

TEMPERED STEEL





TEMPERED STEEL

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CONTENTS

CHRIS CHURILLA

There Be Dragons Here *Fiction* 1

MANUEL RIOS QUINTANA

A Father's Promise *Poetry* 5

REBEKAH DIAZ

Never Lasting Love. *Poetry* 6

AMY KASZA

Grey *Poetry* 7

10th Circle of Hell *Poetry* 9

LUELLYN RUYBAL

Breadstealing Fuck! *Fiction* 11

Nibble *Fiction* 17

T'NAUS NIETO

Sleeping Upon The Palace Ruins *Poetry* 21

MICK HEBERLY

Cigarette Butt *Poetry* 22

JACOB ANDERSEN

Augmentin *Poetry* 23

Macroscopic *Poetry* 24

Noise *Poetry* 25

CLOTILDE CROSS

Werewolf Sanctuary *Poetry* 26

Ghost Hotel *Poetry* 28

DANIELLE WHITAKER

The Deadly Things *Non-Fiction* 31

SIERRA PÉREZ

A Letter To My Lost Tilde É *Poetry* 36

DANIELA CERVANTES

Mexican Tradtions *Poetry* 37

An Unpredicted Goodbye *Poetry* 38

SYED HASHMI

The Tale of Time *Non-Fiction* 39

YESENIA MENDIAS

From a Woman to Her Reflection
in the Mirror *Poetry* 42

De una mujer a su reflejo en el espejo *Poetry* 43

Patria ajena a mis vivencias *Poetry* 44

Homeland alien to my experiences *Poetry* 45

ARIANA POTOKAR

The Boys *Poetry* 46

Girls *Poetry* 47

Dreaming of you *Poetry* 48

NOELANI TULENSA

Brown Skinned Girl *Poetry* 49

MORGAN ROGERS

Time Marches On *Fiction* 50

AUSTIN BELORE

The Steam *Poetry* 57

MARLA VIVODA

Re Moved	<i>Poetry</i>	59
Ophelia's Sail	<i>Poetry</i>	60

MIA REEDER

The Chain Around Her Neck	<i>Fiction</i>	61
---------------------------	----------------	----

REGAN SANDERS

On the Origin of Species, or: How The Giant Dreams	<i>Poetry</i>	64
General Relativity	<i>Poetry</i>	66
The Rift	<i>Poetry</i>	67

EMILY DANIELS

Rise	<i>Poetry</i>	69
Dream Deities Have Forsaken Me	<i>Poetry</i>	70
No Dogs Allowed	<i>Fiction</i>	72

XAIYNE CALMA-VILORIA

Can't Let Go	<i>Poetry</i>	78
--------------	---------------	----

ASHLEY BOWEN

Blue	<i>Poetry</i>	79
------	---------------	----

MADISON FAULKNER

27 Days	<i>Fiction</i>	80
---------	----------------	----

SHANON LAUTENSCHLAGER

The Never Forgotten	<i>Poetry</i>	85
---------------------	---------------	----

SARAH SWARTZ

Austin, Texas	<i>Poetry</i>	86
Poetry Is...	<i>Poetry</i>	88

TAREN WELCH

Drip, Quit

Poetry 89**HEIDI STAGGS**

Rainforest

Fiction 90**ADRIANE COLÓN CASIANO**

It'll be a while, I'm betting

Poetry 94**CRISTINA ÁLVAREZ**

Enredadera

Poetry 95

Neighbors Are Used To Death

Poetry 96

Sally

Poetry 97**JAYMIE BRENNAN**

Blue Hooded Nightmares

Fiction 98**RAENA VIGIL**

Ritual

Poetry 102**KENNETH NEIBERGER**

Empty Purse

Fiction 104

Insomnolence

Poetry 111**ALEXIS JONES**

Never [Ending]

Poetry 112**CARMEN BRONECKE**

No One Told Me

Non-Fiction 113**JESSICA MONTOYA**

Hazy

Poetry 117

JADON CHAVEZ

You

Poetry 118

LEXI LANGONI

The Chef's Daughter

Non-Fiction 119

GABRIEL VELASQUEZ

Day 300

Poetry 123

AUBREY SCOTT

Misdirection

Fiction 124

LEXI BOYLES

cw//food

Poetry 128

Meet Me in the Hallway

Poetry 129

JARROD PADRON

Another Night from the Tower

Poetry 131

TEMPERED STEEL STAFF

Thunderwolf Astrology

Horoscopes 133


EDITORS' NOTE

First, we would like to thank all of the writers who contributed to the latest issue of *Tempered Steel*. We are very fortunate to have such a wide spectrum of talented writers within the student body of CSU Pueblo. They have made us very proud of this issue. They have transcended all expectations and have shown that they are ready to make their mark in the literary world. Without them, this magazine would not exist.

In spite of the current pandemic, the spark of creation burned brighter than ever. Students produced works under immense pressure, some of which were unanimously accepted, others which sparked some healthy debate among the staff, all of which will leave a lasting impression on our lives.

Words have power. They can guide us, they can even change us. It is our hope that when you finish reading this, you will have not only been thoroughly entertained, but inspired by the words within.

The staff would also like to thank our faculty advisor Juan J. Morales. His leadership and mentorship helped guide us and shape us into a confident staff with the ability to make decisions and a passion to make this the best issue possible.

Please enjoy, and thank *you* for reading. 

Our voices join in chorus
Blending until indistinguishable.
Our words offer a glimpse into these-
Beautiful souls ready to be heard
They are kindling, the pen is the match
Now let us light the fire
For if we fuel the flame, forever its fierce,
An eloquent masterpiece
Celebrating the hope breeding within each line
As our words become one,
Let them burn forever bright in the hearts and minds of all

~Tempered Steel Staff

Chris Churilla

There Be Dragons Here

Being sick sucked.
No, Claire thought. *It sucked the big one.*

She didn't know what it meant, but her older brother Alan said it all the time, and he was never happy when he said it, so it had to mean something bad.

She just wanted to go out, even if she did have to use her wheelchair; sure, she couldn't get around like other kids, but at least she would be outside. Her homework from yesterday was already done and she didn't feel like re-reading one of the many books she had. Her parents had given her a phone to text them if she needed something, but they had also set it up so she couldn't play any games on it.

Yes, she decided. *Being sick sucked the big one.*

Then the dragon appeared.

It had to be a hallucination. The fever had gotten into the part of her brain which processed sensory input or perhaps her mother had given her a bad batch of medicine.

She rubbed her eyes.

It landed on the roof of a house across the street. It belonged to Mr. Peterson, a grumpy old man who yelled at anyone for stepping on his lawn. He even yelled at her once as she wheeled down the sidewalk, but she hadn't even touched his lawn.

She giggled at the thought of him getting eaten by the dragon.

It peered around the neighborhood with golden eyes. They fell upon her, and then it winked.

She rubbed her eyes again.

It winked again, then added in a wave from one giant claw.

She waved back and then, knowing it was silly, looked around her room to see if the dragon had waved at someone else.

When she looked back, the dragon had climbed down to the ground and crossed the street, heading towards her. It reached her home

and stood up, and she was reminded of her dog Scraps when he would stand up during dinner to beg for food off the table. It leaned forward, one eye peering in, then pulled back, raised a claw and tapped on the window.

"Pardon me, young lady," he said, and she was reminded of that English guy with the funny name her mom liked. "Would you be so kind as to open the window?"

"I can't," she said. "Sorry."

"You cannot?" he said. "Why?"

"Well, I'm, uh...crippled," she said.

"Oh," he said. "I am deeply sorry."

"It's okay," she said, wondering why she was so calm. "You didn't do it."

"Oh, not about that," he said, and broke the window with a slightly harder tap.

For the first time since he arrived, she felt scared.

"Are...are you going to eat me?" she said.

"Eat you?!" he said. "Good heavens, no! Why would I eat you?"

"Isn't that what dragons do?" she said.

"Certainly not!" he said. "Even if I did eat humans, you would not make a decent appetizer. I prefer cows actually."

"Oh," she said.

"Good heavens, where are my manners?!" he exclaimed, smacking his forehead with a claw. "I have not even introduced myself! I am Mortimer Rothschild the Thirteenth."

"The thirteenth?" she said.

"Yes," he said. "Dragons are not very imaginative when it comes to naming their children. May I have the pleasure of your name?"

"Claire Kincaid, the, uh, First," she said.

The door to her room burst open and in charged her mother.

"Mom, don't freak out!" she said.

"I hear a window break in your room and you tell me not

to freak out?!” her mother exclaimed, looking all around the room. “What was it, a baseball, a brick?”

“Uh, no,” Claire said, puzzled.

Her mother went over to the window and pulled the drapes shut, then went over to the closet, dug out a sweater, and put it on Claire.

“I’ll call someone to fix the window,” she said. “Do you need anything?”

“Uh, no, I’m fine,” Claire said.

Her mother nodded, shutting the door as she left.

Claire looked back at Mortimer, a questioning look on her face.

“It would appear her magic is gone,” he said, pushing the drapes open. “We dragons are highly magical creatures, and in low-magic realms such as this one—I felt it as soon as I entered—people without some magic in them cannot see or hear me.”

“I have magic in me?” Claire said.

“Clearly,” he said. “That makes you a very special person. Now, I need to find a portal leading back to my realm. Basil Remington the Eighteenth, that cheeky bugger, invited me to tea at his cave and told me this would be a shortcut. You can rest assured I shall be having words with him when I return.”

He waved a claw and a large scroll appeared in it. He waved his other claw and a large pair of glasses appeared, which he proceeded to put on.

“I would be most thankful if you told no one of this,” he said, then unfurled the scroll and peered it over.

“Well, that is rather disconcerting,” he said a minute later. “My map is not working, undoubtedly due to the low amount of magic in this realm.”

He looked over at her.

“It would appear I am in further need of your assistance, Lady Claire,” he said. “Are you knowledgeable of the geography of this realm? I am in need of a guide.”

“Uh, okay,” she said. “How can I help?”

“Do you know of any places in which unusual occurrences occur on a regular basis?” he said. “They are often places with high levels of magic in them, which I can use to open a portal back to my realm.”

“Well...maybe Stonehenge,” she said.

“I am not familiar with that,” he said. “Would you be willing to guide me to it?”

“If I help you, how will I get back home?” she said.

“Before I open the portal to my realm, I will teleport you back,” he said.


“Oh,” she said. “Okay.”

“I am deeply indebted to you, Lady Claire of the House of Kincaid,” he said, bowing. “Now climb onto my back.”

He reached one claw inside and opened it.

She grabbed her phone, checked its battery level, then pulled herself to the edge of her bed and flopped onto his waiting palm.

He placed her on his back, and she found it to be surprisingly warm.

“Let us away!” he said, and with a flap of his wings, they were airborne. 

Manuel Rios Quintana

A Father's Promise

You'll always hear my voice on the phone,
I promise that it won't be long,
But I'll be far from home.

At first, life will feel like a cyclone.
You will beg me to bring you along.
You'll always hear my voice on the phone.

Your heart will feel like stone.
Having that empty space on the dinner table will feel wrong.
I'll be far from home.

The pain in your heart will feel like a thorn.
You will tell yourself to remain strong.
You'll always hear my voice on the phone.

The emptiness will feel like the norm,
Seasons will change like melodies in a song.
I'll be far from home.

I could tell by your tone,
We know it won't be long.
I'm glad that you picked up the phone.
I'll almost be home.

Rebekah Diaz

Never Lasting Love

i never got a chance to tell you
how that expression on your face stayed with me
even while i lay sleepless in a small bed
with a full moon singing me lullabies
it helped me relax though i still could never rest.

eyes closed lips pursed
hands slow bodies immersed
in an overflowing cup as the sun came up
that came to an abrupt halt.

that morning you were quiet
and i became calm
the grand canyon between us
filling with sand.

no more sleight hands
only piercing revelations
of what we had become
before we had begun.

Amy Kasza

Grey

I stare at the Dandelion,
Studying its beauty.
I stare at the grass,
Not wanting to miss a moment.
I stare at the lake,
Like I'm waiting for its answers.
When will I no longer be able to see-
Every yellow petal?
Every green blade?
Every blue wave?
I feel it f

a

d

i

n

g.

As I'm told it's green-
Not **grey**

I want to burn the colors into my mind.
Maybe I will remember them.
As a fond memory of what the world was.
Before, it all faded.
Like an old photograph.
Dulled from the p a s s a g e of time.
Will I remember what blue is?

Or yellow

or green?

Will it slowly s
l
i
p
away?
Leaving nothing,
But
grey?

Will I forget to pay attention?
And wake one day,
Missing the color in the world.
Never able to recall-
What a dandelion,
blade of grass,
or lake
Looks like?

Will I be able to trust the paints?
When I **claw** through my memory
Making the burnt images into something-
That might **actually** last?
In the hope that if I create it,
I can see the image once more.
Of the colors that had left-
Quietly, while I wasn't looking.
Leaving me to see the world,
Only in shades of

Grey.

Amy Kasza

10th Circle of Hell

My eyes dart open,
And I feel the weight on my chest,
And the hot breath on my face,
Both making it hard to breathe.

I lock eyes with my demon.
As I hear shoes against the hardwood floor,
Trying to be quiet,
As they navigate my living room.

I try to move,
But my body is **paralyzed**.
From fear?
Or from being held down?

With enough effort to **lift a car**,
I try to flinch my finger,
I try to turn my head away from the demon's face,
But it is no use.

Trapped in a body that **refuses to move**.
With nothing to do but stare,
At the mangled face, inches from mine
And listen to the foot steps,
As they get closer.

All I can do is **listen** to my door open,
And **watch** my demon look in the direction,
Of the unwelcome guests,
Slowly approaching my paralyzed body.

With my eyes clenched shut,
I know the only way out,
Is to hope that this isn't real,
Only a meld of conscious and unconscious,

Creating a hell,
That the Devil himself,
Would be afraid,
To find himself in.

LuEllyn Ruybal

Breadstealing Fuck!

“Could you flip a burger any fucking slower?” Josiah yelled.

I'll fucking flip it across your face, I thought. Grease sizzles real nice on skin.

Josiah walked over to me, placing his callused hands roughly on my back. I knew what he was going to say to me.

“Smile, brother.”

Yep, and don't take it so seriously, brother.

“Relax. Don't take it so seriously, brother.”

I'd shoot you if I could.

It's hot as hell in Chubbie's Burgers and I need a lunch break. Surf rock plays softly through the speaker system that took up most of this year's budget. It smells like a burger joint and sounds like a beach shop.

Thirsty as fuck. Could die. Might die. Then Josiah can flip these fucking patties, I thought.

I flip and grill and send dozens of patties on until I can't anymore. I'm ravenous, but I couldn't stomach a burger right now. Jo spots me as I lumber out the backdoor for a smoke. I lean against the back of my car as I take in harsh drags of my cigarette. The menthol burns like shit. The cherry of my cigarette burns red until I put it out on Josiah's ugly purple Audi, tossing the butt in the parking lot. I march back inside and return to grilling patties for the next two hours.

“I'm out,” I say the moment I see the next no-good, sad patty-flipping grill boy walk in. I don't think his face would sizzle as nice as Josiah's.

“Gone already?” Jo says. I grumble. “You must not like us that much, Hobo.”

I should have stolen a burger when I had the chance.

I practically skip out the door. I slide my greasy, lanky

body inside my car and breathe in the stuffy air. My car reeks of stale smoke and sun-baked fast food. I'm pretty sure there's a sticky puddle of soda still in the backseat.

I'll clean this shit later. But for now, nothing a Little Trees Black Ice Air Freshener can't fix.

I know I sound like a violent, hateful asshole. I'm not. I'm just an asshole. I know I'm an asshole, but I'm not that kind of asshole. I don't push in babies' soft spots, I don't mug helpless frail old ladies. I nick candy bars from gas stations. I mostly steal from big corporations. I take from people who don't need it as bad as I do. I have unprotected sex with Louise and Sam, and not at the same time. I go to work high and I'll smoke in the walk-in freezer when it's slow. I graffiti shitty art on private property. Sometimes I steal my mother's credit card to buy myself lunch. I buy pills from my friends, and pop an Adderall or two before a shift. I buy booze with a fake ID. I buy younger teenagers booze with a fake ID. I'll even offer them one of my cigarettes. I break into people's sheds and rifle through the shit that they don't want. I know they don't want it because it's in a shed. I'll run red lights late at night if I know no one's coming. I'll drive stoned, and I swear, it makes me a better driver. I'm a common criminal, and I don't get punished for it. The man doesn't care about me; the one that controls all the prices and the scammy ads, the one that tells you that you need to obey and you totally need this product. I'm a criminal, by law, but what does that even mean? At what point are you considered a criminal rather than someone who has committed a crime? When does the big switch flip? Maybe when they catch you, or maybe when you steal too many half-melted peanut butter cups and God gets mad.

I go home after smoking a bowl in the parking lot. The drive home is a lot of FUCKYOUFUCKYOUFUCKYOU and WHYAREYOUBRAKING. My mother's in the kitchen, making lunch for her husband before she's probably eaten breakfast herself. Mother has never done anybody wrong. She isn't a criminal like I

am. The only crime she's ever committed is loving her horndog, douchebag husband. He's a criminal too, but the kind that nobody wants to be around. He scams the feeble with his crooked tie and shit-eating car salesman smile. Sometimes when he's late for dinner, I spit in his water.

Mother sets down a tall glass of peach iced tea in front of her husband. She presents a plate of diagonal-cut turkey sandwiches on grain bread. She tells us to put on whatever we want. Slices of cherokee purple tomatoes, rings of red onions, a bed of sprouts, a spoonful of giardiniera, a dollop of mayonnaise, a smear of stone-ground mustard. She does too much for him, maybe us. I never thank her like I should. I eat so fast that my stomach balloons.

"You ever been burned?" I ask, breaking the silence. "Like bad."

"Back when I worked in New Mexico," my mother's husband says. "On my leg." He pauses for a moment, licking the mayonnaise off his moustache.

"What was it like?" I ask.

"It hurt." He states.

"Did it sizzle?"

"What?"

The skin, did it fucking sizzle? Like grass-fed beef patties on Uncle Ted's grill, like morning bacon in a cast-iron, like my hand submerged in the fryer, like squirmy ants and dead, crunchy leaves under a magnifying glass?

"Did it sizzle when it burned, Dad?"

He pauses for a moment, wrinkling his forehead.

"I don't know. I guess it did, but I was too busy dealin' with it to figure out if I could hear my own skin melting."

Bad eggs still sizzle up just fine.

I snatch a few pieces of spare bread and head out the backdoor. I trek over to the small pond behind our property to feed the ducks, dragging my shoes through the wet grass. They huddle towards me like needy orphans. I bite into a piece of bread

and offer the rest to the tiny beggars. I know it's bad for them, but they seem to like it anyway. Ducks can't see that I'm an asshole, or a criminal. They can't see I'm an asshole criminal who steals cinnamon-fire gum packets and semi-rancid corn nuts. They don't know about my mother's husband being an asshole either. They don't know nothin', and they never will. No, ducks see me as the Breadgiver. They don't see me as the movie-torrenting, traffic violating, anti-capitalist merchandise stealing, property damaging, marijuana smoking, underage drinking, perfectly complacent man that I am. Just the Breadgiver. I look down at the ducks, and listen to the small flutter of their shuffling.

I'm your fucking mom now guys.

Mother doesn't see me as a criminal either. She sees me as her do-no-wrong, star oboe-playing, jam-stained face, untouched angel of a son who only has a little smoking habit. She doesn't see all the beer bottles I suckle like a baby. She doesn't see all the pants I've torn jumping fences. She doesn't see all the times I drop off a girl at her house after having sweaty, teenage back-seat car sex. I'm still lovable to her.

Mother doesn't see her husband as a criminal either. She sees him as her hungry, ass-slapping, endlessly ambitious, driven salesman who definitely deserved the commission bonus this month, not Jim Strombeck. She doesn't know about the secret phone in the shed that he uses to talk to other women. She doesn't know that he rolls back the odometer on the cars he sells so he can get a better buck. She doesn't hear the vitriol spewing from his mouth after she burns dinner, and she doesn't see the holes he punches in the walls when she cries about it.

The ducks are involuntarily finished for tonight because I'm out of grain bread. I slither through the back door of the house to get back inside. My mother's husband is sprawled out on his recliner like a hardworking farm pig; he opens his heavy eyes to look at me.

"Son," he declares.

Don't criticize me for whatever bullshit you deem unacceptable right now.

"Would you stop stealing pieces of bread and doing whatever the fuck you do with it? Feeding the ducks or scarfing it behind the house like a starving child; I don't care. Just buy your own bread to waste."

Stealing bread. I steal bread now?

"Yep," I say, and I leave.

I don't take anymore of his precious bread. Instead, I snatch it from work. I stuff burger buns in my pockets; their crumbs finding a home in the deep crevices. I shove about six full buns in my pockets each shift. I scurry home to my children and watch them as they waddle over to me. I wonder if I'm fattening them, but they're happy being fat. Sometimes I'll steal a loaf at self check-out. Light rye, pita, boules of sourdough, brioche, naan, even challah. On the drive home from the grocery market, I rip off tufts of brioche and chew on it mindlessly as I drive.

I take burger buns home for about three weeks until Josiah says something to me.

"Hey, hobo." Josiah says as he slaps his right hand on my back. I continue to grill the patties in front of me.

Jesus Christ.

"I got some bad news for you, brother." His eyes begin to dart around the room for just a moment. "I heard Johannes talking about you."

"Uhuh."

"Says he's seen you stealing on the cameras."

"Uhuh."

"Bread, though. Not even money from the till, just bread."

"Uhuh."

"He says he's going to fire you."

"Uhuh."

"Sorry, man, I just thought you should know."

Breadstealing fuck, you breadstealing fuck!

I pause and look at Josiah. Small beads of sweat litter his bronzed face. Greasy bastard.

“That’s alright,” I finally say. I pull my cigarettes out of my crumb-filled pocket and lift one to my lips.

“Hey.” Josiah stammers. I flick out my lighter and inhale until the flame grips onto the cigarette. “Knock it off, you’re going to get in deep shit.”

As if it matters now.


I nod at Josiah and exhale the smoke. I leave the patties to burn and push past Josiah, despite his hollering. My body knows where to go before I do. My hands begin to shove burger buns in my pockets until they bulge. The surf rock is so deafening that I can’t hear Josiah anymore. My hands snatch bags of bread and hoist them behind my shoulder. I keep the cigarette in my mouth as I take, take, take. I’m done now; this is enough bread until I get a new job. What will mother do? Let her husband feed her bread. It’s not good for her. He’ll kick me out for stealing bread. It’s not good for me. The Breadgiver, the Breadstealer, I don’t know which one I am. I walk towards the back door with my bulging pockets and bags of bread in my arms.

Josiah’s voice finally breaks through all the music and adrenaline.

“Why are you taking all this bread?” He asks.

I bite down on my cigarette and give him a toothy smile.

“I’m stealing.”

I’ve got kids to feed. 

LuEllyn Ruybal

Nibble

I lurk up and down dimly lit humid streets. I trek into the grocery store thirty minutes before close, only to see toilworn workers quietly dragging their feet. Shuffling through the aisles, I snatch a creamy milk chocolate candy bar. Its wrapper crinkles beneath my fingers, whispering to me. I ever-so-gently grab a box of sweetened cereal, so as to not disturb the contents inside. The lights are twitching; their fluorescence is cold to look at. Almost jogging towards the frozen desserts, I grab a pint of mint chocolate ice cream and a small tub of dipping caramel. A container of mid-quality brie. Low calorie baby cereal. Sticks of processed meat jerky. Laxatives. A zero calorie energy drink to wash it all down, or maybe back up. I opt for self checkout. The workers know not to look directly; they know I'm too embarrassed to even say good night. Nobody bothers to see what's going on, and I can die silently. If they were different, if they knew, if they asked, if they talked, if they saw, they'd be like everyone else. Their silence is everything. The chime of the automatic door murmurs goodbye to me as I scurry out. Before I even leave the parking lot, I've ripped open the candy bar. I let it melt in my mouth, the cream and sugar dissolving under a wave of saliva over my tongue. I could cry; it feels like relief.

I slink down the alleys like a bodega cat and sit on the descending stoop. My fingers rip open the tub of caramel. I dip my fingers in, scooping it into my mouth. It's sickly saccharine; overwhelmingly thick and sweet. I'm not thinking, there is no time to. I hastily shove handfuls of cereal into my mouth so fast that the roof of my mouth is raw by the end of it. I gulp the energy drink in between bites; it makes it easier. I lick at the ice cream pint until my tongue makes a well too deep to lick. I tear down the thick papery sides of the pint to reveal more ice

cream. I eat the ice cream so fast that my tongue is numb. The box of cereal is halfway full; the contents inside jingle around when I hold it. I open the container of brie and tear off pieces of soft, almost-gooey cheese. My stomach is bloated and bulging; I wouldn't be surprised if melted ice cream was leaking from the seams. I'm a child, pushing my peas and carrots to one side of the plate. I scurry down the stairs like a shameful goblin.

I wonder if someone is watching me from their balcony or their bedroom window. They must think how horribly messed up I am, and how gluttonous I must be.

Terribly wasteful, they must think.

"Sorry," I whisper to myself.

Sick in the head, they must murmur.

My body knows what to do; my upper body hunches over and I try my best to push my hair to my back. My knuckles are sore and raw, and all too familiar with what's about to happen. I place my fingers in my mouth until they reach the back of my throat; my front teeth reaching my knuckle. They wiggle gently in my mouth enough to make me gag. Throwing up takes time, depending on what you've eaten. I throw up on the second gag; it's the ice cream. It's still cold. The fat from the cream makes ice cream easiest to throw up; it coagulates all together at the top of your stomach. The cheese, too, as long as it isn't too heavy. The cereal is the hardest to throw up, which is why you soften it with a beverage. The chocolate bar coated my whole stomach in its cocoa-creamy-sweetness so everything I throw up is vaguely brown and sweet. The caramel leaves a bitter aftertaste; it's far worse than stomach acid. Snot runs out of my nose and the tears drip down my face. Saliva trails down my hand and to my elbow. I gasp for air; I gulp for it between my attempts to control my body's cries. I clear my throat and spit the rest of the saliva out from my mouth. It strings out a line of clear, bubbly liquid.

No one gets to see me like this; exposed and vulnerable, so unaware of everything else. No one gets to see my search

history of “calories in chapstick” and “bloody gums after vomiting.” No one sees the two-in-the-morning mile walks to account for the extra fifty calories that day. Or the days of restriction, starving in the work breakroom. A mandated thirty-minute lunch feels wasteful; like torture. No one gets to see me in my most intimate moments of sickness; teary eyed, gagging on my fingers, spit dripping, and broken breathing. No one needs to, and people would be afraid to watch if they knew.

No one realizes that they have been watching, for weeks and months. They notice the weight loss, and they offer their congratulations and beg for “the secret; how’d you do it?” They see the clothes become baggier and baggier, and how they hang against my bones. They notice how little it takes for me to get full, and how sometimes, how much I can eat and still be hungry. They love a girl with a big appetite, but also love just how small, delicate, and dainty a girl can be. They see it in the ways they want to.

These nights cycle. Maybe a couple nights a month, or twice a week. Once every couple months, or five times a day. The grocery store workers observe me, like curious pigeons. They hardly offer a smile, or a hello. They peck at the morsels of bread I offer them; the drunken staggers, the sheepish smiles, the half-eaten cheese stick I bring to check out, the odor of something almost sour and rotten, the hours I spend walking around fantasizing in torture, the hours I spend walking around to burn an extra calorie. If they knew the full shameful, sad, disgusting, sick story, I would lose it. My safe haven. That cold, bleak grocery store. Their silence, their nothingness, is the only peace I have. They don’t praise, they don’t talk. But they want to know; the crumbs are just not enough.

And tonight, I lurk the aisles of the grocery store. I trudge, and trudge. I walk and I run. I march up to self checkout with an armful of food.

I stop.


It's closed.

The pigeons are curious, and they peer around the corners to watch me. They're waiting. They scuttle closer as I realize what I must do. I lumber to the sole lit register number. And she stands there behind the register, waiting, looking, seeing, almost with a smile. She longs to know. The workers are watching, and I can feel their small, prying eyes widen as I set the food down on the conveyor belt. The cashier begins to scan my food, slowly. She doesn't speak and neither do I. I look her in the face. Her eyes frantically skip back and forth between observing my face and looking at the food. She bags my groceries; a luxury I never have the time to do. She rings me up. She doesn't offer me a receipt; it's their memento. I grab the bags and turn away from her and her gaze, like I'm rejecting a kiss. I run away so fast from her, from them. I have no more crumbs to give.

"Good night," she offers to me. She says it so faintly that I could hardly believe she said it.

I stand in front of the automatic doors that chime at me. I look back to see them. Their curious eyes all look at me. They're waiting. They want to see me like this, and they do. I stare back at them, and they all stand there staring right back. It's not silent anymore.

A few nights later, I stand outside in the parking lot and peer inside. These lights seem almost dimmer and the layout of this store seems maze-like. These birds are unfamiliar. They don't pass a glance when I walk in. No eyes pop around the corner as I grab oily, salty chips and nacho cheese dip. The self checkout is wide open; it seems almost encouraged. The workers exhale almost a sigh of relief the moment I enter self checkout. I can't help but smile. As I walk out the door, I pause.

"Good night," I offer to them. 

T'Naus Nieto

Sleeping upon the Palace Ruins

She is laying in her crumbling palace
Her bed is upon massive amounts, even mountains of malice
Although her body aches, she must sleep to evade,
the mistakes she's made
Because her palace is a lonely place

Her soul and mind float away
and drift into her only escape
But snores are quick to quake, startle and shake her mind awake
She realizes her palace is a dark and lonely place

Compared to her nightmares and memories death appears tame
Vengeance, vindictiveness, victories gained
I suppose, when you hate love, you could only love hate
This is why her palace is a broken and lonesome place

There's no roof in place, the dark clouds move away
She's no longer blind to the stars that sparkle in space
The rain, the tears, they sprinkle her face
Now she hates that her palace is such a lonely place

Her armor it harmed her,
By preventing death while preventing a life
Now she sings lullabies of sorrow and strife
Hoping to sleep, although she can't escape
The Palace she built, a broken, dark, and desolate place

Mick Heberly

Cigarette Butt

Hook me by Achilles.
Dry my flesh.
Shred it finely like tobacco.
My nicotine growth
is a lung of fresh air
where buses belch acid
and sputum gels concrete dust.
The garbage bin is a frontier
for black-hole stomachs
that gnaw the toes of my soul.
Maggot-bile teems.
Let my tongue lap up
a metropolis intermezzo,
rainbow oil stains
that glide a gutter river
to city bowels unraveled.
Slick my moss-teeth --gapped between--
skyscrapers anchored by alleyways.
Homestead stiff cardboard,
mount my shame above
the trashcan fireplace.
Gloves cradle, ripped at the tips and loose,
threadbare.
Smoke me facing the wind.
Like a signal.
A twister, a tornado, twirl,
into a whirlwind that congests the traffic-world.

Jacob Andersen

Augmentin

Excuse me a bit
while I numb myself,
inject steel fluid into my buzzing brain.
I sink it into every branching wrinkle and fold.
My self imposed faraday cage huffs out
each shimmering electric burst,
so I can say fuck it and stay home.
Next morning the steel sinks and rusts and cracks,
into a bursting white tv screen static
that I hate, curse,
but won't submerge from.
Guess I'll give a little less
of a damn today.
Or guess my deep red rear eyes
is all I'll pick up though
the thick decay.
All my antenna brain absorbs
is lighting quick stabs through
the red, and all I can gain from them
is more steel.

Jacob Andersen

Macroscopic

You look out from your world, your street
 Observe the sky, the great fogged dome
And melt, seal, adhere to the cracked, ragged concrete
 Of your sprawling infinite home

In light of the haze, you find your means
 A sentient fiber optic wire transmitting all
Through the electric glow of screaming screens
 Which out of, a glowing worm crawls

The neon cobra's fangs pierce your iris
 And telescopes into your deflated brain
A melding broth of blood and viscera, clenched fist
 The swirling flux of the truth of pain

The lux vortex expands and contracts
 Reducing the world to a sticky, sweetened sheen
Fractals of glinting lights blossom through tubular glass
 Scorching every stretching space in between

And as you're consumed by the burning bright tunnel
 Filter yourself all the way through
You realize, too late, the true end of the funnel,
 A single blaring point of constricted view

Jacob Andersen

Noise

Why can't you just

STOP STOP STOP STOP STOP STOP

FUCKING

Do this

Nothing

Wish I could just

END

Fucking assholes

You know you could have

Can you even

Feel

love

Fuck

all

of

you

SEE YOU

ALWAYS

Feel you own

Body

Move

Just do it

Breathe

Why do they

Choke

Have

To

Why why why why why why why

DO I HAVE TO

I'll blow my brains out

Then they'll

She

stop bitching

They

you're just

All of them

Weak

Stupid

See you

You'll never

Notice you

They'll never

Talk about you

care Never feel love
Clotille Cross

Werewolf Sanctuary

Werewolves aren't as romantic
As vampires.
They are rough,
Big meaty semis
That shred flesh and
shatter bone.
Perfect for a quickie.

I'll die under the full moonlight
Deep in the woods with
The perfect woman.
She'll worship my body
When no one else would.
She'll love the outside
And inside of me
More than myself.
She'll consume my whole being
And let none of it go to waste.
She needs to eat to live, after all;
The least I can do is give her what she wants.

I've been chosen by the caretakers;
Thrown out onto the sanctuary
as game
For the women of the moon.
I hear their howls as the hunt begins.
As much as I don't want to,
Instinct kicks in.
I stagger through brush,

Trying not to trip
And scrape up the meal.
Tree replicate every hundred feet,
My feet become veights,
And I fall in a clearing.

The full moon is warm,
A light in a dark room.
The beams carry off my scent.
My burning heart cools in acceptance
Of defeat
My muscles twitch in anticipation
Of love.

I feel the footsteps before I see her
A powerful commanding force
Stands over me
Covering me in shadow.
Eight feet tall
Piercing yellow eyes
And jaws that can snap a car in half.
Her wet nose presses into my legs,
My shirt,
My cheek.
I hear her mouth salivate,
Its warmth drips into my hair,
Down my face.

She raises a paw
Larger than my torso.
Our time together is ending,
But she gives me a smile and a wink
Before she brings it down on my head.

Clotille Cross

Ghost Hotel

I hurry through the dark, foggy streets
The soft pattering of rain covers my tracks
As I make my way to the empty hotel
Where my clients wait for me.
I feel their excitement grow
The closer I get to our room,
I go to the door at the end of the hallway,
And I stop right before the door
To remove all my clothing
And I step inside.

It's a beautiful room,
The type that'll set your blood rushing
And thoughts dancing;
Rose petals from the door to the bed,
Candles soften the shadows,
It's just cold enough to make your nipples hard.

A pair of naked lovers
Float over the bed.
Man and woman,
Phantom swingers
Looking for their unicorn,
Looking for me.
They smile warmly
Like we're from the same era.
For all I know, we could be.

They've died a long time ago,

But they still have fun
And I consent and lay on the bed
And invite them into
My body, my immortal temple,
The meeting place of our
Menage a trois.

Possession is an acquired taste:
Some love it, some don't,
Some see the inch and go for the mile,
Some forget why they even do it at all.

Have I become so starved for touch
That I'll allow ghosts to take me over
For their own enjoyment?
The rest of the world sees me as
A living sex toy,
A doll for their own pleasure,
Beautiful,
As long as the lights are off,
And I must lay back and enjoy it
Cause "girls like you don't deserve sex this good".
But jokes on them
I've outlived all of them
And their family lines!

The dead couple sees me as essential,
For they can't make love as ectoplasm.
They need a vessel,
And yet they treat me
Better than all humans ever could.

Though they accidentally neglect my needs,
I can make the most of it.

I allow myself to be in these positions,
It's not like I can die anyway
Like these monsters, I live on
While my people die off.
I've felt all of what humans can do
Generation after generation
Technological advancement after advancement
So I seek my pleasure in the arms of monsters,
Forgotten,
Just like me.

Danielle Whitaker

The Deadly Things

I was barely 17 years old and had only had my permit for about a month when I finally convinced my dad to teach me how to drive on the interstate. After my family and I got back home from church I didn't even give my dad a chance to change out of his clothes before kicking him into the passenger seat and slowly coasting down our street. We lived in a comfortable suburb on the border of Fountain and Colorado Springs where the only eyesore around was a giant pit by the side of the road that had been there since the day we moved in. The number of Black families there could easily be counted on one hand, which meant that I had spent the majority of my adolescence growing up surrounded by people who were mostly white. I got comfortable there and eventually reached a point where I thought that racism couldn't touch me. That was a foreign, mythical beast that would never dare rear its head here.

The Glenn, my physical comfort zone, was only a few minutes away from the Mesa Ridge Parkway exit off I-25, but it seemed like it took ages for us to get there. I had a deep-rooted fear of getting into a car accident which was why I had waited so long to even get my permit. As I pattered along Mesa Ridge Parkway, my hands never left ten and 12 and my speedometer certainly never passed 55 mph. Papa had me go down I-25 N to start out since there were a lot more places to turn around. Actually getting onto the interstate proved to be pretty challenging but once we did, I realized that for the first time since we'd left our neighborhood I felt like I could breathe again. My grip softened, a slight bend found its way to my elbows, and I even rolled the windows down. On some subconscious level it felt like I was finally going so fast that nothing bad could catch me

there. After I felt that I had gotten enough practice for the day, we headed back home.

If you were to ask me about what I remembered about the events leading up to the accident, I couldn't tell you even if my life depended on it. The more that I try, the more questions of my own come up. Why was I the one driving when I had never done anything like that before? Why did we even stop in the first place? What would things be like if we hadn't? What I do remember is a loud, gut-wrenching sound like the kind that nails make when dragged across a chalkboard. I remember the contrast of the pale white hand of Death himself on the opaque Glock in his holster.

On our way back home we stopped by our local Walgreens off of Fountain Mesa Road. Now anyone who had lived in the area was painfully aware of the infamous unprotected left that had claimed more than its fair share of victims. I pulled up to the stop sign and waited patiently for an opportune time to turn. If I went too early then I would risk going at the same time as the person stopped at the stop sign straight in front of me. If I went too late then I would risk crashing into two lanes worth of oncoming traffic. Time itself seemed to halt in its tracks. In that moment my whole world was reduced to the deafening thud of my heartbeat in my ears. All of the sudden there was a lull in the traffic and my way was clear! I made the turn without causing any carnage; however, just as I was about to celebrate, I caught a flash of red out of the corner of my eye.

The person at the other stop sign had decided that this was also their window of opportunity and had taken their right turn shortly after ours. The woman behind the wheel started to turn into our lane instead of the lane closest to her. She came dangerously close to hitting the car on the passenger's side-- my dad's side. My only thought was of getting him out of danger and my body immediately obeyed. I swiftly jerked the wheel to the left and accidentally drove the car over a brick median. God, I would

rather lose all hearing than have to endure that sound again. Once we made it onto the other side of the road, I slammed the car in park so I could take a minute to catch my breath. In the distance the woman sped off in the same lane that we were just in, despite all of that she hadn't even slowed down one bit.

My father instructed me to pull into the Urgent Care next to the Walgreens so that he could call a tow truck and the police. We had almost gotten into a wreck but that one sentence struck more fear and dread into my heart than I had previously ever felt. I pulled into the Urgent Care parking lot and my father and I both got out to inspect the damage. For the most part everything looked okay except for an ominous trail of liquid that led from the main road to the car. I figured that that probably wasn't good.

Papa gets on the phone with 911 and describes what happened while I find a shady piece of sidewalk to sit on. Although racism had yet to touch me, I wasn't an idiot. My dad is Puerto Rican and Black which made his complexion significantly lighter than mine; however, he also towered above me at a height of six feet, zero inches. If he were a woman then the shade of his skin alone might have potentially been his salvation, but I knew that as soon as the cops showed up that he would quickly be chalked up to be another "intimidating" Black man. It wouldn't matter that his favorite color was green or that in high school he was voted prom king. It wouldn't matter that this man was a great one who had worked to become the only father that I had ever really known. One person could feel threatened by him for one moment and just like that...

As the reality of how little time I could have left with him began to sink in, so did the pressure on my chest. My heart slammed against my rib cage and despite being outside, I found myself gasping for more and more air with every second that went by. My mouth went dry and my hands shook like autumn leaves in the wind. Papa had yet to notice at that point as he was busy on the phone with a tow truck company. Once again my

body slipped into a haze and I found my phone in my hand. After a few moments my mom's calming voice washed over me like a tidal wave. She delicately took me through several exercises to get me calm enough to explain what's happening and eventually the grip of panic loosens. I described the accident as calmly as I could until I caught a glimpse of the flashing red and blue lights in the distance. Panic gripped me once again and my whole body trembles. I make sure to tell my mom I love her before hanging up just in case they're the last words of mine that she ever gets to hear.


As a Black child you reach a certain age where you stop being cute and start getting looked at as a threat, just like it is with people and exotic pets. That point can come as early as middle school so once I was older my parents sat me down to have "the talk". Usually people hear that and some assume that I'm talking about the one with the birds and the bees; however, the rest know that I'm talking about how to handle dealing with police as people of color. There are certain rules we must follow, certain things we can't do. *Always keep your hands where they can see them. No sudden movements. Always explain what you're going to do before you do it so that there aren't any surprises. Never give them a reason to hurt you.*

The car turned onto the street of the Urgent Care and I reached into my pockets to take out my permit before they arrived. Oh dear God! All I can feel is the pockets' liners which means that my permit is nowhere to be found. I never forget my permit! The accident I assumed that I would get a ticket for, but forgetting my learner's permit is a mistake that could prove fatal. How many others had been killed for making a simple mistake? My eyes filled with tears as I took in the image of my father, potentially for the last time.

My dad, who had always seemed to tower above me (and most people he met) seemed like he shrank as the sirens approached. His signature, stony exterior cracked and burst a

smile forth. His dark, bushy brows unfurled. Everything about him seemed so much more approachable and I prayed that he would make it through this. I prayed that we would make it through this. The cops pulled into the parking lot and I forced myself to slowly walk over to Papa's side.

The cops were both men, clad in blue and the power to take our lives without any real repercussions. *Always keep your hands where they can see them. No sudden movements. Always explain what you're going to do before you do it so that there aren't any surprises. Never give them a reason to hurt you.*

The actual interaction didn't last long at all and I wound up getting let off with a warning. To this day I wonder why my father and I had gotten so lucky when so many have died over so much less; although, I'm okay with never knowing the truth. If I did then I'd probably drive myself crazy-- working hard to make sure that my family and I could live as a part of the upper middle class, surrounding myself with the unfamiliar, teaching my kids to live the same way-- all the things that my family did in order to protect me from the deadly things. Racism, poverty, and those meant to protect and serve. 

Sierra Pérez

A Letter To My Lost Tilde É

“There are many gods...gods of beauty and magic, gods
of the garden, gods in our own backyards ...”

- *Bless Me, Ultima*

I have just come to know you. My ancestors were crying, I heard them
last night.

Howling at white moon. Where was Coatlicue?

Your absence for so long haunted the people of broken corridors.
broken tongues.

Gurgled laughter. Huitzilopochtli couldn't save you this time.

Like a flower rooting, breaking, sunlight on shadowed generations.

You are mine,

Because Quetzalcoatl breathed life into the wind.

I cried for you, waiting for your return. And now you're here.

Tlaloc's tears brought you back to me.

I wonder what Tonantzin would say. She sees her sons and daughters
dying. All for an é.

Maybe I don't want you. Maybe I do. Maybe, I wish for Tenochtitlan to
go silent.

But the roaring in my ears never stops. The earth weeps for me, to
remember.

That I am the gods and goddesses of legend.

That my blood carries the memories of my ancestors.

I speak a tongue long forgotten, I am the curandera.

And you, dear tilde, are my owl.

Daniela Cervantes

Mexican Traditions

After the painting by Jeff Barnhart

The sound of singing roosters,
and chirping birds
plunges out of the painting.

The scent of hot chocolate,
and homemade tortillas
that around the village ambulates.

Flowers unfold with direct sunlight,
women walk to the market,
and people greet others with delight.

Merchants go around offering products
with bikes and small carts.
The time when streets become obstructed.

Walking through kaleidoscopic homes,
some are larger than others,
where the wind hardly roams.

Women go around with long skirts
and colorful shawls,
Where happiness the music emits.

A place where visitors are common,
and photographs take place
to maintain their experience unforgotten.

Daniela Cervantes

An Unpredictited Goodbye

I find myself at a place where you were always present
I drove more than a thousand miles to be with you. For you .

All of the nights of no sleep and endless thinking were worth it,
because the things that were in my mind, were you. For you.

I wish I could remember every conversations we had since we
met,
but I did stay with those bits of advice you gave me. For you.

I felt useless. I didn't have the power to save you and eliminate
your pain,
but I was capable of putting a smile on your face before you left.
For you.

Your death was not supposed to be the reason I travelled here,
but even a moment of silence around you is worth it. For you.

Your closest family and friends are united to keep you company,
and the differences between families were left aside . For you.

You have moved on to a place where pain is not experienced.
where you will take care of us from a distance. I remain strong.
For you.

Syed Hashmi

The Tale of Time

Pueblo, Colorado. January 2020, 11:17 pm. He yawned and, before heading to bed, scanned over the living room with his hand on the light switch, ready to turn off the five LED lights giving the illusion of mid-afternoon. His eyes moved across the carpeted floor, satisfied that all the building blocks had been picked up and properly placed, the white rocking horse tucked in the corner and the stack of children's books heaped up in the basket. Next to the basket, he saw the home phone turned over and as he walked over to pick it up and place it on its charger, his eyes landed on the book on top of the stack: *Llama Llama, Red Pajama*.

Multiple images of various memories flashed in a millisecond: numb toes from near frost bite, giggles of a tired but wide-eyed one-year-old, warmth of a cup of tea handed to him as the baby fell asleep in his arms and the soft, aching biceps and triceps from mopping the freezer room at work, the sharp peppermint flavored Mentos chewing gum tingling taste buds and sending shock waves for a sleepy brain, and a silky sleep mask owned by his wife was the last sensation he would remember before the alarm rang again the next morning.

With the blue and red book in his hand, he sat cross-legged on the carpeted floor and flipped over its pages slowly and affectionately. He found it hard to believe it had been almost a decade since he last read it aloud.


He had just immigrated to Canada with his wife, trying to absorb the cultural, environmental and financial shocks that come with moving from a place near the equator to what appeared to be a tundra at first. The language itself was not new but the accent made it hard to understand and be understood. In an effort to stay afloat, he quickly enrolled in the local college to

polish his resume but soon realized the need to work in order to have their basic needs met. He first applied and landed a job with the college IT department but needing more hours, started to pull nights at a local gas station. Being a newcomer with limited language skills, he was handed a mop as he followed the owner towards the back into the freezer room. With passing time, he was soon selected for an internship that required a full day's work. It was then they welcomed a baby boy into their lives. The baby served as a soft pastel color in their world of bold shades. With the baby, he continued to work nights at the gas station while days were spent learning via the internship. He would return home in the evening for dinner and try to spend every possible minute with the beautiful and energetic baby before putting him to bed and heading off to his night shift.

During this time, they somehow developed a ritual of reading *Llama Llama, Red Pajama* multiple times. He wasn't sure if it was the change of his vocal expressions with each line, the acting out of certain parts of the book or the kisses towards the end of the book where it would say: "A kiss for me, a kiss for you." that made the baby giggle, jump and point to the book to be read aloud over and over again. The baby would soon fall asleep in his arms, spreading an inner peace after a long day of work. His sore muscles eased against the softness of his baby's cheeks. His wife would bring him his favorite tea to sip before he put the baby in the crib. They chatted a while and sometimes she would bring a second cup while he smiled lovingly, grateful inside for the one familiar and constant ritual from his teenage years.

When he returned next, it would be about 5 a.m, giving him just about three hours to sleep before starting all over again. Driving home before sunrise, his head would jerk as he fought sleep and exhaustion. Quickly, he would reach for the gum pack in the cup holder. The peppermint flavor sparked neurons, sending jolts from his oral cavity to his brain, helping him stay awake and focus on the road.

Entering his 850 square feet apartment, he would quietly look at his little world, smile, and pick up the red silky eye mask his wife had placed near the dresser. She set up his temporary bed in the small living room with a dark bedsheet pinned to the window, to allow him to rest. He recalled rubbing his toes to wear off the feeling of numbness from walking in the snow. He recalled slipping on the eye mask and nothing much after except for when the alarm went off again.

He smiled and reflexively took a deep breath, one filled with contentment. He held the book and ran his fingers across its edges, somewhat curled and beaten after a decade of handling. He walked over to the children's bedroom, ran his fingers through his son's hair and kissed him on his forehead. He then turned, fixed the baby girl's blanket and placed *Llama Llama, Red Pajama* next to her pillow. He could not wait for it to be morning to read to her. 

Yesenia Mendias

From a Woman to Her Reflection in the Mirror

the woman whom I dreamed of becoming I am not
my life like some promises stayed on a sidewalk
another body picked them up a younger one
 Without a touch of death.
some remains are carried by this body full of stretch marks
 Watching an owl until orange dawn

How to feel good with a few pills?
If the crumbs of your past Bitter my lips to the touch
 then
 I watch life go through my window

 so romantic
 so timely
 so fictitious.

De una mujer a su reflejo en el espejo

Sin sospechas de muerte.

Observando un búho

hasta el alba naranja

Si las migajas de tu ayer

Amargan mis labios al tacto

luego

veo la vida pasar por mi ventana

tan romántica

tan oportuna

tan ficticia.

Yesenia Mendias

Patria ajena a mis vivencias

De niña aprendí

La extrañeza de mi vida-
Clandestina.

Perpetuamente bajo el agua
Sin hacer un solo ruido-
Calladita.

En esta tierra
Me falta esa tarjeta-
La verde-
La que brinda la subsistencia
El certificado de existencia.

Al pie del muro estoy-
Reclamándole a mi patria
la expulsión de su vientre.

Ajena a dos nacionalismos-
Repudiada.

Creciendo entre dos países aprendí -

Que mi existencia esta solo-
en mis palabras.

Yesenia Mendias

Homeland alien to my experiences

As a child, I learned

The strangeness of my being-
Clandestine.

Perpetually underwater
Always quiet-
Soundless.

In this land
I'm missing that card-
The green one-
The one that gives subsistence
The certificate of existence.

At the foot of the wall I'm standing-
Blaming my homeland
My expulsion of its womb.

Alien to both nationalisms-
Rejected.

Growing up between two countries, I learned-

That my existence is only-
Through my words.

Ariana Potokar

The Boys

The boys in elementary school chase me until I fall down
call me a cry baby when my knees spew red on the pavement
 The boys in my fourth grade class question my gender
 saying You don't look like a girl and motioning at my small chest
 The boys at my middle school smack my ass without asking
 They think it is funny when I get mad
 The boys in my advanced art class in 8th grade laugh and
 tell me that I should have cut closer to the vein
The boys tell me I'm one of the cool girls
Cool girls sit quiet and laugh when they should
 The boys at work lock me in the freezer for five minutes
 They laugh when they release me and I am only tears and rage
 The boys at work touch my waist to get by
 even when there is enough room
 The boys go to my house without asking when I do not answer
 The boys do not take no for an answer
They boys hold me down
They do not take no for an answer
 The boys tell me they like long hair
 The boys tell me they like when I stay small
 The boys say they are good guys
 The boys say they do not take no for an answer
 The boys like cool girls
 Cool girls sit quiet
The boys do not know why I am so cautious around men
The boys do not know why I am so critical of men
 The boys tell me no to go out at night alone
 The boys tell me they want me to be safe
 The boys want me to get over it
 The boys tell me to calm down

Ariana Potokar

Girls

I tell him

Men are afraid of how powerful women are,
that's why they try to oppress us

He laughs in my face

What power do women have?

I grab the steering wheel and pull from the passenger seat,

The car rolls out of control until we hit a guardrail &

The ceiling stays above us,

The sky does not.

I do not let go

He is screaming for me to let go,

The car comes to a halt,

Blood everywhere,

He is not laughing.

Ariana Potokar

Dreaming of you

She kisses my cheek my lungs fill with daisies or whatever girly shit
that can clog an airway- I guess I just mean it is hard to breath and
I am in love she laughs a wholesome laugh & we are drifting in
the water-she whispers *don't go, don't go.* Her voice makes my heart
shake and my body tense the water rushes hard against our tiny safe
haven. We sway. I peer off the edge and see nothing but red

I look back at her & salty confessions stream down her cheeks.

Don't go. Don't go. Soft whisper lullaby from the girl of my dreams. Her
soft lips can make anything sound beautiful. Our timbered home falls
to its side and we scramble in the water. *I can't breathe. Baby, I can't
breathe.* I hear her voice echo as she grabs my hand & I cannot swim.
We are pulled down.

My eyes peel open, my body jumps, & she is not here. She has not
been next to me for years. He glances at me from her side of the bed- a
space he has only occupied for a couple weeks-*are you okay?*

He asks me- his voice chalky and sleepy. My stomach aches and my
face is warm. *I'm okay.*

It's not about last night? He reaches for my arm and I want to vomit
all over the bed.

No, it's okay. I try to reassure myself and him a little too.

Last night-

Pillow talk.

I lie on his chest.

Do you love me? He asks-rubbing my back
with one hand and the other resting on my side.

My lungs fill with water and I cannot
breath. I tip the house over and swim
away.

Noelani Tulensa

Brown Skinned Girl

I love the color of our skin,
being a brown skinned girl is a blessing.
The way we shine,
especially in our pearls is a blessing.

Our presence is powerful,
our attitudes are nothing but strong.
Our hair is perfect,
the way it swirls is a blessing.

We have endured so much pain,
but have never given up.
They would have far less without us,
having us in this world is a blessing.

Every feature on our being is beautiful,
our big noses, our lips, our fros.
Now dance little brown girl,
the way we twirl is a blessing.

Now when you're feeling down
because the world puts you under.
Remember every part of you is perfect,
I love every curl, Noelani, you are a blessing.

Morgan Rogers

Time Marches On

One morning we'll awaken, not knowing what we have lost, what we have gained or what will come to pass, only knowing how it will all end. This is the deliberately ambiguous story of an unnamed boy, how he learns, grows and lives, how he suffers, and how he dies.

-----~-----

In the beginning, his life was simple. Wake up, cry, get fed, sleep. Wake up, get burped, diaper change, sleep. The cycle continued for so long, it seemed this was all life was. Sleeping on the warm, soft belly of a man with a bushy beard was all he really knew; the comfort, the security within the bearded man's arms. This went on for an unknowable amount of time, unbreaking, unrelenting.

Suddenly, the cycle became wake up, crawl around, cry, get fed, sleep. Still within the arms of the bearded man, still safe, still warm, but much more mobile. Words came next, ever so simple yet so complex to understand. First "pa," then "ma," then "daddy," then "play."

Wake up, cry, babble, get fed, sleep within the confines of a comfortable prison. Next came walking.

Wake up, babble, stumble around, get fed, sleep in the comfy cage. Incoherent and coherent words mix, simple sentences follow. Understanding steadily built, the wellspring of knowledge finally approached. Potty training, complex ideas, complex toys. The boy now knew the bearded man was his father, yet knew no mother, yet he often spoke of her.

Wake up, talk, learn, get fed, use the potty, sleep. Fun activities come now, learning toys a plenty. Learn to build things, watch videos and see cartoons on the indestructible picture box. The boy's imagination builds, roiling out from some unknown

recess of the mind, ever expanding from here on out. He makes simple stories, perhaps ones that make no sense, but the satisfaction of a parent's laughter keeps them coming. Vibrant images dance across the invincible picture box (dad says it's a TV) and the mind is expanded with scientific knowledge. The bearded man is ecstatic as the boy brings models of the things they watch together to him. Cloud-filled bubbles erupt from a wand like a swarm of tiny jellyfish. One lands here, another there, then behold, explosions! Smoke rises from the remnants of soapy orbs, a field of little mushroom clouds. Laughter erupts, choruses of "more, more!" echo out joyously as the bearded man smiles broadly. A large, swirling bubble fills with smoke from the bearded man's lips (the boy is never to touch his father's fiery smoke sticks) and launches from the wand as time slows down. Every vibration in the air seems to be echoed by the swirling mass as it falls ever so slowly down to earth. The boy looks up in wonder, watching as dragonfly colors swirl about on the surface of this orb which cascades down towards him. The bubble lands and compresses for a moment before erupting into a splendid mushroom, swirling about before dissipating into the air. Time passes and the cycle changes.

Wake up, play, talk with the bearded man, watch educational videos, build what they see, get fed, sleep. A three wheeled present comes next, climbing skills enhance, opportunity to play outside comes more frequently. A voice echoes from below as he perches high in a tree. "Come down!" his father exclaims, fear in his heart, for what if his son were to fall? Never mind this, he thinks; he got up the tree, surely he can get back down. The boy struggles and returns to a warm embrace. Success! Days pass, lessons are learned. A new favorite bit of information gained, another lost to obscurity. No more are the magic bubble bombs, now come the immense towers of boxes. The wheels of the tricycle grind against the pavement as he races towards the towers. Fear only briefly grips him, then joyous laughter erupts as

the towers crumble before his three wheeled fury! This becomes his favorite game, the most requested, the most applauded. The cycle grinds on. Lessons are learned, he is taught to be wary of the metal monsters that occupy the road beyond his domain, the things called cars.

Wake up, eat, play, run outside, barrel into towers repeatedly, come in, eat, sleep. Time advances again. Moving to new places, unfamiliar faces come into view, supposedly family, so he loves them too. Love is new and fresh, yet already bonded strong as forged steel. A new friend comes in the form of pointy ears, a swishing tail and a catchphrase entirely consisting of the word “meow.” Time passes on, bringing a new concept: snow. So cold and dense, yet light and fluffy when needed. It can be thrown, can be eaten, the possibilities stretch with the scope of imagination. Tall towers can be built, men of snow, ice, sticks and carrots can be formed. The bearded man shows him the joy of sledding and he is once again ecstatic. Death is learned, but only in its barest and most simple form; a means to obtain food. His father must hunt, and then they get to eat Bambi! Loss is yet to be experienced, though will soon follow. A friend is soon to pass, the days are numbered, yet filled with wild abandon. The boy carries on with his furry friend, not a care in the world. Suddenly, an accident. Shock, sudden reality. What life was once had, lively and fun, frisking about now lay in a heap, fading away. The metal monster has taken his friend to a place he cannot yet follow, or so the bearded man says. The boy sits through the night, willing his friend back to health, hoping he would suddenly sit up, meow and be frisky, yet this hope never comes to fruition. One last sad look, a final meow. His vision blurs, hot wet tears soak the fur of a friend now gone, never again to grace the light with a shining coat and a warm “meow,” never again to pounce and play. The man and boy bury his friend in the garden, nice words are said, tears are shed. Time passes, pain fades.

Wake up, eat, wait, eat, sleep. Eventually the feeling

of loss fades away, play resumes. He knows his friend is gone forever, yet cannot fully comprehend. Suddenly new friends come to visit, showering him with gifts. A welcome turn of events, a few friends for the bearded man. A huge gangly creature bounds up, ready to play. This massive dog chases and chases the boy, who laughs and screams. A crash, blinding pain, screams fill the air. Glass shatters, shards clatter. The bearded man rushes up, gathering his son. A long metal monster ride later and another fresh concept: hospitals. It's bright and smells funny, but the bearded man says the masked men and women will help. A long, thin instrument approaches, then blinding pain, then calm. He watches in fascination as his hand is stitched back together. A fog obscures the details of the accident, but soon it comes back to him: the chase, the crash and fall. The bearded man says the boy's hand went through a window, getting cut open in the process. A while later, all is well. Back home, playing, visiting the new faces of his family. He learns he has a sister, but he rarely gets to play with her. While fleeting, their adventures are memorable. Time marches on. Loss again, this time in the form of the old, kind one passing away. She was always nice to him, and sorrow was felt for her loss. Many more will be taken; more will pass on. Time marches on. He and the bearded man move to a new place and meet a woman, the one the bearded man says he loves now. His sister will never be seen again. The woman showers the boy with gifts, so this is fine, he thinks. Time passes and the boy quickly learns to dislike this new woman. Negative interactions steadily fill the day, and a new concept is born: Rebellion. He doesn't like the concept of these two being together, his time with the bearded man fades.

Wake up, eat, go to school, learn, come home, eat, do homework, sleep. He begins fighting back against the union between bearded man and this new mother. She treats him badly, takes the toys she gave him for no reason. He refuses to do chores, breaks things, annoys her. This becomes a familiar cycle

for a few years. Not all is bad though, and new friends are made in this strange new place. Not all is bad, but this woman must go. Rebellion extends to school, trouble arises. The boy angers classmates and teachers, gets into fights, refuses to do homework. Since his reality is unpleasant at home, his imagination is supplemented by the worlds of countless authors, each absorbed and appreciated, rapidly accentuating a new false personality with each favorite character. Reality blurs on occasion, but this is to be expected. More and more troubles arise: relations between the woman, bearded man and him break down, worn out by her treatment of the bearded man, the boy and his constant rebellion.


Wake up, eat, go to school, cause trouble, go home, cause trouble, get yelled at, eat, sleep. Tragic news is delivered, bad news, terrible news. Time stops suddenly one day, reality shatters. Days pass in obscurity, burred by bouts of crying and disbelief, an extraordinary loss. The boy's sister, his father's daughter, she is gone. Taken by a car crash, the metal monster steals another life. Later he will know the man responsible. So grievously does the loss strike the bearded man, yet this grief he must suffer in silence, for the woman hates the sight of sorrow. The boy carries on, fading away inside, more bad news keeps assaulting the mind, wracking the body with reality's cruel hammer. More family is lost, one by one, year after year. Rebellion in full swing, joy faded away. Where did it go wrong? Why did it happen? Where did the joy go? Nothing made sense, everything was wrong. Why did his sister have to die? The boy too dies inside, forced to suffer in silence alongside his grieving father. He stops playing, stops seeing friends, gets into fights with everyone he can.

A harsh new cycle of violent tendencies emerges, fueled by sadness, expressed in rage. Time marches on. Pain fades, numbness sets in. Long ago are the days of simplistic joy, so many small yet meaningful moments. He had gained much, yet understood so little, and given even less. All he truly knew was how it would end, as all good things had. Poisons are imbibed,

drowning the boy, turning him into the shell of a man. For years he drinks alcohol far too heavily, getting worse and worse as each person passes, for the losses never stop. All the pain and anger in the world is expressed in one broken frame, all its fury lashed upon those that say they understand. He pushes everyone away, loses contact with all, even the bearded man. Eventually he meets the one responsible for his most prominent loss, the one who really killed his sister. Not a metal monster, but a monstrous man. Fury rushes forth, bloodlust so ravenous, hate so tangible, words most vicious. The man is not made monstrous by his accidental slaughter, but by his treatment of the family whose daughter and sister he had taken away. The monster jabs and whines, assailing them with bouts of shouting and degradation when he, in fact, was the one responsible. He had been drinking and yet still chose to drive the boy's sister home. The boy's fury unleashed in so torrential of a force his very being shattered and fell away. His very youth depleted before the bearded man, torn away by suffering long withheld, long bottled in. The boy was gone, now thrust into the shell of a man. This shell of a man lay broken and sobbing, yet no hint of remorse was found in the monster's eyes as he observed this sobbing boy, this broken man.

Time marches on, more poisonous alcohol imbibed; the shell of a man becomes bedridden. A welcome face visits him; the bearded man returns, such long years passed since he had last heard from his son. They speak for a time about life and death, but while at ease, the shell of a man is broken. He musters the strength for one last effort, one final act. He and the bearded man embrace. A simple look, so enormously complex and profound in nature would be exchanged, a heartbeat would fade away, the alcoholic shell would close its eyes. In the end, the shell had returned to being a boy, cradled in the loving arms of the bearded man, his father. His imagination would fade, showing one final thought, so insignificant yet so treasured, then all would fade to black; a bubble blown from a wand, full of smoke. So vibrantly

the colors do swirl across its surface, so gently does it echo the vibrations in the air as it falls. When it hits the ground, it compresses and pops, releasing the captive smoke within, which billows upward into an ephemeral, ethereal mushroom.

Eyes open suddenly to a bright, clear blue sky, and his lost and fallen surround him. The boy sits up and is greeted by a familiar “meow.” He is embraced by those young and old, all those who left his life when he was so young. Warmth and security envelop him and a genuine, joyous smile emerges on his face as his sister walks up to him, ready to play. 

Austin Belore

The Steam

Crystalline cut, so clearly opaque.
The head holds a rusted reel:
film, images, missions, and...
Obdurate disease obscuring my memories.
Obscuring my final glimpses of this reality.

Happenings happily remembered in frames.
Previously focused with grace,
now I must endure sharp searing pain.
Nothing to gain from a ghost stilled in glass,
No escape from pain,
relaxed only while wadding in metaphysical paths.

On a slope I sit, gazing through the dark.
The immeasurable moveable canvas flows in front of me.

Light emerges through steam and trees.
Light carrying memories.

The moon rises, comes and sits by my side.
Blue gleam of light drowned by the glimmer on the canvas.

Weddings and watersheds,
Date nights and death beds.
Soft kisses.
Soft touches.
Soft kisses.
Soft kitten, dogs, long since passed. They all call beyond the
steam, they see me

Long since I've held her hand.

Grass crunching near.

Soft voice whispers "Long time no see"

Spirit leaves the body on the bed.

I go into the steam.

Marla Vivoda

Re Moved

The Stiletto Goddess, wearing Siren, moves to
rendezvous in the dusk's un-nighted mist.

Her slender thoughts, worn in Metro Eden, lift
their transcendental veil in slate Aegean air.

Her lover's masquerading countenance hovers
in clouded truth by the ominous seaside.

She'll float past coniferous majesty, grounded,
defiantly purposed for healing impasse.

She leaves bearded contemplations breaking
with the lake's tide and only an imperial façade is left.

Through the pines, the leafy promise, miles away, moves
with the graying breeze.

Seagull's riff and repositioning, heralds
the prelude.

Marla Vivoda

Ophelia's Sail

Oh sweet Ophelia now flowers gifted,
Proceeding, looking for Hamlet's vow
You wander on the beach, berefted
Lovers wait in cloud and under bough.

Yes, from 5th Avenue Claudius celebrates diems
And like Laertes departs in cocktail,
You flee captivity in your stolen freedom
Siren red paints your windy sail.

Still clutching violets and rue
Stilettoes sink quick on sandy shore
Leaving the Hamlet Heights from view
And on to a larger chalice, you adore

Mia Reeder

The Chain Around Her Neck

Carrie sat running her fingers across the chain around her neck, wondering how long she would have to sit on the cold bench waiting for the door to open. The glass double-entry doors to the Grand Hotel finally opened and she lurched forward with relief. But as a man she had never seen before exited, she recoiled back into the same position as before. She anxiously glanced at the gold watch that adorned her wrist. The slow ticking of the hands rung loudly in her ears, each tick a reminder that her partner was running late.

“Nathan should be done already,” she mumbled to herself. Carrie and Nathan were jewelry thieves, and the chain around her neck that her hand reflexively kept reaching for was the first piece they ever stole together. It also was her favorite item, one she refused to part with despite the value. It was a reminder of how everything between them started.

A few years back, Carrie had been just stealing what she could to survive, not having much experience with higher priced items. As she was in the middle of trying to steal from a drunk couple at a party, a strange man approached her.

He watched her with curious eyes before whispering, “You’re being too obvious about trying to steal from them.”

Carrie yelped and jumped a bit back while the man laughed.

“How did you know what I was doing?” she bemused.

“I know a thief when I see one,” he flashed a grin before sauntering off. In the time it took her to catch her breath from being caught off guard, he was back with the couple’s wallets. “The name’s Nathan, and yours?”

Carrie relaxed a bit as she recalled their unusual encounter then began staring back at the hotel. Usually they steal together, today, however, Nathan was stealing a few pieces from the event inside the hotel alone. Authorities were searching for a couple matching their

description so they were going to skip town. The jewelry in the hotel was their last stop, an opportunity too golden to pass up.

Sitting on the bench outside near the front of the hotel, Carrie's eyes flicked back and forth around the area. If she couldn't be inside with him, she'd survey the area as support.

Nothing seems out of the ordinary, Carrie wondered to herself, *so why is Nathan taking so long?* He's a master thief, yet it's approaching thirty minutes since he said he'd be done. He told Carrie to wait outside no matter what, so she gripped the bottom of the bench to keep herself from rushing in there. As her knuckles began to turn white, she heard someone chuckle next to her.

"You'll hurt yourself if you keep glaring like that," said a deep, unknown voice. As she craned her neck to see who was taking the empty seat on the bench, she blew out a sigh. It wasn't Nathan. That calm only lasted a moment before Carrie tensed up, her heart beating so loud she feared the stranger could hear it. She looked him over but he seemed average, like any other person you'd pass on the street. He wasn't anyone to worry about.

She took a deep breath and replied, "Yeah, I'm just waiting on a friend but he's running a bit late." She smiled uncomfortably, not wanting to draw any more attention to herself. Maybe he won't give how strange she had been acting a second thought.

"I was wondering if that might be the case," he nodded towards the hotel, "Are you going to go to the jewelry showing they're hosting the next few days?"

Carrie froze but finally coughed out the word no. The man went on, "I was just on my way there when I saw you sitting here alone, that vein on your forehead was threatening to pop out so I just had to know what was troubling you."

So, that's why he asked, I need to stop worrying, Carrie huffed to herself, *although, I wish he would just leave*. Her breathing had returned to normal but she still fidgeted uncomfortably in her seat. She shuddered, but not because of the cool spring air. She's a professional, and has had plenty of close calls but there's just something about this

situation that isn't settling right.

"I heard they've got quite a collection in there. I wonder how expensive their top pieces are," he grinned.


He's still here? "Are you an expert on that sort of thing?" She questioned him, deciding to play along until he finally leaves.

"Not really, it's the sort of thing my wife loves, I'm supposed to be meeting her in there shortly," he paused before his tone changed into worry, "I hope it goes well, I don't want my wife to miss anything. There's been some jewelry pieces that have gone missing from viewing like this so I worry they may target this big event next."

"Is that so? I hadn't heard anything about that," she calmly replied. She reminded herself to play it cool; after all, this stranger has no reason to suspect that the woman he just met was the one stealing the jewelry he just mentioned. By the time he puts anything together, she and Nathan will be long gone.

"I'm shocked to hear that, after all it has been all over the news. I overheard they were going to secretly increase security because they suspected this event would be the jewelry thieves' next target," he shared.

The last comment caused Carrie's heart to fall into her stomach. The man went on about the jewelry in the hotel but his words weren't reaching her ears anymore. She turned her attention to the hotel and that's when she realized that traffic going in and out had stopped. People were gathering around the front entrance but they weren't being allowed in. The faint sound of sirens blared in the background but she could barely hear it over the thrumming of her own heart. Her hands became clammy and she began to feel dizzy. Something wasn't right, what's going on?

Carrie reached up to grab the chain around her neck just as the stranger next to her sneered, "I don't know if I said this before, but that's a beautiful necklace you have, Carrie." 

Regan Sanders

On the Origin of Species, or: How the Giant Dreams

Somewhere in the sky there is a giant
who after a long day's work

Collapses into cumulonimbus comfort and,
Shutting star eyes and exhaling thunder,
He begins to dream of water

Of the microbes therein that soon grow
Complex and large enough
to feed and feed until they
Become prey to the evolutions
they gave birth to until

The land prompts
change
Prompts
legs
Prompts
breath
Prompts
hair
feathers
scales
claws
and nails
until

This dream realm becomes crowded.
Repressed traumas that turn giant's dream to nightmare meaning

Everything dies but
Things with tails and more than tunnel vision

Soon learning to walk with straightened spine
And making fire a symbol for life and death.

Movement is essential until eventually
Homes form out of caves out of mud out of stone out of

Necessity is the mother of invention so soon
A revolution of industry that is part the giant's memory
And part the last paragraph of
a novel he read and

This chapter ends with

A girl lying awake in bed,
questioning the walls around her,
she has visions of the origin of species
and later finds herself convinced that

Somewhere in the sky there is a giant
who, after a long day's work,
Collapses into cumulonimbus comfort and,

Regan Sanders

General Relativity

He

Tosses

In

His

Sleep

And

Our sun

Goes

Dark

And so the girl sleeps soundly too.

Bound by the conventions of the giant in her mind she wonders if
freedom

Is impossible angles and body movements

On a planet in another system where girls dream of giants
dream of girls

Floating in an abyss not unlike the space she imagines her giant
Fears so much

He saves it for the smaller things.

Regan Sanders

The Rift

Between the land of the sleeping and the conscious
Grows ever smaller until nothing at all distinguishes them.

Monoliths and plague bats
Fridges and love confessions

When someone asks what you have dreamed of say
“This.”

Explain to them that though you try to ground yourself
Everything you say has been rehearsed in the land
No one recalls being born in.

We assume that with our eyes we can see the lines of unreality
Hear the hum of imagination as it pulses like a heartbeat

But I can't help but wonder:
If that's true, why did the philosophers argue
That we are all blind?

Did they know something that we won't allow ourselves to know?
Or did they just like the sound of their own voices?
God knows, Plato probably did.

So who are we to say that the trees are not merely projections
Of what we wish we had in the void that we come from
And return to.

Who are we to feel the sand beneath our feet and yet not consider
Why we cannot hold onto it?

Do you think that it is simple?
To sit here and write about concrete things
When my dreams stick like wet cement

Tell me that this world is real.
Show me that my mind is broken so that
I know to get it fixed because right now-

In the in-between of things-

I just want to sleep.

Emily Daniels

Rise

Silence is the song of melancholy
Serenity is found in solitude
Tragic ending from this abrupt folly
Skeptical phoenix I have been renewed

Tortured because I was too insecure
Time is the timid one's only true friend
To heal tattered fragments that were once pure
Waiting for the right time to try again

Ashes of the burnt pieces that won't heal
Seeking the warmth of a better embrace
Wrestling the burning flame of what is real
Instead of floating lost somewhere in space

Welcome that there is no if —only when
Soar through the bright galaxies of begin

Emily Daniels

Dream Deities Have Forsaken Me

Bes, let me stay

Njörun, I don't want to leave

The images and sounds f a d e
Eyes open to a feeling of l o s s
I close my eyes again
Futile attempt to
Regain joy

Put me back, Sandmann

Let me go back, Somnus

I was so beautiful there	—Taller, thinner, elegant
Content with life	—Not a care in the world
He loved me so much	—See it in the way he looks at me
We were happy	—Ordinary, but better-than
Cadences of sweet laughter	—Sounds of splendor passing time
We were in love	—Love that lasts through the ages
Floating above soft music	—Dancing held in his arms
Complete	—I could live in this moment forever

Morpheus, please just let me go back

Last moments in between realms
Alarm r i p s away my d r e a m s—
Ugly, Alone, Hate, Despair

Mara claims me as her victim
World shatters
Crumbles around me
Natural disaster of reality—

Helios has bested Hypnos

Waking fully the scene vanishes	— <i>clutch at the remnants of the dream</i>
Snatches of string quartet music	— <i>violin and cello melody</i>
Polished wood floor underfoot	— <i>click of heels gently echo</i>
Low rumble of guests talking	— <i>sharing in our bliss</i>
Sweet taste of frosting	— <i>fresh on my lips</i>
Weight around my finger	— <i>golden evidence of vow</i>
The man spins me fast	— <i>grips me back to him</i>

Who is this handsome man and how can
I miss someone that I have never met—

Agony of alarm clock and blinding sun
Longing only for the chance to revisit sleep and
—*discover how the fairytale begins*

Emily Daniels

No Dogs Allowed

Eliza chattered away excitedly as she packed her luggage. “How did you guys ever afford four tickets on the Mars shuttle? This is so cool to be in the first group of people to move to Mars!” She knew space was limited. They were each only allowed one suitcase for their clothes and one carry-on bag for everything else. All the things they left would be redistributed to families that decided to stay or could not afford tickets to go to Mars. Eliza packed her favorite bright pink dress for nice occasions, two sets of work clothes which she would be required to wear for school lessons and her favorite pajamas, the ones with little puppies printed all over the bottoms. She couldn’t decide how much she really wanted her lounging clothes. “Mom, how much do you think jeans cost on Mars?” The lack of response didn’t faze her. Eliza decided she would just buy more on Mars, putting the folded pants and tee shirt back into the dresser drawer.

“I can’t wait until we get there! I want us to play card games on Mars! I mean it’s not like we ever have time to play them here but there it’ll be different.” She grabbed several of the themed card games she collected and stuffed them into her bag. She knew that she would especially need to take the holiday themed ones to celebrate with since they wouldn’t have decorations at first. She decided she would buy a new toothbrush when they got to Mars and wouldn’t waste the space in her bag by packing it.

She next started to go through her keepsakes. She was excited at the idea of Mars and stopped to dance with her favorite stuffed animal, a well-worn purple cat with white stripes on its tail, before cramming it in with her clothes. She had a broken watch that had been her grandfather’s and a refrigerator magnet that had belonged to her grandmother. They died when she was

little during the drought before the government had figured out how to synthesize water. Eliza stood there holding the small items, trying to decide if her grandparents would want them taken to Mars or to stay on Earth where they had lived their entire lives. With this decision she had been stopped in her tracks, and finally took stock in how momentous this trip was going to be.

Eliza, still holding the watch and magnet, went to find her mom. Her mom had been packing for her father who was still at work.

“Oh, Eliza, did you finish packing honey? We are supposed to have our luggage checked in before dinner time.”

“Do you think Grandma and Grandpa would want me to take these to Mars or leave these here?” Eliza held the items out toward her mother.

Patsy didn’t know that Eliza had saved anything from her grandparents and for a moment she was struck dumb. When she looked back at Eliza her eyes were damp, but she was smiling. “I think they would love for you to take these things to Mars and they are small enough they should fit nicely in your bag.”

“Thanks Mom. Am I supposed to put the dog’s stuff in my luggage or does Clementine get her own bag?”

Patsy’s face went white and her smile fell. “Eliza, they don’t allow pets on Mars. Clementine can’t come with us.”

Eliza gapped at her mother in horror. She was so shocked at how excited she had been moments ago when she hadn’t even thought twice about her dog coming with her. Furious and hurt she dropped the watch and magnet on the floor and shouted at her mother. “If Clementine isn’t going then neither am I! Have a nice time on Mars!” She quickly stalked out of the room and went to find her dog.

Patsy bent and gingerly picked up the only relics left from her parents and went to Eliza’s room. She tucked the watch and magnet into Eliza’s bag and headed to the backyard to try

and reason with her daughter. Children raised in the worker encampments were sheltered from the realities of the outside world and this led to naivety and an inability to comprehend the magnitude of each decision. When Patsy got to the backyard, Eliza had Clementine in her lap just like she had when Clementine was a tiny puppy. Eliza was hugging the dog and crying into her fur.

Clementine was a runt and the breeder thought she was going to die, that is the only way they could have ever managed to have a pet. Patsy's husband, Frank, was coming back from Central Encampment after picking up that week's food rations when he noticed a small gathering of people. He decided to go see what the fuss was about. A dog had just given birth and everyone had stopped to see the tiny creatures they could never dream of affording for themselves.

He noticed a rag in the corner of pen. "What's the rag for?" Frank asked gesturing at it.

"That's got a runt in it. Gonna die. Better it don't use up the milk from the others."

"What are you going to do with it?"

"Incinerator."

Seeing an opportunity to score some major points with his family Frank calmly asked, "Can I have it instead?"

The breeder laughed at him then, realizing he was serious, smirked pointing at the bag he was carrying. "You give me that loaf of bread you got there, and the runt is yours."

When he got home, he presented the tiny puppy to Eliza, "It might not live but I thought you might want to take care of it for now."

Eliza nursed the puppy back to health and it had become her best friend. Clementine thrived under Eliza's care and the two had been inseparable ever since.

Clementine was the only dog in lower West Quadrant Worker Encampment. Not only was the cost of buying a dog exorbitant but you also had to give up part of your food and water rations to feed it. Frank, however, was a very skilled and specialized worker. He was a mechanic employed to build and maintain the machines that made the Mars shuttles and was one of only two people in West Quadrant who understood the job. This made him an invaluable worker and he often got perks because of it, like getting free rations for Clementine. This is also how they were granted the tickets to Mars.

Frank had no real desire to go to Mars, but he didn't have much choice. They needed a mechanic on the shuttle in case anything went wrong and once he got to Mars, Frank was assigned to start setting up shuttle operations there. His boss was insistent that Frank take the Mars position because his boss had to stay Earth-bound to run operations and he wanted Rachel, the other shuttle maintenance worker, to stay since he was sleeping with her. Frank never thought about Clementine during the meeting with his boss.

"But why can't she go, mom? She's small and I'll take care of her." Eliza's eyes were huge with pleading and fear.

"It just doesn't work that way. The tickets aren't just for space on the shuttle, they are also for our rations of oxygen, food and water." It killed Patsy to have to be the one explaining this. Frank was always putting it on her to do the hard parenting jobs then coming in with shiny trinkets to play the hero.

"We could get another ticket then, for Clementine." Tentative hope bloomed across Eliza's face. She knew her dad had rank at his job and surely, he could get another ticket.

"On Mars the housing units are very small, and we will have to wear space suits to go outdoors. Sweetheart, there wouldn't be anywhere for Clementine to run and play or even

to go potty. They don't make space suits for dogs. There just isn't any way for dogs to be on Mars right now." Patsy held her breath, waiting for Eliza to understand.

"Then I'll stay here and wait with Clementine. I can meet you there when they get things figured out." Eliza stood defiantly, hands on her hips, braced for the reaction she knew was coming.


The breath Patsy had been holding whooshed out of her. She was expecting grief and tears. She had not been prepared for this. Tears welled in her own eyes as she tried to reason with her daughter. "Eliza, you are too young to stay here by yourself and you won't have enough rations to feed her. There is no way to know how long something like that could take or even if dogs will ever be allowed on Mars."

Eliza stared into her mother's eyes. She was resolute and there would be no swaying her decision. "Clementine is like my daughter. She is the closest I will ever come to having a child and you want me to leave her here, alone, to starve and die? I can't leave her. I won't."

The first words out of Pasty's mouth when Frank told her about the tickets to Mars were, "Why would we want to go to Mars?" The next were, "And what about the dog?" Eliza had been severely depressed as a child. She was not athletic and not social. She was smart and liked books. There was no place anymore where that fit into society. The worker camp was made up of maintenance workers and scientists who had to constantly work in groups at the factories and the workers that did the manual labor of synthesizing water and food and making the rations deliveries to thousands of people. There were no more librarians or secretaries and that made Eliza stick out like a sore thumb. She had no friends and, even though she was book smart, she did poorly in school because the new schools tested on practical matters. Even fifty years ago Eliza would have been fine but now the prospect of her future weighed on her heavily. When Frank

brought the puppy home Eliza came back to life. She had found a purpose in that puppy and her whole demeanor changed. Since no one in the quadrant could afford a dog, she quickly made friends with the children that wanted to come over and play with Clementine. When Frank explained to Patsy that Clementine couldn't go to Mars, she feared that it would break Eliza in a way that they could never repair.

They were at an impasse. Pasty looked down at her daughter. The daughter that would have been denied her if Pasty had been born closer to the population restrictions passed in 2068 where all humans were sterilized at birth. The daughter that Patsy's parents had died from dehydration for when they had stopped drinking their rations and gave their water to Eliza to ensure the child would live. Falling to her knees, Pasty swept Eliza into her arms. Hugging her daughter so tight it was imperceptible where one body ended and the other began. Clementine squeezed out from being squished by the embrace and popped her head up between their faces, causing Pasty and Eliza to erupt into spontaneous laughter. They fell to the ground together as Clementine pranced around them yipping in approval.

Pasty sat up wiping at the tear tracks left on her face resolute in her decision. "Okay honey, we will figure it out. I could never leave my daughter either." 

Xaiyne Calma-Viloria

Can't let Go

Caught in the labyrinth, are two pine souls
trying to find their way out of their failed haven.
The walls slouch weary, ready to molder.
The air slowly becomes bitter and colder.
The memories fade from the damage made.
So why keep relations, with a former lover?
Because they had nowhere to call home,
Except the ones they made in each other.

Ashley Bowen

Blue

A duet of cerulean lines march in time with the deafening cadence resonating from my chest. Uniform anything but royal, the stain mars my mind with obscene melancholic fear. Their persistent progression a sensuous slithering as sinful as any garden serpent. The azure threads warp beyond my vision until I am drowning in their icy depths. Piercing, sinking into flesh with grease-laden fingers of guilt. I wrap the comforting naivety of three-minutes-ago tight around me, blocking three-minutes-from-now out in the bitter unforgiving cold. I am bitter. I am unforgiven. I am frozen. Three becomes two-minutes-from-now, one-minute-from-now, now. Time marching ever onward, synchronizing tempo with the twice forsaken lines. The strands finish their race, their ends achieved, their paths a beacon in my finite world. Only the cadence and its echo remain.

Madison Faulkner

27 Days

The bright sunlight came through the window and filled the room with joy. The forecast called for sunny and 70 all week long, typical for spring time in California. Cora woke up around 8:30 like she does each day and sluggishly climbed out of bed. She made her way to the kitchen and turned the coffee pot on. She checked the calendar taped to the fridge and crossed off the day before. 27. Just 27 more days until Nick would be home. He had been gone for 93 days already in Iraq.

As the days wound down she found it hard to keep herself busy as the days seemed to last forever. She had already reorganized their bedroom, their bathroom and their kitchen, twice. She considered adopting a dog and spending her free time training it, but she soon realized that once Nick got home she probably wouldn't want that dog. The reason was simple, they were going to try and have a baby. Once Nick returned he wasn't scheduled to be deployed for another 3 months. They had figured that this gave them plenty of time to prepare and start the process. Cora had always wanted to be a mother, but being a military wife sometimes your own personal wants end up on the backburner. This had to be the year though, she had just turned 32 and felt like her time was running low, especially since her and Nick had discussed a sibling for their still unborn child.

She poured herself a cup of coffee and put a piece of bread into the toaster. She walked to the tv and clicked on the morning news. She had just made herself comfortable when she heard the toast pop up; she walked over to it, spread some jam and went back to the couch. She listened as a breaking news story lit up the screen. The lady from channel 5 was spewing out details of a brush fire that had broken out by the highway and that was quickly threatening houses. Cora changed the channel, too

early for bad news, she thought to herself. She clicked through the channels for a few minutes before just turning off the tv.

Back in their bedroom she found that she had left her cell phone plugged in beside the bed and saw 3 missed calls from her mother. She sat on the edge of the bed and called her back. They made small talk and then her mother finally broke the news, April was pregnant! Cora faked her excitement over the phone, but deep inside she felt nothing but anger at her sister. How could she get herself knocked up by a guy she has only been dating for 4 months! Especially knowing that Cora was planning on getting pregnant this year. She ended the call with her mother and went to call Nick. Her heart caught in her throat as she realized she couldn't because he didn't have phone privileges until next week when they moved camps. She regained her composure, got dressed and prepared to go to the mall to find a new outfit to wear when she would go to see Nick as he arrived back home.

She was halfway through curling her hair when she heard a knock on the front door. She figured it was just the mailman dropping off a package or something so she continued on. On the second knock her thought changed to Jehovah's Witnesses and so she loudly yelled back, no thank you, before continuing the work on her hair. There was a third knock followed by a deep voice who very calmly said "Mrs. Andrews we need to speak with you." She grew fearful, 'how does he know my name?' She approached the door with caution and looked through the peephole.

She opened the door to see two uniformed men staring at her. The man with the deep voice asked her, "Are you Cora Andrews?" She struggled to find her words; eventually the word yes fumbled out slowly. The shorter man beside the deep voiced man looked at her and painfully said to her, "Mrs. Andrews, at 6:43 this morning your husband Nick Andrews was sent on a mission with 4 other soldiers; they were sent to gather intel about

a man we had been looking for. Unfortunately on their way they encountered enemy troops and were engaged in a shootout. There were no American survivors. I am so sorry.”

Cora fell to her knees and began praying. She thought this was some kind of sick joke and prayed that God would send her a sign that Nick was just fine and that in 27 days she would get to hold him again. The deep voiced man reached down and touched her shoulder. He said to her, “We will be back in a few days to discuss funeral proceedings, again Mrs. Andrews I am so sorry for your loss. Your husband was a good soldier and gave his life protecting this country.”

Cora managed to pick herself up and close the door. She ran to the bedroom and fell into the bed. She couldn’t even cry. She just stared at the ceiling thinking she would soon wake up from this nightmare and that she would be able to go to the calendar and check off another day. After twenty minutes she began to realize that she was in fact awake. One fat tear welled up in her eye and slowly dripped down her cheek. This tear was all it took for the floodgates to open. Cora began to sob uncontrollably. She couldn’t breathe and struggled to gain any ounce of composure. She called her mom and managed to get out the words, I need you, before hanging up and falling back onto the bed. She heard her phone ring several times before finally going to voice-mail. Her mom then sent a text that read, “I just booked the next flight out, I don’t know what is wrong, but I will be there at 9 pm tonight. CALL ME BACK!” Cora ignored the text and shut her eyes hoping to force sleep.

A few hours later, a puffy eyed Cora crawled out of bed and made her way to the living room. She pulled out a prepackaged salad from the fridge and sat at the counter to eat it. She stared at it for 30 minutes before throwing it away and realizing that she pretending like everything was fine was not going to work. She changed out of her sundress and put on a pair of sweatpants and one of Nick’s t-shirts. It was only 4 pm and her


mother wouldn't be here for five more hours. She walked to the medicine cabinet in the bathroom and pulled out an old prescription for Hydrocodone that she got last year following a bad back injury. She popped two pills hoping to ease the pain she felt inside.

She went back to the living room and sat on the couch waiting for the pills to kick in. It was right now she wished she had gone through with the dog idea because being alone in the house was sickening. The hours passed slowly as she waited for her mother; she thought about calling April but she didn't know what she would even say. Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, a knock on the door came.

As soon as she opened the door and saw her standing there the tears returned. She fell into her mother's arms and sobbed into her shoulder. Her mother managed to bring her inside and to the couch where they sat down and Cora finally had the chance to break the news to her. Each word stung as it left her tongue. The meds had worn off and she was back to her painful reality. Her mother just stared at the wall trying to make sense of what she had just heard. She really couldn't believe that Nick was gone.

The months passed slowly as Cora adjusted to life alone. Her mother had begged her to move back home so she could help her, but Cora refused. She wasn't ready to leave the house that she and Nick had built together. Their whole life had been in this house since they got married eight years prior. April was supposed to have her baby in just two short months and had asked Cora if she would be the godmother. Cora refused. She didn't refuse because she wanted to hurt April, she refused because she knew that she would never get a child herself and couldn't bring herself to be responsible for one that was not her own.

A year later, on the anniversary of his death, Cora went to the fridge, checked the calendar and said to herself, just 27 more days. She thought the longer she could pretend that he was

still in Iraq, the less painful it would be for her. This proved to be a failure as she woke up the next day, and each day after that, to an empty bedside that she knew wasn't temporary. Despite coming to this realization she still couldn't bring herself to cross off that day from her calendar. For the next three years that day still remained untouched, taped to her fridge with a little number 27 written in the top right corner. Each day after she woke up and turned on her coffee she would walk to the calendar and look at that tiny number 27 and pray that he would walk through the door soon, even though she knew deep in her heart that he would never be coming back. 

Shanon Lautenschlager

The Never Forgotten

I see them as if they never left.
Or were forgotten to be forgotten.
They roam my brain,
Random thoughts.

Touched us in ways no others have.
Leaving footprints behind,
Like on the beach,
When waves cover them.

Most were fluffy, and some kind.
Some others even funny.
But no one, was left behind,
Not in mind, not in heart,
Not even here.

Some lay underground,
Wrapped in gifts and flowers,
Others in urns with name plates chiseled still,
They stay in us.

In our hearts, in our minds, in our souls.
They have a special place
With-in us all.
They are the pets, the friends, the family, the Soldiers.
The Never Forgotten.

Sarah Swartz

Austin, Texas

Night

Black lips and corset hips

Electrical tape covers my nipples

Notes of clove serve as a guide

Day

Junkies and flunkies

Trash lines the sidewalks

Sunshine on pale skin

Night

Psychic vampires and voodoo dolls

Expensive drinks from a rude Korean bartender

Bathroom doors with crooked locks

Day

Honking horns and traffic jams

Smells of fried food and exhaust

People living on the street

Night

Peripheral judgements

Solo philosophy

Live music for 15 dollars

Day

Text messages gift early smiles

Tall Bloody Mary with celery stock

Same pants

Night

Cab Fair

Bare midriffs

Admirer's make small talk

Day

Smoking door men

Carnival barker brunch specials

Acoustic guitars played for busy ears

Sarah Swartz

Poetry is...

Poetry is...

Becoming one in a pilgrimage to prose

For without I am

Caged like an animal

Seething

Anticipation giving audience through its echo's

A soundtrack for the masochist

Poetry is...

A galactic carnival motioning on

I participate in the attic of my mind

I avoid the opium smoke from the caterpillar for it is distracting

Poetry is not...

Demons dragging heavy weights to the doorways of invention

That beckon in your memories

Teasing and offering substitutive remedy

I will not dwell in the thought house of skeletons

No

Taren Welch

Drip, Quit

Water fell through the roof to the floor
Lots of it
thought there would be only be a few drops of it
6 hand towels later
Grabbed the mop bucket,
Listened to the drops hit
Till they reached the top of it
Kicked over on accident
Now I'm cleaning off ovens
Called the boss on Sunday he said he's not comin'
Said he'd be there on Monday
Said I should stay on top of it
Said I should stop fussin'
I told him last week I wouldn't stay if he couldn't stop cussin'
So, I clocked out
Went home
And the whole shop flooded.

Heidi Staggs

Rainforest

Spiders ran up and down her arms. Her hair stuck up as if she had just been struck by lightning. With each gulp, dryness swelled in her throat, a tinge of pain coming as a result. She was facing her parents in the foyer of their comfy, middle class home, but their faces appeared a blur. She could not see the worry lines on her mom's forehead or her dad's arms flexing from the weight he was carrying.

Her focus was drawn to the large door that led into the outside world, the brown of the door reminding her of the bark of the trees in the rainforest. Abruptly, the terrifying thought of being trapped alone amongst the twisting branches flooded her mind. The sunlight above dimmed until all that was left was blackness. As she looked around she could see fingers crawling towards her, when suddenly the tips burst into bright red flames. Attached to the fiery fingers were stumps of trees, falling, crashing. Dark gray smoke clouded the light from the flames around her.

To escape from being burned alive, she redirected her thoughts to being submerged in a lake. As she looked for light to indicate to her which direction was up, she could hear a voice, muffled and unclear, coming from the surface. She swam in the direction of the voice, until she recognized the whimper coming from her mom.

"Phoebe, Phoebe, are you listening?"

Then like a car crash she was back in reality.

"I don't understand what you mean," Phoebe whispered.

"Sweetie, we told you about this months ago."

"Yeah, but I didn't think it was ever going to actually happen."

Phoebe was about to have her first night alone. Her

parents were going on a weekend getaway. Her parents had told her about their idea to spend their anniversary away when the trip was first planned, but Phoebe filed their comments and excitement to the back of her brain, figuring there was no way they would leave her home alone.

Finally, the day of their supposed departure came. When she got out of bed that morning, she found her Dad was up earlier than usual, folding endless piles of laundry.

“Laundry, that’s something that needs to be done regularly. No worries,” she thought.

Then she went into the kitchen where Mom routinely made breakfast each morning. The aroma of greasy bacon and fresh pancakes typically served as Phoebe’s alarm clock, but that was absent this morning. Instead she found her mom packing little sandwiches and heaps of snacks into a cooler.

“Perhaps they are just going on a picnic for their anniversary instead,” she hoped.

As the day progressed, every small detail of her parents’ preparation swelled in Phoebe’s mind. There was an extra twitch in her eyes and sweat in her eyebrows, but she kept trying to push back her anxiety. Mom picking out outfits. Push. Dad scrummaging through all the laundry to find matching socks. Push. Bags being filled with makeup and hair pins. Push. When her Dad came down the stairs, luggage in hand, she could no longer push as panic took over Phoebe’s actions.

“Mom, Dad, please don’t go. I can’t be alone the entire weekend. I’ve never even been alone for a whole night,” she begged.

“This will be a good thing for you,” Dad replied.

Mom chimed in, “Yeah, someday you’re going to grow up and move out and have to be alone all the time.”

The panic she was feeling sunk further into the pit of her stomach as the room around her morphed back into the rainforest. The floor turned to wet mush which snaked in and

out of her toes. The door expanded into the bark of the oldest tree. The ceiling light was the sun dimmed by the clouds. The last recognizable aspect of the room were the walls, seemingly keeping her safe from the outside world. But the rainforest took over her security. The wall transformed into mazelike bushes growing rapidly past the height of their house, reaching towards the heavens and imprisoning her.

She looked towards her feet, trying to put the cage out of her memory. But as she did, vines began to wrap around her toes, entangling her feet, and crawling up her legs towards her head. After just a few minutes, Phoebe could no longer move, and the feeling of being entombed alone forever in this position engulfed her mind. She closed her eyes and tried to imagine reality, placing herself back into the conversation with her parents until she could finally respond.

“I just don’t understand,” she whispered.

A few silent moments passed before she continued, “Why can’t we start with baby steps? Like you two going out for a few hours for a date night, instead of leaving me here to go on a weekend getaway?”

Phoebe knew the compromise would not be enough to stop her panicking, but she believed that if she could have her parents to agree to these terms, maybe they could be convinced of more. As thoughts of failure floated to the front of her mind, she reminisced a childhood memory.

She was at the florist with her mother. They were looking at assortments of flowers for her aunt’s wedding. Although they were inside, it felt like she was outside in a garden: smelling the flowers, watching the fluttering of a bee’s wings, and feeling the soft grass tickle her toes. With a sunflower in hand, she looked up towards her mother to find she was no longer there. She looked around in a panic, but she became distracted as each flower grew into a large tree ensnared in vines. The garden grew to the height of a giraffe and the leaves on the branches covered all light and


heat. Fear numbed her as the rain of the forest poured from her eyes. When her mother returned, she found her daughter pale white from fear and eyes puffy from all the crying.

Phoebe could not understand while this moment defined just a large part of her personality. She had questioned her fear so often.

“Lots of kids get left alone for small periods of time, right? And they all seem to be doing just fine with it,” she would think.

As Phoebe would think of how ridiculous her fear seemed to be, she would also remember how her mother never forgave herself for abandoning her daughter when she turned the corner for only a moment to look at some white lilies. Phoebe could never talk about her petrifying fear of being left alone. She knew that if she could remind her parents of this event, she would convince her parents to stay home yet again, but when it came to avoiding her fear, this is the one line Phoebe would never cross.

“We are sorry Phoebe. Truly. But your father and I are going. You’re seventeen. You’ll be just fine. We left all the emergency contacts on the fridge, and you know how to take care of yourself.”

And before another thought could cross her mind, Phoebe fell back into a coffin, the lid slamming the casket closed just as hard as she slammed onto the cold, wet stone. Moments later, she felt the coffin sinking deep into the ground. She could smell grass and dirt as she was being buried next to the roots of the trees in the rainforest. With the last of the sunlight, she pierced through the cracks of the old stone to see her parents walking out the front door. 

Adriane Colón Casiano

It'll be a While, I'm Betting

The first prayer that escaped my lips was on a Wednesday,
and I did not pay mind when my words were met with quiet.

The asphalt echoed my laughter as I shivered besides big red.
He was torn between loving my joy and pleading for quiet.

I know I've known love. When I returned, I found my door ajar.
My brother had woke to find his sister gone and the house quiet.

When they returned I felt the weight return to my shoulders.
To those who had lifted it off, my heart apologized, but I was quiet.

Even now I sit next to one of them, and I remind myself that
my love can not be worth the craving they inspire for quiet.

I've made disgusting and violent plans, hours at a time reassuring
myself that it would be a moment of action for a lifetime of quiet.

The myth of the mirror. I avoid eye contact. Is it me or him?
When you look at me, do you see her? The glass is quiet.

To dialogue or to monologue, that is the question, isn't it?
True belief is naive, but if not that, then I'll have to face the quiet.

For someone who wants to run, I sure am frozen quite often.
For someone who braids screams into dreams, my replies sure are quiet.

Please, for me, nudge yourself awake, Adriane. Do your best to
remember bathing in the sun and falling in love with the quiet.

Cristina Álvarez

Enredadera

Una amiga en su auto me dejó en la playa.

Una playa con cangrejos caminando por la arena. Había una reja que separaba la playa del estacionamiento, una reja cubierta de enredaderas florecidas, tan pesada era que la reja se doblaba y caía sobre el pavimento. En la arena había un bar-restaurant, techo de palma seca, columnas de libros atrapados en el cemento. El lomo de cada libro tenía el dibujo de una mujer infeliz, una chica llorando, una dama sollozando. Quise sacar los libros del concreto, no pude. Los dibujos gritaban por ayuda y mientras tanto mis uñas rotas sangraban en el concreto. Mi mente lloraba sangre a través de mis ojos. Quise salvarlos del espectro que rondaba la playa, el que arrastraba mujeres desde lejos, las acuchillaba y las lanzaba al mar, atadas con cadenas, algunas aún vivas y condenadas a ahogarse bajo el agua pesada como roca, bajo pies indiferentes que jugaban en la arena. No pude. No pude salvarla.

Ya no vi más a mi amiga,
ahora me pesan toneladas de culpa florecida.

Christina Álvarez

Neighbors Are Used To Death

Blood expanding around her

silky hair on the pavement

and her limbs

oddly placed.

Neighbors they remove her try
they live in the nice pallid houses
they are however used to
pallid faces from famine
they try to rip the helmet her
Neighbors lift up her neck
her is broken
they take her pulse
her is null
Neighbors used to death

They grow paler, however
they remove the helmet
they take it off and see blood
the brains of the motorbike girl

half of them in the helmet

half of them

in the street.

Christina Álvarez

Sally

Sally is a trans girl
I wave at her at work
Sally is happy, bubbly and kind
she has a cat hat
and a minivan.

Sally sits at a party
drink in hand
frown and glassy eyes
Never seen her
this dark.

Party host tell me

“HIS whole family

Sits by HIM”

Sally leaves early.

Party host asks

“where did you meet her?”

Jaymie Brennan

Blue Hooded Nightmares

Twigs caught my feet and I tripped. I stayed silent every time a branch hit me, and I kept running. My hood covered part of my face and the wind bit at my cheeks with anger. I looked wildly as the trees zoomed past me, my feet throwing me through the woods, hopping over fallen trees and sliding over the muddy forest floor. As I swung an arm, I looked at my watch, 2:50 am. I cried out. It was almost the end of the devil's hour, but I had to keep running. My eyes slit, and I constantly scan everything around me.

A black shadow comes out of nowhere slamming into my chest, knocking the wind out of my lungs. My blue hood falls from my head as I fall onto my back. Laying on my back I look up and see the shadow move along the tree line. I roll onto my stomach, catching my breath while I quickly glance at my surroundings. I know it is him, and he knows it is me. There is nowhere to run; I was ten minutes away from freedom and I could not make it. I look up, slowly pushing myself off of my stomach and onto my feet. I take gasping breaths as blood drips from my lips. My brown eyes glow in the late-night shadow as I look at this gigantic demon standing before me. His eyes green heavily matching the forest, fogging as we near the brink of dawn.

Fear shrouds my mind as I look into his eyes. The human-like mouth and teeth form an intimidating smile. I cover my face as his talons strike at me again fast, like a tornado. I jump back, faster than his claws that are reaching for me. I swivel on my feet and start to run again; I can feel the ground tremble from his weight as his claws slam into the floor. The branches are back to hitting my face. I cover what I can with my hands, the time on my watch revealing it is now 3:00 am. The end of devil's hours. I scream and shoot awake. My heart pounding, my alarm ringing as my bedroom door creaks open, the stench of whiskey clouds my room,

I can see his green eyes. I close my eyes and pull my knees close to me. I can hear his belt being fiddled with; the lock of my door being clicked to ensure no one else comes in. I close my eyes and wait for it to end. The shadow following me stops at the tree line, he sniffs the air.

He pounces on me, blood drips down my forehead from hitting the rock. One eye is closed as blood drips into it, a devilish smirk covers my face. I place the barrel of the gun to the demon's chest. His green eyes dilate quickly becoming red. He howls, attempting to bite off my head, but instead of a scream the forest quivers with a loud 'BANG'. The bullet tears through his skin, he howls in agony, his eyes growing dim before they stop glowing completely. The forest melts away to my room, I am in my bed, it is still the dream, but the dream has never ended like this. It has become unfamiliar to me. I look around my dream room, I see him on the floor, a bullet wound in his chest. The blood dripping from his mouth and his eyes closed, finally, those devilish green orbs close.

I stand in my dream walking over to him and opening his eyes, only to softly whisper, "You don't control me anymore..."

I shoot awake from the dream. It is quiet, my alarm has not gone off yet. I look at my clock, the time is only 2:30 am. I have time. I stand up, grabbing my blue hoodie, quietly walking into the living room. He is asleep, passed out on the sofa with a bottle in hand. I can see the bruises that cover my arms, left by his greedy hands. I know it will be proof enough to anyone I tell, especially after what he did this night before bed.

I walk slowly from the hallway in which my room sits, I can see him. The soft movements of his stomach and chest as he breaths, I can hear the snores and the stench of a man covered in booze and sweat. I gag softly and cover my mouth, my feet walking softly to the door. I tiptoe across the floor, wincing every time it creaks beneath my weight. I can watch as he stirs wanting nothing more than to just sprint out the front door, but I know he would just

wake up and attack me, not allowing me my freedom. I look at him again, seeing him grunt and move turning on his side and dropping his bottle of whiskey, his eyes fluttering open for only a second before they shut again, and he snores. Tears stream down my face as I grab the doorknob to the front door and walk out. I just begin sprinting down the street. I will face my biggest fear tonight. People fear spiders or heights, but I am stuck with the fear of my father.


My feet kick rocks back as the streetlights above my head fly by. I can see the police station in front of me. I stop in front of the doors, two police officers standing from their desk, a man and woman. The woman covers her mouth looking at me, the man's eyes widen. I push the doors open with shaky hands, lifting my face. My heartbeat picks up as I stare at the officers, both have no clue what to do as the hood falls off revealing my busted lip, my black eyes, I tear up as I move to sit down in the police station, sitting in just a small chair at one of the desks, not looking to see which one I am at. My heart races faster as they stare me down, I bite my lip looking for the courage to say what needs to be said.

“I would like to report sexual, and physical abuse. This is where I should report that sort of thing... right?” I mutter this nervously, tears pouring down my cheeks.

The male officer rushes to me and reaches for my hands. **“Yes, please, come with us. Let us help you.”**

I smile softly, a sigh of relief escapes my mouth as the officers take me to a secluded room. The female officer sits with me asking questions, gathering an understanding of my situation. I cry heavily as I finally, for the first time in 12 years, admit to everything my father has been doing. The rapes, the beatings, the hostage-like situation I have been living in after my mother died at four. I feel free, getting this all off my chest, even though my heart beats wildly, my body shaking with anxiety.

Within hours I am put under witness protection to protect me from him, as they raid my home. They take my father out in cuffs

as he kicks and screams, demanding to be released. He attempts to claim he has done no wrong, but the officers know, I know, and deep down so does he. He knows he has done wrong and that this is what he deserves, but he will never admit to it. I smile, as I watch them drag him while he fights, all I can do is smile. I am free. I have faced the demon known as my father for too long. I have overcome the fear that has stopped me from enjoying my life for years. He will be stuck behind bars for life, while I can finally live, rather than merely survive. Life is good. My fear, my demon is finally gone. I am free. 

Raena Vigil

Ritual

The sacred bell rings.

Our heads bow

down to contemplate

nothing in the present moment but

only facades of

connection. Highlight reel images

of deception. Inception of

reality yet we still

say Amen. It is so. Let it be done

to our psyche, our soul.

Palms up to

the sacred text

& tweet, instagr-

Lauren S. tagged you in a photo

Habitually, on the altar

we sacrifice, freely

subscribe our attention to the

tech temple:

Silicon Valley.

The Apple from the tree

we gladly consume to satisfy the hunger

for likes, follows, and friends.

Black mirror, a mere reflection
of who we really bow down to.

Ascension of approval
we're promised by the
prophets of algorithms and
the gods of revenue, selling us.

We become what
we worship, formed into
a fragile glass, surface
level being.

A ritual beginning with *diiiiinnnnnnngggg*.

Kenneth Neiberger

Empty Purse

“Well, that’s going to leave a mark.” I thought as the sword slid through leather and into the green flesh beneath. This wasn’t even my war yet here we stand; in a field of viscera strewn by strangers for another man’s cause. A king decreed we should fight so the virile answered the call. I, however, was hired to be here. This all started over a starving orc tribe raiding a farming village near the capital city of Inkasneah. In ten years it grew from retaliation into all out war.

I retrieved my sword from the dead orc in front of me. It lay beside a young man who had fallen to the same. Tears and spittle left the only clean patches on his face. I shook my head in disgust and walked back to the main camp as the slowing cries of the skirmish fell quiet around me. The squelching of boots in the churned mud accompanied me as the zombies of the campaign marched inexorably towards their next encounter. I was ushered to the tent of our present spoiled King Jahred.

The inside of the tent was its own world. Clean furs adorned the bed and chairs. Tapestries depicting history’s greatest victories were on proud display. I’d seen puffery before and this was no different. I just came for my coin and to have a quick wash before moving on to the next job. War is profitable. Staying in them is its own risk.

The king was wearing gilded armor that would crumple under an actual attack. An emblazoned lion chewing on a ray of sun greeted me from his breastplate. Maybe one day he’ll be as important as he thinks he is. His voice came out as white noise to me. The same monotone patriotism that drivels from the mouths of rulers and people who dwell in yesteryear. He confused my hired contributions for love of country. One king means little to me. I only need food in my belly and a roof over my head. If I needed

more than that is for the gods to decide. Judging by the look on the King's face though I would not be getting out of this campaign so easily. The sound of coins hitting the ground jolted me from my distracted thoughts. I looked at the suspiciously flaccid purse a knight had dropped by my feet.

"That's not what we agreed on." I kicked the empty purse back at him.

"Because you are not finished." He scoffed. "That is an advance on your next assignment. I want you to kill their king."

"Oh? Decided that for me all by yourself did ya? You wanted my sword for this fight. This fight is over. The orcs were routed. Your precious countryside is safe. I'm leaving in an hour and I expect the rest of that gold in my hand by then." I turned to leave. The gauntleted fist of the knight stopped me.

I felt ropes tighten around my limbs in my obfuscated state. Gruff voices surrounded me as I felt my limp body being dragged by men who did not care if I suffered further damage. I was dropped unceremoniously into the back of a wagon. I landed on my side with my head at an angle reserved only for the dead or the drunk. The rough wood pressed furrows into my cheek. If I were more conscious I could have counted the rings surrounding the knot grinding against my cheek bone. I drifted in and out of darkness on my unplanned journey. I had one last rough drop as a boot rolled me from the back of the wagon. I felt the mist rising from the ground and hoped the heat was sun warmed mud. I was woefully wrong.

I woke up tied to a post on the floor. The smell of animal shit was the first thing I noticed. I blinked away dizziness and took in my surroundings. I was in a shed of some sort. Gnarled, knotted planks of gray dead wood served as walls. The only thing new in this building was the thrice knotted rope around my wrists. I don't recall seeing any permanent structures in the camp so my first thought was on figuring out where in the hell I was. Second, figure out how to escape. I started looking at the knots to see how

I could work them loose when I heard growling guttural voices outside. I slumped back down pretending I was still unconscious. The door creaked open and several not so subtle stomping feet walked across the dirt and crumpled straw.

“Oi, humie, wake up!” a swift kick into my side from a booted foot punctuated the order.

I looked up to see four orcs in full scale mail looking down to me. The one nearest had a single yellowed tusk dripping slobber over his lower lip. I also noticed his very heavy hobnailed boots and didn’t fancy receiving another kick.

“I’m awake. Where am I?” I said weakly. I felt fine but they didn’t need to know that. A little hungry but otherwise healthy enough to fight or to flee depending on what happened next.

“King Krug ask questions not you.” The single tusked orc leaned down and hauled me to my feet. He pinned me against the pole with a single hand against my throat while two others slid around behind me and worked at the ropes. I felt them fall loose and my shoulders twitched to free myself on instinct. Before I could move further the hand pressed into my neck and I felt the wind cut off. He shook his head at me.

“King Krug say Plonk can hurt you if Plonk has to. Plonk good at hurting.” He squeezed to emphasize his point. I relaxed my shoulders and accepted my situation. Fighting now before I knew where we were or what this Krug wanted would leave me in a worse situation. They didn’t want me dead, yet.

Plonk had one of the others blindfold me with a scrap of thin cloth. It obscured my vision enough that I only saw the ground that had been stamped muddy from hundreds of feet. I smelled cook fires and latrines, blood and sweat, mud and steel. This was the war camp of the Gray Crow tribe. The same tribe I had been fighting that same morning depending on how long I had been unconscious. My movement through the camp was half trudging and half being dragged by my bindings. I knew enough orcish to understand the insults. Although the shouts of pink skin

and sheep shagger didn't need translation. A couple of rocks and sticks were hurled my way. We weren't walking for long before we stopped.

"Humie no speak unless you answer Krug." Plonk did not make it a question as he kicked me in the back of the leg dropping me to my knees. I heard a few sentences exchanged in orcish before strong hands grabbed me once again.

The ratty blindfold was removed along with a grip full of hair. I blinked away the pain and looked up to see a terrifying specimen before me. King Krug was seated in a throne fashioned from a combination of timber and horse bones. He must have stood seven feet tall with green skin mottled with patches of black. He sat bare-chested, exposing raised lines of scars in the shape of a crow wrapping around his torso. He took a deep breath and his muscles tightened into striated cords when he exhaled. This was the king the general wanted me to kill? Fuck that. I shook my head and Plonk cuffed for moving.

"Krug have three questions for humie. He answer honest maybe make happy Krug. Happy Krug not kill humie. Unhappy Krug show humie his mancrusher." He looked left and I followed his gaze. Leaning against the tree beside him was a rock the size of my torso spattered with blood and mud with a length of chain anchored into it. I followed the chain to see it looped over the side of his throne. I nodded my acquiescence.

"Good. Krug first question. Why Plonk find humie knocked out by camp of Gray Crow orcs?" He raised his index finger and his yellow eyes fixed on me.

"I was left there. I assume so you would find me and kill me." I was going all in on honesty getting me through this. I didn't want to be here any more than they wanted me here.

Krug looked for any sign of deception. Not finding any he raised a second finger.

"Is humie here to try to kill Krug?" He leaned forward in his throne and angled his head like a dog hearing an unfamiliar

noise.

“Human king tried to hire me to do that.” He tensed his grip on the chain. “I refused him!” I kowtowed in my defense before Plonk or Krug or any one of the dozen orcs on hand could kill me.

“You refuse because you scared of Krug?” Krug said but I thought it was rhetorical so I held my tongue. This turned out to be the right response.

“Krug have new third question, how much Krug pay to have humie kill other King?” He raised his eyebrows at me. I saw an opportunity reflected in the hunger in his eyes.

“I will do Krug one better. I can get Krug face to face with the man who tried to pay me. Krug can kill the coward himself.” I met his gaze and smiled knowingly. Krug’s face screwed up in contemplation.

“If this trap to kill Krug maybe Krug just kill you now and Gray Crow keep fighting.”

“Sure, you can drag out this war for weeks and lose strong orcs... Or you can face the king of humies himself and end it.” Krug thought about it for a couple of seconds before shouting.

“Untie him! He will take Krug to fight King of Humies and then Gray Crow will be in charge!” Krug cried out to the bloodthirsty retinue around us. They stamped and cheered but exchanged a couple of nervous glances.

Within the hour I found myself with my hands tied while Krug and I made our plodding pace towards the human’s camp. The afternoon sun beamed down making me wonder which was worse the flies or the heat. As the hours rolled on I decided hunger was the worst of it all. I could not remember the last time I ate. We found an abandoned barn a couple of miles from the camp and I thought it would be a good meeting place for the Kings. The paint had flecked away but still showed patches of faded umber.

“Wait in there, I will send the human king to come fight you, Krug.” His eyes promised violence if I were to betray him

as he cut the rope from my wrists. I raised my hands claiming no subterfuge. Satisfied, he walked into the barn to prepare his ambush.

I talked my way through the sentries and made my way to the camp. After some colorful exchanges I found myself in the tent I remember before being knocked out. My sheathed sword still sat in the dirt next to the imprint my body left.

“So you return to me, alive... somehow, but without proof of the dead orc king.” He sounded let down, but curious.

“We had not agreed on terms. You seemed to assume I would do it without wage or contract.” I smiled.

“So speak your wage, merc. That is all you’re good for. Money inspired murder.” He said it as an insult. I took it as an honesty. I knew who I was.

“50 gold and I can take you to Krug to finish him yourself. Claim your victory instead of buying it.”

“50 gold?! I piss that away in a night. You think so lowly of yourself.” He searched my face for deception. “Fine, lead me to him and I will see you get your gold.”


The servants dressed him in his gaudy, useless armor and we stepped off. It took little convincing leave his retinue of knights behind. “Imagine the glory of singlehandedly winning the war m’lord.” Or something equally insipid. We stopped before the rundown barn.

My mind flashed to the first time I worked for Jahred. He was the crown prince then and somehow more insufferable. That was back before I found my trade as a sword for hire. He found my unloading crates in the docks for a silver a week. I knew two things back then: good workers keep getting paid and the bars I could spend that pay in relative peace. I wish I could go back and kick my own ass for being naive. Jahred hired me for my first guard job for a caravan leaving Inkasneah for a hamlet to the south. What he didn’t tell me was he knew there were bandits and he struck a deal with them. He could collect more taxes to make up for the lost

gold. They could keep half of it.

Scars leave impressions for people to know you have a story but that does not mean they were there for the telling. This tale was a curved knife that found my forearm before I could bring my blade to bear. It was the first time I ever saw living bone. I was left for dead beneath a birch tree while the bandits counted the gold. I bled out as the prince arrived and took his cut. It was a week before I made it back to the city. Another before my fever broke and I knew I would live. The next day I stood at the castle gates demanding my pay. Jahred laughed from the parapet and had me hauled away. It's funny how some things never change. I smiled because I knew for Jahred they were about to do just that.

"He is tied up in there. Beaten and barely clinging to this mortal coil. Go in and you can claim the victory as your own." The gilded king dropped a heavy purse in my hand and walked forward with swagger. He unsheathed his sword before walking inside. I tied the door shut behind him. I heard a shriek of surprise followed by the exchange of blows. I struck fire to a branch that had fallen from a nearby tree.

"Fight your own war." I muttered before setting flame to the structure. The screams inside served as soundtrack for my dismissal. 

Kenneth Neiberger

Insomnolence

Can't sleep my dreams will eat me.
Can't dream my hopes will beat me.
I toss, I turn, I've lost, I'll learn.
I spin, I sit, I curse the churn.
Rumination wrestled into a zero sum.
I'm tired of tirelessly twirling thumbs.
Sweat soaked sheets kicked aside.
I'll let these thoughts decide.
Tonight's insomnia ride brought to the front.
A cerebral approach to the memory's hunt.
Cogitation cocks the starter pistol.
Cockerels call to the morning vigil.
Another night lost to a wispy mistress.
Shackle me tight tonight, I come guileless.

Alexis Jones

Never [Ending]

Our love is like a song

Blocking out the sound of the world.

Our song is the kind that takes away the pain of the past

The kind you play on repeat.

I tune out the unnecessary noise, so I can focus on you and
our song.

Shutting out friends, family, God

I could not bare our song being turned down even one notch

You used to have it playing constantly

The repetition started to become too much

Please don't pause it

Just a few more times

I can't listen to anything else

Sometimes,

when you play something over and over

you reach a point where you want to turn it off,

you grow tired of it

the music begins to fade

the voices stop

no ballad

silence

Carmen Bronecke

No One Told Me

I looked into her eyes and genuinely thought I was broken. I didn't have a bond with her. This tiny thing that resided inside me for nine months. I wanted so badly to have this miraculous moment, and all I felt was exhaustion and fear. I looked into her tiny eyes and knew I would do anything for her, because that was what was expected of me. I hated myself for it.

I woke that morning, and something was off. I couldn't remember my last period and my husband and father had already left for the day. Safeway was just down the street; I remember people asking me why I couldn't have just waited for someone to get home. I had no other explanation other than the thought would not leave me alone until I did it. I kept perseverating and making up stories in my head about all the possibilities whether pregnant or not. How would I react if I was pregnant, if I wasn't? I bought the tests and something to drink, I think it was Sunny-D, but that could just be the movie Juno pervading my memories. I remember reading somewhere that you get better results first thing in the morning. So, I drank my drink and decided to wait, and tell nothing to my husband or Dad. Again, the ideas raced in my head, a constant nagging. I couldn't wait. I reasoned with myself, if it was negative, I would just use another one for a morning test. The moment I had to use the bathroom I took the test.

Ten minutes later and it was positive, I didn't know what to do. I had to tell someone, but father-to-be wasn't home, and I wanted to surprise him in a special way. I brainstormed ideas of how to tell him, but eventually came up with nothing. I called a good friend to help pass the time and calm my nerves until everyone got home. My dad got home first, I think, but I knew I needed to tell my husband the good news first. Finally, he came home. I wasn't sure how he was going to take the news; I was honestly a little scared.

He looked at the test and just hugged me.

No one ever tells you the bad things about childbirth and post-partum. People will tell their stories of how pregnancy was awful with morning sickness and bed rest and having to go pee every hour on the hour. Yet, no one tells you how your schedule is no longer yours.

No one told me.

I like my schedule; I like doing things on my time, when the urge struck me. It was hard to bond with my child, because I couldn't do what I wanted when I wanted. I wanted a nap, she didn't. I wanted to clean the kitchen, she wanted to nap, but couldn't sleep without me next to her. She needed the boob to fall asleep, and the moment she sensed it was gone, she was awake. It was little things like that too. I found that I was doing nothing for myself. Showering became a chore. Eating became a chore. I had these problems sometimes that I would just get so overwhelmed with things that it was too much effort to do them. I was doing everything for my child. That was expected, if I didn't do something for my child, I felt guilty. The doctors and nurses explained post-partum depression to us, but we didn't see it; not at first, not without external help.

"I just wish I could put a pillow over my face and sleep." I didn't think anything of it, I just wanted to ignore my responsibilities and sleep for a solid eight hours.

"I'm going to refer you to a therapist."

"What? Why?" I stammered.

"You just told me you had suicidal ideations."

Maybe he misunderstood, I didn't want to die.

"Oh, I didn't realize, I guess that makes sense." I said, letting his words take over me, a part of me still unsure if it was suicidal ideations or not. Either way, I knew I needed to see someone. I needed help with this torrent of emotions.

No one told me that post-partum would show up while I was holding my crying daughter in my arms as I slammed by head into the wall behind me to get rid of the thoughts I was having. The idea

of hurting her, just to get some peace and quiet. Those thoughts, the ideations, scared me. Scared me so much that I would rather injure myself repeatedly just to stop, to get a moment of clarification. Postpartum hits differently than normal depression. I can't fathom that I wanted to harm my child, and to keep myself from doing it, I harmed myself instead. Anytime someone would offer to babysit, I readily handed her over, but then the guilt would crush me. The guilt of not wanting to be a mother would crush me. This life that I had tried desperately to bond with. I thought I wasn't normal, I thought that I was broken, defective.

No one told me these things.

The first doctor's visit consisted of a pregnancy test and a few questions about domestic violence and whether or not I felt safe with my husband. I wanted an ultrasound. I wanted visual proof that something was growing inside me, but they told me I would have to be around eight weeks, and I was only four. My first mental health appointment was very similar.

"Do you feel safe in the home?" She would ask.

"Yes."

"Do you feel safe with your husband?"

"Yes."

"Is there anything you want to myself or the doctor?"

"No,"

I've always viewed mental health as a positive and medications as a last resort. This was my last resort. The fear of hurting my child was my last resort. I met with the therapist who referred me to the psychiatrist who could prescribe the medication. It worked wonders, I'm not going to say it made me happy and everything was rainbows and sunshine, but it made things easier. I was almost numb to a lot of things, but I kept going to my appointments and kept trying to better myself and understand what was happening in my brain.

People warn you about the postpartum depression, but no one warned me about the jealousy I would feel. My husband is a great

man, and I will love him until the end of time, but the jealousy I had for him and my daughter was almost toxic. This is hard to write, as it's the darker side of having kids, the raw side; not everyone has fairytale stories of children. I love my daughter, and I would die for her, but that doesn't mean I wasn't jealous of her. My husband would look at her and hold her, and I would hurt. My husband would leave for work, leaving me alone with her and I hated him for it. I wanted to get out, not every day, but more than what I was. I'm not sure if this was part of the depression, but after I started seeing someone and getting help, it eased and eventually faded away. Things get better and time is usually the best medicine. It's okay to seek help and take medications to help through dark times. It gets better.

Don't be afraid to reach out and ask for help. Follow your instincts. If something feels wrong, it most likely is.

I'm telling you.

"Up, please." My child asks, arms raised, watching me expectantly. Picking the three-year-old up I sway a little, the way I do when I always pick her up. Her brown eyes watching mine, I remember the color they were when she was born. They were so black you couldn't see her pupils. I hoped and hoped that my child would have her father's hazel eyes, but she is perfect with her brown ones. I never thought I would be here; always told people I wouldn't have any children, but here I am, with my beautiful little girl that drives me insane. I would do anything for this little girl of mine, because I love her with all my heart and it's no longer an obligation, but an honor. I love you, my beautiful daughter. ❧

Jessica Montoya

Hazy

The ancient dragon lifelessly looks onward to see your future,
Nothing but ignorant pride emerging,
Purple and orange hues glow vivantly
Pride got your tongue?

He mocks you,
Slipping his tongue out, slimy
He chuckles as you ponder,
Pride got your tongue?

He flows with grace
Grace you lack,
Hold onto yourself
Has pride gotten your tongue?

Your soul has entered his body
The eyes are the only gate,
He grows stronger now that he decided,
Pride got your tongue.

Jadon Chavez

You

Walk in a party
I see way too many people
We weren't invited
There's beer and cups on the table
Your friend is crying
This headache's making me evil
This headache's making me evil

The fun don't come 'till you need me
You're having fun I'm still keeping up
Keeping up
Look at the way you're standing next to me
As gorgeous as you'll ever be to me.

My friend is calling. He's asking me for a ride home
Your mom is calling. To say when you had to be home.
But you were lying. You said that you were at sleepover
Sleepover

The fun don't come 'till you need me
You're having fun I'm still keeping up
Keeping up
Look at the way you're standing next to me
As gorgeous as you'll ever be to me.

Lexi Langoni

The Chef's Daughter

“FREED WHAT? FREED RAMS!” echoed throughout the gymnasium after the state champion middle school cheerleading team concluded their Friday afternoon practice. Exhausted and eager to leave the school grounds, I impatiently awaited my dad’s arrival for our Friday ritual to begin. Attempting to keep occupied while waiting, I found joy in performing handstands against the bushy and dense trees, roundoff back handsprings in the dry and prickly grass, and socializing with other students that were expecting rides after their extra curricular activities. As I whipped my head around to remove the long-tangled hair from my face, I noticed my dad coming to a halt in the pickup roundabout.

I rushed over to the big white catering truck and peeked in the window to watch my dad lean over to unlock the door. As I climbed in bouncing on the ripped seat, glanced over to him I said, “You’re late, again!” He chuckled but his face displayed remorse, the spritz of cologne was strong and pleasant, but the odor of a hot grill lingered. A cap and glasses were occasionally worn but billowy striped pants and an apron covered in flour was his typical attire. Assuming we were heading to Wal-Mart after my dad shouted, “We’re going to Wally World”, for a few last-minute ingredients and produce; I felt a pinch on my neck and quickly turned around to find my sister ducked down in the back.

My older sister, Gianna, would frequently go to her friend’s house on Friday’s so I was not expecting her to be there. I was ecstatic at Gianna’s presence though because it was always more enjoyable with my sister by my side. Arriving at “Wally World” we pulled into the closest yet tightest parking spot available. Hopping out of the truck with hustle, it seemed as if we were sprinting to get into and around the store. It was always the quickest shopping trip with him because he knew the store like the back of his hand.

The one and only thing that took the longest was someone at each aisle stopping our dad, AJ. He was well known throughout the small town due to the restaurant, liquor store, family, and last name always drawing attention. My sister and I looked at each other and both had the same internal thought, “Why can’t we go anywhere without knowing someone?” After awkwardly standing through brief conversations and checking out, us three were able to scurry out of the store and back onto the road. Heading in a familiar direction, we exit onto Jerry Murphy Road and drift over the bumpy pavement while pans, trays, and utensils were rattling and sliding in the rear of the truck. I bent down to pick up my dad’s wallet that slid off of the center console. As I raised my head, my eyes were laid on the bright red neon sign that read “Noodles Pasta and Deli”. The restaurant that had become our second home.

Racing Gianna to the entrance, I grasped the latch and pulled the door wide open right before my sister darted in. Meanwhile, dad went around the secret back way to carry in and unload the groceries. Right as Gianna and I arrived, we were greeted with family and friendly faces commonly known as “regulars”. They would frequently gather and reminisce about memories and traditions, with unique Italian portraits and paintings circling them. Including our dad, five family members were employed at the restaurant. It truly was a family affair.

Aunt Shawna would be the first friendly face you would see upon entering the restaurant. Her smile was contagious, she was soft spoken, short in stature, and needed a stool to see over the counter. Great uncle Pep would rush in, talking a mile a minute, all while holding multiple bags of fresh bread he just picked up from Schuster’s bakery. Sneaking under the counter, Gianna and I would walk around the deli counter and enter the main kitchen, always interrupting Great Aunt Louisa and Joanne arguing about something foolish.

The special board in the lobby had fried chicken, spaghetti, side salad, and a roll scribbled on it. Although Gianna despised

this meal, I loved everything about it and looked forward to having it every Friday. Upon entering the kitchen, the aroma of fresh sauce and the sound of chicken sizzling in the fryer engulfed them. Stepping in the warm and busy environment, we were bombarded with questions like, “Are you hungry?”, “What do you want to eat?” Always followed by the statement, “We will make you anything you want”. I excitedly replied, “I’ll take the special!” and Gianna joined in with, “I’ll have fried spaghetti”. While our stomachs were growling and mouths were watering, steamy plates of food were put in front of us ready to devour.


With fuel for the brain and body, we recognized it was nearing time to get to work. Standing at the wall of aprons, I could not help but notice how they were always crisp, spotless, and free of wrinkles. We wrapped and tied the aprons around each other, as tight as they could possibly get them. Gloves that were a smidge oversized slipped right on, and just like that we were prepared to cook at the silver, shiny, cold table. Beside Gianna and I was our Aunt Joanne, equipped to show them the ropes of making meatballs, Italian sausage links and patties, and billucci. An hour passed of pouring, mixing, spreading, strategically placing, and rolling, which led up to the meatballs and billucci being thrown in the oven. It was a waiting game at that point so our job was done.

Working up a craving for a sweet treat, we ran to our dad to politely request money to head up the hill to TCBY. Gianna grasped the 20-dollar bill she was handed and put it in her small pocket, “Watch that doesn’t fall out of your pocket,” Dad voiced from afar. She started sprinting up the hill and I wasn’t far behind. Once we reached our destination, we swung open the door and felt a chilly breeze and a pleasant welcoming environment. Nothing was new when it came to the menu, so we wasted no time in ordering our favorites. Once handed the cups of mint chocolate chunk, we were out the door so fast we could barely get out the “thank you!” before the door shut.

Before going back to the restaurant, we made a stop to

meet our uncle next door. To the right of Noodles was Lang's liquor, which was also family owned and operated. My sister and I found joy in getting our aunt to purchase scratch tickets for us, to see if we could win any money to stow away in our saving accounts. Once our aunt passed us the tickets, we scurried outside to the front to sit on the railing we would repeatedly do flips on. More times than not, we were not incredibly lucky and ended up not winning more than a couple dollars.

As the sun began to set, we started winding down inside and assisted with the nightly routine. I went from table to table refilling each of the salt and pepper shakers while Gianna took the parmesan cheese and sugar. The two of us started on opposite sides of the room, knowing deep down it was always a race to see who would finish first. As we were finishing our last table, we saw headlights shining through the front window. "Mom's here!" We abruptly stopped what we were doing and rushed out the door. Only for the story to repeat itself for what seemed like forever.

"ORDER UP!" will forever be ingrained in my mind. I never went hungry and neither did my close friends and family. Growing up in a restaurant has provided me with many lessons, memories, and skills that I will take with me throughout my life. These memories and lessons are unique to me and my family, therefore, hold a deeper meaning. I look back on these days and feel so incredibly grateful. These memories cannot be replaced. 

Gabriel Velasquez

Day 300

Today is the day!
Yet, something did not feel right?
Ah, I was correct!
Before long as I saw the sign.
I was running!
No this could not be happening again!

But it was true.
It sent a shudder down my back!
The sky darkened.
All I could do was ask,

Why?

Why?!

A sign in the window with 6 words,
Sold out of Popeyes chicken Sandwiches.

Aubrey Scott

Misdirection

Despite the sun having sunk far below the horizon, it was sweltering outside, and Cleo had no AC. All the windows were down in their 2002 silver Mazda while they tore through the loose gravel mess that is Highway 16. Why is it even called that? A two-lane dirt pathway that stretches far too long with not enough streetlights shouldn't even be considered a bike lane. While going a calm 65mph in a 40 zone, Cleo glanced over to the clock: 10:47pm. "If the rerun of this week's Lovecraft comes on at 11:30, I should make it just in time!" Cleo pushed their heavy locs behind their shoulder, nudged the gas pedal down and pushed further into the night.

Sepia light teased at the stretch of road in front of Cleo while red and blue lights began circling behind. *Shit. Oh Shit.* Cleo smacked on their right blinker and the Mazda sauntered to a stop with the police cruiser cozying up behind. The palms of Cleo's hands started to dampen the steering wheel as they gripped it for dear life. Slow, heavy, calculated feet crunched through the gravel. The sound of tiny pellets being kicked into the bumper was enough to make Cleo jump. "Do you know why I'm here uh, *boy?*"

The cop was tall. Almost too tall. He reached a height that was sure to warrant plenty of weather and basketball comments. He wore a plain officer uniform with a broken name tag piece dangling from his breast pocket. His angular face displayed the most perfect geometric shadows that Cleo would have killed to draw with a charcoal pencil. His ivory skin seemed to stretch almost painfully over his sharp bones. He folded himself down and peered into the car windows, carefully inspecting the empty iced coffee containers and wrinkled "Save the Bees" t-shirts strewn across the back seats.

“Uh no officer, I don’t,” Cleo uttered, remembering to watch their tone in this situation.

“Yeah, I’m gonna need to see some identification and permission to operate this vehicle.”

“Right. Okay. I’m going to take my hands off the wheel and reach into my glove box now.”

“Mhm. I see you.”

Cleo handed their license over to the cop. His face scrunched in concentration as he studied the ID. He turned it over in his hands a few times. Noting the embossed designs on the card and its weight. It was like he’d never seen anything like it. The cop pushed his slim face back into Cleo’s window, illuminating his sharp cheeks in the Mazda’s green dashboard light. His proximity to their face gave Cleo a clear view into the windows of this man’s soul. His eyes did not reflect the soft green that rested on his forehead, but rather absorbed it. They were cold, abysmal, consuming. He wearily handed Cleo their license back.

“Step out of the vehicle.”

Cleo’s stomach plummeted. Every muscle in their body began to quiver. The nearby sepia light flickered. Shakily, they stepped out, crunching that old ass gravel underneath their feet. They placed their hands down flat on the hood of the Mazda and froze. Their arms trembling in rhythm with the sputtering engine. The cop waited a moment before approaching while eyeing Cleo up and down. Cleo could feel the cops’ body heat become more intense as he closed the space between the two. Cleo shut their eyes tight and whispered a small prayer.

*Sniff. Sniff sniff. *

Cleo’s eyes snapped open. *Did this motherfucker just SMELL me?!* they thought. Right as Cleo moved to turn around, something cold brushed their elbow, making them and the cop both jump back in surprise. The cop looked down to see light glint off his severed nametag piece resting in the dirt. His pale

face turned a sickly yellow and his eyes snapped up to meet Cleo's. Cleo took a step back and glanced down at the fragment. They breathed a small sigh of relief knowing their dab pen hadn't fallen right into the cop's hand like a one-way ticket to jail or heaven.


Without breaking eye contact, the cop tapped his toe against the fragment, sending it skidding underneath the car. He scratched at the back of his neck, suddenly uncomfortable and sick-looking.

"Drive. Better. Boy." he choked out. Wiping sweat from his brow, he turned about face, snatched his cruiser door open, and sped off, leaving Cleo in a sweaty dust cloud of confusion.

They sat down in the driver's seat, door left ajar, and took a deep breath. Was this a joke? Some kind of dare for bored officers to prank young people into not speeding? The sniffing part was an interesting touch if that was the motive. Still, Cleo was glad this encounter ended with them living to ponder about it instead of the alternative.

Just as they were about to drive off, they remembered the badge. How weird it was that the cop didn't even try to pick it back up? Super glue really can fix anything. Cleo crouched under the car and retrieved the piece of nametag. The only part left of the name tag were three letters that spelled out 'SKY' and the broken edge had dirt crusted into its texture. Cleo figured the cop didn't want anyone filing reports about being sniffed by a strange police officer and discarded their name tag for protection. *What a fucking creep* they thought as they pulled off.

You're watching Channel 5 news and tonight we have a troubling story; retired veteran and seasoned policeman, Robert Pendansky has been reported missing. Reports say his last known whereabouts are from last Tuesday when Pendansky was called in for an emergency around 11pm. His wife, Amy Pendansky, says he was

not scheduled to be on call that night and he never returned home the following morning. Pendansky's cruiser has remained parked at the station on Liverpool Drive since his disappearance. While police conduct a thorough investigation, they have also issued a mandatory curfew of 8pm, right around sundown, to ensure the public safety as they suspect Pendansky could have been the victim of an animal attack. If you have any information regarding Officer Pendansky or his disappearance, please notify the hotline listed at the bottom of the screen. More on this as it develops. 

Lexi Boyles
cw//food

the person i see reflecting back
doesn't match the one inside my head.
i can't go to the doctors,
they'll tell me i'm the problem.

"COUNT YOUR CALORIES"

"I'll just take a water."

"DON'T EAT TOO MUCH"

skip three more meals

"SLOW DOWN"

"I'll just eat when I get home."

but they never ask about the problem.
the living fear of never being able to eat again
or the days my mom pushed her hate down my throat with a
liquor chaser.

"CURVES ARE IN"

what about next year when
you decide to hate fat people again?

"ALL THE BOYS WANT YOU THICK"

what if i don't want to pull them in?

it's hard to love a body you've never grown to know.
maybe if i take her on a date?
who knows?

Lexi Boyles

Meet Me in the Hallway

I try not to slip back into my mind as his body encompasses
mine.

The substances we took fills my veins with a high I was chasing
just half an hour ago.

He doesn't notice I've stopped moving.

The heavy gasps and soft squeaking of his twin sized bed is the
only thing that resonates through the air.

He doesn't notice the way I've left the room, how I'm no longer in
his house and on his block.

I've drifted completely beyond the surface of the two of us.

I can no longer feel him, that left with me.

He doesn't notice the way I no longer see him.

The haze that filled my thoughts blots out the vision of him and
the way he closes his eyes to block me out.

I don't want to see him either.

I don't want to chase the same ending as him.

The moments of euphoria that smacks him in his gut could never
match the ones I feel when I feel the bite of whatever I can get
my hands on.

He doesn't notice the way I convulse around him. He thinks it's a
part of his show.

The way my body screams for peace and panic and rage and
delight.

He doesn't notice I've gone completely out of my mind, from the
inside out-

I am no longer there.

He doesn't notice.

The feeling of victory rises in his chest and exhales through his
nose and forearms.

He only notices when his conscious floods his mind with the
river of reasons for my lack of responses.

It's only now I realize where he's left me.

It's only now I realize there's nothing left to do.

Jarrold Padron

Another Night from the Tower

After the Artwork 'Dog' by Francis Bacon 1952

The slouched man eats dinner at his table alone,
his gaze leaves the bowl and penetrates his window.
Residing at the highest level, he is eye to eye with the neighboring roof.
There he encounters a figure.
Blocks of white, short-haired muscle held up by slim,
unfailing legs.
A dog.

Rooted in the middle of the roof,
only strength is detectable.
Despite distance and glass,
the man sinks deeper into his chair.
But his eye catches a chink in the armor.
This discovery results in a leaning towards the panel,
the droopiness of the dog's head, neck, and face reveal themselves
alongside his initial perception of its panting tongue.

He is now, in the man's eyes, a sufferer rather than a predator.
The dog's solitude is akin to his:
a defining wound masquerading as impenetrability.

Despite the similarities, there is not a trace of solidarity in the man.
The dog serves only as a mirror,
a tool that evokes remembrance of his own lot.
That of having no gods, no community, no person with him.
With no means of purging his sufferings,

they remain concentrated within him.
A labyrinthian mixture of fortune and will
condemns him to finish his coffee
against the backdrop of indifference and unconsciousness,
under a sky absent of light.

Tempered Steel Staff
Thunderwolf Astrology:
Horoscope Erasure Poems

–Erasure original text: Your Five-Year Diet & Health
Horoscope by Neathe Aahmes (Dell Publishing, 1968).

Aries “The Ram”
(March 21-April 19)

Less pressure, better shape,
wholesome diet, regular exercise.

Cultivate a cheerful outlook,
dress for the weather!

End of the year is favorable to
movement through your philosophies.

Be careful and
observe moderation.

Taurus “The Bull”
(April 20-May 20)

Be sure to cut down on sweets
to avoid havoc in your health.

Investigate the possibility of beginning
a diet to include whole grains.

Rest frequently to find a
new lease on life!

Involving a flexible plan to allow
partnership may have great assets.

Gemini “The Twins”

(May 21-June 20)

Possibility boils problems,
to occur in three.
Worried health is like cold blood.
Pressure, tension, and taking to heart.
Also, worsen worry and worry away.

Do not deteriorate with alcohol.
As there is possibility of
eradication of a problem.

Emotional states seem to improve!
Melancholy can be alleviated
as you look forward to freedom
determining your own path.

Cancer “The Crab”

(June 21-July 22)

Your daily should be taken with calmness,
keep your temper in gloomy difficulties.

Some activity or hobby will
bring a better state of mind!

A new attempt will bring favorable results
to cut down on your workload.

Try to avoid constant sitting,
do not jeopardize your health.

Leo “The Lion”

(July 23-August 22)

Neglect can cause serious consequences so
Delegate to people you can trust-
Resolving the series of impasses
And taking the greatest care.

Ambitious career affairs could be necessary.
It is valuable to stimulate you mind.
Projects can be favorable for
mental well-being.

The holiday can renew you energies
and promises to bring rest you need!

Virgo “The Virgin”

(August 23-September 22)

Use caution in travel,
wear proper shoes for walking.

Seek forms of extra comforts,
do not worry too much.

Knowledge rewards
your prospects in life!

Delegate yourself to rest and
conserve your energy.

Libra “The Balance”

(September 23-October 22)

Ease your everyday tensions
Money is a rather quarrelsome influence
Some expenses are beyond your strength

Pay attention to your physical welfare
Ill health may contribute to ill temper
Seek proper medical source for treatment

Seal off all hazardous portions
Avoid retaliation
Better relationships ease tensions

Try out different systems
Open the door
Widen your horizons

Find time to pursue your goals
Enjoy without going overboard
This is not permanent

Scorpio “The Scorpion”

(October 23-November 21)

A short trip to a pleasant site
Can bring good auspices.

Take time to examine your goals,
And reevaluate for modification to your advantage.

Avoid overindulgences,
Hydration is key!

Look forward to an overwhelming sense of accomplishment,
You have a very pleasant prospect.

Sagittarius “The Archer”

(November 22-December 21)

It is imperative you take care of yourself,
See to your personal safety in every way.

You can secure good value for money,
And reap benefits from your investments.

Take pleasure in social interludes,
Energy lost in overworking may be restored.

Spend time with those you love,
Avoid quarrelling with those closest to you.

Capricorn “The Goat”

(December 22-January 19)

Always be understanding,
for your friendships are important.

Challenge your fears and
find a fulfilling hobby.

Relaxation is key,
do not waste all your energy!

Avoid hectic situations and remember
to make time to celebrate your achievements

Aquarius “The Water-Bearer”

(January 20-February 18)

Take care to avoid accidents.
You may experience easier friendships.
Make this time for literature and
healthful routines in mental attitudes!

Rest makes a calmer existence possible.
Fasten your belt when driving.

A favorable period could bring advice
indicating harmonious condition healthwise.

Pisces “The Fish”

(February 19-March 20)

Keep poisonous household substances in a safe place,
Do not try to pass trucks on the highway.
Walk carefully
Do not strain your system

Overcome these destructive thought forms.
Step up confidence in
order to help make decisions.

Carefully plan a good
pathway for a career on
the road to happiness

The holiday is an excellent
time for proper diet and rest.

CONTRIBUTORS

Cristina Álvarez is an undergraduate English major with a Creative Writing emphasis and a minor in Spanish. She is also an international student from Venezuela, currently working as a Spanish tutor at the Gen Ed Tutoring Center. Her favorite poem is “Ozymandias” by Percy Shelley, which is also how she sees the crisis in her country.

Cristina Álvarez es una estudiante internacional venezolana, estudia Inglés con concentración en Creative Writing y busca también un minor en Spanish. Actualmente trabaja como tutora de Español en el Gen Ed Tutoring Center. Le gusta el misterio, el horror y el análisis de imágenes arquetipales, por lo que tal vez no sea buena idea invitarla a un cumpleaños.

Jacob Andersen is a Pueblo native Mass Communications major with an interest in creative writing and poetry.

Austin Belore is a double major in English and Mass communications at CSU Pueblo. He currently works for Residence Life and Housing as a desk assistant. Austin specializes in non-fiction, fiction, and poetry. He is influenced by artists like Stephen King, Frank Herbert, Frank Zappa, Trey Anastasio and Maynard James Keenan. “The Steam” is inspired by the San Isabel National Forest and Lake Pueblo.

Ashley Bowen is working on a second Bachelor’s degree in Creative Writing, a far cry from her first degree

in Zoology. As a full-time employee and a part time student, she is spending every free moment writing her first novel. Her poem “Blue” was inspired by the fear of watching a medical test show a positive result.

Lexi Boyles is an English major with an emphasis in Creative Writing. She is currently in her second year at CSU Pueblo. She likes to write poetry and fiction short stories. This piece, “Meet Me in the Hallway” is an interpretation of the song by Harry Styles, and “cw// food” is about struggling with personal identity and self love.

Jaymie Brennan is a student at Colorado State University Pueblo. Her story “Blue Hooded Nightmares” is a fictional creative writing piece. It has some moments where it can be a little intense. It isn’t for those with a faint heart toward trauma.

Carmen Bronecke is an English major with an emphasis on creative writing and a junior at CSU Pueblo. She is a mother and wife and has aspirations to publish a fiction novel. This creative non-fiction piece was inspired by the struggles she faced as a new mom.

Xaiyne Calma-Viloria is an Art major, with a minor in Business Administration and Cannabis Studies. Proficient in all forms of art and creative media, Xaiyne experimented with creative writing during his first year at CSU Pueblo, where he was inspired to write “Can’t Let Go” while observing and experiencing toxic relationships.

Daniela Cervantes is a sophomore at CSU Pueblo. She is looking to obtain a major in Nursing and a minor in Honors. She has developed many skills on non-fiction and poetry writing in her creative writing English course.

Jadon Chavez is a freshman here at the university studying in creative writing. He is minoring in music production. Jadon's hometown is Las Cruces, New Mexico and he loves to write!

Chris Churilla is a Graduate Plus student majoring in English with a Creative Writing emphasis. He is originally from the Chicago area and an Army veteran. His story was born from a class writing prompt, which involved merging the magical and the mundane. It was a deliberate departure from his usual writing, which is more serious. Chris believes positivity is a choice, and can be a difficult one, but the rewards can be worth it. He dedicates his story to his mother, who read to him as a child and sparked his interest in storytelling.

Adriane Colón Casiano entered fall of 2020 as a junior studying political science and getting a minor in legal studies. She hopes to become a lawyer in the world of humanitarian or immigration law. Last fall was her first semester here at CSU Pueblo. Since then, she has been working at the Writing Room here on campus. Her piece "It'll be a while, I'm betting" is a modern ghazal. As she wrote it, she began to explore times where she found herself conflicted between the seeming chaos of home and the peace found in those she had learned to love.

Clotille Cross is a graduating Senior majoring in English with an emphasis in Creative Writing. She is planning to attend graduate school in the coming year and focus on screenwriting. Her poems “Werewolf Sanctuary” and “Ghost Hotel” were inspired by her love of supernatural stories.

Emily Daniels is an English major with an emphasis in creative writing. She enjoys writing fiction, nonfiction, and poetry. She is always looking for writing inspiration from nature and dreams. Emily looks forward to graduating and completing her first full-length manuscript this summer. When she isn’t writing, she can often be found creating artwork and making pottery.

Rebekah Diaz is a Media Communications Major, with an emphasis in Digital Media and a Minor in Creative Writing, and is a Senior at CSU Pueblo. Her poem “Never Lasting Love,” was inspired by a break up that she went through in 2020.

Madison Faulkner is a Psychology Major and a Sophomore at CSU Pueblo. This piece was written as part of her creative writing class her Freshman year and was written as a way to take her personal rough patch and depersonalize it while still maintaining the feeling.

Luis Figueroa is a 17-year-old East High School student who is studying Graphic design at CSU Pueblo. Born in Pueblo, Colorado but raised in Parral, Chihuahua, Mexico, he enjoys painting, sketching, and 3D modeling. He dreams of one day working as an

illustrator and a graphic designer for his work to be seen around the world.

Syed Hashmi is a Business Management and Accounting Major. He grew up in Karachi, Pakistan and likes to travel. His children are the greatest source of his happiness and are the inspiration for this story.

Mick Heberly is an English Major Alumni, Class of 2020. He works comfortably bridged between nonfiction research and poetry. His poem “Cigarette Butt” was inspired by the relationship between a city and its homeless.

Alexis Jones is in her third year at Colorado State University Pueblo. She was on the CSU Pueblo cheer team the last two years and is nearing the end of her degree program. Writing has become an escape and a way for her to connect with others. Her poem “Never [Ending]” is about young love and then the heartbreak that comes to follow.

Amy Kasza is an English Secondary Certification Major with an Italian Minor at CSU Pueblo. The poem “Grey” was inspired by her passion for art despite being color-blind. The poem “10th Circle of Hell” was inspired by a conversation she had with a friend about their experiences with sleep paralysis.

Lexi Langoni is a senior in the nursing program at CSU Pueblo, will be graduating in May with a Bachelor of Science in Nursing, and will soon have RN after her name. Writing is her second passion behind nursing. Her piece “The Chef’s Daughter” was inspired by her

everyday life as a child growing up in and around the restaurant environment.

Shanon Lautenschlager has been with many people and creatures. All have been some form of inspiration in her poem “The Never Forgotten.” She found it both easy and difficult to write, but felt that it was worth the hard work.

Yesenia Mendiás is an English/Spanish Major, and a Senior at CSU Pueblo. She was born in Chihuahua, Mexico, and has lived most of her life in Colorado. Her poems are a reflection of life between borders.

Jessica Montoya is a student at Colorado State University Pueblo. Her poem “Hazy” is expressing the consequences of being too prideful.

Ken Neiberger is a Senior at CSU Pueblo studying Strength and Conditioning. He currently work as a Personal Trainer at the Thunderwolf Recreation Center. After graduating he plans on establishing a career as a Strength and Conditioning coach for professional Soccer. His story, “Empty Purse,” began as a writing prompt for creative writing class and was inspired by his love of fantasy novels and Tabletop Roleplaying games. His poem ‘Insomnolence’ is a piece from a poetry project from the same class.

T’Naus Nieto is a student at Colorado State University Pueblo for a BA in English (with an emphasis in creative writing) and a minor in Business administration. He is a ten-year US Army combat veteran. He has written poetry since seventh grade and won awards in high

school. He discovered reading novels not only as an escape from hardship but as a way to inspire the mind, with books like the *Giver* and *Fahrenheit 451*. T’Naus is a poet, writer, and aspiring novelist.

Jarro Padron is a student at Colorado State University Pueblo. His poem “Another Night from the Tower” is a free verse poem that was completed in his creative writing course. It is based off the artwork ‘Dog, 1952’ by Francis Bacon.

Sierra Pérez is a CSU Pueblo graduate. Her poem, “A Letter To My Lost Tilde É,” is inspired by the Aztec stories her father passed down to her. The poem walks through the Aztec gods and goddesses that speak most to her and through her.

Ariana Potokar is a graduate student at Adams State University in the Clinical Mental Health Counseling program. She graduated with a BA in Psychology from CSU Pueblo. Her writing is primarily non-fiction. Her collection, ‘And I Swim Away,’ is written to (hopefully) help empower quiet girls.

Mia Reeder is a senior at Colorado State University Pueblo. She is majoring in Psychology with a minor in Creative Writing. She spends most of her time at home with her daughter, and hopes to continue writing after she graduates.

Manuel Rios Quintana is an English major and a Senior at Colorado State University Pueblo who is set to graduate in May. Manuel is an aspiring poet and novelist. His poem, “A Father’s Promise” is dedicated to

his daughter, Komori.

Morgan Rogers In her story, “Time Marches On,” she drew upon a reserve of joy, curiosity and grief in order to tell the story of a boy who learns, grows up, experiences loss and eventually dies broken. It’s a very deliberately ambiguous story meant to force the reader to fill in the blanks and make their own inferences. She indicated through repetition each stage of his life, ensuring that the reader knew the boy had grown or changed somehow, deliberately denying the satisfaction of knowing how old he was when each event change occurred.

LuEllyn Ruybal Thai-American raised in Illinois, LuEllyn Ruybal now roams Southern Colorado while attending Colorado State University Pueblo. LuEllyn enjoys learning, laughing at the mundane, and cooking for her loved ones in her free time. In her pieces “Breadstealing Fuck!” and “Nibble,” she weaves together comedically pathetic snippets of daily life and raw emotion into her work.

Regan Sanders will be receiving her bachelor’s degree in English with an emphasis on creative writing in Spring of 2021. The poems featured in this issue were influenced by her struggles with mental illness, specifically dissociation. Her goals for the immediate future include getting involved professionally in the publishing industry, and finally writing her first novel.

Aubrey Scott is a Creative Writing Major with a minor in Spanish. This is their fourth year at CSU Pueblo and will be graduating in May of 2022, after which they will

be pursuing a career in animated storytelling. Aubrey has always had a great love of storytelling, especially in the horror genre. Their short story “Misdirection” was inspired by modern day fears and the recent television show *Lovecraft Country*.

Heidi Staggs is a student at Colorado State University Pueblo. Her story “Rainforest” is a short fiction piece about a girl who is afraid of being alone.

Sarah Swartz is an English Major with a Creative Writing emphasis. A Junior at CSU Pueblo, she enjoys writing poetry, plays, and fiction. She is an Ohio native and veteran of the United States Air Force. Originally having started writing freelance professionally in beauty and cosmetics, she has a history with a love of poetry. She had been writing unofficially since she was a young child. She always had the ambition of being a writer. Her poem, “Poetry is...,” is her personal take on what poetry is and is not, and her poem, “Austin, Texas”, is a first-person account of the experiences witnessed during visits to the city.

Noelani Tulensa is a student at Colorado State University Pueblo. She wrote her poem “Brown Skinned Girl” about her experience growing up as a young Black girl. She never saw herself on tv as a princess, a love interest, or anything besides the face of struggle and pain. She is a firm believer that representation is the key to a high self-esteem.

Gabriel Velasquez is a student at Colorado State University Pueblo. He is a 6’4 student-athlete who plays and loves football. His poem “Day 300” is an expression

for him to have fun.

Raena Vigil is a senior at CSU Pueblo. She is a Mass Communications major and has a minor in English. Her poem “Ritual” explores social media, technology, human behavior, and society.

Marla Vivoda is a post graduate student and English instructor, who writes in all genres. Her poems, “Re Moved” and “Ophelia’s Sail” are tandem poems about the character in Shakespeare’s Hamlet. The two pieces are inspired by “Ms. V’s” students and a painting.

Taren Welch is a junior at CSU Pueblo. He majors in economics with an emphasis in finance. He specializes in fiction. He currently works at a bank in town and hopes to one day work for the FBI. Taren’s inspiration for the piece was his love for his hometown. In Pueblo, the average rain lasts around 10-20 minutes. In Taren’s hometown the rain lasts almost the entirety of the day. On the day he wrote this, it rained for the standard 15 minutes. Longing for more precipitation, he imagined what would happen if it rained heavily for multiple days.

Danielle Whitaker is a Mass Communications major and English minor at CSU Pueblo. She specializes in non-fiction writing and hopes to one day write for Essence magazine. Her story, “The Deadly Things”, was inspired by her personal experiences with the Colorado Springs Police Department.

SUBMISSION GUIDELINES

Tempered Steel is Colorado State University-Pueblo's annually published literary magazine. The magazine accepts student submissions of poetry, drama, fiction, and creative non-fiction.

Students interested in submitting their creative works for consideration can do so through <https://temperedsteel.submittable.com/submit>. The submission process will ask students to include a cover letter about their submitted work. They will also be asked to remove any author identification and replace it with their PID number.

Tempered Steel accepts multiple submissions from students. By submitting to *Tempered Steel*, students agree that the work is original, has not been published elsewhere, and grants the magazine the right to publish it both in print and on their website. Students retain all copyrights to their submissions and will be allowed to assign any subsequent publishing rights as seen fit.

For more information about *Tempered Steel* or the submission process, please email our faculty sponsor at juan.morales@csupueblo.edu.



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