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spring 2021

The Works

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Community College

Front cover artwork: Third Eye, by Alyssa Devine

The Works

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Table of Contents

| | | | |
|------------------|---|------------------|--|
| Ethan Ainley | Monster in My Mind, 20 Rosemary and the Red House, 51 Aliens, 76 | Micah Green | Contest Winner: <i>Untitled</i> , 16 <i>Untitled</i> , 30 <i>Untitled</i> , 54 <i>Untitled</i> , 70 |
| Keanna Alba | <i>The Eyes Are Watching</i> , 44 <i>Crazy for Nuts</i> , 66 | Yasmine Gurrero, | Contest Winner: <i>Lazuli 1</i> , 13 |
| Amaya Allen | <i>Pandemic Dining</i> , 67 <i>Are You Here?</i> , 74 <i>Untitled</i> , 82 | Tom Irish | Your Grandfather's Hay Field, 27 Last Year's Tomato Vines, 45 Obvious, 55 |
| Mia Ashley | Ope, 68 | Joseph Magana | <i>Hendrix #2</i> , 23 <i>Luke Skywalker #1</i> , 59 <i>Caleb Widowgast #1</i> , 71 |
| Noel Berkey | Contest Winner: His Robot Companion, 10 | Naomi Meeks | Soul and Flesh, 31 Company, 42 |
| Graycyn Bennett | Parting at Departure, 24 A Harbored Weight, 32 Springtime, 46 | Kailey Meusel | Ashes, 28 |
| Glenn Bodish | Contest winner: <i>Painted Hills Close-up, Central Oregon</i> , 15 <i>Untitled Oil Painting</i> , 36 <i>Oak Tree Covered in Snow, Illinois</i> , 69 | Ruth Montino | Contest Winner: Easter Sunday 2020, 5 |
| Nic Bullock | Contest winner: Dead Star, 4 Organic Machine, 19 Advertisement, 37 Junk, 41 | Jessica Payne | Contest Winner: <i>Passing Time</i> , 14 <i>Starlight</i> , 26 Waves, 33 <i>Untitled</i> , 58 <i>Petals</i> , 65 |
| Elliot Casson | Contest Winner: Common Ground, 7 | Katie Sauer | Sunday Evening, 29 Nature, 38 Looking In, 72 |
| Andrea Cervantes | When You Don't Speak to Me, 22 If, 40 | Quinn Sedig | <i>Self Portrait</i> , 49 <i>Blood for Blood</i> , 57 <i>Bowie</i> , 81 |
| Jim Chisholm | Gladys, 60 | Debbie Thompson | Contest winner: <i>Jazz</i> , 17 <i>Assembledge</i> , 75 |
| Alyssa Devine | <i>Third Eye</i> , front cover <i>Growth</i> , back cover | Emma Torres | Where I'm From, 34 |
| Bri Erbes | <i>Untitled</i> , 39 <i>Untitled</i> , 48 | | |

2020-2021 Art Contest

Student Winner, Poetry

Dead Star

You cannot know if you're weightless
or just in freefall until maybe you crash
and crunch into bits of battered bone,
inside a bruised bag.

Or, you'll hang suspended in serene sterile stillness
losing bone density as time speeds by
above and free from the slow drag of heavy gravity.

I shattered the sky, and they make it sound so violent.
Galaxies ripped apart, shared friends, a mutual mattress.
Beauty restructured into a newly compressed dark distant danger.
Light-eater.

Lost behind the bright points
that slowly stretch from the distant past
still looking alive and unreachable.

A dead star.

-Nic Bullock

2020-2021 Art Contest

Non-Student Winner, Poetry

Easter Sunday 2020

On an Easter Sunday sojourn slowly trekking, frisky furry companions
checking
Movements alone, solitary... seeking the Presence on lands marked by the
Spiritual Essence.

From one holy site to the next, alone and yet together on this quest. No
tongues of fire of the Holy Spirit to flame for the tongues of a rapturous
congregation—only empty pews and parking lots

As my footsteps fell in plodding pacing trespassing the site of another
denomination, in the air wafted the smell of some home conflagration.
Roused from a too familiar pattern of introspection, my focus shifted to an
alternate studied reflection.

Looking across the road from the heavenly abode where treading and tra-
versing I stalwartly strode, I paused and questioned:
“Whose home has lit the fire that brings to life the flicker of something, of
what? Of people, of warmth, of home, hearth, a beacon, a beckoning on
this religious day of reckoning?”

Arson action, atomic aspirations, ashen associations—
Recollections of the incendiary potential of fire, of fusion of elements to
aspirate the air, the lives, obliterate the memory...or to

Bring together, bound, bind—burning bonfire bonds bidding memories
forged in fond remembrance and in bombastic revelation, recollection—
incantation—

In the blaze of the bright light, half-recognition of facial features but full of ritual knowledge orally affirming ties not to be extinguished by time or trial

Campfires—chimneys—coals conjure comfort, conjecture, composition, creation

Contrast combustion—cinders—charring charcoals

Devouring destruction, devastation, disintegration, demolition,

Decomposition

Extinguishing, eviscerating, engulfing elements—except

Evoking, eliciting the exhumation and examination of

Memories in embers—

Fires in fireplaces—the flames fuel, fume fleeting flickers—fragments or fixed

focus—the fond feelings, formative framing—or-----

Daily, I visit all churches—Methodist, Baptist, Lutheran, Church of Christ—but belong to none. The incendiary glowing heat within the split-level across the street serves as the contemporary alter, giving honor to Hephaestus on this Sunday morning rather than to God—to Aphrodite rather than Mary. The hearth a gathering place for the only worshippers who will cross the threshold—the family.

Easter Sunday 2020—alone and yet together

Keep those home fires burning.

-Ruth Montino

2020-2021 Art Contest

Student Winner, Fiction

Common Ground

by Elliot Casson

One night a few years ago, following a bizarre series of events whose specifics I can't even begin to recall, I found myself attending a fancy, candlelit dinner party with a group of people who I thought I would never be able to relate to. Every person I sat with there was a loaded, bible-thumping Republican. Their unbearable conversations reflected each of those three labels, and I happened to be the opposite of each one. Considering my presence at such a gathering made about as much sense as a known serial killer opening a daycare center, I found the majority of the dinner incredibly uncomfortable.

I showed up to the place on time, and I found that we all spent a strange amount of time standing around before the food was served. While we did, I stood in the corner of the living room, far outside of the many conversations being had around me. I barely moved as I stood, as the room was full of things that - if gently bumped into - would fall to the floor and shatter into many expensive pieces. I wore a dress shirt and a wrinkled, ill-fitting sport coat, finding comfort in the drink that I held and refused to put down for any reason. Even simply holding the thing was a valuable comfort, a coping mechanism disguised as an ordinary dinner party behavior.

When the time for dinner finally came, things became worse, as I was then forced to actually be around them all, and forced to listen to what they had to say. I tried not to, however. I ate my dinner in silence, only looking up to sip my drink. As I listened to the people at the table lament the continuing changes in the world and the doomed future of the increasingly liberal youth, I wondered how easily I could have rushed the kitchen and drank from the expensive bottle that sat on the shining granite countertop, in order to make it all more tolerable.

I was pulled away from these thoughts and back to the table when I heard some offhand remark that caused a rush of feelings separate from the boredom I had

already been dealing with. A man at the table, heavysset and in his sixties, had said something, laughing as he did, about - in his words - homosexuals marrying. I don't remember exactly what it was the old man said, but I knew it was unmistakably on-brand for the crowd; the comment suggested, from behind a thin veil of a joke, that such unions would be the final nail in the world's coffin, and that their legality would effectively bring about the apocalypse. The remark made the table rumble with jovial laughter, and I, straight-faced, took a gulp from my drink. Trying to keep calm, I excused myself and stepped outside for a cigarette.

As I stood on the stone doorstep, blowing wisps of smoke into the chilly night, I found myself unable to quit thinking about the old man's comment. Naturally, I thought about the reason comments like the one I had just heard continued to have such an effect on me.

When my brother and I were teenagers, he came out to my parents and I after struggling with the secret for a long time. Knowing the rules of living in a small, redneck town, he told no one else. Though he had relieved himself of the terrible burden to some extent when he told us, he was still not entirely free of it. He carried it deep inside, walking the streets and high school hallways in virtual secrecy, sure that word would somehow inexplicably spread. He wanted to avoid being seen once it had.

Despite his efforts, shortly after his secret had become the subject of discussion throughout the town and the school, three of his gym classmates jumped him in the quiet locker room after class, leaving him hospitalized for two weeks.

Standing in the dark on the step, I hung my head and sighed when I heard another loud, collective laughter just beyond the front door behind me. I considered leaving right then and hoping to never encounter any of them again, but I thought about the attitudes of the group once more. Affected by drink and emotion, I stamped my cigarette out on the doorstep and went back inside.

After managing to get the attention of everybody at the table, I stood over them all, explaining why I had stepped outside. I told the story of my brother as they watched and listened with a mix of sadness and surprise on their faces. Ordinarily I would have kept quiet, but I was just buzzed and angry enough to speak what was on my mind. As I reached the end of the story, told in a slightly raised voice, I started speaking directly to the old man who had made the comment. When I was finished, the table had grown quiet and people looked down sadly, deliberately averting their eyes from me. I looked down at the old man in his chair. He quickly glanced up at me, saying nothing but giving a solemn, apologetic nod.

However, I couldn't stop. Still standing beside the table, I felt angrier and more drunk than ever. "What's wrong with you all?" I asked. "It's the twenty-first century and you're still listening to some . . . made-up Santa Claus. It's ridiculous, and you all need to grow up." Not entirely aware the words were coming out, I looked down at those at the table and was surprised to see them so quiet and dejected. I couldn't decide whether to feel regret or satisfaction. The old man spoke then.

"He's not made-up to me," he said, emotion creeping into his words.

"Why not?" I scoffed. "Look around. The world's a terrible place. I can't help but think that if your guy was real things would be a lot better."

There was a long pause between us and everyone else at the table, although I was quickly growing unaware of the rest of them. Something changed in the old man, and I watched it happen. A look came into his eyes so grave that I felt I should sit down. Quietly, I made my way back to my chair and sat down, seeing only the old man as I did it. He proceeded, in what was nearly a whisper, to tell me a story of his own.

When the old man was a child, long before cars were what they are today, his parents were driving through a blizzard late at night. When they failed to return home at the time they had promised, the boy knew what had happened. Outside of town, the car had gone over a patch of ice on the road, sending itself off the road and into a tree. The boy stood and paced late into the night, watching every window in the house, awaiting his parents' return. Knowing that the odds were not in his parents' favor, he did the only thing that made sense in that moment. He had prayed for the first time in his life, and shortly after, his parents walked through the front door, only slightly harmed.

As I sat in my chair, the room seemed to go dark. All I noticed was the old man and the tiny flames of candles, flickering and trembling above the table.

"So," the old man said, leaning forward and putting his elbows on the table, "I understand your feelings about your brother. Can you understand mine about . . ." he trailed off, but quickly tipped his eyes and head skyward.

I leaned back in my chair and looked at my drink. I left it where it was.

"Yeah," I said, looking the man in the eyes. "That sounds fair."

2020-2021 Art Contest

Non-Student Winner, Fiction

His Robot Companion

by Noel Berkey

We watched the video clip and then watched again. There he was at the award ceremony dressed in his fancy suit next to this gorgeous creature. Her hair was stunning, even it was fake. His was choreographed into an all-too-real comb-over. Her synthetic cheekbones, eyes, nose, and mouth were a perfect fusion of art and science. His face . . . hmm, let's hold off on describing it.

She moved with a type of natural precision. Her back curved at just the right spot for his hand to be placed there when they strolled slowly through the flash of cameras. Her dress was fancy too. She seemed designed for this dress. Her precisely calculated but seemingly natural movements and expressions seemed to reveal when responding to whatever he was saying that she could tolerate him and even find his observations interesting, and that she didn't take herself too seriously. We thought that was a special touch.

They seemed like a good match. We were happy enough for them. For him especially, since he was human, and most likely had feelings like the rest of us. And since the viruses had been spreading in waves, leaving us isolated and craving companionship, he was lucky to find someone who was likely designed to disinfect herself daily and free from all biological contamination.

It is safe to say that most of us reflected on this relationship now and then as we tended to our daily needs and desires. What would it be like to live with and love an unnaturally attractive robot companion? Indeed, after much consideration, there was a great deal of envy. When our human mates challenged us, like when they got sick or made us feel guilty for some reason, we could see the appeal of having a creature programmed to support and tolerate us at all times. We thought about being able to push a button to keep our mates quiet when they kept talking about things they had already talked about too much, or pushing a button to make them smile more, or love us more. For those of us without intimate human companions, this attractive option, even if it

was likely too out-of-reach expensive to pursue, inspired dreams aplenty. It was hard to get people to pay attention to you sometimes, and here you could push a button to get someone, even if it was a robot creature, to look into your eyes and listen to what you have to say and laugh when you hoped they would. We thought of all kinds of buttons we could push. And we also wondered which buttons he was pushing, where they were hidden on her body, or whether there was a remote. We dreamed of having that kind of control.

Soon a clip was posted of them eating dinner together. "She doesn't eat much," he is recorded saying while looking at her with what appears to be great admiration. "She nibbles away like a little bird." The camera pans in and shows a close-up of her plate, a dazzling display of colorful liquids that look to be elegantly dancing around a tiny cracker with a sliver of lettuce resting upon a pinkish paste. When we watched the first time and saw the camera follow her hand to the cracker, and then follow the cracker as she put it to her lips, we realized there were many questions we had yet to consider. How was this going to work? Some of us with modest incomes had already thought that not having to feed a robot companion would be a key benefit of such a relationship. But here he was, feeding her what appeared to be an incredibly expensive cracker. And she was going to have to digest it somehow. We assumed he was showing off here, as was his style, and could have chosen a robot model that didn't eat anything. We could sort of understand his preference though. After all, we didn't know anyone else in his position who would have been without an attractive companion at his side. At the same time, admittedly, it was hard to know how to feel about all of this.

What we did know for certain is that he had been lucky enough all his life, but that we had also felt sorry for him now and then. He had inherited generations of wealth built on his family's efforts in coordinating military campaigns. We had watched him rise, as the media initially followed him and he later took on the key role of informing all of us of his goings-on. Apparently he wasn't good at school, even though he attended the best. Apparently he had quite a few confrontations with bright-eyed students at these schools who were critical of wars and profiting from human suffering. He dropped out and traveled the oceans on a yacht to escape their taunts. There were images posted online of him on deck with his arms around real women in bikinis. Sometimes he was surrounded by a quite a few. After many years of this, his smile seemed forced in some of the photos that were posted. Maybe the ladies he surrounded himself with were forcing their smiles too.

It's possible that he was looking for something more meaningful, like a relationship, or maybe he had some other purpose to explore. We didn't really know. As much as we might have envied his bachelor life on the yacht, we knew it was directionless, like an endless yet pleasant enough hangover unfolding on a daily basis. And yet we were somehow surprised when he had begun posting pictures of just him and a special lady friend with a toothy smile. Every day there were more pictures. We tried to ignore them at times since we often had other things to do, but there they were, again and again. Pictures of the two of them traveling the world, exploring its mysteries, and perhaps their own. We'd never seen him smile like he was smiling now. He looked like he was in deep, like maybe, just maybe, he might actually care for her more than he cared for himself.

This lasted for some time. The world kept turning. Seasons changed. We watched movies. Some of us read poetry. We nurtured relationships and ended relationships. And when the first wave of deadly viruses spread through, he lost the woman with the toothy smile.

We were all huddled up and separated from one another to stay alive. We still found ways to amuse ourselves online too, even when the future didn't seem so amusing. But news of his loss touched something within us, and it was hard to be optimistic for a while. It just was. There was a vulnerability we shared with him, and we didn't know how to move on from here.

A few more viral outbreaks swept through, as they do. They were worse than first anticipated.

When life eventually began to get back to as normal as it would ever get back to, the first images of him with his new robot companion began appearing online. We had to admit to ourselves that whatever our feelings for him, seeing him moving on was inspiring. We were hopeful somehow, even if just a little.

In time, we learned that their relationship had turned a corner. The viral outbreaks, it seemed, had made him question his mortality. So after much thought and "soul-searching," as he put it, they had decided to create a special child. She was pregnant, we were told, and now they were going to be parents. If our confusion concerning how she processed food had been put to rest one way or another, finding out that she was growing his offspring in her robot tummy unleashed all sorts of curious thoughts in our relatively primitive brains. How was this going to work? Would this be a human child, or something else? The unique form of inter-species fertilization that was required seemed sort of cartoonish in the way we visualized it, if we're being honest. How we imagined the moment in our respective imaginations would fill many lines of poetry. Even so, we couldn't decide whether to feel sorry for this unborn baby/creature or envy its future.

For the next few months, in quiet moments when we were alone, we thought about this growing being taking shape, not only in its robot mother but in our imaginations. We were all preparing for a new chapter, it seemed. Those human struggles through history we had heard about at school hadn't really prepared us for this turn of events. In our search for meaning, we found ourselves identifying with the baby/creature. This made us feel small, too. And also made us wonder how much time we had left. Something would happen that we would struggle to comprehend. This much we knew. And, of course, it was already happening. Our human dreams would not abandon us, we told ourselves.

2020-2021 Art Contest

Student Winner, Digital Art



Lazuli 1

by Yasmine Guerrero

2020-2021 Art Contest

Student Winner, Photography



Passing Time

by Jessica Payne

2020-2021 Art Contest

Non-Student Winner, Photography



Painted Hills Close-up, Central Oregon

by Glenn Bodish

2020-2021 Art Contest
Student Winner, Traditional Art



Untitled

by Micah Green

2020-2021 Art Contest
Non-Student Winner, Traditional Art



Jazz

by Debbie Thompson

Poetry

Organic Machine

“The body is like a computer.”
Or the computer is a body.
Just as whatever you put
into the body it comes back
changed. Give the computer
something, electricity and input
then it will give you something else
inorganic and digital. The body will
return to you heat and waste. Kill a body
or CPU with strong impact. Crumpled metal
and shattered glass on the street
wet with blood and transmission fluid.

-Nic Bullock

The Monster in my Mind

It follows me home again.
“There is nothing out there,” my mom says.
The scratches on my arm say otherwise.
She turns a blind eye,
Nothing is wrong,
When you ignore the problem.

It finds its way into my room,
Lingers above the bed,
Peeks through with piercing crimson eyes,
And decaying yellow fangs.
The beast mutters words,
Its faint voice reaches my ears,
And only mine.

I close my eyes to find an escape,
But it still follows me in my slumber,
Controls all my visions,
Never lets me find peace,
I get no sleep.

It idles on the shelf above me when I wake,
And slowly drifts behind me,
While I drag my feet down the stairs.

It remains with me at the table,
I tell my dad of the monster,
“Just ignore it, its nothing,”
My dad informs me.

That nothing continues to track me to school.
In class, it distracts me,

With its constant demeaning voice,
Beating me down,
And leaving me exacerbated.

It clutches my shoulders at lunch.
Everyone at the table oblivious,
To its bony hands grabbing me.
A tight grip holds me still,
And keeps me quiet,
“What’s wrong?”
My friends ask.
It holds me hostage,
And forces me to read the words,
From its soulless script.
“Nothing, I’m fine,” I reply.

By end of the day,
It’s got me in a chokehold,
Closes in tight on my throat,
And leaves me gasping for air.
I crawl my way home.

My house is no longer safe.
I’m suffocated by my thoughts,
Walls close in on me.
A single option weighs on my mind.
Through my misguided eyes,
I see only one departure left.
The cloud swallows me whole,
Leaving me dead and alone.

-Ethan Ainley

When you don't speak to me

If you wish not to speak to me,
I respect what you wish not to say to me.
For everyday I wait to listen
To the voluptuous volume of your voice
That used to send vibrations down my spine.
So,
If you wish not to speak to me
Compliance is key,
But I'll loathe the words
You say not to me
The words you say to her
Is what gets to me.

-Andrea Cervantes



Hendrix #2

by Joseph Magana

Parting at Departure

Our arms release signaling our parting
 You look at me and your face is soft
 I hear a rumble of thunder
 Hopefully we won't lose power
 Good-bye my first spark
 We see the departure sign

I ask God for a sign
 I smooth down the way your hair is parting
 You hold my hand and the nerves in my body come to life with a spark
 Your hand in mine is warm and soft
 The situation makes me feel powerless
 In my chest my heartbeat thunders

Around us an army of footsteps thunder
 I'm still waiting for a sign
 A voice booms through the loudspeaker with power
 The crowd starts parting
 My voice goes soft
 Teardrops form and my eyes spark

I could make this whole situation go away with one spark
 It would be another story on the news followed by a weather forecast
 of thunder
 But I wouldn't because I'm too soft
 You wouldn't love me if my face was on a wanted sign
 The loudspeaker says the plane will soon be departing
 I can hear the planes landing on the runway and shutting down power

You stand up straighter and you look like someone of power
 You look into my teary eyes and I can see yours spark
 With one last hug you turn and maneuver through the crowd by weaving
 and parting
 Quiet sobs crack out of me like thunder
 I see the text bubble on my phone sign
 My body goes soft

I read over the words softly
 It says you are turning off your phone's power
 I send a heart sign
 I wait to see your green logged on bubble go away in one spark
 I hear the plane's engine outside rumbling like thunder
 I wave good-bye as the plane is departing

I watch the plane fly away softly amongst the lightning sparks
 I feel a powerful pain in my chest and my heartbeat thunders
 The sign of our final parting

-Graycyn Bennett



Starlight

Tulle and chiffon gown with silver applique

by Jessica Payne

Your Grandfather's Hay Field

and there was that time at your mother's place
 when we walked in the green hay field your grandfather used to own
 and I said that I understood why you felt this empty, flattish place was
 magical
 and you said that you knew that I didn't, but you appreciated the effort

later, at the house, when I found tick after tick crawling
 on my pants, you told me not to throw them over the porch rail,
 and you called your mother, and
 she took them, one by one, to the kitchen, where
 she burned them with matches
 while we drank beer on the porch and stared at my shins
 it was to protect the dog, she said,
 and when she disappeared again,
 we both had the same smile

-Tom Irish

Ashes

On my shelf they sit you see
Two things reduced to just things
That once meant the world to me

Gone forever
They'll always be with you, they say
Have you ever tried to live when your worlds gone away?

Every time you catch a glance
It's a painful reminder
The biggest part of your heart
The reason for your being

Is gone. Just gone.
It's hard to breathe sometimes
And sometimes it's hard to feel

Please, please wake me up
Tell me this isn't real
I want to be with you both
See your faces, feel your touch

I know my work here isn't done
But haven't I felt enough?
Anguish. Grief. Heartbreak.
Enough to go around twice

Give me the strength I need
Send a message from above
Please
I'd give anything to feel your love

-Kailey Meusel

Sunday Evening

Surrounded by Water

Ocean Breeze Scented Bubbles

Soaking into My Skin

Pink Toenails Peek Out to Say Hello

Breasts Become Buoys

Nipples Bobbing For Air

Glass of Moscato in One Hand

Music Playing in the Background

Sunday Evening

-Katie Sauer



Untitled

by Micah Green

Soul and Flesh

Charred skin
The smell of death wafting in
Burning the nostrils
Rotting flesh
Red
Tiny and large bodies laid side by side
In a line

You can't hide
From the cold-hearted truth
The passage of youth
Two kinds of pain
Two kinds of poison

Soul and flesh
Combined in one
Two ways to bleed
Two ways to come undone

Death comes not once, but twice
The final asking price
Stripped to nothing

-Naomi Meeks

A Harbored Weight

*I had a dream I was floating aimlessly in the ocean all alone in a little blue
rowboat
The salty breeze drifted across my face wiping the tears from my tired eyes
My cheekbones flushed a wind burnt red
My body had grown weary from my persistent fight against the swelling
waves
With each falling crest my boat rocked and I was knocked down to the splin-
tering floorboards
The ocean I had known was once calm and inviting and I enjoyed basking in
its beauty
Now the ocean was cruel and unforgiving and I wanted nothing more than to
be swept away by its waves
The bitter taste of salt reached my lips and I did not know whether it was the
making of my own creation or my adversary finally getting to me
I reached out to grab hold of the sides of my ship and I steadied myself for a
moment only to be crushed beneath another swell
The roar of the wind stung my ears and resonated within me
I scanned the horizon for a break in the storm but the dark billowing clouds
blocked out any glimmer of sunlight and were only illuminated by the sudden
flash of lightning followed by a startling echo of thunder
My body crumpled to the unyielding deck and I sniffled longing for the scent
of my vanilla perfume but only inhaling the salty mist of the ocean which now
intimidated me
And I woke up from my torment only to have it repeat itself again*

-Graycyn Bennett

Waves

The waves pulled me under
and I reveled in the silence

The thunder of waves
drowning the waves in my head

The world painted blue
strokes blended together in a blur

Down here the world is soft

Lost in the depths
I find solace

Soon I will swim
but for now,
I relish how it feels to sink

-Jessica Payne

Where I'm From

I am from the big green farmhouse.
 From the sweet-smelling pine trees and bright green grass
 I'm from the never-ending cornfields.
 From the hot, steamy summer days and cool, crisp nights.
 I'm from the soft, blush pink peonies.
 From the willow tree, who's long wisps continually danced in the
 breeze,
 as it created a soft, ocean-like sound.

I'm from a family of brown skin and brown eyes.
 I'm from a Torres and a Moreno.
 From pan dulce and strong dark café.
 I'm from the constant laughter of my big family.
 I'm from the heartbreak of losing a family member.
 From the pain, my heart felt on April 8th, 2017.

I am from being an adolescent child always eager for adventure.
 I'm from running free.
 Running, running into the deep dark fields.
 I'm from being my own captain of the vast great world.
 From scaling trees as if they were massive mountains.
 And fishing in a clear blue creek.
 From misty, my well worn-out bike.

I'm from Sunday school and bible verses.
 From "Wear your Sunday best."
 And "Sit up straight and pay attention."
 And that's why I'm still alive.

I'm from small quiet Sterling, where nothing ever happens.
 From the friendships, I still have because of that little town.
 From friendly neighbors and warm greetings
 And a diverse community

Buried deep in the basement is a trunk,
 Filled with my memories of where I'm from.
 It contains everything from my happy childhood.
 Everything from laughing faces, letters full of love and sentimental
 dried flowers.
 I am from those moments.
 From growing up just as I should have.
 From the moments that shaped me into who I am.
 From realizing now that all those seemingly average days got me
 to where I am now.
 And from realizing "Where I'm From" is no longer solely where
 I'm from, but where I am now.

-Emma Torres



Untitled Oil Painting

by Glenn Bodish

Advertisement

The generic zip of commercial humor tries desperately at my attention screaming, “Want this!” like a pesky child in the supermarket. T.V. ads with clean white rags, messy husbands against wives, and dad’s dorky dopiness that totally kills the cool because we don’t have an LCD in our backseat.

The truth is that I don’t want it, they just need me to.

-Nic Bullock

Nature

A Pipevine Swallowtail dances through the air to a beautiful pink daisy
 That has rooted itself in between two dirt rocks that have grown
 A protective covering of moss.
 The wind kisses your cheek to your ear and whispers
 "Follow me."
 As you walk you look around you.
 And you take it all in.
 You close your eyes and listen to the sounds that surround you.

Leaves crunch under your feet,
 Twigs falling from nearby trees
 As squirrels play "tag you're it."
 Cicadas calling out to a mate with their tymbal.
 Birds singing to you saying, "Follow me."

You take a deep breath and take in the smells.
 The fresh air that satisfies your nose hairs.
 The different plants that surround you.
 The sweet smell of lilacs,
 Viburnums nearby salsa dancing,
 And what is that?
 A smell that is not distinguished.
 A smell that says, "Follow me."

You open your eyes and follow the unknown.
 You round a corner and hear it instantly.
 A waterfall.
 When you set eyes upon it, it is like no other thing you have ever seen.
 The cascade jumps into a pool of water below.
 The crystal clear liquid calling to you saying, "Come in, don't you be shy."
 And you politely give in and say hello.

You walk towards the water performing a strip tease.
 Standing at the water's edge you walk forward,
 Allowing it to swallow you whole.

-Katie Sauer



Untitled

Bri Erbes

If

But if each day
Those burnt lips were no longer frayed
The sweet lips of hers would come his way.
And if each week
The lachrymose thoughts lingered on
Her unblemished persona
Would be soon forgot.
And if each year
The same disparate people
Came to a parallel
Too soon to intersect
A discrete parody of what she thought to be
Was only a speck.

-Andrea Cervantes

Junk

Kicking through your sentimental clutter
and he is spitefully disinterested in who spoke to you
from within a burning bush earlier today.
Checking the expiration dates on the junk you collect.

You don't always touch only what you own
and keep some cats in captivity for twenty years.
Wandering eyes say, he can cheat on you
like some unfair test, that tribulation called you.

And you do it too.

-Nic Bullock

Company

Steam fleeing a teapot
It shrieks in despair
I pick it up to comfort it
And pour its lifeblood into my cup

Rain thuds loudly
Against my sturdy roof
Trying to attack me
But splattering, deterred

A book cradled in my hands
Bites me with its pages
My eyes straining to find its' soul
My heart bleeding inconsolably

A knock at the door
Yellow raincoats, thrown off
Muddy boots abandoned
Wet hugs leave my clothes soaking

Flashing of gums
With white shiny jewels
Lines etched in faces, landmarks
Crows feet and chapped lips

The laughing was contagious
The guitar strums a symphony
The small fire inviting
Friends the answer-key

Company is better
When for so long you're alone
Every moment is a treasure
Every person a home

-Naomi Meeks



The Eyes Are Watching

by Keanna Alba

Last Year's Tomato Vines

They're snaky, entwined in an almost sexual pile,
lounging languidly in the angle between two neat planes of fence
vaulting vainly from picket to picket
and the overlying snow does not conceal these sins,
it highlights them for the hard eyes of the neighbors

so while I drink my morning coffee, I imagine what it would be like
to wake up one day and find them just gone

It would mean that someone fought them
wrestled them like Jacob wrestled the angel
killed them like George killed the dragon
and they did it just for me, so that
I could stand in the kitchen with my coffee and feel a little better

like maybe it was finally time to keep up with the shoveling
so that the neighbors' faces might turn soft and welcoming

but what's more likely is that there's an impossible crocus sprouting under
those vines

insulated and warmed by the heat of my decomposing sins
and if they were removed, it would wither in the harsh December air
and if they were allowed to remain, it would be smothered

-Tom Irish

Springtime

We were once seeds
Small and seemingly useless
But to our mother
We were the world

We shook, cracked, grew, and sprouted
Our arms outstretched to the world around us
Climbing up the beams of sunlight
Stretching our dreams to the moon

Our petals opened and bloomed showing us our true colors
The garden around us became plentiful with multitudes of hues
The new sproutlings drew closer to one another and formed in groups
We grew taller and stronger and our colors became more vibrant

Others sprouted around us and we soon began to compete for the sunlight
They poked, bent, and choked us in order to get the sunlight's attention
We waited in the shadows cherishing what little sunlight we could get
But soon the other sproutlings faded away and we were left all alone

Our colors were no longer vibrant and our petals no longer stretched out to show the world
The sproutlings we once knew were gone and we were all alone amongst the weeds

We no longer cared about the sunlight and found our strength through other things
We began to like the shadows because we did not have to compete for the light

-Graycyn Bennett

Untitled

Depression is a monster.
 Its claws sharp, like a blade.
 It tears at itself.
 At first, from within.
 Then the scars start to appear on its skin.
 With its mouth and teeth,
 The beast gnaws at you.
 Playful.
 Like a dog.
 But even some dogs bite.
 It latches on so hard,
 You couldn't possibly escape.
 You scream and you bleed.
 You beg for someone's help.
 Your words are fall silent.
 And those who hear don't seem to listen.
 You get blamed for being consumed.
 They tell you that you should have been nicer to the thing.
 Maybe it wouldn't have bitten you if you were only nicer...
 But this isn't true.
 And you know this in your gut.
 So you pray and you try,
 Again and again.
 Until someone comes through.
 Until help arrives.
 And you'll feel better someday.
 But for today, you're just mauled.
 And, no matter what anyone says,
 It is not your fault.

-Bri Erbes



Self Portrait

by Quinn Sedig

Prose

Rosemary and the Red House

by Ethan Ainley

The house is at the end of a long driveway that circles around and then leads back to the road. I'm not sure where to look as there are a plethora of colorful flowers and bushes that draw my attention. However, the plant life seems to have taken over and the yard is unkempt.

I approach the red front door and I'm about to knock when I see a note on the door. It reads, "For those interested in the job offer please come around to the back door." I frown a bit confused but decide to go along with the demands. I closely follow the red brick on the side of the house, which is covered in vines, around to the back. I eventually find a paved pathway I can follow to a back door.

Before I can knock there is a scream coming from a nearby greenhouse. I head towards the noise and walk across an overgrown lawn. I feel as if I am trudging through the Amazon forest between the unkempt garden and tall grass.

I find an elderly woman holding her finger. She doesn't notice me as she utters some cuss words under her breath. Instinctually I know I need to help this woman and I forget to make my presence known. I grab a nearby clean rag and walk to the woman. She is dressed in an old pair of jeans and a flannel shirt that is accompanied by a black apron.

I approach her and say, "Here let me help you," and then I wrap her finger in the cloth, applying pressure.

She jumps back, "Who are you?" she says.

I smile and say, "I'm here for the job."

"Oh... well, I guess you've arrived just in time," she laughs, "I've cut myself picking out roses even though I've done this a million times before. The old body doesn't work like it once did."

"You have to be very careful with roses, their horns can get very sharp and at your age, a little prick is worse."

She frowns and says, "I know that and roses have thorns, not horns."

"Anyways, is there a first aid kit we can use to bandage this finger?"

“Yes, follow me inside,” she says and then adds, “My name is Rosemary by the way.”

After I use the first aid to help her bandage the finger she decides to put her teapot on the stove and make us some evening tea. I can’t help but notice that the inside of the house is a cluttered mess. There are sticky notes all over with different messages. I spot one that says, “Make sure to get a dozen roses picked out for the Bushnell’s.”

“So you live alone,” I ask.

She is in the other room and says loudly, “Oh no, of course not. My husband Richard lives here with me,” she then adds, “Oh and I forgot to mention that my name is Rosemary.”

At this point, I have entered the kitchen. I notice the outside of her refrigerator is full of pictures, drawings, and more notes. I spot a newspaper clipping of an obituary and get closer to read it. I see the name of the person is Richard Nellerman and that he died about two years ago.

“Do you have kids or family that visit often?” I ask.

“I have three amazing children and five beautiful grandchildren,” she pauses, “But, you know, life gets busy and they don’t always have enough time to come visit.”

She corrals me back into the living room and hands me some tea. I grab the teacup from her and slowly blow on it as she heads to the bathroom. While walking around the living room I see there is a landline phone with a message and I push the button to hear it.

“Hey mom,” there is a pause, “Give me a call back so I can talk to you about the different options we have. I talked to some nice homes that I think would be a great fit for you,” Another pause, “Anyways, I know this is hard for you to accept but I can’t drop everything to help you,” the person pauses again, “Just call me back when you get this.”

Suddenly, there is a loud bang that comes from the bathroom.

Once I’ve made my way to the bathroom I yell, “Hey! Rosemary is everything alright?”

“I’m fine thank you!” she meekly yells back.

“Are you sure?”

“Well,” she pauses, “I suppose you could go into the kitchen and get the bathroom key that’s.... Um... It’s in you know... the drawer.”

I run to the kitchen frantically searching every draw before finding a key with a tag attached to it saying, “Bathroom Key.” I run back to the door and quickly push the key in and turn. When the door is open I see that Rosemary has somehow slipped. She is sprawled out on the floor and grimacing in pain.

“God, this is so embarrassing,” she laughs and then recoils in pain.

At this point, I have helped her move to a nearby chair where she sits to catch her breath.

I tell her, “You just need to be more careful. You also need handles in this bathroom.”

She gives me a dirty look before yelling, “I’m not a goddamn baby! I can

handle myself! This is the first time anything like this has happened!”

“It’s not though, I noticed the bruises earlier.”

“This is none of your business! I could tell earlier that you were not the right person for this job! Just leave! I don’t even need you because I have my five children and three grandchildren!”

I take a breath and say, “I can help you. I mean no harm. No one should have to end up in a nursing home. I’ve gone through these situations plenty of times before.”

Rosemary scowls and says, “I’m sick of being treated like I’m a child!” she pauses and starts to tear up, “I am a grown woman who can take care of herself!” At this point, she has started bawling and buries her face in her hands.

“Of course. I’m only here to help and do what you say”

Rosemary takes some breaths and then says, “Okay,” she pauses, “I guess I could use an extra hand.”



Untitled

by Micah Green

Obvious

by Tom Irish

I don't understand things sometimes. A good example happened the other day. I was eating my oatmeal and I saw something brown out the window. I thought it might have been a package I had been expecting, so I got up and went outside. It turned out it was a McDonald's bag that had blown into the doorway. I kicked it back into the yard so it would blow away again and then went right back inside.

When I sat back down at the table I looked into my bowl and saw a blurry footprint sunk into the top of my oatmeal.

Savanna was the only one in the house, so I called for her and asked her about it. She was six, and the footprint was about her size. She said she didn't do it. Now, I know that sometimes kids lie. But not my Savanna. One time her mother found a kitchen knife left out. Savanna admitted that she had done it right away, even though it earned her a swat. I don't believe that my granddaughter has ever told a lie in her life.

So I sat down and looked more closely. My spoon might have scooped some oatmeal up and left a weird indentation. But it was clearly a foot. I could see the little toe prints, the deeper hole where the heel had sunk in. Specks of black and gray dirt from the floor.

I looked around the kitchen to see if we had been robbed. Nothing was missing, but on the floor near the door I saw a little splot of oatmeal. That told me that whoever had stepped in my oatmeal had run out the door. I went out onto the back porch and saw no oatmeal out there, but I think it's possible that the oatmeal wore off the foot by the time he or she got outside. I had no idea, and still don't, how he or she got by me.

This was over a year ago. I scraped the oatmeal down the disposal and ate a grapefruit. I never did figure out who or what left that footprint. But that's not what I don't understand.

Once in a while I tell this story to people. They just want to say it was Savanna! They tell me things like she was the only one home, that her footprint would fit in the bowl. Well, I get all of that. But the thing I don't get is that SAVANNA DOESN'T LIE. Nobody listens when I say that.

I mean, it's not impossible that someone broke into the house. I might have scared them off coming back in. Or there's all that science fiction stuff. Aliens, time travel, other universes. I believe those things happen from time to time. How else could you explain the things happening lately?

So it's not that I don't understand things. It's the people. I just don't understand why people refuse to believe the obvious.



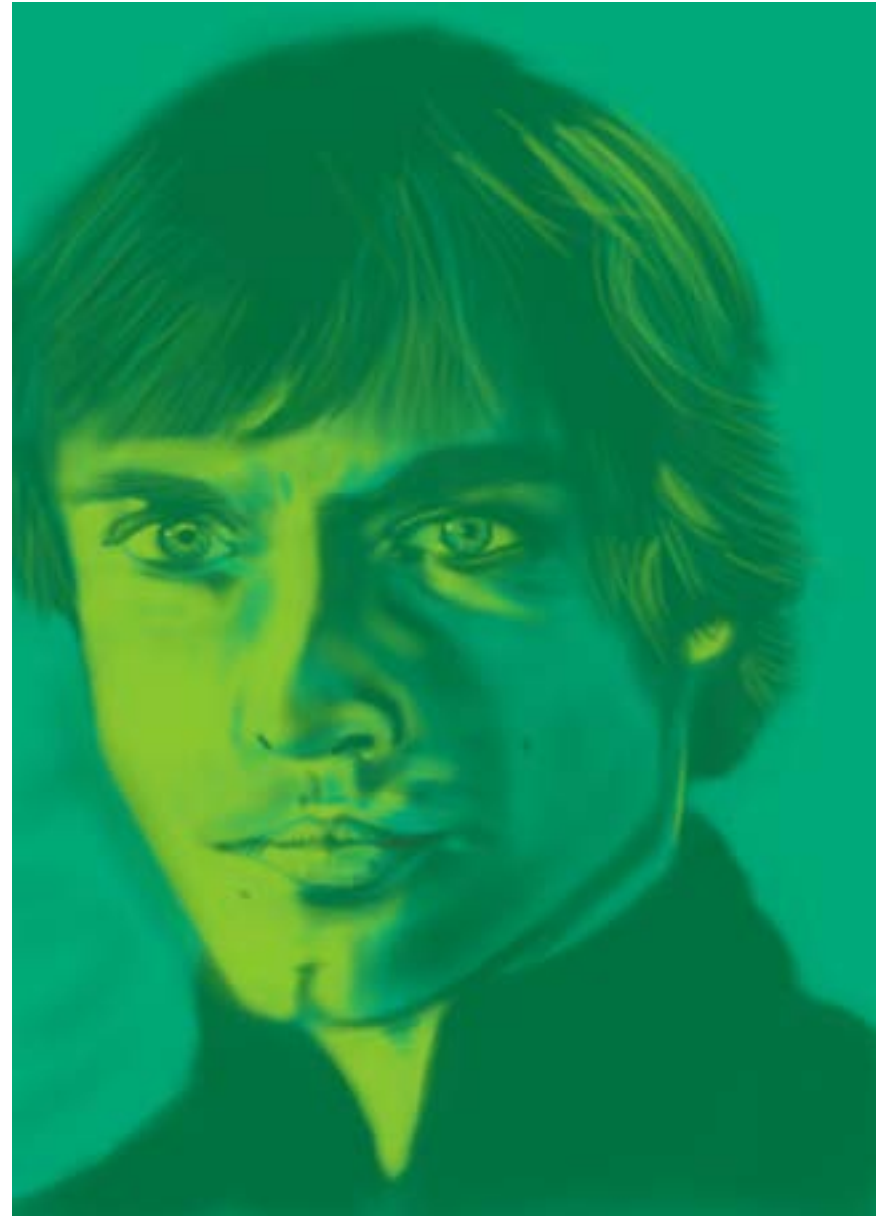
Blood for Blood

by Quinn Sedig



Untitled

by Jessica Payne



Luke Skywalker #1

by Joseph Magana

GLADYS

by Jim Chisholm

Harmony

I was born in rural southwestern Utah, in a mining village named Harmony, in 1933. I was the seventh of twelve children, and the third eldest girl. From my earliest memories, I knew I had a sight that no one else did. Later I learned the scientific name for this, synesthesia, but when I was little, I just called it my Rainbow Eyes. Sounds, tastes, smells, feelings, emotions: all of them were a swirling rainbow of colors.

We were raised in the Church of Jesus Christ, of Latter-Day Saints, which members shortened to LDS but outsiders called Mormon. My father could trace his descent from the original 12 apostles of Brigham Young, and was the long-serving Bishop of our community. I was raised to be devout and proud of my faith. I was happy that my name, Gladys, contained the letters “LDS”, in order, and that the other letters in order spelled “GAY”, which of course back then meant happy. I was a happy little LDS girl.

Happy little LDS girls were expected, by the Church, to grow up to become happy little LDS wives and mothers. To be anything else was to be a failure, forgivable in the eyes of the Lord but not in the eyes of the Bishop.

My eldest sister, Margaret, was married the day before she turned 18. By 22 she was a mother of 3. My second eldest sister, Francis, actually attended a semester of college (at the local normal school, of course) before getting married and having children, and there was an unstated frisson of relief in our family when that happened. My brothers, of course, all went to university (BYU, of course), went on missions, and were then married. The girls were only sent to college to keep them busy and to find a husband. They called it the “MRS” degree. It was never expected that they graduate.

Looking back, my Rainbow Eyes made it hard to connect with people. I had friends, but they all were unnerved at how I was able to read their moods. It wasn't until I was a teenager that I fully understood that this was something not everybody could do. I wanted so badly to be a happy little LDS girl, but it became harder and harder as I grew older.

I first met Rev during my first year of college. I didn't where he was from, just that he wore a leather jacket and smoked cigarettes and had a beautiful pale aura. I had snuck away with some other little happy LDS girls to a shop that was serving coffee. Like the Jews and pork, Mormons aren't supposed to have any “hot drinks” -- which the elders interpreted as caffeine. It was delicious, I was suffused with a mocha glow, and in my hyper state started talking with Rev. It was the latest I ever stayed up, buzzed on caffeine and the warm joy of this rebellious boy who stayed with me for hours. I snuck out of the dorms a few more times to meet up with him, but after a month he said he had to leave town.

I didn't see him again until just after I killed my husband.

Philip

1954. I was entering my 4th and final year of college, looking to receive a teaching degree instead of an MRS. By this point, my family had essentially given up on the thought of me finding a husband. They were angry with me. There, of course, had to be teachers, but my classmates, after all the pretty girls found husbands and dropped out, ended up being the more homely and fat girls, or else old maids whose children are all grown up. I was neither fat, nor homely, nor old, and yet I could not find a man.

I met Philip at a Church service -- he was a Returning Missionary, and this was done on purpose by the Church to encourage pairings. My father introduced me to Philip -- both his face and spirit were plain and honest. I knew I would never have the same feelings that I had toward Rev, but figured I had to get on with my life. The same day I was supposed to start classes, I instead was bonded with him, for life, in the Temple. I was a beautiful bride.

Of course, that was only one half of the two-sided oath I made to the Church: to be a wife, and to be a mother. We of course started trying immediately. Philip sold insurance in the College town, and I had moved out of a dorm to a small house a few blocks away. I considered even taking some classes, even maybe trying to finish my degree until children came, but Philip wouldn't have it. He would take it as a sign he couldn't properly provide if his wife worked.

Months went by, no baby. Both of my sisters had conceived nearly immediately after marriage (in the case of Margaret, I suspect before), and I was hoping to do the same.

The same disappointing looks from my family that were temporarily erased by my wedding had begun seeping back as I failed to be with child. Philip, at the time, was supportive -- his orderly Mormon mind couldn't conceive of a scenario where I couldn't conceive. His faith was in the Lord Jesus, and in the fact he would be a father.

I filled the time. I perfected my housewife skills: cooking, sewing, starching and ironing Philip's shirts so that those at the office knew he had an attentive, loving wife. I even got in the habit of performing his daily shave. He, since I first met him, always had a nick or two from the razor. In the morning, while his oatmeal bubbled away on the stove, I would drape an apron across his A-shirt, lather him up, and give him the smoothest shave. I enlisted a spare scrap of leather as a strop and kept a straight razor to a hair-width hone.

Jacob

It's hard to explain to you the joy I felt when my son was growing inside me. I could see him, you know. Everyone else could feel my belly, feel him kick, but I could see his aura. His rainbow. A vibrant blue and deep purple, wrapped in an angelic white halo. This was before an ultrasound machine made it to our corner of Utah, but I knew it was a boy. I named him Jacob. I watched him get excited when food was coming down the tube and get sleepy right afterward. I talked to him constantly, told him about his family, his faith. Taught him the songs that would help him through the hard times. Taught him to love the Lord Jesus Christ. Those eight months were the most contented of my entire life. My family, my friends, my husband, all of them glowed with the same power emanating from my womb. I was at peace.

One morning I woke up and Jacob was dead. Inside me. He had been kicking overnight, like he always did -- looking for a midnight snack -- but then when I finally woke up in the morning, his rainbow was gone. My inner light was snuffed. I told Philip that we needed to get to the hospital, that something was wrong. He said I was overreacting, the baby was probably fine, and he had a lot of work to do.

I'd like to say that it was the worst day of my life. Except that day stretched on... and on... and on...

I convinced my brother-in-law Gene to drive me to the hospital. He tried to be reassuring like Philip, but he was a smarter man. Much of that day is a blur. Nurses, stethoscopes on every inch of my belly, more nurses, more stethoscopes, finally the doctor they dragged in. It was the doctor that finally pronounced my baby dead.

It was a small hospital... if it could even be called that. Surgery was risky, and expensive, and I was in no immediate harm, so I had to deliver the baby. In another four weeks. Then, I was a walking mausoleum, my face, the tombstone.

Philip wept the first night, but then not again. He was already looking ahead to the next child. We would try again. They would have lots and lots of healthy children, and all would be right with the world again. I have no memories of those four weeks -- I was a walking ghost, devoid of any feeling. Philip bought his lunch at the deli next door, while scratching at the shaving scabs on his face.

When labor finally started, everyone urged me to look on the bright side -- soon this will be over, and you can try again. I won't bore you with details of the pain of childbirth but know that is etched in my psyche as damage that I don't feel will ever fully heal. Normally, you can push yourself through it knowing that you will be soon rewarded with the shrill shriek of a newborn. I would not have that.

Jacob emerged headfirst; cord tightly wrapped around his neck. This happens sometimes, the doctor says, and usually the baby is fine. Nope. Philip was not in the room. Just this sea of masked faces. I got to hold Jacob briefly -- not like they needed the warming pan or swaddling clothes. I simply held him and wept while I delivered the afterbirth.

But labor didn't stop. I was still bleeding. My uterus wasn't clamping down. I kept bleeding. More nurses, more blood, more doctors, more blood, more needles. I didn't care -- I wanted them all to be gone so that I could have this one moment with my child stretched out to an eternity.

Someone said Operating Room and Jacob was whisked from my grasp, never to be seen again. Philip never saw him. A mask descended over my face, and they told me to breathe normally.

Normally.

Oatmeal

I woke up without a uterus. There was some sort of damage, and the only way to spare my life was to take my womb. The doctor said I was lucky. If I had given birth at home -- which about half of our Church brethren still did -- I'd certainly be dead. Now I was alive but wanted to be dead.

Philip didn't cry over this, at least not in front of me. But a pall was over him now. I was his wife, bonded in the eyes of the Church for eternity, and he would have no more children. His only son was dead, and that was it.

He finally boiled over about two weeks after I got out of the hospital. I was mostly healed, and we were trying to get back to a semblance of our normal life. But it was a poorly staged play, our actions from day to day. One night I overcooked some steak, and he started hitting me. I had killed his only son, he screamed. I killed him. I tried so hard not to blame him, to accept and swallow his pain so I could make it all better.

The next morning, as oatmeal bubbled over the stove, he took up position to receive his daily shave -- the first since... since...

I gave him the best shave ever. His face was as smooth as a newborn's. Then, with a muttered prayer, I slit his throat. So much blood.

I remember wiping the razor on an apron and eating a few bites of oatmeal before leaving. I ransacked the house for Philip's caches of cash and coin, shoved some clothes in a shoulder bag and left. I don't know what my family must have thought when Philip's body was finally found. It doesn't matter. I was already dead to them.



Petals

Satin and tulle gown with handmade flowers

by Jessica Payne



Crazy for Nuts

by Keanna Alba



Pandemic Dining

by Amaya Allen

Ope

by Mia Ashley

I have traveled, let me tell you, I have traveled. I left this town, and I went to wherever I could. I went to, Missouri, Nebraska, Idaho, Wyoming, California, Florida, Montana, Oregon, Minnesota, Indiana, North and South Dakota, Washington state, Iowa, Wisconsin, Hawaii, Germany, Dubai, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Italy, India, and so many more! I have traveled. You know what I learned? We all say and do things that do not make sense to someone else.

Now look. This isn't rocket science, we all already knew we say and do different things. But have you been able to experience it firsthand?

Growing up in the Midwest, just like anywhere else, you learn to say; "I am sorry", "My apologies", "Pardon me", and so many more. The only differences are you say them for no reason, even if it was not your fault, and you always start the phrase with "Ope". I will never understand why this is a classic Midwestern phrase starter, but it is a treasured one for sure.

Traveling around the country and around the world, the habit of using the word "Ope" in practically any phrase did not lessen in use. In fact, it more so sparked interests in conversations because it is uniqueness.

When in doubt, Ope it out. Another thing I learned, if I am in an uncomfortable situation, I say Ope and it seems to lighten the whole vibe of the room. Now this isn't bullet proof but it helps, nonetheless.

Through my traveling I have been able to witness other phrases used from other parts of the county. For instance, Californians call pop, soda, and southerners call it Cola—even if it isn't a Cola!

All in all, we all say and do different things that someone else things is strange and I am proud to be a Midwesterner that says "Ope".



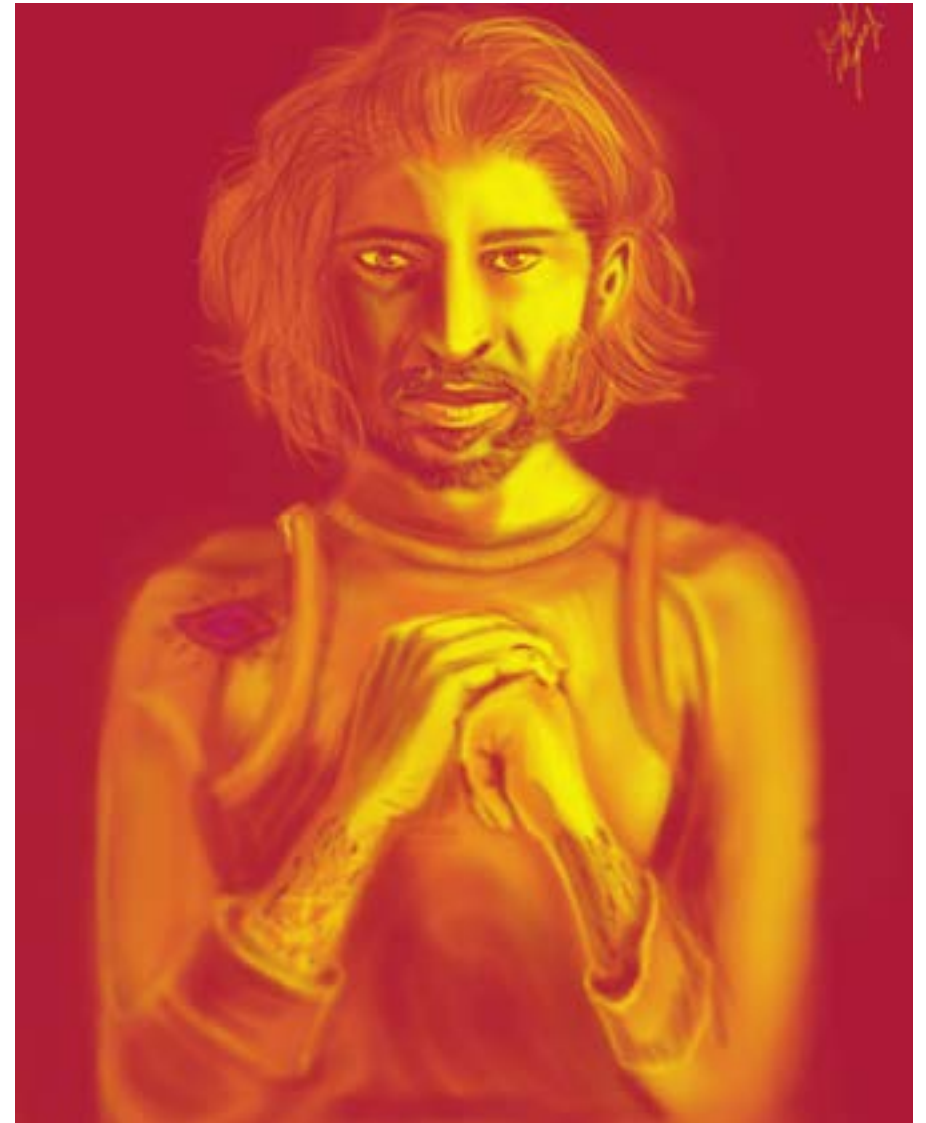
Oak Tree Covered in Snow, Illinois

by Glenn Bodish



Untitled

by Micah Green



Caleb Widowgast #1

by Joseph Magana

Looking In

by Katie Sauer

I only began walking because my therapist told me it would be good for my health; That maybe it would allow me to not want to die anymore. Which did not make any sense to me because what was stopping me from jumping in front of a car? That is right... nothing. I was released from the ward for a suicide attempt. I tried to slit my wrists open and failed miserably, hence me writing this. I lived on my own in a tiny apartment above a local business we had in town. My family disowned me, so it was just me and my half-dead house plants.

Anyways, I started walking downtown a few weeks ago and formed a relationship with this little old lady who had a bright orange cat that would always sit in her window. You could always see into her house because the curtains were spread eagle for anyone to take a look into her life. And that is exactly what I did.

On Monday the weather was brisk; Brisk like you needed to wear a hat and heavier jacket. She lived in a house that used to be a business, so it still had that annoying sign upfront "Stop here and buy a house! We have the right one for you!". The only way to determine it was a living facility was the rusted patio set sitting outside with an ashtray full of butts. On this day she was working on crocheting something. One crochet hook was purple and the other red, she was working with pink yarn.

On Tuesday the weather was fair. I did not need to wear any additional clothing like the day before. She was sitting at the table and chairs that were placed right in front of the windows. It looked like she was working on some type of puzzle book. A crossword maybe or Sudoku. Her glasses sat on the bridge of her nose and her forehead creased with concentration.

Wednesday was beautiful outside. I could wear a short sleeve shirt, but still needed to wear pants. People were starting to put out their Halloween decorations. The streets were scattered with lights, blow ups, false body parts, pumpkins, and black cats that shrieked if you walked by them.

Today she was sitting outside reading a book. As I walked by she said, "Hello," and I stopped and said it back. I learned a bit about the old lady that day. Her name was Gretchen and her cats name is Bob. She was reading a book her Granddaughter gave her titled Sharp Objects by Gillian Flynn. Her face had wrinkles etched in, some worry lines, others laugh. Her teeth were slightly stained yellow and she had the most obnoxious laugh I had ever heard.

On Thursday I would not be walking. I had other things to do that day. I will not lie, it did hurt a little bit. Almost like seeing in Gretchens' life gave me a sense of living. It gave me a sense of friendship and that was hard to find lately.

Friday came and almost went before I decided to go on a walk. I did not want to go that day. It was rainy and cold out, but I found a clear window and dragged myself out of the apartment and into the wide world. I was excited to see what Gretchen was doing today. Maybe she was working on another project or reading a different book. I was wrong though. She was sitting in an old brown recliner watching the news. I strolled on by.

On Saturday I got up and I felt refreshed and decided it would be a good time to go for a walk first thing in the morning. It was one of those Fall mornings that allowed you to sit on your front porch drinking a cup of coffee, if you wanted. I do not drink coffee, nor do I have a front porch. As I was walking I had my headphones in, bobbing along to Blink-182s' new album "Nine" that was released late September. Gretchens' house was coming up and I got excited. Who knew what she would be working on now, she was always doing something different. This time she was working on another project, but I do not think she would be finishing this one.

She was sitting at the table near the window, again. Her head layed on the table top looking out the window. There was a pair of sewing scissors plunged into her right eye, blood leaked across the bridge of her nose and into her eye that was looking at me. The pool of blood that had formed on the table had soaked the cloth she was sewing and pawprints could be seen leading into another room. She had a peaceful look on her face, a slight smile even. If was the most beautiful picture that I had ever seen.



Are You Here?

by Amaya Allen



Assembledge

by Debbie Thompson

Aliens

by Ethan Ainley

Dirk Ledger enters the local super value store with a letter in his hand and a cigarette in the other. He quickly puts away the cigarette knowing the store doesn't allow smoking. The letter had told him to go towards the back of the store where he will see a sign that says office. It is here that Dirk is instructed to enter the door and find the store manager, Brian Milby.

He makes his way to the back and finds the sign that says office. Underneath the sign is a short little scrawny kid with dirty blonde hair similar to the hair that Dirk once had. The boy looks anxious and is fidgeting with something in his pockets. The kid is trying to peek through the window in the door and see into the office. Dirk interprets the boy's curiosity in the office to mean that he must have won the contest as well.

"Hey kid," Dirk says to the young boy.

The child quickly turns around and he looks nervous like he just got caught doing something he shouldn't. Dirk notices the birthmark on his right cheek. He thinks to himself that it kind of looks like Africa. Dirk also thinks of the scar he has on his cheek from getting bit by a dog as a child.

"Um," he begins to say, "I'm sorry mister I was just looking for my... Grandma cuz.... I lost her when I got distracted by the... LEGOS."

"Really? You sure you didn't win a contest, that's what I'm here for after all," Dirk says

The young boy looks surprised and not sure what to say next.

"You know I remember the contest only being open to people 18 years or older. Are you 18 years or older, kid?" Dirk asks.

The boy is silent and doesn't say anything.

"I mean I won't say anything if you don't," Dirk says, "How about me and you... Hey, kid what is your name?"

"Uh... Ripley," the boy answers shyly.

"Okay Ripley, how about me and you just agree that you're 18 and we can get you that gift card," Dirk says, "Oh, and I'm Dirk by the way."

Ripley smiles and tries not to laugh at Dirk's name believing it to be quite silly. Then he remembers kids that make fun of him and decides to apologize.

"No it's okay," Dirk says, "Go ahead and laugh it's a funny name."

Ripley asks, "Why did your parents name you that?"

"They didn't name me. I chose my name, when you're an adult you get to do those kinds of things. I wanted to be memorable at my casting auditions. Who could forget Dirk?" he says.

Ripley smiles and likes that story. He says, "I guess I shouldn't say anything because my name is Ripley and I was named after a girl."

Dirk tells Ripley, "Woah there's no reason to be ashamed of being named after a badass like Sigourney Weaver. You know she kicked some serious alien ass!"

Ripley furrows his brow and gives Dirk a confused look. "I'm named after my great grandmother Ripley."

Dirk seems aggravated and says, "See that's why I changed my name because parents shouldn't get the right to dictate what you will be called the rest of your life. Especially if they are going to waste it by being so uninspired to choose some dead old woman's name."

The young Ripley likes Dirk's honesty and that he isn't afraid to be an adult in front of him. He is used to being treated dumb by his peers and as a kid by his family. He views both treatments the same.

Dirk suggests they better get in the office to be there for the awarding of the gift cards at 9:00 am which is in ten minutes. They open the door and there is a long hallway they walk down. Finally at the end is an office with the nameplate, "Brian Milby, General Manager" on the outside. Dirk knocks on the door.

A loud voice permeates through the door, "What the hell now!" Brain Milby, a short and fat old man opens the door. He is even older than Dirk and most likely approaching 80. He is pissed and seems unaware of the awarding of their gift cards. Ripley would describe Brian as an evil short troll man that just came out from under the bridge. Dirk would simply call him an asshole.

"Who are you?" Brian Milby sneers with his yellow rotted teeth. He doesn't even look at Ripley only caring what Dirk, the adult, has to say.

"This is Ripley and I'm Dirk. We won the \$100 gift cards."

Brian Milby gives Dirk a confused look and then sighs seemingly remembering the contest. "Oh yeah, I forgot that was today. So you are gonna have to give me a goddamn minute to get the cards ready!" Brian Milby slams the door.

Dirk and Ripley walk over to the nearby bench to sit and wait for their gift cards. Young Ripley still seems nervous to be here. He starts fidgeting with something in his pocket again. Dirk assumes that he must have snuck away from his parents to get here. He probably also fudged his age on the contest papers. Dirk is proud of him for showing that kind of independence.

“Ripley, what are you spending your gift card on?” he asks.

The young Ripley pulls his hand out of his pocket and shows Dirk a single LEGO figurine. The small LEGO has a yellow face and blonde hair. It even has a black mark on its face made to look like Ripley’s birthmark.

“I want to buy all the LEGOs in the store,” he tells Dirk excitedly.

Ripley then asks Dirk, “What about you?”

“Well I guess I want to buy a nice big cake to bring to the Perkinson’s family reunion,” Dirk says as he pulls out his wallet and then a picture. “You see this,” he says as he shows a family photo to Ripley, “This is my chosen family and they’ve been good to me.”

He starts pointing at people in the picture and naming them to Ripley. The young boy can tell he deeply cares about these people.

“There is something very important I have to tell them and I want to do it with this picture printed on a large marbled and whipped frosting cake from the store’s bakery.”

“What do you have to tell them?” asks Ripley.

“I have to tell them I only ever lied to them because they seemed like a nice family. I only ever told little white lies to be a part of said nice family. They must know that they are all I have because at the end of the day, Ripley, it is the chosen family that matters.”

The young boy frowns and looks down at the floor before saying, “That sounds nice. I sometimes don’t feel like I belong in my family or school. Do you ever think you’re an alien Dirk?”

“I think I know what you’re talking about, kid. We can’t help it if there are people that want to alienate us for being different,” says Dirk.

Ripley can tell that Dirk is very lonely. He wants to cheer him up and decides to tell him about his LEGO world.

“See this is LEGO Ripley and he lives in a world with friends like LEGO Batman, LEGO Emmet, and LEGO Yoda. He is always going on adventures with his friends to all the LEGO realms. There is the castle, wild west, city, and all sorts of places they go to. They always have each other and always will. No matter if one of them makes a mistake or not. They know who they are, LEGOs!”

Ripley smiles and looks at Dirk. He is also smiling but seems to look a little confused.

“I’m sorry that was dumb!” Ripley exclaims, “Please don’t tell anyone I said that!”

Dirk can see that little Ripley is also alone. He can remember being his age and having the same feelings. As a kid, Dirk would play out in the backyard with friends that were real to him but by anyone else’s account they were imaginary.

“No it wasn’t dumb,” Dirk tells Ripley, “I just don’t know what a ‘laygo’ is.”

Ripley laughs and no longer thinks he is dumb for enjoying LEGOs. Dirk helped to make him feel like he isn’t weird like all the other kids say. Ripley is very thankful to Dirk for that.

Suddenly, old Brian Milby busts through the door, “Here you go with ya

gift cards now get the hell out of here!”

The two take a gift card each and turn to walk toward the office exit. Dirk decides to turn around and head back to Brian Milby who hasn’t gone back into his office yet.

“You know what Brian Milby!” Dirk yells, “You’re a real piece of shit just like my father was! Can’t you show some decency and be nice for the kid’s sake!”

Dirk turns around and goes to leave. Brian Milby mumbles something but Dirk doesn’t care. Ripley turns around and sticks his tongue out at him before quickly running through the door. Once they exit through the door the two quickly run towards the checkouts away from Brian Milby and his office. They run out of breath and stop as they start laughing.

“Ripley Johnson what are you doing!” A woman yells at the pair from across the store. She is now running towards them and looks panicked. She grabs Ripley’s hand and drags him towards her. “What have you been doing?” she asks, “You can’t ditch school like that!”

She then yells, “And who is this man!”

Ripley brings up the gift card and shows it to his mom. “What is this?” she asks.

Dirk tells her, “Sorry ma’am Ripley told me you were waiting in the car and knew all about this. You see we both won gift cards and we were collecting them.” “Don’t punish your son because I really should have known better. It’s my fault for allowing him to get the gift card,” Dirk says.

Ripley’s mom gives Dirk a very strange and disapproving look. She does not seem to like what she sees. The mother then looks at Ripley and is very upset. “You don’t deserve a gift card for running off and getting involved with this fre.... Stranger!” Ripley’s mother says.

Dirk knows the word she was going to say because he has heard it many times.

People would say, “You’re a freak Dirk!” or, “Where did this freak come from?”

“Let’s go home,” she says.

She turns to head towards the exit dragging Ripley along. Young Ripley manages to pull his thin sweaty wrist from his mother’s grasp and runs back to Dirk. His mother then slips and falls forward.

When Ripley reaches Dirk he tells him, “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you I wasn’t supposed to be here and made you lie for me, Dirk.”

“Hey, kid, trust me when I say I’m fine,” he says as he digs in his pocket,

“Here kid quickly take my gift card and don’t tell your mom about it.”

“What about the cake?” Ripley says worriedly.

“Don’t worry about that,” Dirk says, “I just want you to get your LEGOs.”

“Thanks, Dirk,” Ripley says, “Are you my friend now?”

“Hey listen, kid,” Dirk says, “We’re chosen family now.”

Ripley’s mom has gotten back up and made it back to Ripley. She yells at Dirk, “Get away from my kid!”

Dirk apologizes and turns around to leave the store. Everyone is watching him now as he walks out. The people murmur and stare. They all are thinking, “What

a freak.”

Ripley walks out of the store with his mom. They make it to their car and right before his mom backs out of the parking space she asks a question.

“What was that freaks name?” she asks Ripley.

“Dirk,” Ripley says, still upset.

Ripley’s mother laughs and then says. “What a dumb name.”



Bowie

by Quinn Sedig



Untitled

by Amaya Allen

