to do this work at some point, as long as they were over the age of twelve. Every six months, ten would go in and only three would come back out, forbidden to speak of what went on in there.

“I served the Walls. That’s what I did there.” It was all anyone ever seemed to say. No one spoke of the ones who didn’t make it back out.

I took a sip of my own coffee, with a sweet but bitter taste of cinnamon, watching the rainfall from the kitchen window. The dishwasher was making a grinding sound and I could hear birds chirping out by the backyard trees, even though they must’ve been soaked.

I’m going to the Facility. At that moment, I just felt numb.

Just then, the kitchen door creaked open and a pair of wet, muddy boots and the smell of grass and sweat walked into my mother’s home. River stood there, dripping wet, in a brown, worn through jacket and cargo pants. My younger brother, sixteen and now twin-less, looked from my mother to me, and then from the letter to me, without a word. He just stood there, stupid.

Then I felt angry.

I slammed the letter down into the table so hard I could feel my pulse in my palm.

“Did you know?” I asked him, my whole body trembling. I think my eye might’ve been twitching too.

River gave me a quick glance, somewhere between general annoyance and guilt that I couldn't understand. He sighed defeatedly and without further explanation replied, "You know I can't talk about that, Bria. You know that."

Mom stood up so fast, the yellow chair she had been sitting on went flying behind her: "River, what the hell—"

"You know I can't say anything!" He exclaimed for perhaps the hundredth time. He unbuttoned his jacket, working on each button twice because his fingers kept slipping.

Both my brothers, Richard and River, received their summons to work at the Facility two years ago. River had been one of the three to make it out, Richard wasn't so lucky. We hadn't heard from him since and River refused to say anything about what had happened there. No matter how many times Mom had pleaded with him, he was steadfast.

It drove me insane, but on a good day, I could try to see it from his point of view. Mom never could.

"I don't want to lose another child!" She cried, giving her son a menacing look. She then turned to me, with hollowed, sunken eyes, and graying hair; "I don't want to lose you." She pointed a calloused finger at me and sniffled, "You have to come back. Do whatever you have to to be one of the three. P-promise me."

How can I promise that? I bit the inside of my lip so hard it bled. I could not promise that. But I would not cry in front of her either. I looked to my brother for help.

"Tell me what to do," I demanded, less angered now, but a demand nonetheless. "River, please, tell me. What can I do, how do I get out of there?"

River just shook his head, repeating his all-too old saying, "You know I can't tell you anything. I'm sorry."

His eyes were heartbroken for me. He was so young and looked like he had seen wars. I suppose he had. But I couldn't pity him, even if my sympathy for him hadn't ever died. I knew I looked back at him with eyes just as heartbroken, just as letdown.

Then Mom said her all-too old saying, "Richard would've done something."

It could be a true saying, really I didn't know. I did know it was a cruel one for River to hear and for the perhaps hundredth time.

"Mom—" I tried, coming to his defense, but she cut me off.

"Richard would've gotten you both out!" She screamed at him, knocking her coffee all over the scratched up table. As she stomped away like a child throwing a fit, she gave one last, "He would've done it!" then slammed the kitchen door behind her.

River and I stood there in the kitchen, quiet for a moment.

"She doesn't mean that," I whispered solemnly, "when she compares you two."

River shrugged indifferently, used to it now, "Yeah, yeah she does. . ."

I grabbed the paper towels off the counter and began to sop up the black liquid off the yellow surface. The room now smelled of the coffee, along with River's wet coat.

"Can't you tell me anything?" I tried once more, with all the seriousness and pain I could muster. "They'd never have to know."

River then looked at me with a 'Of course they'd know' look that was truly exasperated with the conversation. I wanted to yell, How would they know, River? Do you actually not trust us? Just tell me, I'd

**I took a sip of my own coffee,  
with a sweet but bitter taste of  
cinnamon, watching the rainfall  
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The dishwasher was making  
a grinding sound and I could  
hear birds chirping out by the  
backyard trees, even though they  
must've been soaked.**



never tell you!

Then he said, "I'm sorry," with such a broken amount of exhaustion, I just couldn't.

~~~~~

The week passed horrifically quickly and River wasn't present for most of it. So I spent most of it packing, though I wasn't told what to pack for. In my suitcase was a mix of foods, sweats, shoes, and even dresses. Now it was Saturday evening, the day before my departure. I knew that an officer would be at my doorstep by eight the next morning, just as they were for the twins and my dad. In honor of the depressing occasion, Mom had taken me out to dinner. In the end, it was a show of her crying and me, having no idea how to console her. She repeatedly made it clear throughout the week that she had no desire to discuss my leaving, so when I brought it up over dinner, she blew up. The car ride home was a silent disaster. Mom wouldn't look at me, so I didn't bother speaking to her. That woman had lost the majority of her family to the Facility—her parents, her husband, her son. And now her daughter.

River better not fail her, even if she hates him, I thought.

When we returned home, Mom immediately went upstairs to bed, with her harsh, marching footsteps. I stood there in the kitchen in a beautiful black dinner dress for nothing. A sickening, twisting feeling started to build up in my stomach and my head was light.

I'm going to the Facility. Tomorrow.

I wandered up the steps softly, towards my bedroom to pack or sleep or cry, when I noticed River's bedroom light on.

He's home. Maybe he cares enough to say good-

bye to me.

Before I could even think, I was knocking on his door.

"River?" I got out pathetically. There was no answer. I knocked again. "River, please open the door. Please don't ignore me right now."

Hot tears started to spring up in my eyes and my lips quivered trying to hold them back. I leaned my forehead on the cold wood. I had never sincerely, tearfully begged my own younger brother before. I hadn't gone in his room or spent any quality time with him since he had returned from his own time at the Facility. My fears overpowering my pride, I opened the door and stepped in.

"River?" The bedroom was a small oval area with not many places for a 6-foot boy to hide. River wasn't there and the room smelled of blood. Blood was there, red droplets on his pillowcase,

not enough to be alarming, but enough to be a clue. And his walls. Posters and newspaper clippings blanketing them, all strung together and marked with blue and red strings. On his bed was a green envelope with my name on it. I almost missed it as it blended in with his green quilt. But this wasn't from the Facility; the peaceful green was from my brother.

The blood stained letter from inside it read,

Bria,

Do not show this to mom.

As soon as you finish reading this, you burn it, got that? Burn everything in my room. Go to the woods and burn it. Come up with a cover and a lie for burning it in case you get caught.

I'm sorry I had to leave. I have a plan, I promise.

I'll come back someday. Don't think about that now. Read this very carefully and don't forget it.

When you get to the Facility, it'll seem nice at first. They'll give you all kinds of food, clothes, and

then when you're happy, a sedative. You'll fall asleep and when you wake up, you'll feel nothing. They'll say they were just testing your blood, making sure you're healthy. It's all bullshit. They'll have put a tracker on you. For the rest of your life, they'll be watching you. The workers will slowly start to train you in combat, weapons, fighting. They'll train you to be a soldier. You'll either be one of the seven who's strong enough to get chosen to fight for them, or you'll be one of the three that isn't, like me. If that's true, they send you back here with orders to help find the next ten selected for the Facility training in the next six months. They'll ask you to spy on people, lie to them, keep quiet about what you saw at the Facility. You talk or refuse to do what they ask, they'll know from the tracker. They'll kill you. Read that again, Bria. They will kill you. And Mom probably.

Do whatever you possibly can to be one of the three that makes it out of there. Break a leg, fake an illness, don't fight back in training. Do not be one of the seven. If you are, they'll brainwash you. That's what happened to Rick. They erase your memory and you become a Scavenger Soldier. You go outside the walls, you kill people, take land from others. You follow orders without thinking. NOT. BECOME. ONE. OF. THEM. GET. OUT.

Tonight I took my tracker out of my arm. I'm with people, good people, trying to stop this. Trying to stop the Facility. My tracker's at the bottom of a lake. The police will tell you I drowned; they won't want you to know what's going on. NOT. COME. LOOKING. FOR. ME. I'll find you someday, I swear to God. I will.

Just survive somehow, okay? Get out of there as one of the three. Burn this letter. And again, do not tell Mom, please.

Don't let them make you forget us, River.

A pit in my gut said, you can help him remember. You can bring him back. You can stop all of them from getting brainwashed. You'd be helping River stop this.

I must've re-read it ten times over before I finally stood up from his bedroom floor. The first time, I was just shocked, shaking and by the third time, I started crying. By the fifth, I was sobbing, and by the tenth I had stopped. My brother thought he had given me only one option. Do this or lose it all. I appreciated him for this. But I realized something as I went to grab my lighter. He was asking me to choose between brothers. Richard was in the Facility or outside the walls, one of the two. Going meant a chance of finding him.

A pit in my gut said, you can help him remember.

You can bring him back. You can stop all of them from getting brainwashed. You'd be helping River stop this.

In the forest that night, I watched as River's letter, his posters, his newspapers, and his bloody pillowcase burned in on itself, its ashes into the air. I chose Richard over him,

then and there. I made up my mind. I would become one of the seven.



In Harmony

Hallie Holt

The small village of Xiaon was deadly silent on that humid summer evening," Devon recalls rubbing her stiff leg. A group of children sit in front of her in the vibrant grass of spring. The grass sways in the breeze, fresh and calming. "Not even the chirping of cicadas could be heard..."

Ten Years ago.

Devon trudges home through the small village of Xiaon almost grudgingly. She knows what her mission is. She was the last of the able-bodied women who could harvest the seeds. It was an honor in her village to be passed down

the knowledge of harvesting, but all she wanted to do was stand and fight. She pauses and brushes the sweat off her brow, taking in deep breaths of humid air. She hoists the backpack up higher on her shoulders. This backpack

filled with vials of seeds was the reason her beloved village was about to be locked down and overrun. They were solely independent from the outside world. They didn't need to follow the harsh laws the government forced upon the citizens because they could feed themselves. As a small community, they went unnoticed out in what was left of the countryside, away from the polluted cities. And now the militia thought they could steal what didn't belong to them. The world outside Xiaon had their chance for survival but they destroyed it with greed.

She should be scared; instead she is angry. Devon hates them. Hates them for destroying what didn't belong to them in the first place. She wants to fight with her friends. Not leave them to die, and they

would die. Xiaon couldn't stand against the militia, but they wouldn't go down without a fight. She clenches her fists and hoists the backpack further up her shoulders again. The strap on the backpack breaks, it swings off her shoulder spilling the contents on the dusty gravel. A few vials of seeds shatter into millions of pieces across the ground. Devon stares in shock as the deadly silence is disturbed and like an avalanche the sounds of fighting in the distance fill her ears. What is she doing! She shouldn't even have stopped in the first place. Shaken, Devon scoops the seeds into her hands as best she can,

ignoring the small cuts and shards of glass stinging her palms. Throwing the seeds back into the backpack, she cradles it like a baby in her arms and sprints towards her shack of a home.

The sounds of fighting grow stronger around her

as the militia breaks through Xiaon's small defense hiding in the trees and bushes, blending in and becoming one with nature in a way long forgotten by the rest of the world. Even still the village can't stand against the guns and tanks that destroyed the fertile ground. Devon sprints, ashamed that she wanted to fight instead of completing her mission.

Determination fills her wet eyes and she pushes herself to run harder than she's ever before. These seeds were what her childhood friends were dying for. She wouldn't let them die in vain. Like the hounds of hell are at her heels, Devon runs through the door of her shack. The cellar door bursts open shifting the dust into the air and then she's being herded down into the cellar by a young man wear-

**Determination fills her wet eyes
and she pushes herself to run
harder than she's ever before.
These seeds were what her
childhood friends were dying for.**

ing the sprouting green symbol of the rebellion.

"What about my siblings? Grandmother? Did they make it?" she asks, squinting in the darkness. The man pushes her gently further into the cellar coming towards a gaping hole in the ground leading into a tunnel system.

"Devon!" Her grandmother waddles out of the darkness, followed by her siblings. Devon's eyes start to adjust and she sees others standing around. The elderly and the young, a few rebellion members glancing at the backpack in her arms. Devon looks at them in shock and confusion.

"You should have gone ahead—" Devon's cut off as small children ram into her stomach. "You made it! I knew you would," her younger sister, Faelyn, says.

"I still don't understand why you had to go by yourself though," her little brother, Ash grumbles while hugging her tightly.

"You know me and Grandma are the only ones who know where they're stored.

It's sacred. Also Grandma couldn't have run could she?" Devon hugs her siblings back.

Ash mumbles that it's stupid. She pinches his cheek and he pulls away rubbing it.

Devon turns and looks into her grandmother's eyes. Her grandmother rests her cool hand against Devon's heated cheeks. "I'm proud of you. We all are."

The people nod in agreement. Devon blushes and looks down.

"Come on folks, we're not out of the water yet." The man who ushered her into the cellar starts urging them to make their way down the tunnel.

As they journey down the dark tunnels leaving the sounds of people dying behind a thought comes to Devon filling her with hope.

"Maybe Ash is right." People glance over at her

in confusion, Ash most of all. "My family kept the location of the seeds secret, only sharing the skills of farming with this tiny village. We thought protecting these secrets from the government was the right thing to do, but in the end we were only protecting ourselves. We abandoned the rest of the world that is suffering from the ravenous greed of those in power. Maybe it's time to remind the world how to be partners with nature."

Ten Years Later.

"Why did you stop?" A child sitting in the front asks. "That can't be the end." "Oh it's certainly not the end, but the beginning," Devon chuckles.

"I want to hear the rest."

The children all start to yell for her to finish the story.

Devon holds up a hand covered with calluses from hard work, silencing them. They hold their breath thinking they're getting the rest of the story. "I'll save the gritty details for another day. Besides, you guys already know

the ending. You're living in it."

The children boo. Their teacher standing off to the side shushes them. The children thank her for the story and go off for recess. Devon gets up from the chair and watches the children screaming with laughter as they chase butterflies through the lush grassland.

Their teacher, Mrs. Swan, comes up to Devon and shakes her hand. "Thank you so much for coming Miss Caden. I know how busy your schedule is but it's an honor."

Devon blushes and looks away. "It's no problem at all. I always love visiting my home village."

Devon looks around her once ruined village with pride. It was now one of many communities, capable and able to sustain themselves. The world wasn't out of the water yet as one of her friends would say. Once something is so polluted it can never recover

We abandoned the rest of the world that is suffering from the ravenous greed of those in power. Maybe it's time to remind the world how to be partners with nature.

to what it once was. But with the help of the rebellion and her family's knowledge they empowered the people to provide for themselves rather than suffer for the small percent in power. Now a sense of community and love for nature, the desire to protect and respect nature is once again reaching to the farthest sides of the globe.





Sona

Jonathan Faust

Colorful and fluorescent screen.
Both mirror and door.
Two worlds intertwined.
To make so much more.
Then could ever be than before.

Of me and myself.
One of flesh and of brittle bone.
Another of fang and matted fur.
Both tortured and alone.
Stories that will end in carved out stone.

My world is cruel and unforgiving.
My world is chaotic and loud.
Yet somehow, we find ourselves together.
In seas of endless crowds.
Split only by names that should be worn proud.

But...
We are black sheep.
To our cultures and our kin.
Bound together by everything.

Just except the skin.





I am

Christopher Jay Sevilleja Wenceslao

I am
fine, honestly,
Or so my husband says.
And my brother, they're both
doctors,
I'm not.

I am
laughed at by John,
and medicated for
my "hysterical tendencies."
I'm not.

I am
told that I should
not write, but I can't stop.
John asks if I'm writing. I say,
"I'm not."

I am
disgusted by
this yellow wallpaper:
Repellant, revolting, and dull.
I'm not.

I am
excited to
see John's sister Jennie.
Checks if I'm writing. When she's
here
I'm not.

I am
seeing something
in this faded wallpaper.
A sort of figure, that sounds crazy.
I'm not

I am
lying in bed.
Caught by the soft moonlight.
The figure, it wants to break out.
She's not.

She is
causing me to
stir: "I'm a doctor dear,
so, I know." John's ignoring me.
She's not.

She is
quite puzzling.
She doesn't let me sleep.
She lies and claims that she's
sleeping.
She's not.

She is
catching the eye
of others in the house.
Jennie thinks she's fooling me, well
she's not.

She is
smelling the room.
Round and round and round and
round. She believes that she is free.
She's not.

She is
always creeping,
in daylight, doors locked.
She thinks she's going to escape.
She's not.

She is
ready for the
last day. Torn down wallpaper.
John's here and thinks
she'll be leaving.
We're not.

Pan de Muerto

Iliana Padilla

As I waltzed into the kitchen I was greeted by a mouthwatering aroma. I scanned the room in hopes of finding my target. There it was... right under my nose. There was a whole stack of *hojaldras* just waiting to be eaten. However, I knew better than to try one. I resisted temptation because I knew it wasn't worth an angry Abuela. I heard footsteps coming towards me. I turned around. It was Abuela. She lectured me on how the *hojaldras* were for the altar that I was to help her set up for Day of the Dead. I nodded my head and Abuela grinned. She handed me a bin and instructed me to open it. In it was a delectable *hojaldrá*. She smiled and said, "I saved it just for you."

Hojaldras, also known as "pan de muerto," is a traditional bread that is placed on the altar for Day of the Dead. The circular figure in the center of the bread represents the cranium of the dead and the stick figures surrounding the cranium represent the bones. *Hojaldras* are utilized to adorn the altar and are seen as a way of welcoming the dead to the land of the living. However, there are various interpretations on what *hojaldras* symbolize in Mexican culture. For instance, others view the bread's circular form as the cycle of life and death. Not to mention, *hojaldras* can also be seen from a religious perspective because *hojaldras* can be associated with the body of Christ. Every Mexican household has their own reasons why they incorporate the *hojaldras* into their altars and their own definitions on what *hojaldras* symbolize. Like the *hojaldras*, we all have different stories that make us unique.

When I looked up the translation for *hojaldras* in English it said that it was a puff pastry; however, *hojal-*

Hojaldras are utilized to adorn the altar and are seen as a way of welcoming the dead to the land of the living.

dras are so much more than a mere pastry. *Hojaldras* are indicators of Mexican culture and demonstrate Mexican culture's outlook on death. Death is known to be a taboo subject, but for Mexicans it is seen as a celebration. The Day of the Dead is the celebration of our loved ones who have passed away and we use that time to reflect on the special moments we shared with them. I know for me I reminisce about the times my grandfather and my uncle were still alive, and I take that day to think how they have shaped me to be the person I am today. The Day of the Dead for me is the perfect time to share stories about what made my dead relatives great. I believe by sharing their stories I am honoring them.

Like *hojaldras*, I too represent Mexican culture and I have various stories that make me unique. A story that I specifically like to reflect on was when I was on TV. I had gone to a meeting in the library and had met the authors of the novel, *Today's Inspired Latinas*. Two of the co-authors, Dolly and Luz, invited me to be on their show and speak about what it's like growing up Mexican. I remember being extremely nervous, but it meant a lot for me to be able to have a platform to voice my own personal story. I will never forget being a part of their show because I was able to connect with my roots and I knew that somewhere out there my uncle and my grandfather were proud of me.

Being born bi-cultural has provided me with various opportunities and I will continue to express my culture until I meet my fate: death. I pride myself on my identity and culture; that's why I will never stop telling my story. I aspire to be like an *hojaldrá* because I too want to nourish others in Mexican culture.

Lost in the Crowd

Leandro Lambert

Thirteen years ago, in front of what is now known as the Willis Tower, I experienced one of the worst moments of my life. An event that lasted less than half an hour felt like an eternity for a seven-year-old Leandro who was lost, disoriented, and separated from his family in a bustling city.

On the corner of Adams and Franklin, my family attempted to cross the busy street after a successful visit at what once was the Sears Tower. We were showing some family that came to visit us from Honduras all the interesting spots in the city. There were probably close to nine or ten of us in the group and my mother was at the helm as she had lived in the city for nearly a decade. At the time we were departing from the tower, rush hour hit the city. People were leaving their jobs and returning home after a long day of work, hustling through the streets, hunting and searching for a chance at relaxation. With all that added buzz, the sidewalks were completely crowded by the diverse population the city had to offer. The moment the traffic light allowed us to cross the street, I was swept away without noticing I had lost sight of all the familiar faces I had seen a moment ago. After a couple of minutes of fidgeting with a new toy my mother had purchased for me from the gift shop, I looked up to realize I had been walking alone.

The realization set in and I was paralyzed with fear; unable to move except for quick shuffles to look around for the family that had just vanished. I was officially lost and the first thing seven-year-old me

chose to do was to panic. Moments ago I had seen an officer on patrol pass by me on the sidewalk as the sound of his belt moving on his waist reminded me of his presence. I quickly turned around to look for the officer but could not find him, or anyone that I thought could come to my aid as a lost child. I then remembered that I had been given my first cell phone a few weeks back during my parents' vacation, as my grandmother was taking care of my younger sister and me. I was given the phone in cases of emergency, as it could only call or text. In that instant I felt a wave of relief;

I felt a wave of relief; I could call my mother and quickly be reunited, removing the title of “lost child” I felt had been branded onto my forehead in the past few minutes.

I could call my mother and quickly be reunited, removing the title of “lost child” I felt had been branded onto my forehead in the past few minutes. I tried calling her number and was met with an error screen several times.

The panic inside me started to roar again. After a few more error screens, I considered that there could be something wrong with her phone. It could be turned off or out of battery, so I decided to dial 911. As a child, I could think of nothing scarier when owning a phone than calling the cops accidentally, as the repercussions would most likely be punishment in some form. Making sure that the situation needed law enforcement was something I internally debated for what felt like hours; in reality, it was probably only seconds. I finally ended up calling the emergency services and was met with another error screen. At that point, I could feel tears forming in my eyes from the stress and panic and loneliness I felt from going astray. I tried removing the battery and putting it back in again, restarting

the phone, even moving around to make sure I was getting cell service; yet, in all my attempts I was never successful. I knew that that phone had its issues, since it would sometimes not make calls or receive them; however, I never thought that in the one time I depended on it, it would fail me.

Once I realized my phone was of no use to me, I looked around, desperately trying to find my family, all while keeping my composure. After a bit of searching, I decided I could not wait any longer. I walked into a nearby McDonald's with the intention of asking a stranger if I could use their phone in order to contact my mother, or the authorities. I walked into the restaurant thinking my problems had been solved; all I would have to do was walk up to a person and politely ask them for a chance to call my mother and it would all be okay. Yet once I was inside, my socially introverted self kept me from walking up to a stranger and letting them know I was lost, alone, and vulnerable. I spent what felt like too long thinking about who I should ask when I took a glance out the glass door I had entered through and I saw a familiar shape. I saw my grandmother frantically walking on the same sidewalk I had just been on.

Once I recognized her, I pushed the door open as quickly as I could and ran to her; tears sprang from my eyes like they never had before. I had never been so happy to see anyone in my life and my grandmother and I embraced as I tried to explain what had happened, all the while sobbing uncontrollably. My grandmother took me to my mother who had been losing her mind the entire time.

I will never forget that day. This journey I went through as a child is something I will forever carry with me as my first memory of true panic, fear, and loneliness. The street in front of the Willis Tower, West Adams Street, will always be the street where I lost my family and gained a sense of what it means to truly feel alone in a crowd.



Inheritance

Harrison Starzec

A man of wretched substance
stumbles through the dead of night,
leaving a cloud of sour ferment
and the rhythmic clinking of his bottle bones,
wispy thin threads pulled too taut
at the scalp, at the joints,
a tugging,
a warning he cannot heed... so
he connects in fragments. Clippings.
Surgical excisions of past from paper;
decomposing ink on his fragile fingers
from forgotten faces
falling to the greying shag carpet,
from names and dates
wafting across the walnut wood table.
Blood is a silent marionettist,
waiting for the glass to fracture,
for the nectar to puddle,
for the prophesied suffocation.
I shut my bedroom door quietly to
make him disappear,
search for comfort between my sheets, try
to sleep again.









A Flame Flickered

Annabelle Burns

When he died, it was as if a wild gust of wind had extinguished the impassioned inferno of her life, or perhaps someone had tossed a bucket of water into its hearth.

The call informing her of the wreck had come a few hours after she had expected him home from work. That evening, the dinner waiting on the table went untouched, the television ran, and the left side of the bed was cold. A cruel emptiness began to invade their home.

There was a frozen, removed feeling behind everything she did moving forward. The routine that had once been driven and animated became monotonous in an instant; she listlessly woke up at the same exact time every morning, she showered listlessly, washed her face listlessly, brushed her hair and teeth listlessly, dressed listlessly, ate listlessly, drove herself to work listlessly. Everything was listless.

Her movements began to thaw when she missed her period for the second month in a row. The dim flame in her heart gleamed ever so slightly at the prospect that she might still have a piece of him. She hesitated to take a test, apprehensive of just how crushing it would be to have yet another reminder that she was alone, and that the bright promise of her life to come had been mercilessly torn from her grip in just one evening.

When the third month approached, she had yet to bleed, and her mornings were plagued with nausea. She ultimately decided to go to the pharmacy, and purchased a single, rapid result pregnancy test. When it came back positive, she returned to the pharmacy

and purchased ten more tests, each with different brands and specifications. All ten of them came back positive. The dull embers caught flame once more.

The listlessness began to subside. She woke each day feeling slightly more emboldened than the last. She now cared for herself with solemn tenderness. She modified her diet carefully and added the appropriate vitamins and nutrients to her lifestyle. She went to work with a purpose and started again to enjoy the company of others.

One thing that brought her particular delight and comfort was to fill their home with furniture, decor,

toys, necessities, clothing, and more for the child. Her favorite purchase had been a miniature pair of blush-colored Mary Janes adorned with two gold buckles; a pair she knew he would have chosen if he could have.

Labor had been agonizing and lonely. The loneliness she felt might have been even more painful than the act of giving birth. The anguish was bearable though because it meant she was bringing his living memory into the world. The fire blazed as she endured hour upon hour of sheer pain. She cried and pushed desperately, yearning to see and to hold her daughter in her arms, all while aching for a glimpse of her beloved.

The flame blazed greater than it had ever blazed when she delivered her daughter, who arrived still-born. The delivery room was silent. No precious, infant wails could be heard, only the hums and murmurs of somber nurses and doctors. She realized that she was alone yet again, and the gleaming, hot brightness flickered, then died.

**The dim flame in her heart
gleamed ever so slightly at the
prospect that she might still
have a piece of him.**

Where

Laura Evenson

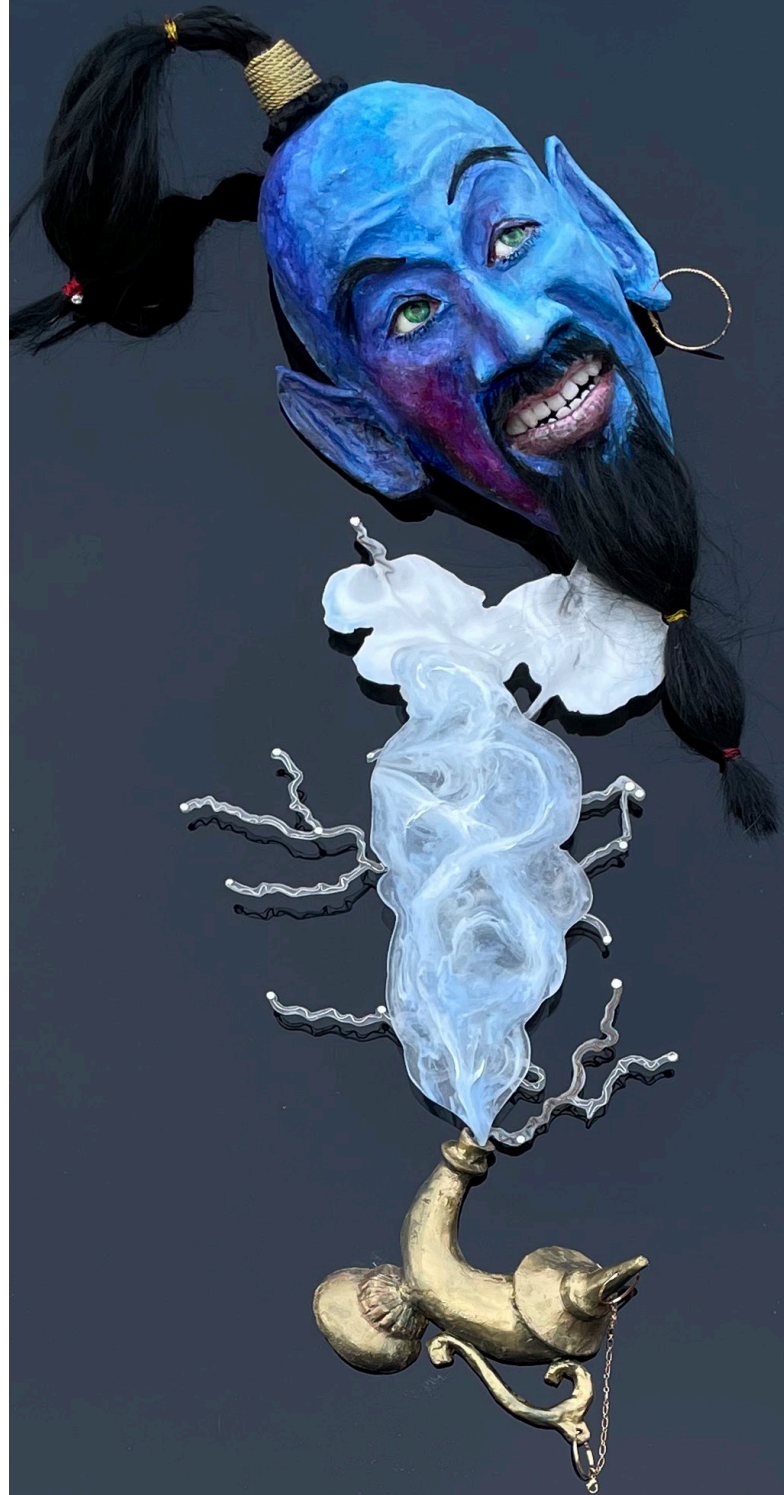
Have I told you I've searched
I don't know where you are
From the early days of security
To the present days of collective madness

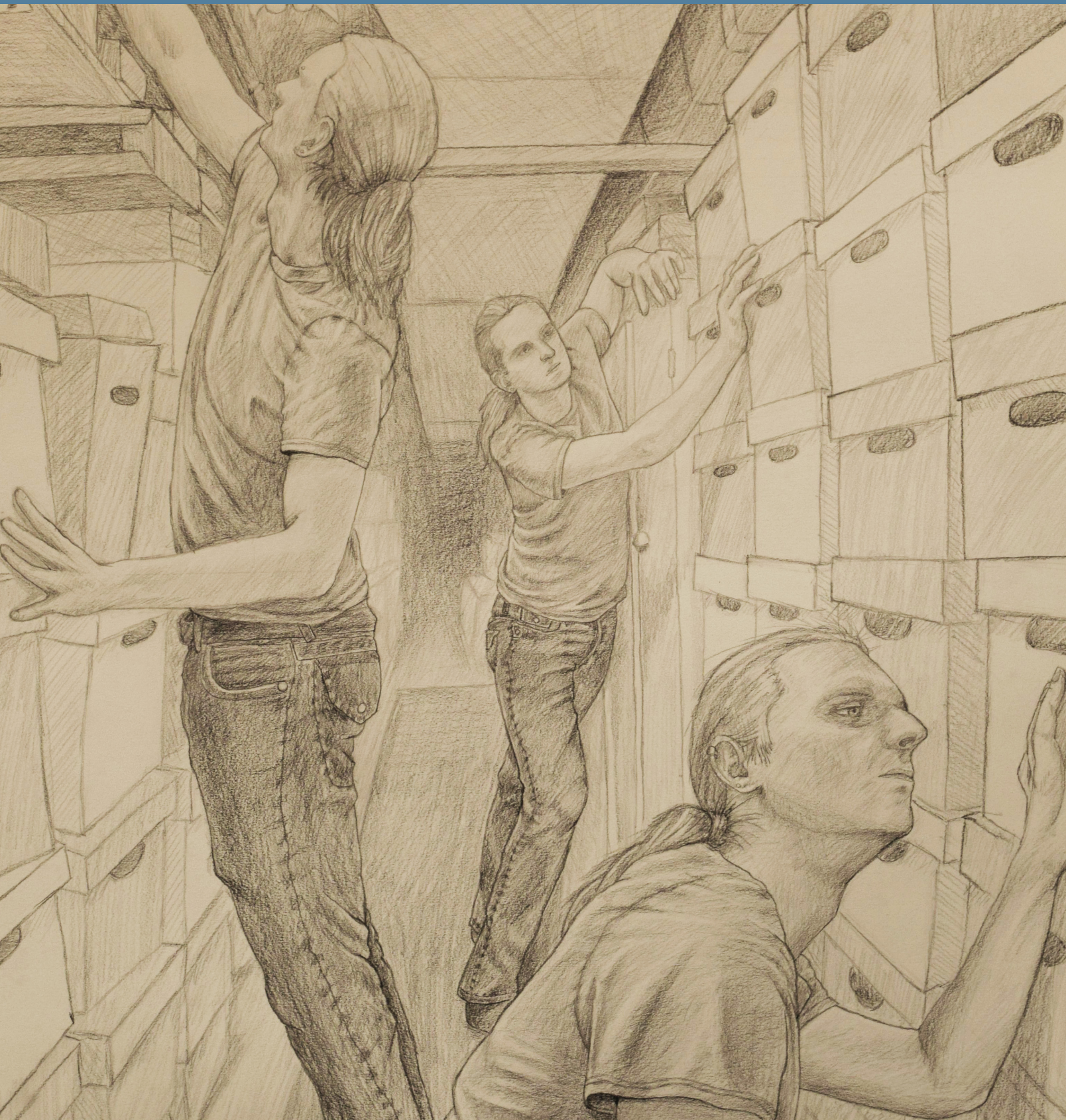
Have I told you I see you in the sun
In every light that shines
Your spirit is always near
And your presence I always feel

Have I told you I see you in the crowds
On endless bright sunny days
Or in a passing car
Stepping-stones of passing thoughts

Have I told you I hear you in the songs
The memories of early times
The random flashback of soft and light
And the purposeful darkness of the night

Have I told you I've found you in my heart
A place where you will always be
Always wondering what if—and why
Those answers will never be





Boxes in the Closet

Mary Burns

The rain pitter-pattered on the window as Mrs. Owens's tears were slowly beginning to roll down her plump cheeks. She and her husband had just bought a new house in the countryside: a quaint two-bedroom cottage surrounded by meadows that seemed to never end. They had left behind the warm, cozy, four-bedroom house with the oak tree in the backyard, the oak tree that had wished to finally have a tire swing tied to its branches. The Owens had chosen to downsize; they would not be needing the extra rooms anymore.

Moving day was tomorrow, and Mrs. Owens was still not ready to leave. She had finally begun packing her closet when she stumbled upon a small box wrapped in paper decorated with snowflakes and reindeer. Tied neatly around the box was a red ribbon speckled with gold. A Christmas present. From what year, she did not know.

"Darling! I've found an unopened present!" she called to her husband. "For who?!" he yelled back.

Mrs. Owens could not seem to find a tag anywhere on the parcel. Being tucked away in the closet for many years had caused the parcel to grow a thick layer of dust. The once bright colors of the wrapping paper had become faded and worn.

"Oh my..." she whispered to herself as she heard her husband coming up the stairs. The tears had just begun to fall as her husband entered the room.

"Honey, who is the gift for?"

Mrs. Owens could not seem to find the right

words. She had become overwhelmed with sadness and grief as soon as she found the tag. Tucked tightly underneath that red ribbon with gold speckles was the tag that had read:

"To: Baby Melanie

Love: Mommy and Daddy"

Mr. Owens caught his wife in a tight embrace once he realized what was happening.

"Honey, you certainly cannot be crying at such a thing," he said.

"How can you even say that!?" she snapped back as she broke his embrace.

She began to rip the red ribbon with the gold speckles off, tearing the reindeer and snowflakes apart. She needed to know what her daughter would have gotten for Christmas. What had been living in the back of this closet, untouched and unloved, for so many years?

Once she tore away layers of wrapping paper, she was left with a shoe box. Pink ballet flats that once had a dress to match with. A dress that was now long gone. Size 4; baby shoes. Mrs. Owens let out a sob.

"We never got to give these to her," she cried

"She had enough shoes. She never even wore half of them," her husband replied.

"But she never got to wear these. Think of all the memories that could have been made in these. All the strawberries eaten, all the parks played at, all the songs sung. My dear baby Melanie never got to put these little pink shoes on her little feet. She should have loved these." As her tears kept falling, Mrs.

Being tucked away in the closet for many years had caused the parcel to grow a thick layer of dust. The once bright colors of the wrapping paper had become faded and worn.

Owens heard the door open downstairs.

"Who could that possibly be?" she said through snuffles.

"I don't know dear; the boys are at school" her husband replied.

They listened intently as footsteps traveled up the stairs and down the hallway towards their room. The door creaked open, and a face poked through the crack in the door:

"Anybody home?" a woman's voice said

"MELANIE!" Mrs. Owens screamed. "What are you doing at home?!"

"I decided to visit for the weekend and help you guys move... Why are you crying, Mom?"

"Oh, it's nothing, I was missing you and we found an old Christmas gift in the closet. I don't know what to do with them."

"Just sell them, Mom! We have no use for them anymore."

Mrs. Owens nodded her head in agreement as she got up to hug her daughter. She felt quite silly about crying over baby shoes, but her little girl was all grown up. And it had finally hit her.

The next day, a post was made in a Facebook group for selling old clothes and things. It read:

"For Sale: Baby Shoes, never worn."





Indifference to Interest

Charlotte Czapiewski

I always despised reading. Silent reading time would sneak up on me every day in grade school. Thirty minutes in the white-walled and hideously carpeted, dim 'classroom'. It always felt more like prison to me, especially when staring at the spider web castles plastered up against the decaying ceiling tiles. I would glance around at my friends, their little noses buried deep within the used library books they had borrowed just hours before. All of them were so content with reading in those dark, dollar-store decorated classrooms. I simply did not have a reason to care about reading. That is, until the gangliest and most awkward man in my life changed everything: my older cousin, Sam, a lanky, blond-haired, and dead-eyed individual. We were always two peas in a pod, but it was he who introduced me to a new perspective on reading. He taught me that reading and writing is really about whom you share it with. Without the sense of community reading together gave me, I probably would have never read another book in my life.

As previously mentioned, I was never a reader. I faked my way through every reading quiz in school. I was never interested in reading the books teachers oh so graciously bestowed upon me. Sticking my teeny pink tongue out, I would deny their requests to read even the most popular books. However, my reading rebellion faced a mutiny the day Sam introduced me to the *Warrior Cats* series by Erin Hunter. I was eleven when he first brought me those books about wild, feral cats and their clans. I was a huge animal nerd, and the idea of reading about animals instead of people really sparked something in me.

Big-eyed and eager, Sam would encourage me through every chapter. Together, we would have a little book club and discuss each book and our favorite characters in detail. Soon, even the spider web kingdoms against the barren ceilings could not tear my eyes away from the feline fighters.

As an extension of book club, we began finely crafting our own *Warrior Cats* stories. With carefully scribbled penmanship, I would scratch out stories of my very own *Warrior Cats*. I would reference my idolized novels and try to mimic Erin Hunter's style with as much accuracy as I could. I did this all so I could present my work to Sam. To my surprise, he did the same for me. Before long we were getting into the same innocent yet heated debates about our own characters. My

Grinning ear to ear, presenting my work to someone who cared about me was what led me to keep pushing, keep reading.

feelings towards reading began shifting and seemingly effortlessly morphed into a passion for wild cats and their stories. Scrambling to turn the next page, my sweaty little fingers would anxiously await to know the fate of my favorite cats. I finally understood what people meant when they said their eyes were glued to the page. Silent reading became my new favorite class period. Something about reading about animals just excited my little brain so much. Of course, knowing I had a sacred space to share all my ideas motivated me to keep reading each book and continue writing each story. For me, it was never the act of reading or writing but rather the time we were spending together that made my heart burst with excitement all the time. Grinning ear to ear, presenting my work to someone who cared about me was what led me to keep pushing, keep reading.

As we grew older, our ideas became crazier.

While we still ran through the world of the *Warrior Cats*, our unique creations started to take shape as well. On a baking hot, sizzling afternoon we ventured to our second cousins' home. They were younger than us, and truly we had no interest in being there. Instead of roaming around in the sun-soaked grass we crowded around the storage bins in the dank basement to commence creation of our magnum opus. We called it *The Tarion Chronicles*. It was a story of two people as they gathered magical orbs throughout the universe, building their knowledge and saving countless lives. We put hours upon hours into that Wal-Mart flash drive. That summer will forever be stained with the beauty of my unrivaled childhood dreams.

Sam and I imagined ourselves as being the writers of our generation for working on those patched together books. Each idea we envisioned being more genius than the last.

Our little faces were painted with permanent grins every second we were around each other. On the boats, on the swings, in the car, at dinner—it did not matter where, we were working on *The Tarion Chronicles*. Getting to spend those unwavering summer hours with Sam made me feel like the coolest girl on earth. Sharing our own secret passion inspired me to expand my literacy skills with an open heart. Every step of the way Sam helped me to feel like my thoughts were heard, like my work impacted him.

Today, I suppose things are not too different. Now I still struggle through all the reading I have to do by myself: my eyes glazing over as Frederick Douglass describes situations I will never be in. I shudder to think how much I will procrastinate on reading articles for my upcoming research paper. All that motivates me is that sense of community I will

receive from doing the work in class. The ability to talk about and share my work with others is what really matters to me. My attention span will likely always lack in anything I have to read or write by myself. The creative time I put in with other people is why I do it. Getting to show my dad every essay I write, reminiscing with Sam over every character we made, that is why I like literacy. I adore the ability to share with others. Sam and I continue to share creative passions with each other. Now he lives in Madison, Wisconsin, and I hardly spend physical time with him. Yet all the time we were engrossed in stories made me feel like literacy was not such a bad experience after all.

Through reading and writing with my cousin

Sam, I have learned that for me literacy is about the sense of connection I get from others. Through reading the same books and connecting more with each other I found a bright spot in seemingly the dullest subject. Sam's persistent support helped

me to grow as a reader and writer and find community in all my work. The very idea that we write for each other and we read to make each other feel something seems so all-encompassing to me. Our minds are all connected through experiences. Even though I still do not like reading, or writing for that matter, I am glad I have the ability to feel connected to other people through literacy.

Through reading the same books and connecting more with each other I found a bright spot in seemingly the dullest subject.



A Dark Future for Electric Cars

Tyler Bentsen

The road to hell is paved with good intentions. Equivalently the usage of electric vehicles on the road will push us towards an ecological hell, despite its purpose of saving humanity from the clasp of climate change. Electric cars, hailed as a replacement for the archaic combustion vehicle, have seen a steady increase in sales in the past years. Americans bought almost twice as many electric cars in the first quarter of 2022 as they did in 2021. The usage of electric vehicles is urged and supported by environmentally concerned bureaucrats and popularized among environmentally conscious Americans who see their choice of car as a messiah to save the planet's climate. However, both the bureaucrats and consumers couldn't be further from the truth, and their assertions will exacerbate the consequences of climate change. In fact, at the present, the usage of electric vehicles is worse for the environment compared to standard new internal combustion vehicles.

Our energy infrastructure does not support the environmentally sound usage of electric vehicles. Electric vehicles are by definition zero-emission vehicles, which means they do not produce pollution from any sort of tailpipe in the vehicle. However, it's an unfair definition because all an electric vehicle does in regards to emissions is move the pollution from one spot to another. The emissions that an electric vehicle produces are dependent on the energy infrastructure that the electric vehicle is drawing its energy from.

Our energy infrastructure at this current time would not power electric vehicles in an environmentally sound way, nor will it ever do so in the foreseeable future in any efficient manner worth ever investing taxpayer money.

It's important to note that the United States, and the world as a whole, is far from producing electricity without the use of fossil fuels. According to the U.S. Energy Information Administration, roughly sixty percent of the electricity generated in the United States is from fossil fuels. Aside from the usage of nuclear energy, that leaves only twenty percent of electricity produced by renewable energy in the United States. It's fair to say that widespread adoption of electric vehicles will draw upon that same energy infrastructure, with little difference in actual emissions. Proponents of

electric vehicles claim that our energy infrastructure will improve and make electric cars more ecologically viable with time. While this is true, greenhouse emissions are projected to lower with the utilization of electric vehicles versus new internal combustion vehicles. However, based on EIA projections of the number of new electric vehicles, the net reduction in CO2 emissions

between 2018 and 2050 would be only about one-half of one percent of total forecasted U.S. energy-related carbon emissions (Lesser). The one-half of one percent represents the insignificant change electric cars will contribute to the environment; in exchange, billions of dollars will be spent on the infrastructure needed to utilize electric vehicles, not to mention the pollution involved with building said infrastructure. An example of this infrastructure is the recharging stations that will be required to replace gas stations all over the country. Our energy infrastructure at this current time would not power electric vehicles in an environmentally sound way, nor will it ever do so in

the foreseeable future in any efficient manner worth ever investing taxpayer money.

Energy efficiency loss causes electric vehicles to be grossly inefficient in utilizing electricity sources. Energy efficiency loss is a scientific axiom that each time an energy source changes to another form, an "efficiency loss" occurs (Morgan). An example of this is electricity being supplied from a diesel powerplant to a Tesla charging station. First, a large loss occurs when diesel is burned and sent to a Tesla charging station. Then another when the battery charger converts the AC electricity to chemical energy stored in the battery. The final loss occurs when that energy is converted to DC power and delivered to the electric motors that power the vehicles. These losses are significant and consume 75 percent of the energy contained in the diesel fuel (25 percent thermal efficiency). Compared to an internal combustion engine, the latest turbo-diesel engines are approaching 50 percent thermal efficiency, so they would only use half as much diesel and emit half the emissions (Morgan). These findings are important with the realization that our energy infrastructure still mainly uses fossil fuels as an energy source, where this gross inefficiency would be present in an electric car utilizing electricity from said energy sources. Since our energy infrastructure is nowhere near 100 percent renewable, it's evident that it would be environmentally better to burn the fuel directly in the car rather than a powerplant. The energy has the potential to be used more efficiently and, therefore, will reduce emissions in general, especially with the utilization of new and future internal combustion engine technology.

Regardless of emissions, there is a more pressing issue with the usage of electric cars: the production and usage of batteries causing unforeseen and potentially drastic consequences to our environment. With the entire cycle of production of electric vehicles included, a high environmental cost is attributed to the electric batteries needed. "[R]aw materials needed for batteries are extracted at a high human and environmental toll. This includes, for example,

child labour, health and safety hazards in informal work, poverty and pollution" (Miltimore). This is especially pressing considering that not only is there an immense environmental toll in the mining process, but the bulk of batteries are manufactured in places such as Japan, China, and South Korea, where the generation of electricity remains heavily dependent on fossil fuels, including coal, which increases the carbon footprint of electric car batteries (Miltimore). Despite the costs of production, another issue arises with using these environmentally destructive batteries. Recycling electric batteries will be seen as a major challenge as batteries have a significantly lower lifespan in comparison to combustion engines and are not as easily recyclable due to the toxic materials present within them. Eleven million tonnes of spent lithium-ion batteries are forecasted to be discarded by 2030, with few systems in place to enable reuse and recycling (Miltimore). As more electric vehicles hit the road, more spent batteries will be needed to be recycled without any system in place to do so in any safe or environmentally sound way, a complete recipe for disaster.

New internal combustion vehicles have improved in reducing emissions, and further improvements in technology over time will only advance our capabilities in reducing emissions. In fact, today's vehicles emit only 1% of the pollution they did in the 1960s (Miltimore). It's easy at first glance to see electric vehicles as a reasonable replacement for internal combustion engines, as it seems like the simplest solution to lower our dependence on fossil fuels. However, it is clear that electric vehicles are notably more damaging to the environment than new internal combustion vehicles. They do not reduce emissions in any significant manner, are grossly inefficient in use with our power grid, and the issue of producing and recycling batteries will lead to potentially environmentally catastrophic consequences. It is evident that electric vehicles are not a viable replacement for internal combustion vehicles now or in the foreseeable future and will only lead to further destruction of our climate.

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The Definition of Insanity

Rhani Jordan

A woman is sitting in her old, shuttered house. She knows she is alone in the whole world; every other thing is dead. The doorbell rings.

Her breath hitches in her chest. Her body may as well have turned to stone. Has it been so long without proper company that it has come to this?

"It's nothing. Just a trick of the mind."

She breathes in the enveloping warmth radiating from the fireplace as her rigid body eases back into her husband's recliner. Its dark leather has discolored in an

outline of a human form and still smells of him. His cologne, a cheap imitation of amber and wood, always arrived into a room before he did. It was potent, pungent, awful, and he loved it. She never cared for it. Until now. Now she feels comfort in the memory of it.

The doorbell rings again.

A gasp escapes at the melodic chime, which she quickly hushes with her frail hand covering her thin lips. Her other hand grips the armrest with strength unbeknownst to her age. For a moment, all is still, anticipating a third ring which could not come.

"I-It's just the electric. It's on the fritz..."

The doorbell rings again, again, and again, in rapid succession. The last ring seemingly holds indefinitely, as if someone's thumb is jammed against the button.

The woman's eyes shut so tightly they ache. Both hands clasp against her ears as she gives a shrill cry in protest, in an attempt to drown out the tune which mocks her. Even as the ringing comes to an end, she refuses to lower her hands. Her head turns, ever so lightly, in the front door's direction. Its frame mostly hidden

beyond an opaque veil of dull gray hair.

Against her better judgment, she indulges the impossible visitor:

"Who...who are you? Who's there?"

A series of urgent knocks upon the door and rattling of the brass handle send the woman to her feet in a flash, taking up the fire poker as a means of defense.

The recliner creaks as it rocks in her absence. One could almost dance to the beat of her pounding heart, as her feet creep along the dingy carpet, seemingly on their own accord. White-knuckling the fire poker, she raises it

over-head with her left hand. The other hand trembles terribly as it reaches for the door handle.

Despite the tremors, whether from fear or advanced age, she waits. She waits, maintaining some semblance of composure, until the opportune moment to strike. Or rather, until she musters some courage. The entirety of the clattering door begins to bow outward. With the speed of a practiced hand, she unlocks the deadbolt, rips the door open, and brings the fire poker down upon the head of the person on the other side. Only, no one is there.

Her faded floral nightgown, with a lace collar, flutters in the wind as she steps out onto her porch. Though, nothing can be seen beyond the raging thunderstorm whipping the nearby trees and bushes back and forth, threatening to uproot them. She stares at the rolling storm clouds in sheer astonishment. There was no cloud in the sky, no thunderstorm, not even a patter of rain, before she opened the front door. A flash of lightning sends her reeling back inside with a slam of the door and locks it shut.

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The woman's eyes fall on the new, mysterious stain

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on the carpet, between her feet: a fresh muddied boot print leading into the house. Upon turning around and placing her back against the door, her gaze follows the trail of muddy prints to the fireplace. A man, approximately in his 60's, wearing a drenched woolen hat, trench coat, and steel-toe work boots, which undoubtedly belonged to her husband, warms himself by the fire.

"I thought you'd never let me in," he says.

"Owen?"

The man looks over at the woman against the front door, seemingly confused as to why she is confused. He gives a chuffed laugh. "Aye, that's me. Don't you recognize your own husband?"

"How can this be?"

"What do you mean by that?"

"I buried you. . . buried you with my own hands ages ago."

"Christ alive, El. Whatever you've had to drink tonight, put it away."

"I ain't been drinking!" The woman closes the distance between them with purpose in her step. "I know what I've done, what I've had to do. You're dead. You're not here. You can't be here."

"Ellie. . ."

He does not say another word, yet takes on a sorrowful demeanor. He merely removes his dripping wet hat and coat and passes the woman by to hang them upon the coat rack beside the front door, tracking mud the whole way.

"I don't know who or what you are, but you need to pick up that hat and coat, and go back to wherever you came from."

"I'm right where I need to be," he says as he turns to face the woman. "Right by your side."

The woman remembers the fire poker still positioned firmly in her hand and has every intention to use it if the man has the gall to get too close. "What is it you want? Take it and leave me in peace."

"I want nothing. I need you."

"Need me?"

"Yes. To let go of this dusty old farm. But I can't do that unless you come with me."

"Come with you where?"

"To the sunny side. He won't let me in without you. You who bound me to this land forever."

A laughter erupts from the woman in disbelief. "And how did I do that?"

"Owen Moore, gone away. Owen Moore, here to stay. Ringing any doorbells for you, hmm?"

Dread seeps into the woman's body as the image of her dead husband recites the epitaph she hand-carved on the stone slab that served as his headstone. As she steps backward, toward the kitchen, he steps forward.

"Soon the fever will take you, just as it has everyone else. But come with me now and you'll not know of the agony it brings. He'll welcome us both with open arms. I'm sick of the cold. I'm sick of the cold, and I'm sick of the storms! Please, Elise. I beg of you. Come with me!"

The woman glances at a narrow door to her right. The moment her bare feet touch the cold linoleum flooring, past the kitchen threshold, her attention falls back to the man before her: "Potatoes," she calls out.

The outburst stops the man dead in his tracks.

"What now?"

"I'm hungry. And I need time to think about all this. Can't hardly expect me to think right on an empty stomach. So be a good husband, Owen, like you always were. Fetch me a couple potatoes from the root cellar; would you? I'd be grateful."

The man, quite obviously taken aback, seems compelled to honor his wife's wish. "Always with the oddball requests from you. Glad to see nothing's changed."

The woman inches toward the cellar door after the man disappears down the rickety old steps. During his ascent, she can tell which steps he is on by the way they creak.

Dread seeps into the woman's body as the image of her dead husband recites the epitaph she hand-carved on the stone slab that served as his headstone.

Once he reaches the top step, "Alright, El. I've got you—" is all he has time to say before she swings the fire poker, and cracks the man in the jaw. The potatoes in his hands go tumbling back down the steps as he temporarily loses his footing. Black tar-like sludge pours from the gash in his cheek.

"El! What the—"

The woman strikes again, this time running him through the center of his chest. He grabs hold of the narrow rod, as black ichor stains his red button-up. The woman manages to wedge the fire poker free before delivering the final blows, under the chin, through the skull. Black blood trickles down his brow and temples in streams and spills onto her hand as she watches his dark brown eyes cloud over and roll into the back of his head. She releases the fire poker, allowing the body of the man to flip and roll down the cellar steps. The woman stares motionless at the corpse at the bottom of the stairs for what seems an eternity. She half expects him to rise from the dead a second time before a roll of thunder brings her back to her senses.

The woman shuts the cellar door and sticks a chair under the handle for good measure, then goes to the sink to vigorously wash the blood from her hand. Though, it seems her pale hand has already stained black. The woman returns to the recliner with an exhausted huff, wondering how to dispose of a body she buried a year ago. Amongst her thoughts, she notices that not only had the rainstorm subsided but the man's hat and coat had gone, as well as his muddy tracks on the carpet. She looks to her hand. The black stain has gone.

"It's the fever catching on, isn't it? Vivid hallucinations. . . it's one of the symptoms."

Sitting upon the mantle is a photo of her and her husband from several years ago. It should depict the two of them gazing lovingly at each other with a picturesque beach as the backdrop. But it has changed slightly, yet dramatically, all at once. Now her husband is looking at her; in the recliner; rather than his counterpart in the photo. He is smiling, but not with his eyes, leaving the expression feeling eerily cold.

"Hallucinations. . . that's all they are. Hallucinations."

The woman is sitting in her old shuttered house, absolutely certain now that she is alone in the whole world; every other thing is dead.

The doorbell rings.







Tobe's Journal

Rhani Jordan

April 7th, 1887

Dying sure is a curious thing. The ones that go slow, I mean. I ain't been working for the Griersons but a few weeks before Mister Grierson up and died on poor Miss Emily yesterday morning. It's hard to tell if she ever loved or despised her Daddy. I've been supposing a bit of both. But, in my first days, I sure thought the affection she laid upon him, in his presence, was nothing more than an act to pacify his nasty temper. There'd been many a time I heard her cuss his name in his absence. Mister Grierson wasn't what you might call an agreeable man, but he loved his Emily something fierce. I'm of a mind that he loved her too much. And here's why I say dying's curious. Because it's as if he knew it was coming for him.

The day before he passed on from this world, he pulled me into his private room and says, "Take care of my baby girl."

"Where ya going?" I says back.

He shook his head, looking me dead in the eyes with them icy blues and says, "Take care of my baby girl," and jabs my chest with his pointing finger.

Now any other day, that cold stare would've made me run for the hills. But that day, somehow, them icy blues of his melted by the warmth in his voice and shed tears.

"Yes, sir," I says back. "Alright."

I didn't say nothing about his crying. I'm of the mind that a man should be allowed to cry in his own home without judgement.

The next day, he was gone.

I was the first to find him. I'd just come on up from the kitchen, like every morning at about seven o'clock, with a cup of coffee and a plate of johnnycakes and cornmeal mush on the side. Made them just as Mama taught me, before she got too sick to feed me and little Richie and ended up bedridden. Mister Grierson got in the habit of asking for johnnycakes and cornmeal mush when I started working for him, so I got in the habit of making them before he asked.

Now any other day, that cold stare would've made me run for the hills. But that day, somehow, them icy blues of his melted by the warmth in his voice and shed tears.

I knew something was off right quick 'cause he was still in bed when usually he's up, dressed, and at his desk, reading yesterday's paper before the new one comes along. I set his breakfast down on top of the dresser beside the door and opened the thick velvet curtains on the other side of the room. When

I'd gone to wake Mister Grierson, I stopped half way to the bed. He was laying on his side, facing me. His eyes were half open and he was too pale, even for white folk. His flesh was more akin to gray and had a waxy look about it. I can't quite remember if I said his name out loud or just thought it, but I nudged his shoulder and his whole body rocked. Stiff as stone.

I can't remember how long I stood there staring at Mister Grierson's dead body before I ran out the room. All I do remember is wondering if that's how Mama looked when she died. Was she too pale for a colored woman? Was she just as stiff and looked as miserable as she felt in her last days? I count it a blessing now that I ain't seen a dead body until I was 21. I didn't even get to say goodbye to Mama before

she'd passed on, back in 83. I'd gone off to school that day. Since Mama could only afford to send one of us to school, she sent me and expected I teach Richie what I learned when I came home. Poor little Richie, seven at the time, was there when it happened. Held her hand the whole time, he told me. He said she asked him to do that. Which means to me, she knew death was coming for her, too.

As far as I know, Richie sat with Mama a good long while before he went to a neighbor's for help. By the time I got home, they'd come to take her body away. Richie and I lived off Mama's last wages for a few days before I had to give up on school and find work. God bless the Bensons, the neighbors Richie went to for help. They took him in when I couldn't afford to feed us both.

Then I found the Griersons, who pay just enough to send a little to the Bensons now and then for caring for Richie.

But now I worry what the death of Mister Grierson means for both me and Richie. Miss Emily ain't been too forthright about the matter. I suppose she wouldn't be too concerned about the plights of a colored boy her daddy hired on. Today, least of all. Don't mean I still ain't anxious to hear her speak on it.

Hers was the next room I went to. I had to remind myself to knock light, as to not scare her to death. Then I'd surely be out a job. She came quick, into the hall, in her robe and hair pinned up in a frilly nightcap. She was still squinty-eyed from sleep and I knew she barely made sense of the nonsense I spewed. Not one sentence I finished before I gave up on words and had her follow to see for herself. Only after she saw, did I think better of it. Maybe it ain't so dignified for a girl to see her daddy dead, whether she's fond of him or not. But I didn't know what else to do.

To my surprise, Miss Emily did not run out the room, like me, but straightened up, held her head high all proud like. "My father is merely sleeping in this morning," she says. "Leave him to his rest," then walked out the room.

"Yes, ma'am," I says. I wasn't sure if she was crazy or if I was. I second guessed myself, staring at him a few moments longer, trying to catch sight of some breath going in or out Mister Grierson's body before deciding for myself, once and for all, that he was good and dead.

Of course, I had to let someone know he'd passed when I went to fetch groceries for the house that afternoon. This morning some ladies came to

pay respects and, from the parlor, I heard Miss Emily turn them away at the door. She told them he wasn't dead at all when he surely was. I ain't going to pretend I know why she acts like she don't sleep across the hall from

a dead body, least of all, the body of a man who I thought she might be happy to be rid of.

Maybe she just ain't right in the head? Maybe that's why Mister Grierson wouldn't let any other man near her? Maybe he knew she was touched in the head and that's why she needed looking after? May all that be, in these last few weeks, Miss Emily's become something of a friend to me and I'd hate to see something bad happen to her.

So, if Miss Emily decides to keep me hired on, I damn well intend to keep my promise and look after her, Mister Grierson, until her death or mine.

To my surprise, Miss Emily did not run out the room, like me, but straightened up, held her head high all proud like.





Challenging Censorship via Banned Books

Jacquelyn Thorn

Challenging or banning books is a topic that is always up for debate. Books are challenged or banned for a variety of reasons, but recently many of the books on these lists consist of racial or gender topics (Colussi). In banning books of a certain nature, a liberty is taken away from many kids. Denying the availability of books for those who feel as though their voice is not being represented by their school or library or being denied the opportunity to read and learn about a challenging time in history is a form of censorship and a violation of First Amendment rights. The freedom to read firsthand accounts of what it is like to be of a different race, gender, sexual orientation, age, religion, or even species, provides knowledge and the ability to understand life through a different perspective. The freedom to read is fundamental to the growth of our future generations.

There are books throughout history that have been “challenged” year after year without being banned; however, that isn’t always the case. There is a stark difference between a challenged book and one that is banned. Simply stated by Brogna Brunner in her article “Books Under Fire,” “A banned book is one that has actually been removed from a library or school system, a ‘challenged’ book is the attempt to ban such material.” For schools and libraries, the biggest setback is the overwhelming number of books that are being challenged each year: “In 2021, 1,597 books were affected by censorship attempts” (ALA). When in question to who initiates these challenges, statistics point mainly to the parents at 39%, not too far behind are patrons at 24%, board

and administration at 18%, political and religious groups at 10%, librarians and teachers at 6%, elected officials at 2% and the low percentage of 1% being students themselves (ALA). With this data in hand, the students are not the proponents of banning books. The challenge of books is coming from adults and rule makers, not the students who are being told what is acceptable to and not to read.

When looking back at the history of challenging and banning books, there are a few books that have made the list for decades. Executive Director of *Orion* magazine, Amy Brady, writes about the history of challenged and banned books throughout history.

There is a stark difference between a challenged book and one that is banned.

In Brady’s article she points to historians’ belief that Harriet Beecher Stowe’s famous book *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* was the first book in the United States to receive a country-wide ban (Brady). Why

the ban? “The Confederacy barred the book from stores not only for its pro-abolitionist agenda, but because it aroused heated debates about slavery (some historians argue that the book catalyzed the Civil War)” (Brady).

Book banning remains today; more contemporarily is the instance of Chesterfield County Public Schools in Virginia in which they removed “titles from students’ voluntary summer reading lists” (Brady). The ABFE (American Booksellers for Free Expression) have protested Chesterfield, pointing out that if schools are banning books that are on a voluntary list and not a part of the actual school curriculum “what does the future hold for students who want access to all books, classic and contemporary-books that might broaden their understanding of the world?” (Brady).

The reason many books were subject to challenge in 2021 was recently shown through an infographic provided by the American Library Association, more commonly known as the ALA. The top 5 reasons being, “sexually explicit, LGBTQIA+, critical race theory, obscene, and woke” (ALA). Oddly enough some of the reasons that fell far below those listed were: “harmful misinformation, totally evil, triggering, and developmentally inappropriate” (ALA). The list of most challenged books of 2021 provides insight into what subject matters are being challenged among schools and libraries across the country. Fifty percent of the books on the 2021 list are of LGBTQIA+ subject matter; the remainder on the list are challenged due to having sexually explicit material (ALA). Given the material that is readily available through the internet and many streaming services such as Netflix, Hulu, HBO, Amazon+, etc. it raises the question of why this and not that? Parents have the right to decide what their children view but until those shows are being watched inside the classroom or are available for viewing at a public library, the question remains, why this and not that? The answer should be simple: censorship is censorship. The value of information and or enjoyment through books and reading should be available to those who seek it.

When it comes down to learning, there is much to be gained from reading about the life and or experiences through different perspectives, especially when it is a point of view the reader seldomly sees and can connect with. The American Library Association President, Patricia “Patty” Wong, speaks of her own personal experience with finding books she could relate to as a child. ‘This is personal to me. Not only did I begin my career as a library profes-

This refusal to shed light on the horrors of the Holocaust is an insult to those who experienced it and shelters kids from the realities of history and the injustices that ensued. Banning such accounts is neglecting that history.

sional who serves children, but I was also a reader who sought stories at my local library to help me understand my place in this world. As a Chinese American with roots in Hawaii and California, I did not find myself or my community reflected in history books or in stories I read... diverse books create a better lens through which all children can see themselves in library collections. And yet these very titles—the ones addressing cultural invisibility and cultivation understanding—are the ones that are more frequently challenged” (ALA). Another book that is commonly challenged or banned is Art Spiegelman’s *Maus*. Not only is *Maus* a Pulitzer Prize winning graphic novel series, but it is also one of the most challenged books, frequenting the list (Garcia). The reason for this ban? One Tennessee school board pulled it from their 8th grade program due to “inappropriate language and nudity” with a school-board member going as far as saying “it shows people hanging, it shows them killing kids, why does the educational system promote this kind of stuff? It is not wise or healthy” (Garcia). This refusal to shed light on the horrors of the Holocaust is an insult to those who experienced it and shelters kids from the realities of history and the injustices that ensued. Banning such accounts is neglecting that history.

There are books across the board that are challenged or banned for a handful of reasons, some of which many people have found in their required reading throughout their education or are considered “American classics” or have been adapted into award winning movies and television shows. The issue comes down to censorship and violating the First Amendment; however, the issue goes deeper than that when it starts to challenge people’s experiences and history itself. The American Library

Association as well as the American Bookseller Association have been put in place to stop the challenging and/or banning of books so that every reader has a book that they can identify with, and that history will not be overlooked. One effort is Banned Books Week, which was created in 1982 (Brady). The aim is to show people that the books that are being challenged or banned aren't "pornographic or excessively violent, but simply depicting the real world" (Brady). Many bookstores and libraries around the country participate in Banned Books Week and showcase frequently challenged or banned books: "people would wander over and find out that the books they love had been challenged. Suddenly they understood that censorship isn't just about fringe literature" (Brady). The importance of reading and learning go hand in hand and always have. Whether a book is taught in the classroom or available to people, the freedom to read is essential for future generations.

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Being Mexican-American When You Aren't

Irving Montes De Oca

I've never been to Mexico in my life. This statement wouldn't mean much to most people. People dream of the pearly sands across the coastlines of the Gulf of Mexico. But my dream is so different than that. I always say that I'll end up visiting Mexico City; then life happens. I have wanted to go ever since I was nine years old. Holding a booklet in my hands meant I could cross the border that separates the place I was born in and the place my parents call home—a dream come true. The only problem was that I was too young to understand why my parents couldn't take me to see the plots of land they owned. When they told me about the farmland that they grew up on and I asked about going there with them, their faces switched from a smile to a sudden pause, like night and day. Holding a booklet in my hands with the seal of the country from which I reside meant I could finally go to the other side. Yet, my parents wouldn't be there to hold my hand like on the first day of preschool.

When things finally began to look up, the dilemma about money and expenses prevented me from seeing what everyone tells me is my second home. I succumbed to the conclusion that I wouldn't be able to form a childhood memory of Mexico anytime soon. When I finally was able to book the flight to Mexico all by myself with my money, flights began to be canceled. Quarantine was the new norm, and the whole world seemed like it was ending. I'm now 19 years old, and somehow, I feel guilty for not being able to visit the land I can easily visit while my uncles and aunts spend thousands of dollars and hundreds of hours into being able to go back home. Part of me wants to lie when people ask if I have ever been

to Mexico and just say what they want to hear. Yet, the other part of me ends up telling the truth.

I don't know if I can call myself Mexican. My family is Mexican, but what am I? People would say I am American, living in the land of the brave. But go to any other country and they will tell you America is the home to entitled billionaires with their money in foreign offshore accounts. America is supposed to be my homeland that I am supposed to be proud of. But I am not. My apartment is located on land that does not belong to me or the landlord that owns such land. It belongs to the several local Native nations that stood on this land long before the existence of the Constitution. My identity cannot be simplified to "Mexican-American" when it is so much more complicated than that.

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This complex feeling of emotions was always within me but something I never knew others shared until more recently. In "A Short Essay on Being" by Jenny Bouly, identity is also challenged and more complex than a simple word. Bouly is of Thai descent, yet her cultural heritage is always downplayed by everyone around her. When she was younger, Bouly was asked by two women where she was from. When Bouly responded with "Valley-Hi," the two women wanted to know her nationality, to which she responded with "Thai" even though she was an American national (2). Throughout the essay, Bouly recounts various other instances where her identity was questioned or interpreted arrogantly. From her being told that pot Thai should be pronounced as "pad Thai," to being told how certain foods that are part of her cultural heritage should taste, or even downright xenophobic comments. Instead of fighting back each time she is met

with comments that belittle her identity, she allows such comments to be made toward her. Part of the reason behind her rarely calling out such behavior from others is because of what she refers to as the Thai way. Bouilly describes the Thai way as not pointing out other people's errors: "...you let them eventually come to learn the errors of their ways and have them come to you for forgiveness later. Sometimes, it takes a long, long time... Sometimes, it never happens" (8). At first, it might seem as if she isn't brave enough to call out people when they need to be called out. She might not want to make a big deal out of people mistaking her for being Hispanic or Taiwanese out of fear that people will still try to correct her either way.

Yet, I see it as more of a way of keeping peace within yourself and others.

There have been many times when people that have just begun studying Mexican history will come to me as if I were the master historian of Mexico. They will lecture me

on how Hernan Cortes infiltrated the Aztec empire and overthrew Moctezuma. I will tell them that I already knew that even before my AP Spanish class and definitely before they told me at that moment. They will insist that I was brainwashed and that the history I was taught was severely white-washed. So, I agree and listen even though I've heard the same history lesson various times before. In a way, I can understand why Bouilly tries to maintain a sense of peace between herself and the people that have mistaken her identity. It becomes just as tiring, if not more, when fighting back at every instance that one's identity is questioned or seen as less. It is so much easier to hold back the rivers of arguments and conversations that lead to nowhere. It becomes much easier to fortify the dams that hold back my tears rather than deal with another person that tries to lecture me about my existence. It becomes harder to live within my skin with every step that I

It becomes just as tiring, if not more, when fighting back at every instance that one's identity is questioned or seen as less.

take, with every inhale and exhale, with every blink I take. Every single day feels like a battle, and I can't manage to win.

On the other side, there are times when I cannot stay on the sidelines and pretend that making peace with myself and others is easy. This can be seen in the non-fiction book *The Undocumented Americans* by Karla Cornejo Villavicencio. Throughout the book, the author puts the stories of undocumented immigrants on full display. Instead of telling stories that propagate a sense of achieving the American Dream, she recounts the interactions she had with people that usually never get interviews on national television or a front-page cover of TIME.

One passage that stuck with me early on in the book was when Villavicencio writes about her opinion on undocumented immigrants being referred to as undocumented workers: "...but to describe all of us... as workers to make us palatable, my god. We were brown bodies made to labor, faces

pixelated" (13). Villavicencio refers to the media always trying to depict undocumented immigrants as hard workers making this country run, yet immigrants are more than workers. They are human beings that deserve to be loved and respected just like any other human being. Reading this passage reminded me of the various times elected officials would point out that if all the undocumented immigrants were deported, then there would be no one to work minimum-wage jobs. Then it clicks that is all that matters to them. Not the lives of undocumented immigrants. Not the family left behind in another country. Not the trauma instilled into the minds of my parents, who got it from their fathers, who got it from their mothers, who then got it from their lovers. Not the lifeless bodies drifting along the Rio Grande with no souls to latch onto.

Instead, undocumented immigrants are reduced to their labor. I couldn't fully realize this until most

recently when all I hear on the news is about undocumented immigrants putting their blood and sweat into jobs that mistreat them and pay them unlivable wages. That is supposed to show how human undocumented immigrants are. Why must undocumented immigrants have this image to receive sympathy? I am the only person in my family who was born and raised in the United States, yet this nation that I am supposed to call home would rather see my parents and brother work every day of the week to prove their existence. Deep down I know the answer to what I ask myself every single night. However, I can't get myself to say the answer out loud. Memories were robbed from my childhood simply because my parents had no other choice but to work their life away to provide food and clothes for my brother and me. When my father asks me now if he made a mistake in working every day for weeks on end when I was barely starting to count, I cannot look him in the eyes and confidently say no. When I came out for the third time to my mother as being queer and was simply met with blank stares and words of disapproval, where did that motherly love that everyone talks about go? I will never blame my parents for working their asses off. But it would be a lie to say that their persistence to prove their worthiness of empathy and sympathy didn't affect me. It is because of this that I cannot confidently say I am proud to be American when America has stolen precious time between me and my family. While America may be the land of opportunity for many, America can mean the land of exploitation to a person without documents. This country has consumed my parents and continues to not show mercy on their bodies. The people within this country have ridiculed the presence of undocumented immigrants when all they wanted was a second chance at life. To feel reborn when everyone around them shut them out.

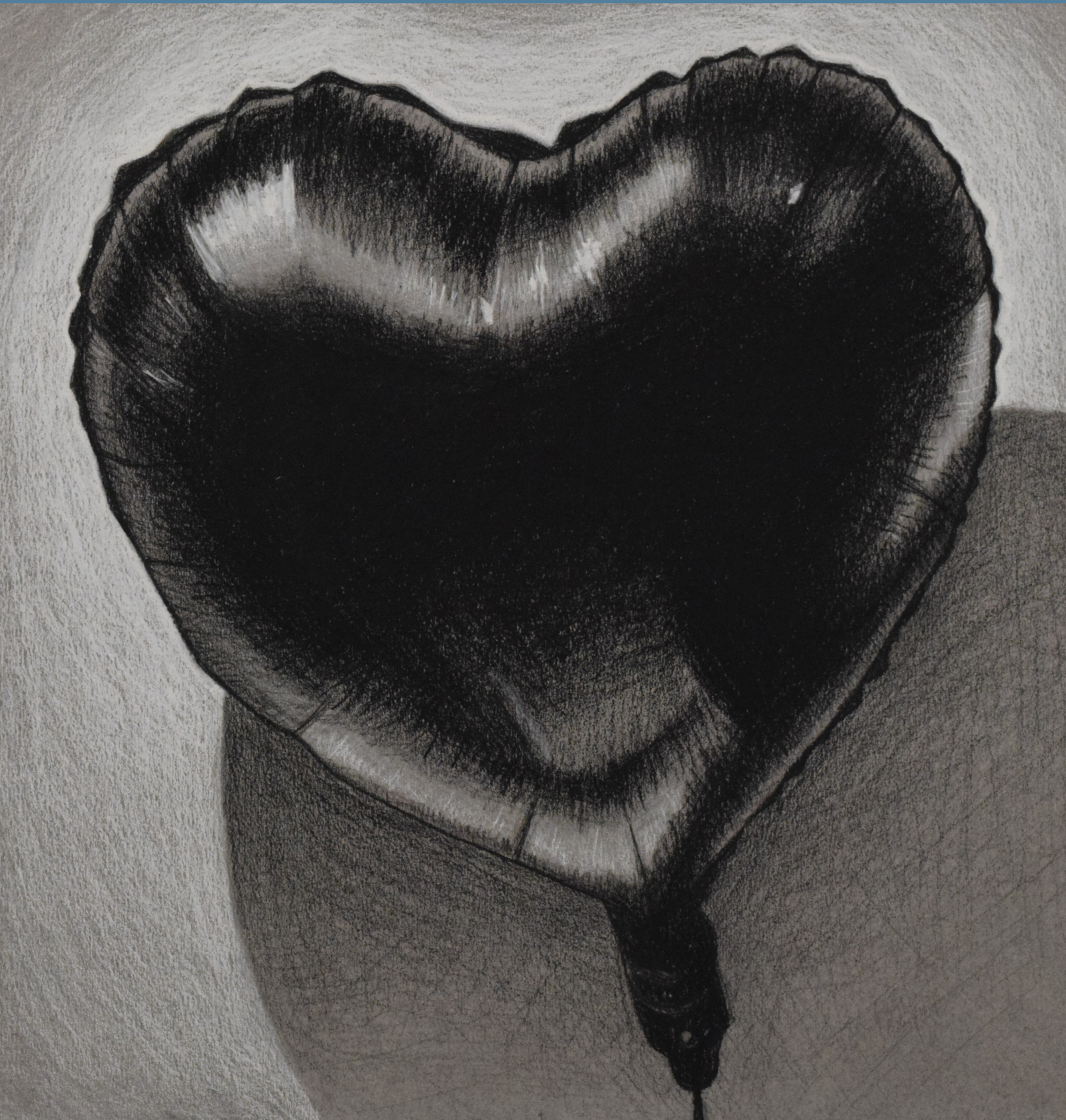
In my dreams, I see myself in the backseat of a Volkswagen driving through the tight streets that make up Mexico City. I see my parents growing old

in Yucatán, carrying their wounded bones and souls but choosing to break free from the shackles of needing to prove something to others. There will always be a part of me that will doubt my own identity, on whether or not I am an exquisite example of a Mexican-American. But maybe that is where the problem lies. My identity is not concise and has no obvious features. My identity is a series of threads that are unique to me and cannot be replicated. I will be able to withstand the obstacles life throws at me, but do not mistake my willingness to make peace as a sign of weakness. I have nothing to prove to anyone else. My identity will be poked at for all to see, but I will never let someone say I am any less than human.

Works Cited

- Bouly, Jenny. "A Short Essay on Being." *TriQuarterly*, 5 July 2010, www.triquarterly.org/issues/issue-138/short-essay-being.
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Illicit Love

Katerina Katramadou

The soul yearns
The body asks
The lips thirst
Loneliness builds a trap

A woman smokes
A man looks at her without saying anything
And
The moon is still there

Saxophone music slaps against
The walls
The whispers are hiding under the notes
The words lost in the night

Desire appears to dance
In rhythmic jazz
Crazy moments
Burn inside their guts

A dim light illuminates the bedroom
Whispers shuffled with sweat
They promise consequences
Consequences that live in light
Of the next day





Writers' Profiles

Shameka Ardour is an artist who indulges in writing, sketching and modeling. She gets her sense of style from her mother and inspiration from her 7-year-old daughter who reminds her most of the child in her. Being on the "BIG SCREEN" is her ultimate goal, lifelong dream and destiny—as scary as it seems impossible (being an introvert and all). But by learning her aesthetic nature, she feels almost compelled to do what she loves and climb each mountain one at a time.

Tyler Bentsen is a veteran who previously served in the Marine Corps and is now pursuing a degree in either engineering or economics. He plans to transfer to a four-year university in the fall. Tyler is currently working as a personal trainer.

Annabelle Burns is in her second year at the College of Lake County and is passionate about reading, writing, and traveling.

Mary Burns is in her second year at CLC and recently changed her major from business to English. English has always been something she took great interest in and excelled at, but never realized she could actually study as a whole!

Rebecca Calloway is a full-time accountant who is pursuing her interest in writing by taking part-time courses at CLC.

Skylar Carter is a home-schooled high school senior taking dual credit classes at CLC. She has been telling stories her whole life and hopes to be able to write them down for others to read forever.

Charlotte Czapiewski is pursuing a degree in medical imaging. Some of her personal interests are playing board games and drawing on her tablet. In her spare time, she enjoys being with her family and her dog. She also enjoys two-mile walks rain or shine.

Laura Evenson is a non-traditional student at CLC who is currently dually-enrolled also at the University of Illinois-Springfield. She is working on an undergraduate degree in English and has spent 29+ in the medical device field. She enjoys learning and is excited about her upcoming career change.

Jonathan Faust enjoys consuming film and video games at a rapid pace to prevent any semblance of reality crossing his already frazzled mind due to our unfortunate reality.

Hallie Holt fell in love with reading at a young age because of her mother's passion for reading and enjoys learning about environmental topics. She is majoring in English and hopes to one day publish her own novel.

Rhani Jordan loves learning, for the sake of learning something new, and her career goals often shift with her compounding interests. Writing fiction is a passionate hobby with the goal to land a spot on the New York Times Best Seller List.

Katerina Katramadou, an ESL student at CLC, has two bachelors in public relations and in journalism. In Greece, she used to write poems, short children's stories and theatre plays. At the moment, she is teaching Greek to Greek-American and American students and is starting to write poems and short stories in English.

Maya Kosar is a floral designer who enjoys winter camping, hiking, and canoeing. She is interested in emergency management and plans to transfer to an online school.

Leandro Lambert is working to complete his education in order to become an attorney in Illinois.

Irving Montes De Oca is in his second year at CLC, planning to transfer to the University of Illinois Chicago to pursue an Urban Studies degree to help underserved communities and neighborhoods. He likes to write, read, listen to music, take Polaroid pictures, buy enamel pins from the places he visits, and collect vinyl records from his favorite artists and bands.

Deborah Onajin is a pre-pharmacy student from Nigeria. She enjoys swimming, reading novels and watching sitcoms.

Iliana Padilla is a first-generation college sophomore who has hopes of pursuing neuroscience and computer science. She enjoys spending time with her loved ones, trying new foods of different cultures, dancing, and reading.

Harrison Starzec is a senior at Bradley University majoring in computer science.

Jacquelyn Thorn works full time at Lake Forest Book Store, which she hopes to own when her mother retires. She loves reading, writing and crafting, anything that expands her mind creatively.

Christopher Jay Sevilleja Wenceslao is receiving his second associate degree from CLC with a focus on writing (his first degree was in Digital AV). He will transfer to Columbia College to study creative writing. His dream goal is to get a job as a narrative designer at a AAA game studio because he believes that games are the future of storytelling.





