



Growing Pains

the
THE CREATIVE ARTS JOURNAL
OF BELHAVEN UNIVERSITY
Brogue
2024.V.15

Thyria



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Allyson



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brogue (brōg), n.

1. a marked accent, esp. Irish or Scottish, when speaking English: *a sweet lilt of brogue in her voice.*
2. any strong regional accent.
3. a rough shoe of untanned leather, formerly worn in parts of Ireland and the Scottish Highlands.

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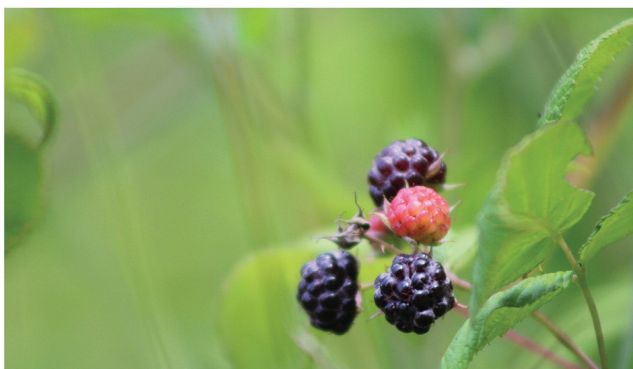
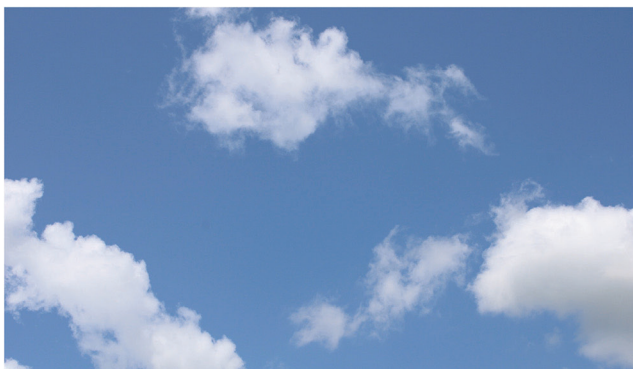
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The Backyard
Hannah Truman



Humming
Lilly Perkins



Night Swamp
Garrison Owens

Childhood

Why Did the Chicken Cross the Road?

Rena Woodard

The sun beat down on the top of my head, heating up the parts in my hair Momma had made when she did our weekly cleaning and styling last Sunday. The weather was nice, but I would have rather been lounging in the house enjoying the ceiling fan my Daddy just installed in June.

I used my index finger to push my glasses farther up the flat bridge of my nose. My elbows supported me as I leaned onto the porch of our house with a book. This week's read was a thrilling adventure of hidden treasure and a princess in need of saving.

"Momma said that we had to come outside to play, Tulip."

I sighed and looked up from my book at my sister. She had wedged her way in between my knees as I sat on the stairs leading up to the house. Her hands were behind her back, and she swayed side to side with the wind. I folded the edge of my page and snapped my book closed in her face. Her eyes squinched on instinct, and she took a step back.

"No, Daphne, Momma told us to come outside because you don't know how to keep still in the house. We wouldn't be out here if you could just play with dolls like normal little girls."

She crossed her arms, and I saw the tips of her ears were beginning to turn a dusty pink.

"Oh, c'mon Tully, just one game."

I gently set my book on the porch and began to tap my foot against the stair beneath me. I tilted my head to the side and hummed as I drummed my finger on my cheek. "Oh, I got it! How about we play hide and seek?" I bit my lip as I watched Daphne's entire face turn red.

"No! Last time we played hide and seek I was hiding for two hours, and you weren't even looking for me."

I gasped and slapped my hand onto the left side of my chest. “Yes, I was, you’re just such a great hider.” I sat up, resting my elbows on my thighs, and I hid my giggle in my hand.

“You know what, I don’t need you to play with me. You’re so mean.” She turned around and began marching away, leaving the residue of kicked-up dirt as she went.

She reached the end of the driveway before she came to a halt. That was as far as Momma would allow her by herself. I took a long breath before I stood up and dusted the back of my blue jeans. I slowly approached Daphne, taking the time to watch as she picked at a scab on her arm. When I reached her, I pushed her in the middle of her back.

She stumbled forward before quickly whipping her head towards me. I laughed when her hair smacked her across the face.

“Stop laughing at me, Tulip! What do you want?!”

I rolled my eyes, but I couldn’t help the smile that tugged at my lips.

“Tag, you’re it.”

I dashed away and I felt the breeze from her hand out-stretching to touch me. The wind slammed against my face like raindrops pelting against the windows in April. I heard her laugh before I felt the tug on my tank top.

“I gotcha!”

I huffed a breath through my nose and stopped, placing my hands on my knees as I crouched down. “We should have played a board game.”

“Tulip!”

“I’m coming, Daphne, I’m not as young as I used to be.”

“Tulip, hurry!”

I felt the tips of my fingers begin to turn cold as I looked behind me to see Daphne stopped dead in her tracks. Her bare feet were hidden in the overgrown grass that edged its way onto the concrete, and her head was tilted into the road.

There, laying in the middle of the pavement, was a chicken that belonged to our neighbors the Emmersons. I covered Daphne’s eyes feeling wet streaks pressed against my palm.

“Tully, do you think it’s alright?”

My eyes widened and my mouth became slack.

“Yeah, I think it’s just sleeping.” I used my left foot to drag one of the chicken’s wings back to its body.

She clenched my hands, throwing them away from her face, and stepped into the road. Momma would not be happy about that.

“Don’t lie to me, Tulip! Look, it’s hurt!”

“Daphne, get out of the road! You don’t even have shoes on.” I moved forward to grab her, but she bent down and picked up the chicken.

“Eww! Put that thing down right now, it’s disgusting!”

Tears fell and landed on the feathers of the chicken she nestled into her arms.

“Please, Tully, we have to help it.” Her chest jumped with every word as hiccups escaped her mouth.

I looked at Daphne, but she was staring at the chicken, petting its beak as snot traveled from her nose across her lips. She sniffled and tried to blink her tears away.

“And just what do you want to do with this chicken?”

“We need to bring it back to its farm.” She finally looked up at me and I lifted my head up to the sky.

“Lord, help me. Ok, fine, we’ll bring it back to the Emmersons.”

“Thank you, Tulip!” She stepped forward for a hug, but I held my hands out to stop her.

“I’ll give you a hug after we get rid of that thing.”

We began walking down the street, my arm wrapped around her shoulders. It took us fifteen minutes to reach the Emmerson farm and for ten of those minutes, Daphne kept hopping from one foot to the other every time a rock got stuck in her heel.

We walked up the stairs to the front door and knocked, but no one answered. I knocked again three times, still with no response.

“No one is home, Daphne, let’s leave.”

“Wait! We can’t just go. What about Sweet Pea?”

“Who is Sweet Pea?”

“The chicken, Tully!

I took my glasses off and rubbed my temples.

“You named it?”

“Yeah, I came up with it on the way here.” She gently sat the chicken on the welcome mat and kneeled beside it, stroking the top of its head.

“You’re safe now, Sweetie.”

I walked to the bottom of the stairs to give Daphne a moment with Sweet Pea. Her heavy stomps rattled every step as she made her way down and stood next to me. We began to walk away, and I took her hand into mine, lacing our fingers together.

“Let’s get home. Momma’s probably done with dinner.”

She nodded before looking back at the farm.

“I hope it’s not chicken.”

The walk home was quiet; it seemed even the cicadas held a moment of silence for Sweet Pea. Daphne kicked up the dirt of the driveway as we finally made it home. The sun had begun to set, and the barn owls were beginning to hoot. She sat in the yard with her legs straight and plucked the grass out of the ground. I sat crisscross applesauce across from her and tickled the bottom of her dirty foot. She moved her feet and put them beneath her.

“I’m not in the mood, Tulip.”

I sighed and shifted to sit beside her.

“You know that thing was dead, right?”

She wiped her nose with her forearm, nodding her head.

“Yeah, I know. I just wanted it to get back home.”

I smiled down at her and pushed pieces of hair that fell out of her pigtails behind her ear.

“You’re really something special, Daph.” I kissed the top of her head, taking in the scent of sweat and scalp grease.

The front door creaked open, and Momma stood on the porch, arms folded, and belt in her hand.

“Tulip! Daphne!”

“Uh-oh.”

My First Dance

Erin Sprague

I lift my face and watch
constellations blur above.
I've been waltzing so long—
is the sky spinning
or am I?

My arms float as
threads of heat gather in my hands.
Waves of hair cloak my shoulders,
and brush my cheek like
a father's proud touch.

A hundred yards away,
behind a wall of stone and glass,
the father-daughter dance
echoes with laughter.

Lamplights burn warmly
through the windows but I
dance on wet leaves
with the shadows and the stars.

The moon shakes her head
at my wild footwork.
Is the wind dipping me or
am I dancing
all alone?

Tita

Taylor Vergel De Dios

Family says you
smiled when someone walked up.
They say your laughter
was a burst of sunlight in a room.
But I,
never knew you.

A perfect glittering flower
with silver stern hugging my finger—
Just as it would have yours,
but you,
left it behind
and now it's mine.

Family says,
my raven black hair—
it's yours, but now
you're gone.
The big brown eyes
that stare back at me in the mirror,
they're yours too.

The four glinting petals on my finger
were yours,
but the last petal,
the little blue stone,

it's mine.

The flower that makes light dance,
that sits, ever frozen
on my finger,
costs more than shells on a beach
and it is ours.

South 14th Avenue

Rena Woodard

Screened in porches and the sound of cicadas.
Nights spent starin' up at the stars
While layin' on a trampoline
And gettin' ate up by mosquitoes.

Eating chocolates before dinner
Cause Daddy's got a sweet tooth
And readin' my favorite book in bed with Momma
Because she's the only silence in the house

Conversations in the kitchen with my sisters and brother
While Momma's cookin' red beans and rice
And Daddy's sittin' in his chair watchin' tv

Momma says family's the only friend you need
Quick get-togethers to speak about Jesus...
And a game of spades of course.

Photos in a tattered pink suitcase
Of Corrine and Ronald in the New Orleans Projects
And the memories of Katrina to zip the case shut.

An old story about the long scar on my leg
And how much trouble I was as a child.
Memories about me that aren't mine
But my family there to make sure I don't forget 'em.

My Favorite Book

Christy McDade

Warm, worn, and familiar.
Her cover rough yet healing,
Her pages soft yet weathered,
Her binding tough as leather.

I need not search for meaning,
I know her words completely,
They summon age-old memories.

No longer does she stand sprightly.
I flatten out her creases,
And smell the scent of seasons.

I peel her pages lightly,
So not to taint her beauty,
As might forever ruin me.

No longer am I seeking,
For words that hold the treasure,
Of times I best remember.

Night Voices

Tara Teter

Under the moonlight,
the silver wind
spreads its necrotic tongue
on each blade of
crystal grass— emerald
hidden under panes of ice.

It sneaks in
the house, under the door
and up against
the little boy's toes.
He shivers.
Coughs.

Then its still once more,
under grandmother's patchwork quilt.

An ember
whimpers, nestled
against charred wood.
The red brick fireplace glows
matching the cherry flush
on the little boy's
cheeks and nose.

Fingernails of the willow tree
scrape the building
asking to be let in,

as its branches
groan—
silver wind amid
the leaves
singing its siren song.

Heart Dotted I

Rena Woodard

The house smelt of fried pork chops and mashed potatoes. A meal that we eat every Wednesday because that's when pork chops go on sale at the deli in the market. I sat at the dining room table with my homework in front of me, waiting for Momma to fuss at me to clear the table for the hot food.

Daphne sat across from me with her "special" plate on the table.

"Do you ever get tired of pork chops every Wednesday?"

I bit the bottom of my lip to hide my smile. Like clockwork, Daphne asked the same question every week. Even though I know, she would still ask Momma for the biggest pork chop, just for her to say no and that she's saving it for Daddy when he gets off his late shift.

"Sometimes. Maybe the food would taste different if you didn't eat off of the same plate everyday." She shook her head and grabbed the plate, lifting it in the air.

"This is the only plate in the cabinet that's not white, which makes it special, just like me!"

She smiled proudly and set the plate back down with a loud thunk.

I shook my head and began to put away my papers. "Every Wednesday we have this same talk. You always wait 'til Momma goes out to get the mail to ask. You must be scared to say it 'round her."

"Tulip, stop teasing me! I just wanted to ask you a question." She kicked my knee under the table before turning in her chair, her legs hanging from the side of it so that she wouldn't be facing me.

"Ouch! Why'd you do that!?"

I stood up from my chair, ready to walk around the table when I heard the screen door slam against the frame and Momma's footsteps walking into the room. I sat back down, making a 'V' with my index and

middle fingers and pointing them at my eyes before pointing them at Daphne.

“Tulip, I hope you put them papers away already. I’m ‘bout to bring the food to the table.” She walked in with the mail in her hand, shuffling through it, placing a few under her armpit—the bills. I put my homework into my book bag and grabbed the two plates I had brought to the table for Momma and me.

“Yes, Ma’am.” I noticed Momma was holding a letter to her chest and smiling at me.

“Oh, Tulip, it looks like you’ve got some mail today. It seems to be a very special letter, too.”

The left side of my upper lip quirked up, and I furrowed my eyebrows.

“Why didn’t I get a letter in the mail?” Daphne slammed her back into the dining chair and crossed her arms.

Momma lightly set the letter in front of me, and as I reached, Daphne snatched it off the table.

“Daphne!” Momma chastised.

Her shrill giggles filled the dining room as she leaped from her spot and ran. I quickly shoved my chair away from the table and chased after her.

“Give me my letter, Daphne!”

“Oh, Tulip, Momma was right, this is a very special letter. The ‘I’ in your name is dotted with a heart.”

“Alright, Daphne, that’s enough. Give Tulip her letter and help me get this food to the table.”

We both stopped, Daphne only a few inches in front of me. She stomped towards me with the letter stretched out in front of her. I snatched it from her hand and poked my tongue at her.

“Momma! Did you see what Tulip just did!?”

Momma rolled her eyes and walked to the kitchen with Daphne hot on her tail. I sat back in my seat and began to read the letter.

To Tulip

Roses are red

Violets are blue

My favorite flowers are Tulips

And so is the name
of the girl, I love too.

Love, Emmett Emmerson

My eyes widened to the size of the plates sitting on the table. This wasn't just any old letter. No, this was a love poem sent to me from the farmer's boy down the street.

The worst thing about this is, I kinda like the way my name is dotted with a heart.

Equal in Theory

Dee Holden

There's nothing more sobering than when
your brother punches you in the throat.

You're left rabbit eyed,
mind frozen
in this sudden change in safety.

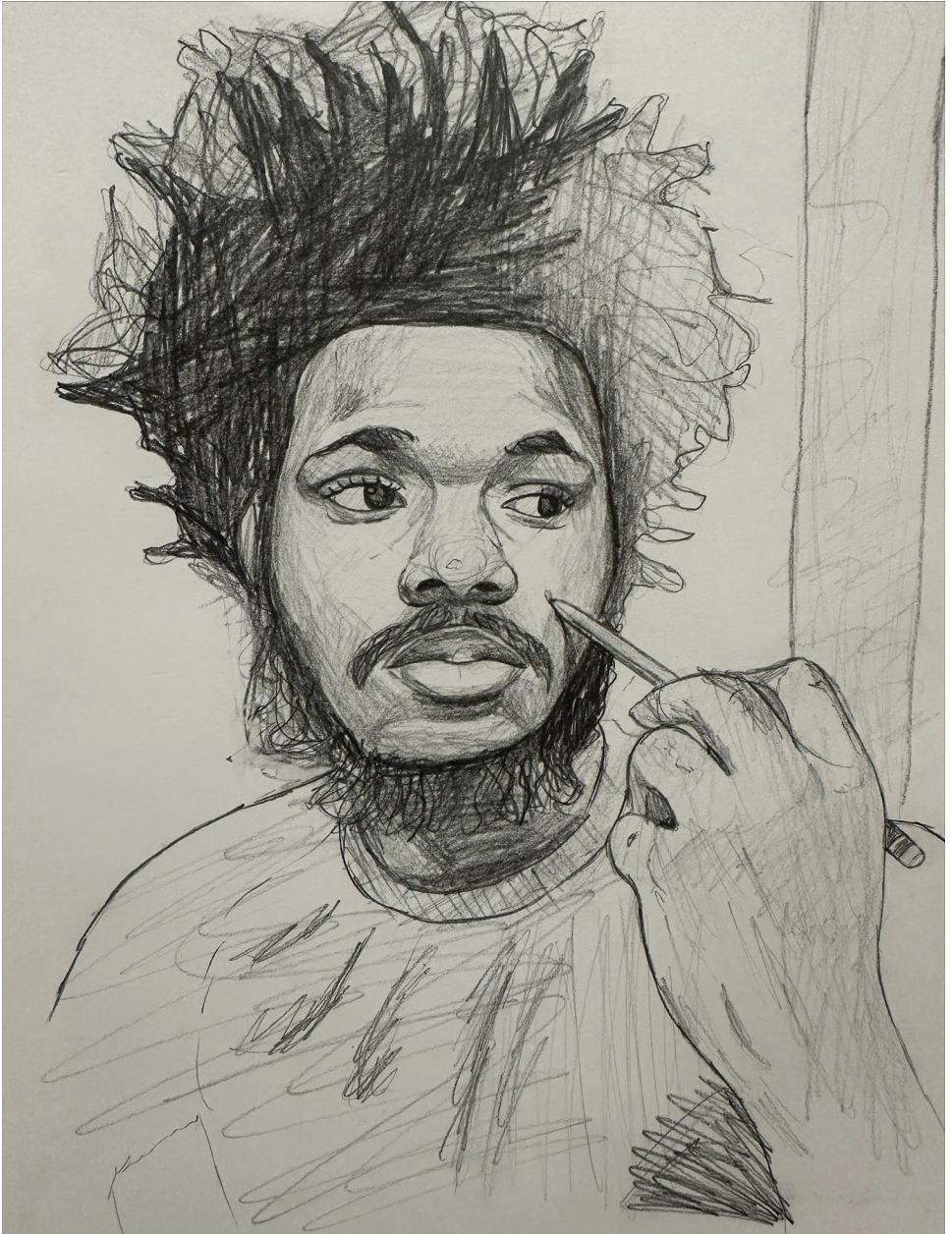
You've nagged at his vices one too many,
jeered at that low grade, indifferent
to the changes that separate two souls
who came from the same womb.

Maybe you weren't cautious of his emotional
imbalances. Why should you be?
He's your sibling.
He'd always done the same to you.

But that night his patience was thin and it
snapped
from just one wrong word.

So there on the ground you wheeze, all winded and
stricken in this moment of fear.
Because the second he's tired of your bullsh-t

you're reminded
he's only—



Looking Presentable
Daniel Warren



New Perspective
Ke'Marri Thompson

Adolescence

So, Childhood, Goodbye

Anna Jablenski

She's dead.

I saw the last ray of light set beyond the horizon of the living.
I felt her pulse lighten, sending one last wave of butterflies deep, deep
within my soul.

She fought hard, I fought harder.

But so the ever changing,
always rotating,
actively evolving world

moves.

And so our favorite parts of us move. She
served well,
robing my life in white for as long as she could wrap the fabric around
my body.

we both saw it coming.
For a while now, we knew.
I knew.

She died slowly, slowly—
as every day the world pressed its loud self in, she
seeped further out.
Goodbye to clinking pink and white plastic tea cups.
Goodbye to sweaty, sun-kissed apple cheeks.
Goodbye to sticky ice-cream arms.

Goodbye to Grandma's lullabies. Goodbye
to innocence.
Goodbye, Childhood.

With arms like anchors, I reached to steady her fall.
But she was wave on shore, and
no one stops the tide.

I buried her under grave marked “Memory”
in graveyard of long forgotten things and never-remembered times.

I face the world of suit and tie

Citronella

Ella Simmons

Keeping the mosquitoes away was monotonous and tiring, but the shadows of swimming teenagers caught his eye over and over, mesmerizing him. Their awkward dances lapped water onto the edge of the pool, sending bits of water at him, attempting to extinguish his gleam. Boys chasing girls, picking them up, pretending they'll throw them in, giggling. The sun had set behind the tree line and the stars were starting to show. White specks on orange canvas glowed down onto the water, but not any brighter than him, a flicker of flame. A couple got out of the pool, walked to the boy's pickup truck and laid in the bed, watching the stars. The girls sat on the steps, ate watermelon and whispered, wondering what "those two" were doing. The boys screamed and pushed each other into the water, climbing on shoulders and swinging fists, horse-playing. Dives and flips and speed and strength. The girls rolled their eyes. Unimpressed.

The lights turned on by the back porch, and wet feet ran across the concrete. Parents wary of nighttime sins, only there to throw out the kids' pizza boxes and Coke cans. They waved frantic bugs out of their faces and wiped sweat from their brow. Even in the evening, heat radiated from the ground, sunburnt concrete. The teenagers smiled at the parents, who smiled back and told them it was getting late. They didn't have to leave, but the parents would be going to sleep soon, so be safe when y'all drive home. Thanks, mom and dad, we will. The lights turned off, and the bugs flew away.

Let's go to the lake, the boys said. We can fish and swim, and then we won't have to be quiet for anybody. The boys started their trucks and revved them, which earned an eye-rolling laugh from their audience.

The girls looked at each other's faces through the filter of nighttime and chlorine, and even though it was getting late, they wanted to go. At

least everyone was sober, and it doesn't hurt to have a little fun. They started walking toward trucks, some sitting in beds, or feet on the dash, or out the window. One girl took it upon herself to push all the chairs up, and blow all the candles out, until she came to him.

She took a hard look, seeing right through him, melting from the heat of teenagers and his own flame. He was small and blue. They usually are at the end. Blinking in and out, sweating.

Questions of Serenity

Lillyanna Robinson

Peeking at the sunlight,
Fragments of life are composed;
Certain features are considered,
While darker parts are controlled.
But how can this be?
Sweeter things of life dissipate.
Joys of life are captured.
Only with memories of things
before,
The dreams of
a new beginning,
The moon and sun spoke to me—
A new day will come.

Lovesick Little Me

Mae Gardner

people are
infectious.
I am a birthday gift,
all wrapped up with
them, for them.
I lounge on platters,
silver ones, offered
up on my palm.
I let them into doors,
to windows, to the
cat flaps in between:
always in love,
or falling.
for the boy with
ruffled hair, the
cynic wearing
high-tops, the best
friend full of
books, the little
artist with killer
boots.
artworks of life, hung in a row
by lovesick little me.

Impressionable Birds

Kylah Mays

My alarm rings. I remember now, the wind blows though
The tethered falcon feathers dipped in black ink.

This atomic bomb will help me. Curved by eating
scraps, subconscious blood stains form through
survival of the fittest.

Dismissed us by command, not the bell.
Fledglings lost by foresight stuck doing homework. Plucked at our wings
degrading our twenty-twenty vision leaving the nest is my endgame
decision.

Momma, I am tired. I don't want to
go...

Contaminated, as the water evaporates and is replaced by sweat.
Bottling up the fumes while I listen. I'm a threat.

I cannot hear you teach without an owl's screech.
Daydreaming in my seat, wishing I wasn't here.
Inside a pothole of a classroom.
I bet I could fill it with a single tear.

They bred us to do the bare minimum for eight hours a day. Give me
back
my youthful mind that was bulletproof.

While pellets sent from higher-ups, pull the trigger to
invade our thoughts.
They check our pockets and speak to us as a flock.

Watching the migrating birds head south.
During winter despite the weather's dismay.
My handwriting wears out on this abrasive paper.
The magnolia wasteland gave me frostbite.
Even with the help of others, there is no guarantee I'll sleep tight.

The Curse of Gift

Isabel Faulkner

Some young children are labeled as “gifted,”
And with that, their whole life’s course is shifted.
They must know the answer to every question asked
And the only place they belong is at the top of their class.

“We’ve run all the tests, and your child did the best.”
They should have said, “She’ll work hard and never get any rest.”
But I can’t tell them about the tears cried while taking showers
Or how the fear of failure completely devours.

I’ve been doing this for so long.
Hit all the notes in every song.
Must never do anything wrong
Because good little girls are strong.

I know that perfection is attainable;
Then I wonder, “Is it sustainable?”
Who am I without winning gold?
For these awards, has my soul been sold?

I’ve learned plenty about grace,
But for myself, it has no place.
If I have no faults, then there’s nothing to be forgiven.
I’m not crazy— I’m just driven.

If I get an answer incorrect,
Then I don’t deserve any basic respect.
One mistake and my reputation is wrecked.
So, of course, every response is double-checked.

Study, practice, rehearse for hours
Because we all know “knowledge is power.”
But if I wasn’t the perfect scholar,
Would they still be proud of their daughter?

Nothing hurts quite like a disappointed frown.
I just don’t want to let them down.
My whole life I’ve been their golden child.
Never got a chance to be crazy or wild.

Excellence is all that they will extol.
Earning their approval is the ultimate goal.
At all costs, I must maintain my control.
None of my mistakes will ever get parole.

Adults love to say, “You’re so mature for your age.”
You would be too, if you were a kid in a cage.
“You’re smart, you’ll figure it out.”
But I’m still just a child and maybe I need to pout.

My merciless jailer is self-doubt.
It tells me “You’re just another ‘gifted’ kid who burnt out.”
From its constant taunts, I cower,
Because against it I have no power.

The worst part is that no one understands.
This prison, I built with my own two hands.
I was told I would construct a mansion when they handed me the plans.
Never should have given in to their demands.

If this place was made of the strongest metal and stone,
Then maybe I could make the greatest escape ever known.
But between my ears and behind my eyes is my cell.
Locked up here all alone in my very own personal hell.

No second chance. No second place.
If you aren't gonna win, what was the point of entering the race?
And maybe my worst critic is myself,
Yet, I still need more trophies to put on the shelf.

If anything goes wrong, I am always the one to blame.
No amount of achievements will ever kill my shame.
Maybe this is a losing game,
But I'll keep playing it all the same.

Exceed their expectations.
Get high on the congratulations.
Without this, all I feel is frustration.
I desperately need their validation!

This drug is highly addictive
And its hold on me is extremely constrictive.
Each time I hit it, I crave more.
Next time I'll have to raise the score.

Make endless laws.
Cover your countless flaws.
Do it all for the applause.
From this nightmare, there is no pause.

I'll calculate what's my best move,
Because my whole life I've had something to prove.
My worth goes up the more I do
And that way I'll earn more love from you.

My perfectionistic obsession
Has thrown me deep into depression.
But no one cares about the weight of my stress
Just as long as I can still reach success.

They called me a “high achiever”
And now I’m nothing more than a praise receiver.
I am an imposter and a deceiver.
This “gifted” kid is falling apart. Please believe her.

Antigone, The Last

Meagan Fuller

Locked Away,
with a silver of light.
Her sister was right.

Now the only gods
calling to her
were the shadows
crawling to her.

Close to the edge
or already at it?
She saw her brothers, hand in hand,
her father, watching her,
her mother,
beautiful silk around her neck.

A cursed loving bloodline.
Her brother reached a hand towards her.
her fingers slipped inside his
as she felt another familiar hand.

She turned to her love who stroked her cheek
as white silk wrapped around her neck.
Hand in hand with her loves,
child of gloom, now at the end.

She would be with her gods.

Now I Know

Anonymous

As we once were,
Benevolent in our cause,
Cares were there naturally,
Deeply rooted in natural laws.

Even or uneven,
Factual or not,
Greatness was vastly tangible,
Held high in unique thought.

Is it not that way anymore?
Joy, a reachable view?
Knowledge did not matter as much when
Loveliness of heart could pursue.

Maybe I'm all grown up now,
Not as young as before,
Opposite creatively,
Particular at my core.

Quirks are for the childish,
Respect, for the sensible.
Shouldn't one dignify the old
and make room for the acceptable?

Understanding is limited.
Value the knowledge of old.
When the time is right, you'll understand the
Xenacious passions you hold.

Yet, staying young at heart means freeing of the mind.
Zealously remember; the young are not blind.

Something in the Silence

Taylor Vergel de Dios

“I Hear Them Calling”

Moments fill the silence, I hear them calling.

I walk through the pictures, I can see the lies. Darkness fills my dying
eyes; I can see the lies.

Dreams relived

A movie in my mind

in my chest a twisting rope Breathing... breathing... lies

I can hear them calling Stars long denied Shadows building behind my
eyes

I can hear them calling

“Why did he say that?” “Does he hate me this time?” “I’m a horrible
person.”

“I should hide.”

I hear them calling Even though

I know it’s all a lie.

Death Spiral

Erin Sprague

I quiver from head to toe, a web of wet
Papier mâché ribbons

My toe sticks recalcitrantly
As I prepare and
The music raises me up on a
Brave crescendo

I beg silently for an end
Even as I drive into the last manège

Pique en dehors, dehors, dedans
A strange force propels my numb limbs
My sight reduces to a blur

Dedans, SOUTENU, chasse
The stage floor rolls beneath my feet
The music shouts: almost late, too late
Or is it too soon?

Chaînés, chaînés, SPOT, SPOT
I hurtle through space
Where did the orchestra pit go?

Pirouette, land
Catch me
Please

The Green Knot

Lena Embry

Every night I could hear Jordin screaming in my dreams; he'd been dead two years, but the sound never left my memory. It always echoed in his room and rattled down the hall to mine. The night before my knotting ceremony I woke in the dark, the screams louder than ever, and realized they'd become my own.

Estella slept through it. She'd slept through Jordin's, too. Maybe she was just used to all the noise. She'd been a baby when it started, after all. But I remember how happy Jordin was in the peaceful years before Estella was born. Before the border was compromised.

A faltering light in the doorway broke my thoughts. It was father, a dull crystal lantern in one hand and the other empty. His face was stoic as ever as he sat at the foot of my bed, setting the lantern on the blanket between us.

"It wasn't your fault, Yvonne," he said, resting a calloused hand on my shoulder.

I couldn't breathe. My father was...being genuine. He hardly spoke to me outside of training. Everyone was jealous that the Captain of the Royal Guard was my father, but he had never shown me preference beyond starting my training when I was too little to hold a wooden sword. And I've never felt very grateful for that.

Still, him making an effort made me feel better.

"Squire Markin is alive, right?" I asked.

"Yes," he answered. "He was on the training ground, not in the field." The training ground. Even thinking about it brought back that horrible scene.

Dusty earth churned up beneath our feet, clouding the air all around us. I remember it was hard to see, but I knew where my feet were; I knew where his feet were. The distance between him and my sword

was easy to gauge but—he moved into the blade instead of away. I didn't move in time. I couldn't expect the trickle of red that wet my blade or the queasiness that rumbled my stomach. The dust had settled before I processed what happened, and by then the red was a river of sludge on steel and Markin's eyes had a glaze over them. The sword moved, he fell into the dust and I—I didn't want to think about it again. My father was still sitting there, his face unreadable but soft. And I was still in bed, the sweat dripping down my back cold enough to wake me up.

"Will this change anything about tomorrow? Will they refuse me?" I asked.

"No," he answered, his voice low. "It was his mistake. Nothing but to train him better."

"I wasn't aiming to kill...I was holding back, just like you said to."

"A real sword always aims to kill."

He stood up, giving my shoulder a final squeeze before picking up the lantern. The light swung in his hand, framing his silhouette as he walked out of the room. It was the longest conversation we'd ever had made him when we were little. A torn knot meant dishonor on the knight. A dishonorable death, even though he gave his life for his country.

I brushed a hand over the thin ribbon, feeling the grooves and roughness of the wooden beads. I'd get my own sword with my own knot today. Then I could add meaningful beads to build my own story. One day...I would surpass Jordin. I would get further than he could. I would take this family further.

Mother stopped me at the door, her lace gown wrinkled and the green dye faded. It was still the nicest thing she owned. She swung a short, undyed wool cape around my shoulders, pinning it in place with her family brooch. The single diamond chip glittered in the candlelight, reflecting off the swirls of silver filagree. It was something a mother would give the eldest daughter when she got married. I was marrying the knighthood; a loveless thing that would be my only relationship. Mother's shoulders sagged.

"You could have chosen something else," she sighed.

"I know. But I want to give you all a more comfortable life. It's what he would have wanted," I answered.

“He would have wanted you safe.”

“He helped keep his country safe. Now I’m going to keep this family safe.”

I clasped her hands and gave them a squeeze before stepping out of the house. Standing in the cold air, I could smell rain on the way. What a terrible day for a parade.

I walked through tight alleyways until I reached the main road. Crowds had gathered on either side, but once they saw my armor they let me pass to join the march of squires. We marched through the city three times, in three different paths, weaving everywhere, even the slums. The crowd went straight to the ceremony site, where we met them on our last rotation.

The training ground was decorated with flowers and colorful ribbon streamers hung everywhere. I barely recognized it. The crowd had pushed themselves into every available corner, leaving just enough room for the squires to line up in the middle. Father stood at attention, his second-in-command standing next to a rack of new swords. Father picked up the first sword, pulled one of many ribbons from a satchel on his belt, and began tying a knot.

Every soldier received their own knot. Something to symbolize what they valued or what type of knight they might be. I watched the ones before me: honor, trust, friendship, joy, hope. All knots I recognized. Until my father got to mine. End over end, but I didn’t recognize the loops or the shape. A twisted circle with a square in the middle. Father stepped towards me and presented my sword, calling out my new name.

“Lady Yvonne of Tallow,” he shouted. Then he whispered just loud enough for me to hear over the shouts of the crowd. “A knot made for you. Bear it proudly.”

I looked at the sword in my hands, the sheath and leather handle a dark green to match the ribbon on the pommel. My own sword-knot. My own knightage. I stared at it while the last squire received his title and soft rain began to drizzle. The crowd surged forward, families embracing their loved ones with tears and laughter. I felt Estella’s arms wrap around me, then my mother’s, but I could only stare at the fragile ribbon. How long until it was torn?

They Asked Me What Life Is

Mae Gardner

it's thinking he's beautiful though he stands like a hunchback.
I feel cuter than two seconds ago.
it's melted ice cream on the floor that used to be cookie dough, now it's
just
vanilla.
it's me and them. we have double chins and wear pajama pants.
we love ourselves, we hate ourselves.
it's crumbs on the table and straw wrappers and wanting to scream: why
can't I cry?
they asked me what life is, and that's what I said 'cause I don't have
a clue.

Antoinette

Tamia Jones

She hates her name.
I forget
how to spell it and only
call her when I'm upset.

She looks like her dad.
Small eyes and round face
that appears
in every mirror that I own.

Antoinette

She doesn't speak,
because when she talks
her gap is
wide and peeks through every smile.

She doesn't walk.
My knees
buckle and shatter and pop
with every step.

She lives in a bottle,
that cracks when my temperature
rises and spits
out filthy lies.

Antoinette, Antoinette

We sleep together
in my bed of dreams
as she
haunts my nightmares.

I remind myself of her scent
like death,
that lingers heavily
in my nose.

She weeps every night.
I breathe in and out.
I never know when she'll
come and stay.

Emani

Malia Logan

I hate her.
The shiny curls and perfect teeth
Stomach flat and pure of face
Her presence, her words
The reminder
Looming over me

Emani, a reflection
Of everything I want
Or is she a curtain
Covering everything I wish
I didn't have?

Silent shackles dance tightly around me,
Every step forward tugging me
Backwards.
Her dark fingers linger on my body,
Her judging eyes forever focused
On me.

With drooping eyes I see her
This different version of me
Flawed yet better
Distant but close
Never leaving me behind

The Day the Petal Flourished

Cameron Clark

Drifting into the unknown nature of Japan,
A petal flew away in dismay,
Threatened by the way
The gusts interrupted her thoughts,
Causing the petal to be distraught.
Swayed among the branches,
There seemed to be a hideaway
Where the ivory cranes lay,
Nipping the rubescent meadows.
The petal gazed at the sight.
Never had she glimpsed a scene so bright.
Exotic shades swiveled and took flight.

Dead Woman Walking

Maurissa Winford

Momma fed me the blue pill, and never
let me look back. "Sit with me daughter. "I was 16,
sinking into the couch cushions.
I never liked this story. I made the oath, and
kissed her hands, and said my prayers.
"But deliver us from evil."
Daddy whipped and yelled; He was mad about something.
And I'd kill him if could.
Shameful as I felt, I never looked men in the eyes
again. Prevention from what? Protection from who? This city is
no good for women. This towns no good for dreamers.
Took up the word and gave momma the fears. This towns
no good for believers.

Today's Date

Christy McDade

Today started with rain,
And followed with hail;
And when I'd arrived,
My hair smelled like whale.

I walked through the door,
And low and behold,
The candy I'd bought
Was several years old!

In my remorse
I ripped up my ticket;
An accident, yes,
That emptied my pockets.

I tripped on my shoe,
And poured out my pop,
A trick, none the less
That ruined my top.

At last, the right seat!
I looked all around,
But would you believe,
That no man was found?

Indeed, he was missing
Vexed, I yelled "great!"
Guess who is missing?
Today's date.

Girl on a Roof at Midnight

Mae Gardner

There is a girl on a roof at midnight.
She aligns her eyes with the stars.
She parts the layered darkness.
She pines away for what is imagined;
The dreams that ache, the thoughts that
suffer. She snaps pictures, knowing
they fade.
She forges memories, sweet and homemade.
She digs for others, though they are frayed.
There is a girl on a roof at midnight,
Watch her become a woman.

Aging with Grace

Kacie Hudson

I looked in the mirror and I sighed,
I see the scar in the corner of my eye

from a little girl who believed she could fly
I see the circles under my eyes from studying till sunrise
I can see the holes where my piercings have now closed
I can see the burn left on my tongue

from my impatience when I was young
I see the freckles that show

in the summer, but they come and go
I see the lines that formed around my lips

from the laughter of good nights spent
I put down my facial creams,
I put down my oils
I looked in the mirror and smiled.

My Crown of Brown

Malia Logan

My mama always told me that each curl was a diamond within my crown, a jewel to love and protect. My black magic. Actually it's a black pain in my behind, but who am I to talk about my "precious" hair like that? Endless nights of it being ripped out, and waking up twice as early to make the natural curls presentable. The art of controlling the hair that towered over my head, any outburst of curls or tangles my hair's anger and my reaction, society.

Tame it, pull it back, put it aside. My crown has been glorified all my life and I with it—if I wore it right.

The sisters and elders at Mama's black church loved my hair. So long, curly, natural. That was the key word it seemed: natural. From Barbie tennis shoes to no braces, that was the term that meant approval. Even braids passed the test. Only knew of this from the one day I went to church with my hair straightened, relaxed, when I got the looks. Every black mama smiled and told me I looked beautiful but stared at the fakeness as I walked away. I felt it on my lower back. It wasn't real, definitely not natural. Still attached to my head, this crown. But not the way it was meant to be. Neither was I supposed. But I didn't feel that often, as my mama was one of many who didn't allow fake.

I was never allowed out on Saturdays. Nowadays I tell people that Mondays are my least favorite day of the week. And as passionate as I am now, as a kid Saturdays were actually my least favorite day. For most, it was the epitome of the weekend. The time to sleep in and watch cartoons with your siblings, or go to the library and the park with your parents, but not for me. Saturdays were reserved for the shining of the crown.

I rose with the sun on those mornings, praying high and low that that would be the day Mama forgot. Pray that she was too distracted to focus on the weekly task. I tiptoed down the steps, and the ends of my

old braids tapped my waist to move me forward. On the bottom step I closed my eyes, wishing one more time. When I opened them, Mama was looking back at me, her eyes tired yet forceful. The pillows were already laid out on the floor to spare my body, the TV ready for my choice of poison. My heart dropped to my already aching legs, like it did every Saturday. For a moment I thought about complaining, but knew it wouldn't do any good. I had no chance.

"Why?" I whispered as I crept towards her, and before she could answer she had already started to unravel my first braid.

"We have to baby," she whispered back. My abundant crown loomed around my face by the time my little brother complained about breakfast.

"Coming, Gabe," Mama called, leaving me behind to make us food. I slowly grabbed a hairband, wrapping what felt like stones instead of gems up and behind my head. The sun tried to blind me as I stared into it from our narrow living room, and I ate as slow as I possibly could.

Each Saturday was the same, the attempt to avoid what was next—arguably one of the worst parts of this process. As hard as I tried not to, eventually I made eye contact with Mama, and she gave the signal to gather all of the products. When the sun was fully up, my hair was fully submerged. It got harder and more painful year after year, climbing onto the kitchen counter. Nine-year-old me couldn't find the words to bring it up, the mere notion of washing all that is my crown in the depths of a kitchen sink. Knowing I couldn't avoid it much longer, I jammed my body in between the microwave and the edge, and my back attempted to hold its ground as I laid my head over the hole.

Hours and hours I waited until the pulling was finally over, and Mama took special care of the jewel attached to me as my body limply followed after. Lunch came and went, and four friends called. "No," I apologized, "I cannot play today."

I have to tend to my hair.

Afternoon went into early evening as Mama pulled out the blow dryer, well in my case more known as the blowtorch. Back on the floor, surrounded with gels and clips, another movie was picked as my mop began to dry.

“What do you want for dinner?” The first words my Mama spoke an hour later as I removed the damp towel off of yesterday’s pajamas. I shrugged, knowing the worst was yet to come.

“Just pizza, I guess,” I whispered back, and I slowly found the space to stand before going to turn on the lamps for more light. Inhaling my food, I turned the TV back on and tried to find the movie that would distract me the most. That would remove the pain. Finally, I found one, and my mama sat me back on the floor as she sat behind me once more.

Comb, pull, twist. Comb, pull, twist. Comb, pull, twist.

I thought about saying “ow” but I knew it wouldn’t change anything, so I held my pillow close and closed my eyes as Mama tightened each diamond, each braid, each nerve on my head. “All done,” Mama whispered finally, and the chorus of cracks and sighs burst as I rose from the floor. Without a word we both tidied the living room back up, as if we weren’t there all day. Gently, Mama pulled the bonnet from underneath the couch cushion, one of my newer hiding spots. She wrapped it in my hands as she kissed the top of my shiny new crown.

“Goodnight,” Mama whispered, and all I could do was nod back as I turned away and walked upstairs. I avoided all the mirrors from that point on, and right on schedule my nightly headache began from the left side of my head. I crawled into bed, positioned myself in the place that would hurt my head the least. Tears spilled down my face, and I pushed away the hair that was there as I tried to fall asleep. I hate my hair.

You would think my hair was a whole other being the way Mama treated it. How she expected me to treat it. So many rules of how to wear my crown. Sometimes I wondered if it was ever really mine. Not that I wanted it in the first place, after a lifetime of hassle that I never agreed with. It took ten years before I could even wear my hair out, and three more after that for Mama to allow me to straighten my mane. I stopped asking about cutting it last year; Mama would never allow it.

“Please, Mama, just one week,” I had begged per usual, pleading from the backseat as she pulled around school to drop me off. I had made it a ritual; I asked for ownership of the crown, any authority in what I had to walk around with all day, at least once a week. Trained since I was little, however, Mama only broke when she wanted to.

“No, Malia,” Mama responded sternly, and I shrugged in disgust as I twiddled with my braids. My head didn’t hurt as much now, just numb. Now a hard-head from all these years, my nerves recovered just in time for the process to start all over.

“Just one day, I’ll be super careful, I promise,” I tried again, prepared to say anything for her to agree.

“Heat damages your hair, Malia. Besides, your curls are beautiful,” Mama insisted, and I groaned. No they weren’t. I didn’t care, I wanted to burn all the natural out of my head. I wanted to look pretty. Still do.

It was picture day the next day, out of all days. Even if it was for a day, I just wanted to have hair. Beautiful gems falling from my head like magic, like Mama always claimed. Not chains that I couldn’t even see unless I pulled. Mama didn’t respond that time, deciding that nothing more needed to be said. I grabbed my backpack and yanked at my hair once more as I stumbled out of the car.

“I just want hair like the other girls,” I whispered as I stood at the car door. Mama looked at me with tender eyes.

“You’re not like other girls.”

All I could do was nod back. The last thing I was gonna do was stand there and deny facts. I wasn’t like other girls. Nothing about my crown was simple or fair. I closed the door and rushed into the building, blaming Mama while also knowing it wasn’t her fault. More pain rushed to my brain as I wiped any remaining tears, and I began to watch the daily show of the hall’s runway.

Strawberry blonde ponytail? She was the teacher’s favorite, and jet black messy bun always had the cutest uniform combination. Ginger must’ve had a presentation today, as her curls bounced up and down. Dirty blonde caught everyone’s eye for better or worse, today’s headlines being new bangs she got last weekend. All different colors, different styles, different crowns. I watched from a distance, knowing that not a single crown matched mine. You’re different, Mama sang high and low. Special, with a unique crown. Unique is right, from my head to my chocolate skin. If only, for once, I wasn’t different.



Loving and hating my hair rolls through my head as I stand in front of the shower of my dorm. My gems hang dirty, gorgeous within what

most call flawed. Mama called me earlier, starting with “hello” and ending with it was time to wash my hair. I knew I had to, but still stood frozen. What was right and what I wanted, but what I knew I had to do always came out on top. I hop in the shower, and after hesitation I let the water run over my crown. After a moment the smoothness on my skin turns rough, and my disfigured curls slowly start to cloud around my face. Released and running wild, I clean each jewel to the best of my ability, stepping out to style it for another hour.

Once finished, I look in the mirror, the crown big and natural. Immediately, there are tears in my eyes. I leave the dorm and try to continue my day, and earlier than usual the comments begin. Malia your curls! We love them! Ugh, they’re so pretty. You look beautiful! Ahh, your hair!

Friends and foes aww as I strain a smile back, my crown already pulled away in a discreet bun. More and more praises of the real me, natural me. They love my curls, congratulations. I’ve never appreciated them. Over the years the crown has dimmed. Been broken and healed. I’ve tried and I’ve failed, feeling royalty with my jewels one day and shame the next. Real hair is too much, damaging the only version I can accept. Natural is different. Fake is pretty.

I wait out the months like I’m told to, giving the supposed diamonds a chance to breathe. To heal. Once, the wait was barely deemed acceptable, I rushed to wash my crown once more, now grown to take the reins. Plugging in my own blowtorch, I set fire to my crown of brown, crippling them until they’re gone. The fire-licking relaxer presses down on each gem, and I feel each piece of my hair burn, more ruined than the last time. I finish, brushing my hair out like every other girl does, tears leaking into my smile.

Finally, I’m beautiful.

Sing, Memphis Bird, Sing

Kennedy Lewis

I am from the heart of blues, a city drowned peacefully under an ocean of music.

I am from the heartbeat drumming close to the veins carrying the blood of the Mississippi.

River, loud and thrashing like a dance lost to euphoria.

I am the castle to the King of Rock n Roll, ivory halls full of tutting wise men and yodeling hound dogs.

I am six years old, and running upstairs for the first time in a new home, burning my knees on the carpet with my sister behind me.

Cut me open and spill out my song, classical music adorns my veil like sparkling jewels.

I am the dancer that slowly spins across the floor, like a wandering star with no planet children to watch, I just shine.

A child does not see fault, why do they laugh? Does the swan of the lake waltz like an ugly duckling?

Sing, Memphis bird, sing, from the backyard, a lovely coo. Mother runs with a camera in hand, to catch the birds of the chorus.

“Morning, love”, says the Morning Dove, with each coo tweeted anew.

A backyard of freshly cut grass, the sound of cicadas, and the springs of a trampoline.

Over and over like a rhythm, a song, up and down

The flowers adorn my hair like I sprout them, wild and free but nurtured, out and about it took me a while to embrace my garden hair.

I am the “who, what, why?” from Kenneth and the “do, re, mi” from Benita, together like the plot and the soundtrack, a living breathing movie.

I am the adagio of my father, and the crescendo of my mother,
and the cacophony of a mixed-up music sheet. Why is my music
different?

Why is my maraca the orange-colored somber shake of a
diagnosis? What is supposed to protect me attacks me, every day, every
hour.

Sharp piano notes stab and twist the tune, running up and down
black and white ivory keys.

I play the black note, yet everyone tell me it sounds white

Why do I clap differently from the rest of my peers, offbeat, off a
tune in my head

So many noises, so many words

Speak, bird, speak, and shock us all into stillness, not silence.

Speak, God, speak, and tell me that you're there. That you're
listening to me and that I'm not playing music to an empty sky, to a God
that lets me suffer in silence.

To a God that prefers the perfect song over the flawed one.

I am a pair of broken headphones, grasping onto shelf life, to
shield myself from the outside world, peering in.

The need to play, yet held together by the loose strings of a violin.

No, I am not the headphones, but the music—the spirit that lives
and breathes inside you.

And I will sing, bird, sing.

Beginning of the Story

Taylor Vergel De Dios

I look up at the trees towering above me. The tops look like they are leaning in towards each other creating a jagged circle to frame the blue sky. I stand with my back straight, my weapon—a bow that my brother made for me—in my hand. I breathe in the clean, dry air. I haven't been in the field long. Technically, I should still be a training soldier but the war brought strain to the army and required all those who were able to fight to be put into active duty. I'm not in enemy territory, but I'm still on edge. There's no one else out here to watch my back. I'm alone.

I hear a stick snap behind me. I turn, notching an arrow as I draw. I hold my breath as I wait. My eyes search between the trees. I'm more in the open than I would like, but moving now would be pointless.

"Come out!" I tell the hidden figure.

A young man steps out with his hands up and I relax, pointing the arrow away from his forehead and down towards the dirt.

"You're not supposed to be here." I tell him.

"And you have no one watching your back." He states.

"Not many of us do at the moment, Your Highness." I move towards the prince so that I am in range to protect him if we get into a troubling situation.

"I know." The prince sighs.

"We'll swing by camp and then I'll resume my rounds." I say, starting to move but the prince doesn't. I turn to look at him. His blue eyes were determined.

"You can't stay out here with me." I grip my bow letting the rough bark dig into my palm.

"I'm not letting you stay out here alone."

"That is not your call, Your Highness."

"I'm making it mine."

I grit my teeth. He could get me moved to a different division if he pushed. I could be stuck in the camp as a protection detail for the royal family or worse the general.

"We could both get in a significant amount of trouble if you stay." I remind him.

"I'll take the fall."

"And if you get injured? Or killed?"

"I won't."

"You might." I grumble.

The prince moves closer to me, "I can take care of myself. I've had the same training as you."

I can't argue anymore, it's true. In fact, he's had more training; he's two years older than me. He taught me most of what I know. But if I let him come, it's my fault... whatever happens is my fault.

"I guess we are in agreement." He smiles, "I'm going with you."

I stay silent but start to move away from camp, my boots send the dry pine needles crackling quietly with each step. Every muscle is tight, waiting. Ready for something to happen. There's been a tension in the army for days now, it has to break soon. There's no avoiding the war that's coming.

Dark blue flashes to my right. My arrow is flying at an enemy soldier before I can think. I know the colors that our army wears in the field and blue is not one of them. It's too easy to see.

I watch the body fall face first onto the hard ground. He was moving away from us.

"Taylor!" My mom calls from the back door, "Dinner!"

I sigh, turning away from my imaginary foe.

"Coming!"



I lead my horse out the gate and into the front yard. She's a black and white paint named Jasmine. The family is going hiking and Jasmine is a good horse for the trails down in Sedona. Although, I'll have to wash her up when we get home. The red dirt will stain her pastern area, which is the point just above her hooves.

I tie her lead rope to the railing of the deck and start brushing her down. I would just wait until we got down to the hiking trails but my

family probably wouldn't want to wait while I took the time to do a really good job and I'm just waiting for them right now anyway.

"Hey Jazzy girl." I whisper to the horse stroking her neck with my hand and then the brush.

"You ready for a ride?"

The horse tosses her black and white face impatiently.

I smile, "I'm ready to go too. But we've gotta wait for the rest of the family."

A couple minutes later and I've got Jasmine brushed and ready to be loaded. My parents are running back and forth between the blue minivan and the house. I don't want to load Jasmine into the small trailer hooked up to the back of the van until we are actually ready to leave because she gets restless and so I sit watching the packing from the steps of the deck.

It's a good thing that the trailer is invisible, I think, otherwise Dad wouldn't be able to see out the back window while driving.



I'm dressed in black from head-to-toe. It's been my regular outfit for the past couple of weeks. My long black hair is draped over one shoulder in a thick braid going almost all the way down to my waist. I stay focused as I move through the hallway, barely acknowledging the other people in the same all black. I'm on a quick timetable to make the meet with a new informant. No one else can know about this mission and keeping it a secret isn't hard considering I live in a complex filled with spies. We all live with a 'don't ask, don't tell' mentality and I am perfectly okay with that.

I slip into my room at the end of the hall. It's small but big enough for the clutter that fills the dark blue carpet. I move around the papers, shoes, and toys till I get to my bed where my favorite jacket is lying. I pull it on, the dark pink plaid pattern breaking up the black. Then I move silently out of my room and back into the hall. I peek around the corner to make sure that there's no one there before I start down it.

I slip out the red front door onto the wood porch which creaks gently with each step. A breeze rustles the needles of the pine trees. Stop at the railing facing out to the street and take a look around.

The street and neighboring driveways are empty which isn't a surprise since it's late afternoon on a Wednesday afternoon. Satisfied I walk to the sidewalk with my hands stuffed in the pockets of my jackets. It's really not cold out but that's always how the spies look on TV and those are the images that are flashing in my mind.

I turn as gravel is ground into the concrete by steady foot falls.

"Do you have the package?" I ask the girl.

"I have it." She answers, stopping a couple of paces away from me.

"They sent you for it?"

"They did." I answer quietly.

The girl lets out a quiet hum as she scans me. I stand as still as I can under the scrutiny of her look, a task I have to clench my jaw to achieve.

The girl takes a step back, "I don't like this."

"There's nothing wrong here." I reassure her, keeping calm. "I was sent for security purposes.

With the nature of this drop the head wanted more viable options.

"So I've got a sniper on me?"

I shake my head, "I would never let them do that. Never."

"But you would turn me in, right?" She whispers. I can see the pain in her eyes more than I can hear it in her voice.

"You're my sister, but I couldn't let you do it." I take a step toward her,

"But now you have a chance to make it right."

"Make it..."

I hear a car driving down the road and I turn to look. I recognize the dark gray Honda. It's my dad and I take off running up the driveway as he slows to turn. I make it up onto the porch before he revs the car to get it up the slope and into the open door of the garage. As soon as the engine shuts off I run in and pull the door open.

"Hi, Daddy," I smile.

"Hi, T-bone." My dad says grinning back at me as he grabs his briefcase from the passenger side and climbs out of the car.



Trees seem like they have never changed, but I know that they have. They've grown and broken, just as I have. I'm not the little girl running through the backyard brand new adventures at her fingertips. Now I am trying to decide whether I should move four states over for college or two

hours away. I wish I could go back to living in my imagination. It's what I want to do with my life anyway. Make up stories but instead of keeping them to myself I get to share them. It's no longer me inside the story, it's someone else. A person that I have been tasked with bringing alive.

I watch the trees sway in the wind and close my eyes letting the sound fill my mind. Bring me back to the carefree kid and I hug my laptop to my chest. The stories that I dreamed up as a child are similar to the ones I put on paper, filled with adventure and excitement. There's a lot more real life in the stories now and I'm no longer the main character.

I move down the stairs from the balcony to the lower deck and settle in at the wood table. The sun warms my back as I open my laptop and wait for it to come alive. It's been too long since I've written. I've been too busy with work and school to spend a lot of time on my own hobbies, even if it's the one that will one day be my career.

The computer screen lights up and I tap in the password, sinking into the feeling of the keys beneath my fingers. I open my writing program and words spring into existence on the screen. I breathe in the life that flows from seeing words filling a page as I start typing. I slip away from the backyard and into a story.



I look at the clock on my laptop screen: 5:30 AM. I let out a sigh. Everything is quiet in the Lakeview kitchen. There's a lot of peace in the early morning, seeing the darkness looming over the parking garage construction outside the floor to the ceiling windows.

My laptop is sitting in my lap, the screen filled with fresh words for my assignment for Intro to Creative Writing. It's the first piece of fiction I have written all semester.

"This is a new beginning." I tell myself.

Really, the new beginning was three months ago when I moved in and started college, but this feels like something special. All the doubt that I felt about my stories, my writing, myself is starting to wash away. That little girl in the backyard thought of lots of wild stories, but she never thought she'd be sitting in a dorm kitchen in Mississippi, truly learning how to put her imagination into words for others to share in.



Flow (unfinished)
Maddie Bennett



Finding the Light
Lena Embry

Adulthood

Her Name Was

Sarah Rider

She smelled to me of night-blooming
jasmine, blue violets, and lily.
Even a Baptist such as she
took swigs of Irish Whiskey.

She married a man who lived fully alive—
He's an up-and-leave, go-for-a-drive
3 months later pull into sight type.
He'd swish in the wind—free as a kite!
I'd think to myself, did he ever write to say—
“Clara my darling, how did I think I could stay away?”
But he never did—write or stay...
“A ‘free spirit’ is the kindest way” I'd hear someone say.

Her heartbeat could skip, and her hands shake—
but for me, her strength was without give or take.
With one hand on the rail, and the other on me,
I led her around the Chestnut tree.
Then I, too, left.
Drove 12 hours away, then chose to stay.
I call her sometimes but can't see her face.

I can't help but think of our end.
I hope she will go to sleep.
Then in her dream, she'll transcend.
Clara Rider isn't dead,
but I know one day she will be—
and then, I, too, will drink swigs of Irish Whiskey.

The Leaves Will Fall

Allison N. Schwab

Spines protrude
Trunk withered, twisted, and bent
Life locked in sightless form
Unwillingly oblivious

Autonomy constrained to reliance
Powerlessly puerile

Fallen leaves rot unrecognized
Glimpses of thoughts bygone
Wilt unremembered
Permanently faded

The betrayal of senescence
Inescapably cruel

Black Bearding

Maurissa Winford

Teeth, Tip, and Toe
What my mulatto boy knew.
Block quilted pattern with our arms together,
Young and free
Half don't make you whole, sista
But his grammy still fried, boiled, and baked for me
And her daughter followed suit. With baby hung on
hip and resting naps in dips.
Half don't make you whole, sista
Does light not cast out darkness?
Black blood is blood, White blood is blood
Four years, and he's gone.
Men don't make you whole, sista

Parallel Worlds

Malia Legan

His Eden—raised in a peaceful garden
I was removed from a safe space.
Brought to one that appears the same with
my own desirable apple, from a tree that is not mine.

Both worlds present me love,
words to follow, and actions to perform.
One calling for my own desires
and a calling to follow His.

there are promises that He declares
and lies that they whisper.
One place that demands to make me hollow
while another wants to fill me.

The earth's hold grows stronger the farther I push away,
but it doesn't want to love me like my Father does.
What I see in front of me is pleasing, yes
but I have seen the One who sees me.

I must follow that—
follow Him.

Leaving it Behind

Kacie Hudson

She never viewed the world in color,
Her heart was never content,
Only through the windowpane in her 10x10 room, looking out as the
rain poured and the streetlight flickered, could she see the color in the
world,
At 18 she packed up her room and was off towards her next adventure,
She looked back one last time to see the sticky hands she had thrown on
her ceiling six years prior,
She saw the hot pink walls from that one phase so long ago,
She looked back and she saw the holes in her wall where her posters
used to hang,
As she closed the door behind her, she was swarmed with memories of
her siblings running through the halls,
Memories of the late-night fort creations for their chaotic all-nighters,
The sharpie mustaches for those that fell asleep,
She saw the piggyback rides her brother used to give them,
She could see the arguments and the fights about wearing her older
siblings clothing,
She heard the laughs from family night that were so loud the house
would shake,
She heard the cries and the smell of hot cocoa after her first heartbreak,
She could see the bow wrapped around her car as she stepped in to it,
And as they hammered the for-sale sign into the yard tears poured down
her face,
She was sad but still a smirk began to perk from her lips,
She left the place that she had felt safe,
She left the place where she learned who she was,
She drove off and wiped her tears,

It was just growing pains she knew she would be ok,
And to college she waived.

The Half-Africaaner

Callum Sinclair

Ek kom uit die land van duisend stemme.

(Translated) I come from the land of a thousand tongues: The nation with eleven official languages, but I only know two.

I come from South Africa, from Rooibos, Koeksisters, Afrikaans and die bokke. The rainbow nation that comes alive with the sound of a million vuvuzelas roaring throughout the rugby stadiums. A cry, a chant, the sound of my people.

The place of my birth, my childhood, my home. Where my cousins, grandparents, and friends gathered around the flames of the braai every weekend as we cooked lamb, pork, ribs, and boerewors. A true South African diet of meat and meat with a side of carbs.

I come from a Christian home. I am a pastor's child.

To further my father's pastoral education, we sold all we had in 2014, and traveled over the seas. Each carrying two bags contained all that we owned. We lost family, friends, history, and, in many ways, our home. We came to Mississippi, where we reside, battling to stay in a country that is not even mine.

I slowly became a Half-Africaaner.

My father attended the Reformed Theological Seminary in Jackson, while I was placed under and nurtured by First Pres. Jackson. A church with a congregation of three thousand people, nearly thirty times the size of my father's congregation in South Africa. After five years, my family and I intended to return to South Africa as missionaries, but the Lord had other plans for us. We stayed in America for the opportunity and education. Five years became ten, and now my siblings and I are

all grown up. We are no longer pastor's children but Christians with our own paths to lead.

I come from family, both by blood and across the street.

Where a simple smile was invitation enough for someone to take the time to know you. Where your only excuse for being alone was never stepping out your front door.

I come from Schroeder, from the tattered and burned hands of my Oupa, and from my nanna's joyous nature and baked blessings.

I come from the Sinclairs. A Scottish clan passed down to my two siblings and me from my grandfather and grandmother. My identity, my connection to the wisdom and history that is now my own.

I come from a family, once connected, now dispersed. From sad goodbyes that, in some cases, became ultimate goodbyes.

Ten years of distance feels like an eternity, but the distance of eternity leaves burdening regrets. I was not ready to miss them yet.

And lastly, I came from Callum.

The name given to me by my parents connecting me to my Scottish ancestry. A name that is still my own but not used by anyone anymore. A name that was changed to Andrew because it was easier to remember, easier to say, and easier to have.

I came from Callum. A name from a childhood that is long gone. A name that gave way to a new one, reflecting the life I have created in America.

Ten years away from my home does not change the fact that I came from the land of a thousand tongues, I came from a Christian home, I came from family, and I came from Callum.

These are all the attributes that have made me a Half-Africaaner.

Scarlett Mint

Tara Teter

My date loved the dirt, flirting
her fingers in the moist soil
to tuck in plant roots.

Mint leaves tickled the air,
fresh
and sharp. She stood,
brushing brown clumps from her knees
and the hem of her vermillion skirt.

From inside her lavender purse
she retrieved a glass perfume bottle.
Her auburn hair fell
to her back
as she gazed her emerald eyes into the sun
and spritzed
twice
onto the arch of her willowy
neck. Her cheeks flushed
cherry red.

“I smelled too much of the outside.”

But now she smelled of amaryllis,
zinnia,
and something,

something
acid...

sharp.

Her neck was so thin and
pungent.
The mint didn't hear when I
cracked it.

See, It's Funny Because

Taylor Carpenter

AUNT NIKI: *Just drive and drive fast.*

Sometimes I'm twenty-three
and tired of it. Every day I wake up
later than Virgin Mary. I often contemplate
setting my whole car on fire when the door
shuts on me like a bad habit.

TWENTY-THREE: *I don't even know where I'm going.*

Mostimes I'm half-wearing
my coffee. I assign each passing driver
a flipped bird. It occurs to me that I must look
like Aunt Niki in traffic when I'm laughing
to forget the morning-rush bruises.

AUNT NIKI: *Taybaby, you're almost there.*

my head vs His heart

Malia Legan

Grown in a toxic garden
removed from His Eden.
He calls me forward in love, but
they whisper me back from desire.

I yearn to know what He speaks of,
what He's done for me,
what He's promised.
But what about what the world speaks of?

A stubborn string ties me down here,
the fear of missing the 'now' fierce.
But oh, how He loves me,
and wants the best for me.

Tipped Scales

Shannon Cardsma

The water beat down on her, turning her knees and stomach lobster red. Alice drew her hand through the curtain and took a drag from the cigarette. One beat, two, then a smokey exhale that mingled with the steam. She didn't bother to hide the cigarette on the private side of the curtain. She wouldn't see Jack until the party. She could hit her head and bleed out, and Jack wouldn't think to check on her until the guests arrived and he found himself to be the sole entertainer of a gaggle of women.

As soap ran down from her hair into her eyes, she deposited her cigarette in the silver ashtray on the floor and stood upright to scrub at her scalp until the suds melted from her fingers. She yanked on the faucet handle—the one Jack said he would fix months ago—and cut the water. Droplets splashed pitter-patter to the floor as she drew back the floral shower curtain and stepped onto the heated stones. In the foggy mirror, her body was a pale mass, but Alice knew what she'd see if the glass were clear: everything that shouldn't be sagging, spilling, or wrinkled unflatteringly.

Having already served its purpose just half an hour ago, the sleek, black scale sat in the middle of the bathroom, awaiting the familiar pressure of Alice's feet. Alice stepped onto it, heard the optimistic beep, and stepped off without looking down at the numbers between her toes. She knew what they would read.

Her fingertips found the robe hanging from a hook beside the full length mirror, and she pulled the plush fabric around herself before walking into the bedroom. With the French doors to the balcony thrown open, light cascaded into the room, touching the bed, the vanity, the faded rug. Alice crossed to her dressing room and tugged the doors open. She knelt in front of a thin dresser to the right, slid open the third

drawer, and perused her options. Selecting the black one-piece with the tiny cutouts and tastefully plunging neckline, Alice stood, coming face-to-face with another mirror as she pivoted left. You can survive one informal party, she told the tired woman looking back at her.

Dropping the robe from her shoulders, Alice laid it carefully over the mirror so that she could dress. The guests would be arriving soon.



“Did you see Jenna last week? I swear she’s gotten work done.”

The sky’s reflection rippled on the water’s surface.

“Oh, I know! Does she think she’s a supermodel or something? If you ask me, she should be focusing on her children, not her appearance.” Doris tugged at the flowing skirt of her swimsuit and adjusted the bust. Her tortoise shell sunglasses sat comically large on her dainty nose.

“Ugh, speaking of children, Timmy’s at that age where he fights everything I say. I just don’t know what to do with him. If the kids were here now, no doubt he’d be shouting at me about something.”

“Oh, I know what you mean. I asked Katie to walk the dog last night, and you would’ve thought I’d asked her to shoot the dog! She stomped and fussed, ripping her arms through her jacket sleeves like it was the most awful thing to have to walk that little dog that she begged to have. You’re lucky you only have one to deal with, Alice. Alice?”

“What?” Alice responded with equal measures of boredom and impatience as she trailed her fingers through the chlorinated water, fascinated by the slight resistance caused by millions of molecules she couldn’t even see. She’d been purposefully drowning out the babble of the four other ladies floating beside her, but she could ignore them no longer.

“Doris was just telling us about the problems she’s been having with Katie. Does Michael give you trouble like that?”

Alice delayed her response, lazily tracing her eyes from one bronzed lady to the next, studying their aging features. This was the age when the scales tipped. Sun spots popped up overnight, as did the wrinkles around your eyes and mouth. Mothers who had sworn they were through with babies now realized their chance for reneging was a door steadily closing, soon to be locked forever.

“Michael doesn’t seem to care whether I exist or not most days.”

“Teenagers are like that. Why, I remember when my little Rachel—not so little anymore, of course—hit the teen years...”

Alice closed her eyes as the sun washed over her. A warm tingle coursed through her, starting at the tip of her nose. Cool water lapped at her toes and seeped between her legs and the sticky pool float as she slowly paddled her hands on either side.

An unexpected breeze brought with it the sweet scent of ribs being barbecued. It almost made Alice’s mouth water. She could hear them sizzling as Jack flipped them. Both the sound and smell disappeared as he closed the lid of the grill.

On the stone table by the grill sat the elegant serving platter Jack’s mother had gifted them on his and Alice’s tenth anniversary. The one she’d given them as a wedding present had shattered against the stone tiles of the kitchen just a year into the marriage. Michael was born that night.

Alice opened her eyes and rotated her floaty just enough that she could see her husband standing at the grill, Dave chatting beside him. In the fourteen years they’d been married, Jack had changed. They both had, of course. Alice wasn’t twenty-six anymore, and Jack certainly wasn’t twenty-eight. Once his pride and joy, his thick, blonde hair had thinned and was tarnished with gray at his temples; and the strength once evident in his physique was now hidden under a gut that pulled just slightly at his faded t-shirt.

An unbidden bubble of disgust rose in Alice’s stomach as she scrutinized her husband. Though she couldn’t put her finger on the exact moment this nagging resentment had first invaded her mind, it had taken up residency, becoming an ever more demanding tenant.

The white gate at the edge of the house swung open to reveal Emily, Alice’s young intern, clad in a thin swimsuit cover-up that did nothing to hide the bikini underneath. She waved cluelessly at Alice and her friends—not much more than school moms she fraternized with for the sake of playdates and carpools and bake sales—then stripped off the cover-up and slipped into the pool. Alice watched as Jack and Dave’s heads moved on a slow swivel, following Emily’s movements. Her focus was trained on Jack, on the up-turn of one corner of his mouth even as he conversed with Dave.

With the droning voices of the other ladies, the buzzing of cicadas, and the mine-blast bursts of laughter from Jack and Dave as a backdrop to her thoughts, Alice realized with a spark of confusion that she wasn't angry. Not even as she watched her husband steal glances at a twenty-something-year-old girl when he hadn't met her eyes once in the past half hour—at her birthday party no less. She didn't feel a hint of jealousy or spite. Her friend resentment was out to lunch, apparently. She searched her consciousness, scrounging vainly for a hint, a whisper of feeling.

The pool float squeaked and pulled at her thighs as she slid into the waist-high shallows of the pool. The water grabbed at her limbs as she made her way to the stairs, though it evaporated off her almost immediately as she stepped out of the pool. She picked up her towel anyway, draped it over one shoulder, and silently glided toward the French doors that led into the shadowed dining room.

"Alice, where are you going?" Doris nagged. "I'm sure it's nearly time to eat, those ribs smell divine. How much longer will you torture us, Jack?"

Jack opened the grill and prodded the hissing meat. "They're just about ready, Doris. Bring another couple of beers for me and Dave on your way back, would you, Alice?"

Alice shut the French doors without answering. Her swaying figure, distorted through the etched glass panes, faded from view into the bowels of the house.

Doris and the other ladies resumed their gossip, an endless string of secrets and judgments, tantalizing lies interspersed with blades of truth. Jack transferred the ribs to the serving platter.

"Vittles are up!"

There was a brief jubilation from the women before they began awkwardly paddling themselves closer to the stairs of the pool.

The day had begun to cool as the sun sank toward the roof and the breeze stabilized; but, it was nowhere near dusk summer evenings drag themselves out, overlapping with the night. While the backyard was abuzz with chatter, the neighborhood was peaceful. Children on skateboards and bikes were absent from the street. The next door neighbors who played their music too loud were on vacation. It only made the gunshot seem louder.

Every head snapped toward the house, every breath caught in fear and then horror. The serving platter shattered almost silently against the stone patio as Jack made the first mad dash toward the house and the cicadas reached their ringing crescendo.

Seasonal

Tessa Bierle

I

May came knocking —
I said hold on
Just a minute —
I have too many things
In my hands
To open the door.

II

But she barged right in,
Adjusted the air conditioning,
Turned to me
And said, “Your turn.”
But my dial wouldn’t turn.
I’m stuck right here,
Same temperature.

III

So she sat on the bottom step.
It creaked under her weight,
Folded her hands
On her lap,
And stared right at me.
She said,
“I’ll be gone in an instant,”
And I said hold on,
Just a minute —
I’m just a bit slow
To thaw.

IV

June came knocking.
He said,
“Are you coming?
Some friends and I
Are going to see a movie.”
And I said hold on
Just a minute —
I’m stuck right here,
I’m already sitting,
Silent,
In the dark.

V

So he threw popcorn at my nose
On his way out,
Passing July on the stoop,
And I smelled the fresh air.
Caught a glimpse of the green grass
But my feet wouldn’t move.

VI

August rumbled past.
His motorbike was loud —
The thunderous summer storms
Crashing around in my head.
I choked on the heat
Of the tepid exhaust.
We shared a smoke
On that late summer haze.
He glanced over
in between exhales
And said, “This time of year
The days all blend together.”

VII

“Tell me about it”

VIII

I grabbed his wrist,
Said, “California’s on fire”
And bummed the cigarette.
But my watery words sputtered
I was all out of fuel.
Yet his smile raged on
As he said,
“An empty matchbox
Can still burn.”

IX

And on his way out of town,
He took with him the flames and the heat,
But left the smoke behind.

X

November came home early —
The door battered from her wind.
It slammed shut and I did, too.
As she tucked me in,
I whispered,
“Welcome home”

Papa Honey

Taylor Carpenter

“Man, you got a glass heart
there, little girl!” Like a bear
in size, my papa is a man too
grown to need my correction.

Like a bird to the bear, I gently
say as Nana does, “Papa Honey,
this is just a flower not a heart.”
He howls laughing all night long.

I remember this every time I see
the Ricola cough drop in my purse
from a year ago. I think I’ll need it.
I didn’t get his joke then. I do now.

I pick my heart up and break it—
and it is such a weightless feeling
that I pick up a piece and break it
again and again and again and another one and this one and that one
over there!

Old Friends

Kieryn Freeman

They sat back to back on the cliff point, looking out across the water in opposite directions. Ripples lapped at the edges as they talked and talked. She had a chip in her tooth from falling off her bike on her thirteenth birthday, about ten years ago now. He didn't seem to mind. And a scar on her lip from hitting her head on the dashboard of that old Ford when she refused to put on a seatbelt. He'd kiss the scar and tell her she was perfect.

When they walked around the old forest park off the highway, she'd tug at his hair and marvel at its reddish hue in the late afternoon light. He'd look forward and just fiddle with the collar of his polo. They'd get into her Hyundai, say a quick prayer for the taped up gas cap, and she'd drive to the Quick Trip to pick up some of the taquitos that they liked. They stayed up nearly half the night, dodging work and sleep.

Later, she moved to West Virginia to be with her father after her parents got divorced. Her father got married young and didn't even know how to cook eggs or work the washing machine. She didn't care much for her mother after she saw men and drugs trickle in and out of the house when her father was away on work trips. Or when he wasn't.

When she left, the young man stayed in Tennessee to continue working double shifts in the jazz bar in Memphis. When he wasn't working, he sat in there trying to escape into a bottle of cheap beer and fake laughter. His brownish eyes looked at the phone hanging on the wall and thought, I should call her.

A few months later and their hands started to forget the feel of one another's. She called him. They talked for hours but it wasn't quite the same. A few awkward pauses and she sighed.

He asked, "How was your day?"

“Good. Finally landed a job in the hospital. Admin work.” She doodled on her notebook and half-smiled.

“Mm. Cool.” He stared out the bleak window of his rundown apartment.

She said she met this guy. Nothing to worry about, just good friends. But they really had a lot in common. They both understood what that meant.

He stayed in that jazz bar overtime—working, drinking, working, drinking—under the luminescent Corona beer sign. Home was even emptier than the bar was.

She worked long shifts at the hospital, coming home to take care of her father at night. Every once in a while looking at the phone on the desk, I should call him. Months passed and her dad started complaining of chest pains, the kind of ones too fatal to ignore. The funeral was brief and so was her move out of West Virginia. She didn’t go back to Memphis.

He fiddled with the phone cord before punching in the all too familiar digits.

We’re sorry, the number you have dialed has been disconnected or is no longer in service.

Aging with Grace

Kacie Hudson

I looked in the mirror and I sighed,
I see the scar in the corner of my eye

from a little girl who believed she could fly
I see the circles under my eyes from studying till sunrise
I can see the holes where my piercings have now closed
I can see the burn left on my tongue

from my impatience when I was young
I see the freckles that show

in the summer, but they come and go
I see the lines that formed around my lips

from the laughter of good nights spent
I put down my facial creams,
I put down my oils
I looked in the mirror and smiled.

Death of Jupiter

Dee Holden

You're a fantasy—
like the secret ingredient in
Grandmother's hot apple pie,
or why fireflies lie like
stars of the earth.

A vision
dusted iridescent in the eyes,
like someone ripped the breath of heaven
from your lungs,
watching the death of Jupiter
swarm over hollow city skylines.

I wonder if those blinking souls
know their sovereign is dead. Do they
cheer for their freedom? Cast pearls and
flame into the dark?

Or are those glittering lights all but
tears, each hung for every lonesome night
since the one you left me?

What Is It Like to Fall in Love

Kennedy Lewis

Your first love is your mother,
for she is kind and gentle.
A shelter through the storm
holding your hand soft and sweet.
Your second love is your father,
for he is strong and firm.
An anchor to the hurricane—
He lifts you into the sky and makes you laugh.
Your third love is a boy with no name ...or does he?
You proclaim your feelings
But everyone laughs—everyone?
Your fourth love are pink pills,
that nurse you to sleep every time you cry.
You are an adult
and you cannot return to your first love.
Your fifth love are words pouring off a page
but the blinking cursor mocks you.
You close the page and take another pill.

Your sixth love is emptiness
For at least that way it will not leave.
Pour out your love
And return again.
Love is tiring.

Canary Eyes

Shannon Aardsma

I
Cold as death, I
pull on my sweater.
The burgundy fabric tickles

my palms. Light fractures
across the carpet, a kaleidoscope
of color.

Around me, voices echo
like ghosts in a mausoleum. I glance
to my right, and

you are here. Brown eyes
like a handful of dirt cast
on a grave

turn me into a love-sick
fool. My thoughts wander from headstones
in an open field, fog surrounding

the stoic marble masses,
to vaulted ceilings and a white dress,
flower petals tossed between the aisles.

We are young, enchanted,
playing this game because

we have time. The future
is veiled but there. Our threads
have not yet thinned. Our graves

are undug.

II

Today is too
sunny. Warmth soaks
through my chalky

bones—a comfort
unwelcomed by those of us left
behind. A parade

of uniformed black crawls
among the skeletal
inmates, assigned to their cells.

They always keep watch.
Will it rain
on November 14th? Will black

umbrellas dot the landscape
as clouds bury
the sun? A handful

of dirt, relinquished as
the casket is lowered.
Sobs like rainfall,

a prayer lost
in the background
as a sparrow

flies home.

III

A bustle of chatter. Scents
mingle, pressing the air from
my lungs, drowning me.

A flash of yellow in the crowd, lost
as soon as it's found.

I watch the stream of
people come and go. And there

you are
again. You won't meet
my eyes, but you always

find me, boastful in your walk, shy
in your manner.
This dual demeanor intrigues.

I steal
a glance. Your eyes,

clay spheres that quiver
with heed
while your smile betrays.

IV

Cold authority dangles from your lips
as you watch
from the sidelines.

For a moment, your eyes keep me
frozen; all other voices fade into
silence. I smile, glance

away, and the game is begun.
You watch while
I play. Adrenaline rushes

through my core.
Color flashes
in the bleachers, shoes squeak

on the waxed floor.
I can't stop smiling.
My feet carry me

to the ball, blocking and dancing to
inaudible music.
I don't think

of you,
your life and death,
our futures. My mind is focused for the first time
in a week. A weight lifts

momentarily. If you
tell me your secrets
now, we'll bury them

together.

Help My Unbelief

Rena Woodard

To be in your world is to cry,
scream,
and pretend.
Smile when asked if I'm fine
because I'm a strong soldier.

To be in your world is to question
If I'm a good person
who deserves your love
When I lie to others about our relationship.

To see your world is beautiful—
Yellow chrysanthemums
and emerald leaves of live oak trees,
Heavy footsteps of dancers' feet,
And the smell of coffee.

But when I'm in your world, I'm confused—
About my purpose and future.
Who I will marry?
What will become my career?
If what I have, is all I will ever have?

To accept your world is to surrender
to a force I cannot see
and a destiny already decided,
but not by me.

Ghetto Angels

Tamia Jones

The hood isn't a place for children.
Aged up, too fast before our eyes.
Reeking the stench of drugs and living on silent cries.
scared of mob ties and dark skies

The hood doesn't love anyone.
Fendin' for ourselves, sorrows and prayers.
The government sure as hell doesn't care.
When mothers can't pay rent or run out of stamps is God even there?

The hood kills the most.
Guns and knives brought to every function.
rooted in mass destruction.
Anything good can never be constructed.

The hood is overlooked.
Since the world ignores, every open door is immediately closed.
the system needs to be exposed.
Why are kids left behind to rot and decompose?

Ghetto Angels.
The real blood of beautiful people.
They fall victim to the evil.
in the hood it's lethal.

My brother is my ghetto angel.
gunshot to the chest, it broke my heart.
the hood is not good, kids' lives taken like a target with a dart.

Some didn't even get a start.
My brother—the hood ripped my family apart.

Months go by and I can't even sleep.
At night I weep, as the devil creeps and the justice system just keep
to themselves and lets us suffer
in sin and kill each other
taking the lives of fathers and brothers.

I wish life was peaceful for us all but that's not how it goes.
Can't bother the world with my woes.
Only God really knows, where we go when the casket closes.

Do You Suppose?

Taylor Carpenter

Do you suppose time grows tired?
Hours pass not in the thankful kitchen,
but will again in March.

From the table, the mocking tree
glares and winks with merry mirth at
the unmoving. I blink back

a heart-halved attempt. The minutes
in the day, of cracked jokes and broken ornaments,
begin to unthaw,

so I put the tree away, until next Christmas.
For the dining room hosts all:
I repair it for Spring's promises

of April showers— birthdays, too. And when
all is put away, our kitchen sleeps.
Here is where we live. Remembering

waits, a stocking in the attic. Holly berry branches,
like gifted *thought-of-you's* for mother,
decorate my mantle heart. It remains

to be dusted and will sit that way
for some time more, the maid, the mother,
the daughter all gone still. Do you suppose

time grows tired and wishes
for a blanket or a bedtime story,
to lie down with the lights on or

if it asks for holding all the night through?

Take a step out and Breathe

Tara Teter

When it rains at dusk, the ground
glistens

as if small jewels nestle
in the grass.
The air is sweet-flavored

with pine,
musk,
and emerald moss.
The perfect amount of rain

softens the earth
enough to cushion—but not sink—
under heavy feet.

The ground becomes a place of youth.
Even the thickest-soled
shoes feel only of

bare feet,
moist grass,
and soft, soft mud.

Christmas XX of a Shotgun Marriage

Dee Holden

Smile like you got a stroke
of luck finally in hand.
It's Christmas Eve, and I got the lottery numbers
666 tatted onto my forehead

Right next to U and I
there's a letter saying our lease is up,
but you toss it blindly into the dimming fire,
and I smash that bottle like a real grown-up

With a four-step choreography that goes like this:
I've matched it to the rhythm of our mothers'
sobs since our pointless burst of responsibility.
You cry the same now; what a time to discover

what the stars will say,
or when 'heaven and earth passes away,'
'cause here it's just us and father time
to turn our vows into jagged spades.

So smile as I finally get that heart
attack you've been wishing for since youth,
and I promise to vacate by New Year's
like your other dreams;

we were nothing but your threaded noose.

Gone are the Days of Yesteryears

Bess Davis

Oh how I ache,
in places where my body
always has.
Yet I argue that the pain is
nothing I remember.

My knees are like old hinges
That creek with every step.
My back is like rotten wood; it
feels stiff and easy to break.
My mind was a garden of memories,
now tangled with thorns of trouble and doubt.

What happened to
the spring in my step,
the limber in my back,
and the ease in my mind?

Where has it all gone?
Why has it all left me?
Will you help me get it back?

My body speaks yet ignores my questions.
It whispers then screams, and yells that it aches and
I'm to blame.

So I sit here and endure but
wonder where my time of peace has drifted.

And as my mind wanders, I ask
why my childish ignorance has turned from bliss to blight.

Dear Creatives

Maren T. Condra

As an artist, there will likely come a time in your life when you'll have to choose between two things: your health and your craft.

I've been a violinist for close to a decade in total. I started lessons around age nine and held out for two years before quitting. I decided I didn't want to practice and got frustrated when things didn't come naturally. I didn't understand the dedication required to grow in the arts. However, in the time I spent away from the violin, I never stopped listening to classical music.

Over the years I discovered pieces I loved, pieces that made my pulse race and my imagination run wild. My hands were always restless when I listened to classical music. I resisted it for a long time, but, finally, I admitted to myself that I missed it. I found that music helped me work through emotions and experiences when I simply didn't have the words to describe what I felt or what I was going through. I heard symphonies, concertos, and operatic overtures and thought to myself "I want to be part of that. I have to be."

I started lessons again at the beginning of high school when I was fourteen. I was blessed with a compassionate teacher who encouraged me every time I walked into her studio, but I noticed early on that my music career looked a lot different from the other violinists I met. It's common for kids to start learning an instrument as young as five, maybe even younger in some cases. I waited to start violin, and then I quit. When I came back to it in high school, I was literally years behind most of my peers. When I expressed an interest in pursuing violin at a college level, I was afraid I'd be laughed at; but thankfully, my teacher and parents wholeheartedly gave their unwavering support. "You'll just have to work hard to catch up, that's all."

And I did. I remember sitting on the edge of my bed practicing the same ten measures from my college audition piece until the movements came naturally. Any musician will tell you there's a right and wrong way to practice, and although I was still ignorant about that and many other things, I was proud of the progress I made. I eventually auditioned for Belhaven and was accepted into the music department.

I'm a senior now, and my final undergrad recital will take place in the last semester of my fifth year. I have a year to grow and work on this music. Lately, it's started to feel like a Herculean task. Amid all the good memories, lessons, and rehearsals, there's been an underlying element that has taken its toll mentally, emotionally, and physically.

I was told ahead of time I'd have to push myself and work hard to "catch up" with my peers who'd been practicing all their lives, and I took this seriously. I practiced with a desire to grow as quickly as possible and prove to myself that I deserved to study music at a collegiate level and make it my career despite having half the experiences others had. At the same time, I felt welcomed and supported, I also frequently felt out of place, inadequate, and in over my head. It was impossible not to listen to wonderful performances and compare myself to classmates who had twice as many years with their instrument as I did. For every good performance I had, there were at least three moments where I seriously considered quitting the thing I loved most. I assumed that I would never be good enough in this field where perfection and virtuosity are the standard. My practicing grew more frantic, and the tension kept building.

Last year, I focused more on progressing quickly than genuinely growing as a musician. I reached a point where I'd practiced with misplaced intensity and reckless technique, and my wrists felt like they were on the point of snapping. I could no longer lift my baby niece, and writing by hand was painful. I was in physical therapy for about three months and was advised to rest from violin practice the same semester I was preparing for my junior recital. All my plans to transform my playing and hone my talent were put on pause, and it felt like I was forced to sit still and watch the musicians around me excel with little to no physical consequences. I was falling behind again, and everybody could see it.

The pain is still there. I've found ways to avoid it as best I can—stretch before playing and take better care of my body—but there's still a long road ahead. I struggle to know when to push through the discomfort and when to back off and rest. There are times when I can't help but feel that musicians around me look at me and think, "Why is she here? She'll never belong with us. She can't even practice without injuring herself."

Whatever kind of artist you may be—a painter, photographer, writer, actor, filmmaker, dancer, or fellow musician—I implore you not to criticize yourself for needing time to rest and heal. If you're like me and came into the arts later in life, that's not something you should apologize for or be ashamed of. If everyone's experiences looked the same, art would be uniform and lose its beauty. The late bloomer's perspective has just as much value as the child prodigy's.

The growing will be painful, slow, and frustrating, and the rewards may seem insignificant at times. Take the time you need to gather yourself and prepare for the next challenge. Knowing your limits will guide you toward what you need to work on and, in turn, reveal your strengths.

The arts can be beautiful, intense, euphoric, unforgiving, demanding, and heartbreaking. Whether you realized your talent as a child or an adult, it is talent nonetheless and must not be neglected. To throw something like that away because of fear is understandable but still a tragedy. Some days, the pressure may feel like it's going to crush you. I hope more than anything we can get up and keep going, and if we find another who's struggling, too, we can pick them up and carry them with us, to know the time to work and the time to rest and be accepting of both.



Belhaven University

If you would like to learn more about the BFA degree in creative writing at Belhaven University, please contact the chair of the creative writing department as follows:

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Visit the creative writing program on the web at belhaven.edu/academics/creative_writing

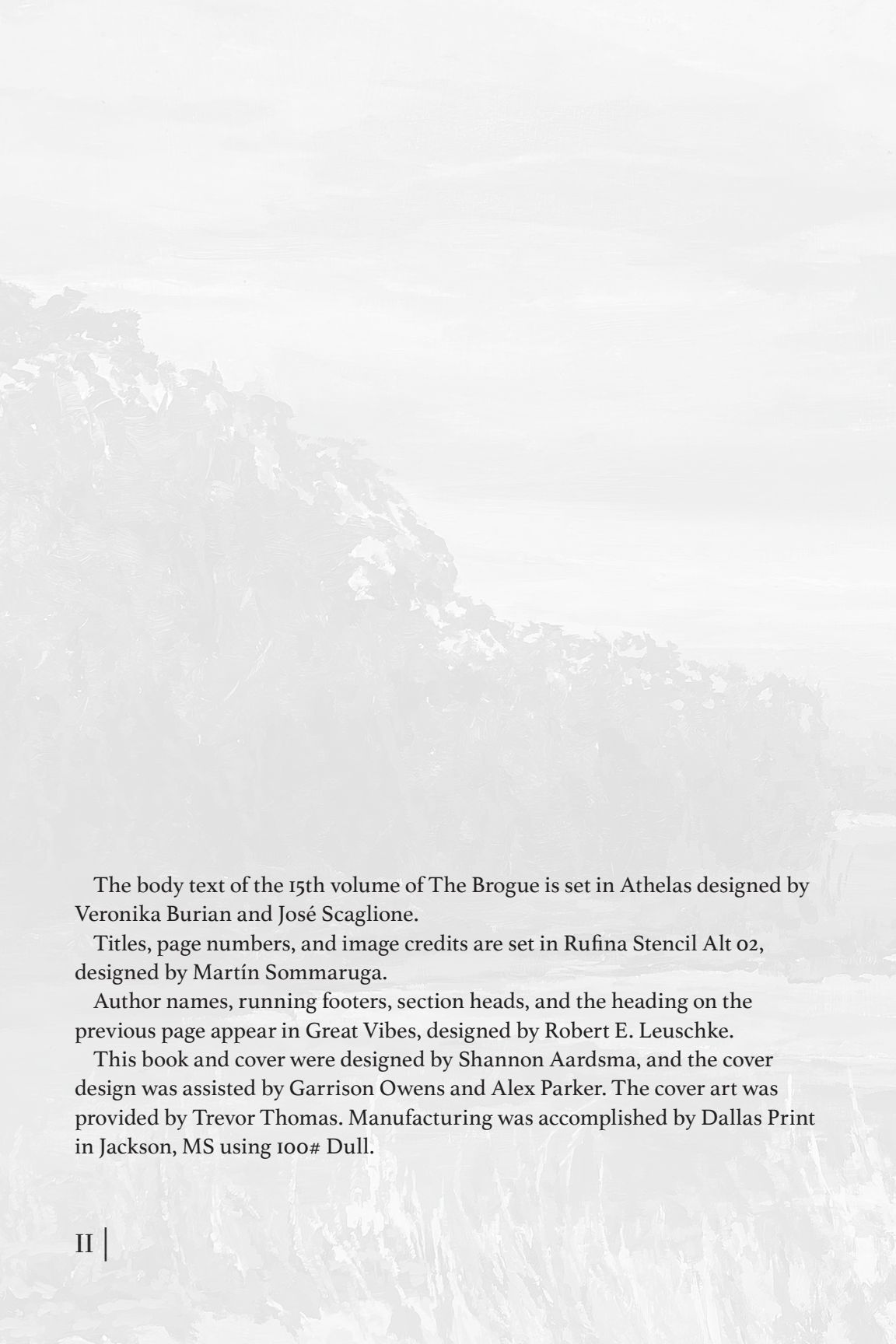
If you would like to learn more about Belhaven University in general, please contact the admission department as follows:

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An impressionistic landscape painting serves as the background. The top half features a sky with soft, blended strokes of blue, grey, and white. Below the sky, there are dark, textured shapes representing trees or foliage in shades of green, brown, and purple. The bottom half of the image is dominated by a field of tall grass or reeds, painted with vibrant, expressive strokes of yellow, green, and brown. The overall style is painterly and atmospheric.

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