



PHI THETA KAPPA  
HONOR SOCIETY

# nota bene

28<sup>th</sup> Edition



## FROM THE *NOTA BENE* EDITORIAL BOARD

Phi Theta Kappa Honor Society is proud to present the 28th edition of *Nota Bene*, the nation's only literary anthology featuring excellence in writing among community college students.

We are pleased to offer scholarships once again to outstanding *Nota Bene* authors. This year's Ewing Citation Scholarship has been awarded to Victoria Hoover, a member from Tyler Junior College in Texas, for her short story "Ashes."

This year's International Poet Laureate has been awarded to Maya Sukala of Harrisburg Area Community College, Lancaster Campus, in Pennsylvania. This award goes to the author of the most outstanding poem or body of poetry. Maya's collection of poetry includes "Freeing Cyntoia Brown," "When an Agnostic Goes to Church," and "Biology Lesson." The authors of four other standout entries have been recognized as Reynolds Scholars.

When we first published *Nota Bene* in 1994, we were overwhelmed with the response from members who flooded our mailboxes with submissions and from the audience who enthusiastically read the book. Today we continue to see a fervent response to the call for submissions, and selection for publication remains a great source of pride.

*Nota Bene* takes its name from the Latin expression for "note well." We hope you will take note and be inspired by the good work of these exceptional authors. We are grateful for the continued opportunity to showcase the talents of Phi Theta Kappa members and to affirm our commitment to the recognition and academic excellence of students seeking associate degrees and certificates.

Sincerely,

### **The *Nota Bene* Editorial Board**

Dr. Rosie Banks

Dr. Kelly Kennedy

Dr. Terri Smith Ruckel

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## AWARDS

The Ewing Citation Scholarship Award of \$1,000 is given to the author of the *Nota Bene* manuscript considered to be the most outstanding of all entries. It is named in honor of the late Nell Ewing, long-time Phi Theta Kappa staff member who was a driving force behind *Nota Bene*, beginning with its conceptual design and establishment. She retired in 2012 after serving 26 years with Phi Theta Kappa.

The International Poet Laureate Award of \$1,000 is given to the author of the most outstanding poem. In addition to the scholarship award, the International Poet Laureate will be invited to present their poem during one of Phi Theta Kappa's international events.

The Reynolds Scholarship Awards of \$500 each are given to up to four authors whose manuscripts were deemed outstanding. These awards are endowed by the Donald W. Reynolds Foundation in Pine Bluff, Arkansas, and honor the memory of the late Donald W. Reynolds, founder of the Donrey Media Group (now Stephens Media Group).

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

## EWING CITATION AWARD

- 6 **Ashes**  
Victoria Hoover  
Tyler Junior College  
Texas

## INTERNATIONAL POET LAUREATE

- 11 **Freeing Cyntoia Brown**  
Maya Sukala  
Harrisburg Area Community College  
Lancaster Campus  
Pennsylvania
- 13 **When the Agnostic Goes to Church**  
Maya Sukala  
Harrisburg Area Community College  
Lancaster Campus  
Pennsylvania
- 14 **Biology Lesson**  
Maya Sukala  
Harrisburg Area Community College  
Lancaster Campus  
Pennsylvania

## REYNOLDS AWARDS

- 16 **The Conception of My Sister**  
Ciara Lukemire  
Cincinnati State Technical &  
Community College  
Clifton Campus  
Ohio
- 19 **Dance With the Wind**  
Karen Batchelor  
Ivy Tech Community College  
Indiana
- 21 **Grandma's Room**  
Donna Michelle Mosley  
Walters State Community College  
Sevier County Campus  
Tennessee
- 24 **Over**  
Noah Newmann  
Weatherford College  
Texas

## SELECTED AWARDS

- 26 **Pitiful in Pink**  
Elaine Scott  
Jackson State Community College  
Jackson Campus  
Tennessee
- 29 **When a Fly Fought the Sun**  
Reyna Ashlee Cirignani Wallace  
Everett Community College  
Washington
- 34 **sonnet no.1**  
Soleil Yakita  
Atlantic Cape Community College  
Mayslanding Campus  
New Jersey
- 35 **80HD**  
Jamie Belisle  
Central New Mexico Community College  
Albuquerque Campus  
New Mexico
- 37 **The Cliff, the Gates, and the Man  
with the Key**  
Parker Black  
Northeast State Community College  
Blountville Campus  
Tennessee
- 40 **American Alms**  
Danny Blakeman  
Borough of Manhattan Community  
College  
New York
- 42 **SSRI**  
Danny Blakeman  
Borough of Manhattan Community  
College  
New York
- 44 **Dear Abdomen**  
Tricia L. Chaves  
Lorain County Community College  
Ohio

- |    |  |    |   |
|----|--|----|---|
| 46 | <b>A Painting (Left Incomplete)</b><br>Zafira Demiri<br>Brookdale Community College<br>Lincroft Campus<br>New Jersey             | 59 | <b>Just a Sandwich</b><br>Jaewon Kwon<br>Bergen Community College<br>New Jersey             |
| 50 | <b>A Moment of Proof</b><br>Kelsey Glass<br>Portland Community College<br>Cascade Campus<br>Oregon                               | 63 | <b>The Raven's Song</b><br>Lilly Preciado<br>Northeast Alabama Community College<br>Alabama |
| 52 | <b>The Death Anniversaries</b><br>Tiffany Hill<br>Rose State College<br>Oklahoma   | 64 | <b>Creation by Magic</b><br>Günter (Jeremy) Schlueter<br>Clinton Community College<br>Iowa  |
| 53 | <b>Red Flowers, White Seed,<br/>and Blue Dart</b><br>Sarah Jacques<br>Delgado Community College<br>City Park Campus<br>Louisiana | 67 | <b>Don't Shoot</b><br>Marquis Viel<br>Miami Dade College<br>North Campus<br>Florida         |
| 54 | <b>The Birth of Hope</b><br>Jessica King<br>Fullerton College<br>California  | 69 | <b>Rumors and Water</b><br>Danae Watson<br>Harold Washington College<br>Illinois            |
| 58 | <b>Semicolon</b><br>Jessica King<br>Fullerton College<br>California  | 75 | <b>The Road:</b><br>Justin Whittington<br>Murray State College<br>Oklahoma                  |

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## ASHES



VICTORIA HOOVER  
 Tyler Junior College  
 Texas

For Phillip Bell waking up was like dying. The air in the guest bedroom was too still and the house too silent. The twin bed was the perfect size for Kaiya, but his granddaughter was eleven, and he was over six foot. He preferred sleeping here, though. While the bed might be so soft his back crackled like glass, it was better than drowning in the California king they had shared for thirty-seven years. Snared in the unpleasant damp of the sheets, trapped in the tidal forces of the down duvet, and battered by the flotsam pillows, he couldn't breathe.

*Three months and sixteen days, his weary brain reminded him mercilessly. One hundred and thirty-six days. Three thousand two hundred sixty-four hours.* He tried to roll over and deny the insistent bloom of morning pressing against the yellow drapes. When he slept, he was with his wife, his Darcy, and he knew peace. Upon waking, that contentment popped like a soap bubble. Reality was a harsh slap of grey timelessness. Without her warmth on the pillow beside him, her soft breath on his back as she snored in that ladylike way she refused to admit, and her diminutive form snuggled tight against him, he felt the weight of every moment since that ill-fated day in July.

As he creaked his way out of the bed his gaze fell on the cordless phone propped next to a highball glass with the barest trace of Scotch pooling at the bottom. Briefly, he thought about calling his daughter Laura back but immediately squashed the idea. What could he say to her anyway?

*You should have tried harder with Laura;* he could almost hear Darcy in his mind. She had always worried over the gulf that had dissolved into a canyon of distance between father and daughter. He wanted to argue with that whispered admonishment, even bickering with Darcy was better than this silence. He didn't want to dwell but found his thoughts drifting back to the conversation with Laura the previous night.

"Hi, Dad," Laura sounded tired, already eager to get off the line. "What's up?"

"Hey, Baby Girl," Phillip said. "Can't I call just to see how you are?"

"I'm on my last bit of patience after trying to help Travis make his dinosaur diorama for the science fair next week. I had to chase Kaiya out of the dining room so he could focus, and now she's pouting in her room playing One Direction at top volume," she said.

"Which direction is she going?" he asked trying to make her laugh or at least smile. Instead, he was rewarded with an impatient sigh.

"What do you want, Dad?" Laura asked cutting to the chase.

"I just wanted to talk to you. To check in." He winced at the desperation in his voice and decided to change tack. "How is Steven?" he asked.

"He's fine."

"Still trying to make partner at Elias and Foster?" Why was he asking where her husband worked? Beating around the bush wouldn't win him any points with Laura.

"No, he left there in August," she said. "He decided to go to a firm that did more litigation and less mediation."

"Oh." He had forgotten. Suddenly Kaiya shrieked in what sounded like a curious blend of fear, disgust, and anger on the other end of the line. Travis was laughing manically in the background.

"Mom! Travis put a frog in my dresser!" She wailed.

"Travis Michael Hunt, you get back here this instant!" Laura had pulled the phone away from her mouth to yell at the kids, but she was still incredibly loud. His daughter had the voice of a career drill instructor. "Kaiya Marie, stop screaming. It's just a frog."

"Laura, I wanted to..." he realized that she had a situation to deal with, and he was out of time. It was now or never.

"Dad, I gotta go. Frogs, can you believe it?" she asked not listening to him.

He tried again. "Laura, wait, I..." But the phone went dead in his hand. She had hung up. "I love you. I'm sorry." He had whispered into the lonely wail of the dial tone.

After that all was scotch. He nearly tripped over the half-empty decanter of deep, amber-colored spirits. They saved the expensive stuff for special occasions, but this oak-barreled delight had not helped his mood nor helped him sleep.

Shaking his head as if to cast off the memory, he picked his watch up off the nightstand. It was 7:29 a.m. He had barely gotten three hours.

*You needed sleep, not Scotch,* Darcy's voice came to him again. *I worry about you.*

*I needed you,* Phillip thought in despair. He closed his eyes and tried to summon her face. To see her smile in his memory, even her scowl would have cheered him. He might as well try summoning up a genie for all the good it did. His mind refused to cooperate.

At a loss for what to do to occupy the morning, he retrieved the nearly empty glass and decanter and wandered towards the kitchen. He tried to walk past the closed door



to the master bedroom. Like all the other mornings, he failed. The hinges gave a soft squeak as the door swung inward. For one wild moment he could have sworn she was at her dressing table. He could see her brushing her hair in the mirror. His heart stuttered in his chest, and when his eyes caught up with his brain, he sagged in the doorway. He didn't want to go into the room, but one thing Phillip had learned over the last three months was that grief has its own gravity. It pulled him across the threshold and into her closet. All of her clothes still hung neatly on identical hangers. Her scarves pouring out of boxes and her shoes lined up with military precision that spoke of how neat and orderly she was. His closet was a different story.

Phillip caught his reflection in the large mirror at the back of the closet. He barely recognized himself. His pale brown eyes were distinctly red and puffy from the lack of sleep. The creases on his face had transformed from pleasant laugh lines into deep gouges. His salt and pepper hair, light on the pepper these days, was shaggy. He needed a haircut, a shave, and a shower. He was profoundly disappointed by what he saw. He had lost weight, and his skin had taken on an ashen pallor from lack of sun.

*Darcy wouldn't even know me*, he thought. *Coffee, I need coffee that's all.* He wasn't fond of self-deception, but some things are necessary. Turning his back on the near stranger in the glass, he left the bedroom closing the door firmly on his way out.

He took his time with the coffee. Before he sat at the chipped Formica dinette set that Darcy had picked out right after their wedding, he retrieved the burnished bronze urn containing all that remained of the love of his life. Placing Darcy on the table before him he sipped his coffee in silence. Phillip contemplated the urn, and all that it said or didn't say.

"Mister Bell," the doctor with the kindly face had taken his hand that day in July. "It is called an intracranial hemorrhagic aneurysm."

"I thought she drove off the Plainard Pass bridge," Phillip's ears had been ringing so hard he at first believed they had the wrong Mister Bell. "Are you sure this was my Darcy?" Perhaps there had been a mistake. Perhaps his wonderful, charming, unique wife was still alive. He could see them sitting in their matched recliners, hers with the footrest up because her ankles swelled in the evenings. Oh, how they would laugh over this silly false alarm together. It would be a story to tell their friends over pinocle.

"My condolences, Mister Bell, but we are quite sure," said the doctor whom Phillip decided no longer looked friendly but like a ghoul. And like that, Phillip's drastic hope was pierced and dying. There would be no reprieve. "We will do an autopsy to be certain, but I'm reasonably confident that she had an aneurysm. It hit her very quickly, and she probably lost consciousness, which is why she had her car accident. She probably felt little if any pain."

*Probably*, he thought. That word came back to him like a foul echo. It filled his mouth with the bitter taste of almonds and pennies, he always thought of it as the taste of blood. *Probably, died instantly. Probably, felt no pain. Probably.* So much can be held in such a simple word. That probably is a hope but not a promise and with that 'probably' he felt his heart stutter and quail in his chest. For a moment Phillip feared a heart attack, but then he welcomed one. Anything to see his Darcy's crooked smile again.

He had not had a heart attack. Instead, he had a very tense conversation with Laura. Darcy had been perfectly clear. She wanted to be cremated and for her ashes to be scattered somewhere beautiful.

"Somewhere you'll think of me." He hadn't considered that at the time. His mind refused to acknowledge a reality without her even then.

"I want to be burned," she had told their lawyer when it came time to write their wills, "like the witches." Darcy had a wicked streak. The lawyer had blinked owlish eyes at her in surprise, but he had written it down word for word. That had been her last request, her final say. Darcy always got her way in important matters.

"I don't care what that paper says," Laura had thrust her chin in the air, unconsciously mimicking her mother's gesture, "You are *not* going to burn her up! She has been through so much; we've been through it too. I want to see my mother buried like a decent Christian not barbequed like a witch!"

Phillip had wanted to slap her, to take her by the shoulders and shake her so violently so all that fancy dental work they had taken out a second mortgage to afford would rattle like castanets. He shouted at her in the tumult of his mind. *You are nothing at all like her.* At least, he thought, he hadn't said it out loud. Laura didn't respond if he had. They fought like tigers over the rights to have ashes instead of a wax doll to weep over. Laura lost but insisted upon the most expensive urn they had. He had tried to reason with her. What would they do with the urn after they scattered the ashes? But there was no talking her out of it, and so Phillip stared at the overpriced urn and hated every expensively burnished inch of it. He took great satisfaction in unscrewing the lid and removing the plastic bag containing Darcy's ashes. *Such a small thing,* he thought weighing it in his trembling hands. *So small to hold my whole world.*

Downing the last of his coffee in one impatient swallow, he rinsed his cup in the sink and put it on the draining board to dry. Darcy had loved this house and worked so hard to keep it nice. The least he could do was honor that.

He went to the highboy in the living room and removed the letter from one of its massive drawers. It had no address but bore the name *Laura*. Inside was a single sheet of paper. He hadn't had much to say and since he failed on the phone, he left the envelope propped against the now empty urn on the table. She would see it when she came, if she came. On the paper were only three words.

*I'm so sorry.*

He thought they would be enough. If they were not, an entire volume of words would not help. It was up to her now.

Wasting no more time he stepped out the front door into a beautiful autumn day. The sky was a perfect faultless blue above, untroubled by clouds. The air was crisp but not cold yet. In short, a perfect day for a drive.

He had considered putting the top down. It was a sporty little red convertible. Darcy called it his "belated mid-life-crisis mobile" even though he had been sixty-one when they bought it. She had loved riding in that car. Feeling the wind tangle her shoulder-length grey hair into impossible knots. Smiling her crooked grin at the wide sky above. She would laugh like angels singing when he drove sharply around bends and cry, "Faster, Baby! Give it some go!"

With the top firmly latched he walked around the car. He had seven jerry cans of different shapes and sizes. Two fifty-gallon plastic jugs in the cramped space behind the seats, three thirty-five-gallon jugs in the trunk, the ancient metal forty-gallon canister precariously filling the rest of the backseat, and one tall fifty-gallon jug in the passenger seat footwell. He checked each container and nodded in grim satisfaction to see they were all full and the wick he had put in the middle jug in the trunk was still in place. All told, 295 gallons of high-octane gasoline not counting the convertible's gas tank which he had filled yesterday when getting the last jug for the footwell. After verifying that all was as it should be and making sure to unscrew or uncap every can, he climbed behind

the steering wheel. He had initially considered setting her ashes on the passenger seat but decided to drive with them on his lap. He wanted them to be together.

He drove toward Plainard Pass and the now repaired guardrail leading into the expanse of a ninety-foot drop. He made sure to give it all the Go he could. The fuel was splashing out of its containers and soaking the upholstery, but he didn't care. The fumes trapped inside the little sportscar were making his vision throb and his head fuzzy, but he kept driving. Just before the bridge, he took his father's silver zippo lighter from his shirt pocket. It clinked against Darcy's wedding band like a soft chime.

"Forever Darcy," Phillip whispered as he hit the guardrail and flicked the lighter simultaneously. He no longer smelled the gasoline; the car was filled with the fragrance of her sweet perfume. In the space of a heartbeat, Phillip Bell was riding a comet to the floor of the canyon.

Darcy Bell's face was the last thing he saw. He smiled all the way down.

## FREEING CYNTOIA BROWN



MAYA SUKALA

*Harrisburg Area Community College  
Lancaster Campus  
Pennsylvania*

A wolf is not a wolf if he pays for his prey.  
A man is not a predator if he offers cash to a child for rape.  
At 16, Cyntoia Brown swallowed these jagged pills,  
Acrid as stray gunpowder.  
She played a pawn in a pimp's checkered past.  
Those hounds held their intentions close like  
Dogs in an absurd puppy poker painting.  
They keep their cards hidden from prying glances.

We tell little girls: Don't let yourself become a victim at any cost.  
Would we rather she pay with her life than take another one?

When she shot her dough-wielding would-be assailant  
After he bought her from a monster called "Kut Throat."  
She claimed she feared for her life, acting in self-defense.  
But she wasn't blonde or blue-eyed or white,  
She stood on the wrong side of the track:  
(The Track, noun, streets where prostitutes stroll.)  
An open market where public shame erases childhood.  
Should she have let The Blade bleed her dry instead?  
(The Blade, noun, a sharp synonym for "track.")  
She wasn't a victim that time, they said.  
She was a murderer through the jury's muddled lens.

For fifteen years, they caged her like Angelou's bird.  
She sang of freedom as she earned two degrees.  
The system's unseen poison threatened to stifle her.  
She became the miner's canary.

After the public begged and pled,  
The judge granted clemency with the pound of a gavel  
Freedom rang out, heavy as the first stone dropped  
In the biblical scene of the pardoned adulteress.

As forgiveness poured down like acid rain  
On the parched desert floor  
I wonder if the acid almost stuck sweet on the tongue  
After years of siphoning the salt out of tears for freshwater.



## WHEN THE AGNOSTIC GOES TO CHURCH

MAYA SUKALA

*Harrisburg Area Community College  
Lancaster Campus  
Pennsylvania*

Sometimes I go to church just for the free  
Food and karaoke, leave the preaching  
At the pulpit like I leave a barbell at the gym.  
I duck out before the evangelists descend like  
Hawks on a freshly split carcass, raw and  
Rank as the scars I earned from what Jesus  
Would call the Pharisees–hypocrites, these  
Self-appointed saints with piety as  
False and towering as cardboard steeples.

It's still a blast, the former Catholic  
In me feels like a rebel, breaking bread  
With the non-denominational crowd.  
On most things, we would never agree, but  
We all like home cooking, bellowing  
Unfamiliar tunes like we know the words.  
We cling to invisible parachutes,  
Skeptical defenses in hand, ready  
To launch ourselves out the door when staying  
In this suffocating space feels less safe than  
Plummeting from the sky to rocky ground.

I wonder how many fishermen feared  
The storm that interrupted Jesus' nap.  
How many thanked their nations' other gods  
For the break in the clouds, pause, Hebrew Selah?  
Church calls their lifeline "Christ," I'm not sure what to  
Name mine, but Jesus still sounds right sometimes.

## BIOLOGY LESSON



MAYA SUKALA  
*Harrisburg Area Community College  
Lancaster Campus  
Pennsylvania*

The professor says sharks  
Only destroy people by accident.  
It's a moment of indiscretion  
Like a flustered diner ordering steak at a vegan cafe—  
A miscalculation, a misunderstanding.  
I have learned this lesson before.

I know what the sharks must say  
After their lapse in judgment.  
*The shark confused a person for a plaything,  
Minding-my-own-business for a meal.  
Anyone could do the same.*  
Do you understand?

The sharks do not enjoy the devouring—  
They feel so disgusted  
By the taste, by themselves,  
That they eject the flesh from their jaws  
Before they have time to stomach the carnage.  
They are children chucking a damning cookie back into the jar.  
They miss the container in their haste,  
Wasting the treat as it plummets to the floor,  
Broken and tainted.

Do they, like the predators among man,  
Relish the whirlpool of fear swirling in our eyes?

Does the power trip leave them plastered  
Like drunken sailors at a liberty port?

I cannot show you the scarlet blooming in the water  
Or the parts of me that floated into the deep after the attack.  
I can only tell you who know nothing of a shark's appetite  
Of the sear of sharp rage in unsuspecting flesh.

The wreckage remains  
Constant as the churning waves  
Even after the shark declares the event  
A game, a mistake,  
An accident.



## THE CONCEPTION OF MY SISTER



CIARA LUKEMIRE

*Cincinnati State Technical & Community College  
Clifton Campus  
Ohio*

Hold her hand against yours at kindergarten registration  
And she'll chatter as you walk about how the colors aren't the same.  
That her paper diploma is lighter than her and  
That the other kids helped her learn these vocabulary words.  
Not knowing her skin would be one of their favorites.  
And you'll have to let go as she skips into a bright blue classroom.  
Knowing she never paid much attention to color  
Until they told her that I wasn't her sister.  
Siblings aren't a black and a white.

Interval one-

Put her hair up in braids and tell her that her culture is beautiful.  
She'll teach you Spanish in front of the mirror and begin to gash her arms,  
Showing you how the white lines make her body appear more like yours.  
Mi hermosa hermana no eres un error.  
Plead how you wish you had her tight kinky curls that twist up with shea butter  
And she'll begin to mourn for thin straightened hair because the kids said this would  
Fit her better during quiet time.  
That her thick natural tresses were not the hairstyles in their Dollar Tree coloring books.  
Take her down each aisle looking for a publication that portrays her,  
When money couldn't heal words drawn all over my five year old sister.  
They turned her into a drawing board when she was already a work of art.

Interval two-

Take her out to your favorite safe place- your grandmother's house.  
 And let her play with the children there as you laugh at stories selectively shared,  
 Be surprised on the car ride back when she comes home with a tale of her own.  
 About how a little boy told her  
 She reminded him of dirt but to not tell anyone because it's their secret.  
 She told him  
 He  
 Was  
 Handsome  
 And then asked what he  
 Saw  
 Her  
 As.  
 You'll watch her pick out books about waste to read aloud.  
 Her teacher says,  
 "She's going to be a great environmentalist one day."  
 You'll watch how people fail the Earth through watching how they fail my sister.  
 The environment you want her to save being the same one that will destroy her.  
 Act surprised when no one organizes protests.  
 You'll witness every part of her becoming unclean matter  
 And thinking this is her only color on the palette.  
 While you wish to describe her as the embodiment of everything but their blinded  
 description. A child of lovable laughter and silk honey sunshine who learned to be their  
 personification of damp darkened smoke and the pits of blackened flowers.

Interval three-

Break up with me for being too happy.  
 Do it quick.  
 Cuss me out.  
 Get it over with.  
 Let time pass.  
 And watch me make a video about the way my sister has turned into a life I couldn't live  
 without.  
 Let it go viral for the love she brought into the world at 2.3 million views  
 But she'll sit and listen to you call my number outside her door after I tucked her in.  
 Reminding her in that moment that she is all the words my family never allowed her to say.

Interval four-

When did everyone but my sister get to decide the conception of who my sister is.  
 Based on the appearance of melanin produced by melanocyte  
 Cells that have never known her name and only compose the composition of her skin.  
 Yet you know the way she skips, the hair she has, the books she reads, the name she loves  
 And  
 Still  
 Choose  
 To call her by a skin variation.  
 You watch my sister begin to call herself that too.

Can I ask you a question?  
 And can you answer it in something besides your interpretation of a damn color?

When will teachers teach less words and more equality in classrooms to their students.  
 When will parents enforce less mannerhoods and more civil conduct to their children.

When will family members verse less stories and more liability to their kids.  
When will mothers educate their sons that my sister will not ever be  
The equivalent of  
Their dirty words.

When will my sister get to be enough for a world that defines her as everything except  
Who she is.  
Mi amor- you don't owe them a color swatch when you're already a portrait.  
Remember that- my love.  
Bella,  
You are so much more than a pigment.

## DANCE WITH THE WIND



**KAREN BATCHELOR**  
*Ivy Tech Community College*  
*Indiana*

They stand tall and straight as they rise from the green grass, facing each other, two trees sheared of their bark, squared off, and fashioned into two six-foot poles about 15 feet apart. Planted and set firmly into the ground, lovingly, and purposely. Long awaited, carefully planned, and often dreamed of. The soil had to be just right—we'd only just built our house, and a fence had to come first. My husband didn't understand my need for this life sustaining system. He couldn't fathom the joy it would bring me or the sense of grounding that I yearned for. So, I waited for them. I waited for their calming peacefulness, and the memories they would bring forth.

Both posts have arms that stretch out stiffly from the sides, like branches, helping to bear their heavy loads. Between the two, ropes are strung tightly back and forth, back and forth, back and forth. The rope lines hang on for dear life when set to the task they perform, stretching each time, pregnant with their load. You see, the items, together with the linen and cotton garments that I hang from them, create what I think Heaven must be like. The posts are the enduring golden gates, beckoning to me, and the lines are the ties that bind. And oh, how they bind. I bring my washing to them on sunny days, warm or cold, it matters not. I carry to them my wicker baskets, just like the ones my grandmothers used, that creak, snap, and crackle with every move, to my backyard with my antique bag of clothespins set on top. The baskets, full of wet laundry, slowly empty as I carefully and lovingly pin each item to the lines. I take my time. I revel in every single second of it. When I am in between the two posts and among these lines, I feel glorious. Everything around me melts away, and I am whole again. I breathe in and out consciously and deeply. I go back in time and smell my memories: lilacs, Fels Naphtha, lakeside breezes, dirt, and grass. I can smell heaven in those moments and the scents of long past women—my ancestors, my grandmothers, and predecessors who long ago paved the way for me to be standing on this ground; right here, anchored by the poles

and the rope. The lines sag with the weight of what they hold, and I carefully prop them up with my small, notched wooden pole, supporting them as they do me. The higher the better. The sun drenches them with beams of magnificent, whitening rays of magic. Sheets snap in the wind as they wave hello; reminding me that I am not alone in this task, there are souls surrounding me, feeding me with their light.

Towels ripple with the waves of brisk air that flow through them, back and forth, like the tides of an ocean. I wander through the sheets, towels, and clothing, lightly dragging my fingers along to find what is dry enough to come down. I bring each dried item to my face to inhale the freshness-like a drug, and I, the addict. In those moments I feel that I am home again, surrounded by an explosion of scents, memories, and feelings that can only be achieved by this work-this dance with the wind and sun. I want to wrap myself into the sheets that sway with rhythmic movements and play among them as I did when I was a child, around the ankles of my grandmothers, who did the same around the ankles of their grandmothers, on the shores of Lake Huron where we called home. I enable this dance as often as I can-I have to, it feeds my soul so that I can feed the next generation and teach them how to make things dance in the wind and reach for the sun.

## GRANDMA'S ROOM



**DONNA MICHELLE MOSLEY**  
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*Tennessee*

I stood in the hallway outside of the door, as I had many times since I was a little girl. My fingers trembled as they touched the cool brass of the doorknob, but I couldn't bring myself to turn it. Pulling my arm back, I dropped it against my side in defeat as my stomach churned. I had never felt reservations about entering this space. Why couldn't I do it? *Just go in.*

Low, familiar voices drifted from the room. My mother's voice cut above the others. "Let me see where Mikki is," she said, as the doorknob finally turned. I quickly stepped backwards to avoid startling her with my closeness, but she still jumped at the unexpected sight of me. "Ooh!" she yelped, followed by a laugh. "Come on in; she's settled."

My mother moved aside for me to enter. I immediately looked past the bed to the far side of the room where my Aunt Doris stood, and I gave her a tight smile. My eyes flitted over the room's furnishings—the brown plastic sewing box in the corner, the mirrored dresser, the tall chest of drawers topped with knick-knacks. I settled on the bell-shaped glass bottle that held the last remnants of the rose-scented Avon perfume. The late afternoon sun pushed through the gauzy, homemade curtains and pierced the red perfume bottle, creating a stained-glass effect on the closet door. I looked back to the mirror on the dresser and held my own gaze for a moment, steeling myself for the inevitable.

This had been my grandmother's bedroom my entire life. After her breast cancer scare in the 1970s, my grandfather had moved into the spare bedroom across the hall to allow her the space to rest and heal after the mastectomy. They'd been sleeping apart ever since, though their relationship never appeared to suffer. As a couple, my grandparents had been the most loving and stable force throughout my life.

This particular room had always been one of my favorite spaces in my grandparents' house. I used to sneak in to look through my grandmother's small collection of costume jewelry and play with the metal-encased lipstick she kept in the top drawer of her dresser. She never wore any other type of makeup, and rarely used the lipstick. When I saw her put it on, I knew she meant business. I never took anything from her room. Well, except for the black cardigan that I used without permission when I was ten. Grandma had been upset, but when I'd told her that it was a very important piece of my spy costume, her furrowed brow eased. I had always liked looking through her belongings. Though kind and gentle, my grandmother was shy and a woman of few words. Being among her things had made me feel like I understood her a little better.

My grandmother's bed was also the best in the house for bouncing. I would get a running start from the hallway and jump onto the bed, the mattress flinging me up, like a slack trampoline. Even into my teens, I would bounce on the very bed that I was currently trying my hardest to avoid. One day, when I was fifteen or sixteen, I was jabbed with a sharp dose of reality. I ran and jumped up as I always had, though this time when I landed, I rammed the corner of the mattress and bedspring through the frame, slamming them both into the floor. I had finally gotten too old and too big. That had been the last time I ever used a bed as a trampoline.

"Mama, Mikki's here." My mother's voice snapped me out of the memory, and I turned my head sharply toward the bed. My grandmother's dark auburn hair, which she had dyed well into her sixties, had now gone almost completely gray. It was jarring. She had on a familiar yellow housecoat and was resting amid the floral sheets and chenille blanket that always seemed to wrap her bed. She looked to my mother's face as my mother motioned me over.

My grandmother took a long look at me. Our eyes connected, and I wanted to slam mine shut to avoid what I knew was coming. But I couldn't. Her polite coldness felt like a sledgehammer to my chest. I gently smiled at her, hoping for a brief glimpse of recognition—a crinkle around her eyes, a curl at the corner of her mouth. Nothing. She quickly turned away, retreating to the familiar face of my mother.

My beloved grandmother had begun suffering from dementia near the end of her long battle with leukemia. She had difficulty recognizing family members. These days, confusion was the norm, but it was dotted with moments of clarity. I wasn't sure if that was a blessing or a curse. Grandma still recognized my grandfather and my mother and aunt, but she had trouble with the grandchildren. She no longer knew the granddaughter that had practically been attached to her hip, the granddaughter that had spent every weekend and summer vacation at her house for almost twenty years. She turned her attention from my mother to my Aunt Doris and asked about one of my uncles. I released a breath I didn't know I was holding.

I loved my grandmother dearly, but I had found myself avoiding her in recent weeks. My grandparents were the kindest, most loving people I'd ever known, and I was devastated by my grandmother's decline. My mother had shared stories with me of the far-fetched things Grandma had been recounting during her recent stay at the hospital. She was adamant about certain aspects of our family's history that no other family members could recall. We didn't know if these things had actually happened or if they were fragments of her sickness. She also mentioned being visited by people that no one else could see. Grandma would talk about a kind, dark-skinned man that she would have long conversations with inside her hospital room, and she spoke many times of seeing a little girl with brunette hair standing at the foot of her bed.

My mother walked over to me as my grandmother and aunt were talking. She turned me away from the bed slightly and spoke near my ear. "Why don't you try going out in the hall and coming back in on your knees?"

I was incredulous.

"She may be remembering you as a child," she continued, "and your height could be the reason she doesn't recognize you." I shook my head slightly but found myself being pushed toward the door. I watched her smiling face as the door closed in my own. I was back where I started.

Looking down the hall to the living room, I could see lights from the television set that my grandfather was watching. The familiar whistling of the *Andy Griffith* theme song carried through the small house. I couldn't imagine what my grandfather was going through. I didn't want to allow the thought even a sliver of space in my mind. He'd been married to my grandmother for fifty-two years. To watch such a defining part of his own life slipping away, both mentally and physically, had to be a special kind of hell. I felt so small and selfish in that moment. I had to put my discomfort and pain aside and spend as much time with her—with them—as I possibly could before she left us. I wiped my hands on my jeans and dropped down to the mottled brown carpet.

I turned the doorknob and hobbled back into my grandmother's bedroom on my knees. It had been years since I'd viewed the room from this vantage point. A faded memory came into view as I saw my grandmother in the bed. I was eight, and it was the night of my Aunt Jenny's car crash. My grandparents were keeping the grandchildren so the rest of the family could wait for news at the hospital. I was pretending to be asleep in the bed next to my grandmother when she got the call that her firstborn had died. I will never forget the soul-wrenching noise that escaped her.

I roughly pushed the thought away as I realized my mom and aunt were waiting expectantly. Grandma's eyes were closed as her head rested gently against the mound of pillows Doris had stacked behind her. I waited a few feet from the bed, a lump forming in my throat.

"Mama, someone's here to see you," my mother called out, pulling my grandmother from her nap. Grandma slowly turned her head toward the door and looked at me. I held my breath as our eyes locked once again. She stretched out her arms, a wide smile appearing on her tired face. "There's my baby!"

I quickly covered the distance between us and slid into my grandmother's embrace as the tears came easily.



## OVER



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"WE ALL HAVE TO DIE sometime," I say, pulling my gloves tight. My brother looks at me, mute, pulling on his pipe – the smoke is as grey as his uniform, wrinkled and dirty. I take up my rifle, laying myself against the boards and bags of sand that make the wall, a kind of corset for the earth. The air is thick down here, smoke puffing from hand-rolled cigarettes and crooked mouths, stinking. I feel as if I am drowning in air as I fix my mask. Thunder cracks a mile behind the mud and craters filled with bloody water, the heads of horses half in, half out – the sixth cavalry and what is left. Will that be me? Over the field is a yellow, poison haze, the color of plague.

*„BAJONETTE REPARIEREN!"<sup>1</sup>*

I feel the lines stir at the words of the Commandant, the men behind me moving their rifles, the nervousness as they fix bayonets. We are warriors, spears shining in summer sun. I hear a whistle of a shell come to grind us all to dust. My brother is smoking, his mask under his chin like a second head. When will it hit? In five seconds or three? Two? I was always good with numbers—*Kathoom!*

The dugout erupts to my left. I feel something spatter on my helmet, clatter on my canteen as a soldier stumbles into me. Someone is screaming. Everything is blurred. I cannot understand.

He is screaming, the Commandant grabbing a man who is sobbing, throwing him back to the wall. I feel my heart thunder in time as the shells are returned by our own good men. I think of us all, lined like matches in a box, waiting for our heads to be struck – caught by sniper fire. My God... the air whistles as something breaks the turf near my brother's head. He ducks down, pawing the dirt from his eye. He is crying as he fixes

his mask, eyes shut behind the round glass. Another man is not so lucky, and I hear the metal of a helmet sheer.

We are not brave. We are not warriors. We are boys from a city where old men sit safe in cafés and tell stories. A lie is a story. My God... did I send Elena her letter? Of course, I did. Folded just right, I was always good with numbers, measurements. One fold here, another here and then across and again to seal the words dated '18. I know I handed it to the messenger boy, ragged, thin as a picket. I pull from my pocket the photograph, dirt falling down from the top, tapping her face, her eyes and over her white dress... My God.

*„ALLES BEREIT AUF MEINEM ZEICHEN!“<sup>2</sup>*

Only the moment, only the feeling. Cigarettes are crushed and ground into the duckboard, my brother, hands shaking taps out the tobacco and buttons the pipe in his pocket. If he goes, it is mine, he promised me, so long ago, what? An hour? A week? I feel the seconds crash through, every move of the hand a cannonade, my God! I tuck the photo into my pocket, close it tight, will I see her again? My God...

*„JEDES SOLDAT ERFÜLLT SEINE PFLICHT!“<sup>3</sup>*

What is he saying? My throat is dry... My God. Hot breath on my neck, my goggles begin to fog and blind me, my God!

*„UND ALLES... ÜBER!“<sup>4</sup>*

My God, my God, my God – MY GOD!

The whistle from the Commandant, tiny, shrieking, throws us over the lip of earth. We are vomited from the belly of the trench, on through the hanging wall of yellow cloud – a howling tide of thousands.

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<sup>1</sup> Fix Bayonets

<sup>2</sup> Ready on my signal

<sup>3</sup> Every soldier to his duty

<sup>4</sup> And everyone over

## PITIFUL IN PINK



**ELAINE SCOTT**

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I was the sole survivor of what was possibly the worst Mary Kay party ever hosted.

Despite my bottom lip still quivering, having just lost what was likely every last ounce of respect my supervisor and our most valued client had for me, and knowing I'd soon have to explain to my boyfriend why I'd just spent half of our rent, I managed to leave that party with a wry smile on my face.

Now, most people who know me would ask why I was even at a Mary Kay party to begin with since I'm not one to wear makeup. I've always been uncomfortable with it, and the most I've managed to apply is a little mascara. You may be asking yourself, then why on earth did I spend the better part of \$400 on product I don't use? Well, that's kind of funny, actually. I'm likely the only attendee who would tell you the story of that Mary Kay party—with any sense of levity at least. I'm certain neither of my colleagues finds any humor in how that tragic party ended, the three of us standing in uneasy silence with a complete stranger, but I suppose that's because I was the only one to walk away from that embarrassing fiasco with a jaunty stride.

So, how did I end up a guest at what was possibly the worst Mary Kay party ever hosted? Well, meet Kimberly. Kimberly was my immediate supervisor in the print department of an office supply store where I was working as a graphic artist. She was an almost too personable kind of manager and treated me more like a friend and less like an employee. In the few overlapping minutes we'd have in our shifts, Kimberly would often have me run my fingers through her fine blonde hair to feel how smooth a new product had made it or lean in too closely to get a waft of some new fragrance or other. I'm sure we made for an odd sight. She was this vivacious, perfectly coiffed, tour de force, and I was just transitioning out of an awkward and frumpy adolescence. In hindsight, I can see

she was desperate to take me under her wing. I suspect that's why she was so adamant I come to this Mary Kay party she'd be hosting. I tactfully tried to decline the invitation but capitulated far sooner than I'd care to admit. Although I'd agreed to go, in my mind, I was already concocting my plan to leave as quickly as possible. What I didn't know was that Kimberly had also invited one of our clients, and not just any client, but Donna, one of our most professional and lucrative clients. Furthermore, what none of us could have predicted is Donna and I would be the only ones to show up. Now you can imagine this derailed the plans I'd devised to leave early. It'd be a lot harder to sneak out, especially unnoticed, when I was half of the guest list.

It was the most miserable party I'd been to, Mary Kay or otherwise, and the stark, midmorning sunshine only made the situation seem more surreal. The lack of turnout had clearly put Kimberly in poor spirits; she was so deflated; she could hardly muster her usual charm to introduce the Mary Kay saleswoman there teaching her the art of hosting.

As the saleswoman hyped what was clearly the crown jewel of special offers displayed on the coffee table, I feigned interest in hopes to brighten Kimberly's mood. I'd later discover it was a pricey line of skin care products targeted to women significantly older than I was. I mindlessly nodded my head as the saleswoman asked me if I was worried about wrinkles on my neckline—I wasn't. I was barely eighteen. I'd never even considered my neckline before that moment, but she continued on her spiel, and I thoughtlessly kept nodding at her excitement as she mentioned the complimentary travel bag and accouterments that came with the purchase. I had no idea what I was doing there or how I could possibly leave now.

The saleswoman transitioned her attention to a small, specialized suitcase, and I sat quietly and attentively as she showed us myriad color palettes and passed around bottles of scented lotions and perfumes for us to smell. It was dizzying how much she seemed to pull out of her little case. By the time my eyes had begun to glaze over, our Mary Kay Mary Poppins had run us through the entire catalog, and it was time to make a purchase. I hadn't planned on buying anything, but I'd really enjoyed one specific product: Happiness. I even loved the name. It came in cheerful soft yellow bottles and smelled like freshly cut daffodils and daylilies.

I began filling out a little order card, beaming at Kimberly to show her this hadn't been a total waste. That's when the saleswoman asked if she could match a palette to my skin tone. I tried to decline what I saw as an obvious attempt to upsell me, but the other women—even Kimberly—lit up at the thought, and before I knew it, each of them had the simultaneous idea to give me a makeover.

Now, at that point, the party was pretty awful, but by most accounts, it would have hardly tipped a scale past tedious; it wasn't until they were done with this fateful makeover that with my help, the party would officially earn its title as Worst-Ever-Hosted.

Leading up to that moment, time seemed to stand still as they fluttered about me with every sort of product and applicator. They pulled my skin this way and that, with commands to open or close my eyes. I could feel the soft-bristled brushes tickle my lids, and the gummy lipstick they had me blot on a tissue made my lips parch. Just when I thought I couldn't tolerate the single overwhelming itch my face had become, the commotion ceased, and the women, like Macbeth's witches, stepped back to admire their handiwork. Their "ohs" and "ahs" filled the air as Donna placed a small mirror in my hand so I too could bask in the glory of their creation.

Nothing could have prepared me for this moment. I could hardly recognize my own eyes behind the heavy black liner and dark eye shadow. As the image of my reflection fully sunk in, the eyes behind this cosmetic Zorro's mask began welling up, and I erupted into uncontrollable sobs. There was an immediate attempt to console me, but it was

clear they were surprised by my response. I panicked and I felt the need to explain, but before I could even catch them, the words—the worst words I could have possibly chosen in that very moment—slipped out, "...you made me look like a whore."

A hush fell over the entire house, and I immediately had to stifle a laugh. Had I really just said that to these very prim, conservative southern women? I quickly made my way to the nearest sink, still crying, but now my eyes were bulging from their sockets and my lips were pursed tight choking on the absurdity of it. Kimberly, as speechless as the rest of us but a dignified hostess all the same, followed me to the bathroom where one after another, she handed me soft washcloths generously doused with a stringent-smelling makeup remover.

I apologized profusely between the scrubbing and the sobs, still holding back what I knew was an inappropriate laugh. I wondered if there was any way I could escape through the window. No, it looked a bit too small for my hips. Had I used enough washcloths to bury myself under them yet? Not even close. Could I assume a new identity mid-party? Oh, if only... Well, it looked like I'd have to collect my composure, give my face one final rinse, and rejoin what was left of this godforsaken party.

While I knew I'd have the last laugh, I couldn't have it right now. With as straight a face as I could manage, I reentered the living room. The clammy air brushed across my now-clean skin and the space that had minutes earlier been all abuzz with girlish chatter was now deathly quiet. Donna and the saleswoman were finalizing an awkwardly silent transaction. I imagined they hadn't spoken at all after my outburst, and that made it even harder to hold back a snicker. They wouldn't even lift their faces to look me in the eye as I walked over to them. Without hesitation, I firmly told the saleswoman that I'd take her up on that special offer. I'd also like to add the specialty hand and foot scrub and a bottle of every kind of Happiness she had. She was clearly stunned I was buying anything at all, but without a word, she packaged my things and completed the order card for me. My heart sunk when she told me the total, but at this point, I didn't think my dignity had a price tag, and I made out a check for the full amount.

When I arrived home, I cleared a large shelf in our bathroom to display my overly priced old-lady exfoliator and serum with nothing I could call pride. I'd hardly touch them again, but I'd keep the bottles long past their best-by dates out of guilt. They moved with me multiple times until I slowly stopped unpacking them entirely. I struggled to throw them away, but eventually, nearly 15 years later, I finally did. However, to this very day, I have (and I suspect I will until the day I die) the world's most expensive lash and brow comb. It's the only thing I have left of that day— just a tiny little plastic thing, with a classic Mary Kay pink handle and cheap synthetic bristles. It only set me back about \$400, the respect of two colleagues, and a healthy knock to my ego, but I have a little giggle almost every time I use it. I can't say I'd buy it again, especially not for that price, but there's no question that I've gotten my money's worth.

## WHEN A FLY FOUGHT THE SUN



REYNA ASHLEE CIRIGNANI WALLACE

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"Flypaper, vinegar, honey," Ross listed off as he unpacked the groceries. "Those smelly bug repellent bracelets, beekeeper hats, a mosquito net, and mosquito spray."

"Will that even work on flies?" Han questioned aloud, squinting to read the small print on the back of the spray can.

"Can't hurt."

The two friends pulled the beekeeping hats over their heads and started to cut the flypaper into strips, sticking it to any available surface. The white noise of buzzing flies seemed to encapsulate the shared condo, leaving the room choking for a breath of silence.

For the last few days, the fly infestation had become the new normal. It started with a few fruit flies hovering near the bananas, but their numbers had quickly increased in density around the counter and refrigerator. Though he hadn't learned the species' names by heart, Han had never seen so many types in one place. The small orange flies, the scrawny black ones, types with elongated bodies, or the plump hairy ones with a green shimmer.

The sight was nauseating, but after checking exterminator prices and date estimates, the two had decided that the best plan was to deal with it on their own. A shield of blankets was stuffed under the bedroom and bathroom doors. Ross had even fashioned an armor of oven mitts, safety goggles, and saran wrap to swat at the buzzing masses.

"I called up London. She said we could stay with her for the time being." Han's jaw clenched involuntarily.

"You know I can't go." He stated stiffly.

"Yeah," Ross dismissed with a quick head shake. "Worth a shot."

Han was very happy with where he was. The condo was a haven of everything he could need. Between the telecommuting and takeout meals, he felt no reason to leave the house, but plenty of reasons not to. Logically, he knew it was a problem, and it even had a name. Agoraphobia. Yet somehow, the clinical title felt entirely separate from himself.

Still, Ross didn't seem happy with that conclusion. He glanced over, his thin lips parting as if he desperately wanted to say something but knew he shouldn't. Han raised a curious brow to egg him on.

"Look..." Ross sucked a breath through his teeth. "I'm just worried."

"The flies will be history in a week."

"No, not the flies." Ross set the roll of flypaper down hard. It was impossible to make out his features behind the white beekeeper net, but the frustration glared in his voice. "You're just wasting away in here. I mean, how long has it been? Over two years without stepping outside?"

Han closed his eyes, sucking air between his teeth until his lungs were ready to burst. There was a pregnant pause as neither of them knew what to say.

"I'm just not ready yet." Han pressed his lips together. "I've managed for this long, and I'm happy. If you need me to take on more responsibilities arou-

"You don't have to bribe me with chores to let you stay. It's what friends are for. Is that cheesy?" Ross sighed out, batting at a fruit fly near his ear. "Forget it. I'll help you set this all up and then pack."

Han nodded, happy to drop the topic. Through the mesh, he turned his focus back to the flypaper cradled in his hands, where he watched the first thread-thin legs of a fly plant themselves on the sticky adhesive.

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Han woke up the next morning with raised bite marks on his heel from stray flies and a profound sensation of hollowness. The sheets, though warm and snug around his body were almost an irritation as the light began to pour through the thin curtains. Despite his body's protest, he kicked off the sheets, landing his sticky feet on the cold, hardwood floors.

As he swung open the bedroom door and swept aside the mesh curtain, he noticed the flypaper placed on every available surface was no longer recognizable. The neon hue was obscured by stacked masses of writhing black.

Han felt a wave of nausea sweep over his body, skin already erupting with chills and the overwhelming urge to itch. He covered his mouth, stomach convulsing with every inhale.

Hundreds more than the previous day had seemingly sprouted from nothing. The air was thick with the scent of decomposing exoskeletons, the floor littered with corpses. Crawling between couch cushions, battering against the window, making a meal from the bodies of their own kind.

Maybe splurging on an exterminator wasn't a bad idea after all.

It took all of his focus to not tread on the brittle bodies, heart thrumming against his ribs as he staggered backward. Grabbing a blanket from the ground, he darted into the bathroom and slammed the door. A few dead flies stuck to the blanket flannel, which he shook off and then used the fabric to stuff under the door. He barely even noticed the sting of his knuckles scraping against the underside of the door.

Then suddenly, a new wave of buzzing seemed to vibrate on the back of his neck. Involuntarily, his spine curled inward, and he looked up.

Flies flooded through the crack at the top of the doorway. Without a single ounce of conscious thought or remorse, they scuttled in an endless stream, dogpiling and tumbling from the trim. They spilled into a growing cloud and dove to suckle on his bloodied knuckles.

Han cried out and fell backward, grappling around for a handhold and finally landing on the shower curtain. It didn't hold his weight. With a clatter, the bar fell to the tile ground and the fabric followed in a billowing wave. Static noise drowned everything else out as he tossed the material over his head, fanning away several of the insects to prevent them from being trapped inside. His fists held the bunched fabric fast to the tile floor until his knuckles turned white.

He could feel the patter of the tiny bodies hitting the plastic covering, and the crunch of a few dead ones beneath his knees. Han closed his eyes. Already he was feeling a flood of lightheadedness from breathing so shallowly, but it was better than risking inhalation of one of the insects.

They would go away, they had to.

They would melt into his senses and cease to exist. He was safe under the net. All he could do for now was wait, stay still, and quiet. Safely enclosed within the chrysalis made of tightly woven thread and plastic. Waiting for the outside to vanish. Waiting for the outside to not be as terrifying.

After all, that was what Han was best at.

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The day passed in a nebulous blur. Time seemed to pass like a weathered hourglass-fine grains trickling through or all at once in sticky clots of hot sand. Shadows spun across the floor as the sun made its lazy arc across the sky, though Han wasn't there to see it.

It had been two years in this apartment.

And two days he lay beneath the cover of that net, heavy with the bodies of dead flies, and sticky from his own blood. forty-eight hours, he was sure of it. He could feel his hand that had fallen outside of the net and see the angry red rashes the flies had left in their wake. The raised bites throbbing, the scarlet scratch lines from nails digging into his own flesh.

The ones who found their way through the gaps in the shower curtain chrysalis crawled across his scabbed skin. He was practically paralyzed as they pierced his skin and filled their plump bellies with his blood. Gnawing on dead skin cells like a full-course meal.



Little black corpses with their creased legs aimed at the heavens. Vacant red eyes, filmy wings twitching in the breeze, disembodied parts scattered across the floor from their offspring's fevered cannibalism.

Han could feel- see himself- vividly as if watching from a closed-circuit television aimed from above. The lump of his body cowering beneath the shower curtain. Through it, his partially closed eyes, glazed over from exhaustion and hunger. The way his lips flaked and limbs sprawled, one knee tucked to his chest.

Through the sludge of consciousness, Han couldn't help but imagine that he was dead. Floating in the pits of blackness between nowhere and infinity. Mindless, listless as any one of the insects raging within this room.

Yet there he was. Reminded in the persistence of every fluttering wing, the tickle of splintered legs, and the incessant buzz pulsating to the beat of his heart. He could taste it, nausea swelling in the pit of his belly with each breath, the bitter taste of his limp tongue pressed against the roof of his mouth. His thoughts were drowned out by the dissonant hum, and his nose was assaulted with the iron scent of festering rot.

It was two days under the net, bleeding, groveling, and seeping in his own agoraphobia. Two years in this apartment like an insect doused in alcohol and pinned to a corkboard.

At one point, his phone rang. The refrain of *'You're The One That I Want'* from the *Grease* movie barely made it to his ear. That song always made Ross laugh so Han had set it as his ringtone.

His phone was still on the nightstand in his bedroom.

When he didn't pick up the first time, the phone rang again. The sound of John Travolta's voice through the din of buzzing should've been comical, but it only made Han press his forehead to the cool tile in frustration.

An hour passed like this, and he drifted between bouts of sleep. But suddenly, he was interrupted by the sound of somebody pounding on the door.

"Han?" Ross's playful voice emerged. The call was punctuated by several swift knocks. "Just checking in!"

Han peeled his forehead off the tile and opened his eyes, seeing nothing but the pale insides of the shower curtain.

"Yah!" Came another shout. This time, he sounded more serious. "I know you're in there!"

Han gritted his teeth, but after a long moment of hesitation, he raised his head. Dead flies slid off the plastic. It was as if his hands were moving on their own, the blood in his veins drawn hypnotically to the edge of the bathtub to hoist himself upward. The crunch of fly carcasses as he planted his other palm on the ground, raising to his knee and lunging at the door handle. Somehow he wrenched the bathroom door open, noticing the red splits his knuckles reopening and oozing blood.

"Stop playing! You weren't answering your phone."

Han hardly heard him over the din that echoed through the living room and kitchen. His head spun with black dots- whether flies or dizzy stars, it was impossible to distinguish. With an impulsive swipe, he brushed away the insects tangled in his hair, shuddering as they tumbled away, sticking to his flannel clothes. The cloud seemed to swarm over his

head, battling to get into his mouth and up his nostrils, but he narrowed his senses to just his friend's voice.

"C'mon, let me in!"

The fear of approaching the door didn't even register. This apartment wasn't the safe haven he had quarantined himself in the last few years. This was a hellhole of infection and death. Nothing in the outside world could fill him with equal fear and revolt as the infestation of his own home. He staggered through the hall, sweaty feet sticking to the hardwood floor.

"Han!" Ross called again. "Are you still sleeping? Let me in!"

Ross was on the other side. All he could see was the door handle that seemed to pulsate. His trembling fingers worked to grasp it, the flies battering his exposed flesh. Without a moment to think, he twisted, throwing his entire body weight on the door.

And then there was nothing.

Nothing beneath his feet, nothing holding him upright. Just the empty air as he fell on himself. Bunched fists hit the cold cement. Body aching, ravaged hands and feet stinging against the prickly ground. Yet his eyes opened to the bright skies, balmy air flooding and filling his lungs. The replenished oxygen pulsed through his veins, feeling like a foreign substance and causing a shiver to ripple through his body.

"Han!" Ross sputtered. He felt hands grapple at his arms, tugging him upward. Han stood, craning his head back farther than he had in years, for finally there was something beyond the cobbled beige ceiling. Ross was speaking to him frantically, though the words entered his ear in a dizzy scramble. He let it wash over him, letting the noise descend into a static.

Flies escaped past in a furious gust, dispersing throughout the clement spring skies. No, not skies. Heavens- blushing pink and layered with gossamer clouds. Buildings stood in the distance at an angle the windows in the condo couldn't capture- sleek and industrial with the sun glinting off their silvery panels.

Ross gripped Han's shoulders to hold his frame steady. He stared in evident confusion but chose to stay silent. Han's gaze flickered between the other man and the view, stuttering as he tried to come up with an explanation and found none.

Two years inside that apartment. A butterfly beneath a net, unable to even lift its wings against the weight of the material. Two days he spent, desperately clinging to the net like a life preserver, wrapping his body up like a cocoon. Yet here he was, a butterfly perched in the blinding sunlight.

The sun- he had never seen it from this angle. It glared directly into his eye as if demanding him to avert his gaze, but Han refused to tear his gaze away even as it burned into his retinas. The sun was only a little yellow marble he could hold between his thumb and index finger. Not much bigger than one of countless flies that boldly aimed their flight path dead center into the sun's burning eye.

And at that moment, Han felt bigger than the both of them.

## SONNET NO.1



SOLEIL YAKITA

*Atlantic Cape Community College  
Mayslanding Campus  
New Jersey*

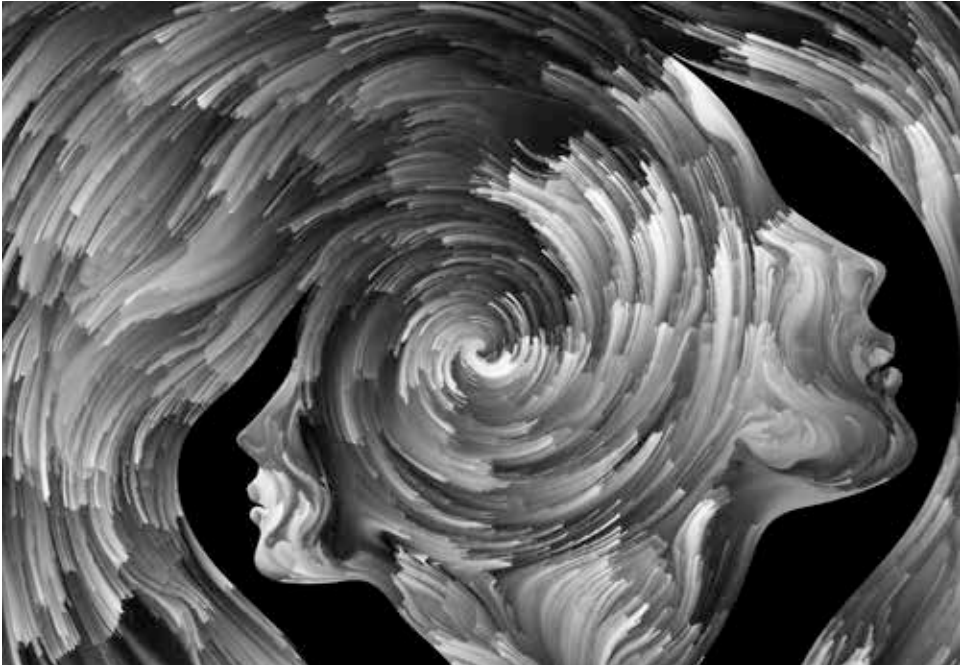
In folklore wild, and restless tales unwind,  
In hidden pages, places—hallowed ground,  
Unravel secrets mortal and divine,  
Do go and seek what yet remains unfound.

Adventure, book-in-hand, by firelit warmth,  
To worlds of warlocks, witches and wishing wells,  
Where foolhardy knights hunt dragons but for sport,  
Among illusions, magic brews and spells.

Yet where such greed and war and pain pervade,  
Just under different nations, flags, and stars,  
It seems a trickery, calling it escape—  
For save the face, the beast's the same as ours.

But lessen not a bit, does the allure,  
'Tis fiction that the heart does hunger for.

## 80HD



**JAMIE BELISLE**

*Central New Mexico Community College  
Albuquerque Campus  
New Mexico*

A thing, a thing!

This thing I think about becomes all I can think of, shiny and new!  
I consume and create, create and consume, becoming engorged until bursting  
erupting information like a geyser! Wanna hear all about it!?

Oh...  
I'm boring you again, aren't I?  
No it's ok I get it...  
I'm sorry, I'll be quiet...

Silence,  
  
empty,  
  
cavernous.

When speaking comes as easy as breathing,  
silence becomes suffocating.

When you're too much  
you don the mask of uniformity,  
become smaller, shrink  
take up less space,

and if the mask does slip

cement it in place  
with shame  
head in hands, pressing  
the cascading deluge of tears  
back behind the dam,

becoming still,  
glassy as the surface of the reservoir  
hiding its true potential.

Until all that's left  
of your wild spirit  
is an ember.

So what next, my little wild one?

Guard this spark  
given to you by the divine,  
and with your last breath, bellow your truth  
stoking the flame imperishable  
until it roars!

Until your heart burns  
in a torrent of flame,  
consuming the chaff  
that once made you question  
the veracity of your own existence

and if you burn too, know  
that beneath the ashes  
you will lie,  
awaiting the breath of inspiration  
to reignite you  
to your purpose  
once more.

## THE CLIFF, THE GATES, AND THE MAN WITH THE KEY



**PARKER BLACK**

*Northeast State Community College  
Blountville Campus  
Tennessee*

*You let them loose, says the man beside me, my own conflicted, reflected soul. You let them free...*

I am the gatekeeper; I am the man with the key. I am the man that protects souls, and I am the one without the bravery to give them freedom.

*Four souls, I whisper again to myself. Four escapees today. Four souls flung off the cliff, smiling all the way. And you didn't stop them...*

My heels click against the white tile floors, and I tug my white coat a little closer, my fingers finding my scalpel as I pass through the metallic door— a divider of two worlds.

Then the mumbles begin, the begging, the screams, all the time pleading for freedom. I scoot to the middle of the hallway, hands reaching out, trying to touch me, to grab me. Heads peek through the bars, tongues groping wildly for the flavor of life. It's brighter in here, yet somehow, I feel darker inside; it's warmer in here, yet somehow, I feel colder; there are hundreds of faces, yet somehow, I feel lonelier.

I don't let my eyes linger on these men, women, and children, with their starved bodies and thirsty mouths.

I am the man with the key. The man with the power to let these harrowed souls free. Free from their alcohol-stained cells and their unhealing wounds and their broken minds. I have freed souls before, so why not now? Deep down, I know. Because I know where they go, I know what they do with their freedom, and as a Gatekeeper, I can't give them freedom, for freedom is death. Freedom is the cliff.

I pass the groping hands, the mentally ill, the moans, and the last door, finally leaving behind the twisted reality of life. The wind feels cold on my face as I open the door and step outside. The morning is foggy, but I can still see the cliff. Dark, foreboding, with an air of trepidation. Fog billows from beneath the cliff and up into my world, clouding out the sun and leaving a tension in the air around me.

As I walk steadily closer to the cliff, another figure appears between the rocks and crannies. But this isn't a shuddering figure, one with a hunched back and trembling features. I step up beside my fellow gatekeeper, staring down the cliff. It goes on forever— or so we say.

"Doc," I whisper. "It's a little windy to be stepping so close to the edge."

Doc takes a step closer.

"Doc," I whisper again, my words carried gently into his ears by the wind. "Step away from the cliff."

"What's so enticing about it all, Geon? Why do they stop at nothing to fall off this cliff, haven't you ever wondered?"

"Doc," I say. "Step away from the cliff."

"Haven't you ever wondered?"

Of course, I had. "It's a release, Doc. The pain is too much, they want it all gone."

The man beside me nodded, his eyes far and distant. "And does it go away?"

"I don't know," I whisper again. "No one does."

"I talked to one the other day," Doc whispers, so quiet I have to lean a little closer.

"You know you aren't supposed to..."

Doc licked his lips. "He said we're next. Give it a few years, and we'll be just like them." I swallow.

Doc takes another step towards the cliff. "Why don't we just let them all out? Unlock their cells, and make them all happy?"

I shake my head. "We can't."

"And why not? That's all they want. Freedom..."

I shake my head again. "Because we don't know what's at the bottom of the cliff, Doc."

"Then let them do it. Just give them the key."

"No, we can't. Doc, we don't know what's at the bottom of the cliff."

"Well, why don't I find out, Geon? I'm more like the rest of those lost souls than you think. All I want is freedom."

"Doc, freedom from what?" I say, watching my words closely and Doc's feet even closer.

Doc rubbed his temple. "From the pain."

"Doc, step away from the cliff."

"Geon, step away from me."

"Doc, don't do it."

Doc smiles. "I watched the escapees this morning. The four. They looked so happy."

"It's a different type of pain, Doc. Your pain can go away. Let me help you."

"You're wrong." Doc takes a step closer, his feet pushing pebbles off the edge, his toes so near, all it would take is to relax...

Finally, I make a decision. My hands reach out and close on Doc's shirt. I pull him far from his precarious position. Doc begins to writhe, his eyes laced with a new fire and his long, white tongue groping through the foggy air. I reach for my cuffs and cinch them around his thin wrists. Then I leave him on the ground for a moment, his body spasming amongst the dark rocks and gravel of the cliff. Soon, his seizure stops, replaced with a slow and solemn shudder. His face and wrists are bleeding, the man I knew already lost within this body I once called friend.

Minutes later, I shut the cell door behind him, avoiding his eyes that now look just like his cellmates. In a few weeks' time, he'll be just like them. His eyes meet mine. "Let me go," he whispers. "The pain..." A tear leaks from those eyes. "...the pain...it hurts... Geon..."

I step back outside, hands groping at my shirt all the while. The door clangs behind me, and I lean into the cool metal as if I can barricade hundreds of souls with my own weight. I slide down the door. My eyes stare out over the cliff, and my back leans up against the building behind me. A building for the broken: broken of body, broken of mind, and broken of spirit. Someday they'll all escape. Someday they'll all be free. So why do I hang chains upon their shoulders and locks upon their souls?

Someday I'll be like them. What will I want? Will I be grateful for the men that put me behind bars, that protected me from the cliff, or will I scream and beg to be let free? I should think I will scream. So why do I abandon them to dirty straight jackets and silver handcuffs?

I see the escapees' smiles every day. And I see the pain in those poor prisoners' eyes every day, and I hear their moans every morning. So why do I shut them in their damp cells and feed them mortal food?

Perhaps, because I don't know what's at the bottom of the cliff. That's why I lock them up.

Even if I did, though, would I let men jump it?

Is pain enough reason to discard life, even for something better?

I stare through the fog. It seems to me that the only people that can answer my questions are the ones that have jumped the cliff.

I stand. I start walking. Towards the cliff.



## AMERICAN ALMS



**DANNY BLAKEMAN**

*Borough of Manhattan Community College  
New York*

Hardly a dream, a lie penned by powers that be,  
The evils of law and order, enforced by aristocracy  
Who have a place to lie their head, their health.  
Eyes averted from others, the stench.  
For every wretch who cries, somewhere there are ears.  
The answer of indifference comes back clear.  
Here amongst freedom, painful begging  
Here amongst opportunity, there's silent death

Survival in a state that forces one to lie,  
In order to fulfill needs to help us get by.  
A human right given by those who withhold,  
Forced to take the meager shreds and  
Do what you're told.  
A real national secret,  
There's starvation in the home of the brave!  
Barren cupboards for millions,  
Unspoken to avoid the shame.  
A real national secret,  
There's rampant unnecessary death!  
Hospitals piled up with bodies,  
Western practices wringing their necks.  
Feigning some illness to get another kind of care,  
A ruse to learn how to cope turns to lifelong despair.  
Of denial, of displacement, uprooted and turned away.  
How dare the destitute expect such civil decency?

A real national secret,  
Four empty homes per person who needs!  
Put on a bus to nowhere,  
After their tents are cut down by police.  
A real national secret,  
There's filthy water that no one can drink!  
Toxic for almost a decade,  
Neglected by the world, as sludge fills their sink.

A false system of health, of state-sanction benefit feeds.  
Like a bone tossed to a dog, grateful for grade D meat.  
Line up for the welfare! The criteria being just so.  
They're busting at the seams to tell your children 'no.'  
Failed by every resource, just a number on a board.  
Picked off like a scab, your value is what you can afford.  
Shelter given to the worthy,  
Medicine goes to the respectable man.  
Hunger keeps the poor in wanting,  
The greedy disease of a splintered land.  
But still give us this day our daily bread,  
And forgive us our sins against the state.  
All we wanted were basic needs,  
And somewhere to feel safe.

## SSRI

DANNY BLAKEMAN

*Borough of Manhattan Community College  
New York*



Shocking the nerves with an electrical pill  
To quiet the cycle between boredom and thrill  
Drown out the monster who lays in wait,  
Dormant, in slumber. Obliterate!  
Hateful disdain learned by life's trials  
Dig deep in the cortex, the heart of a child  
Raised to forget all innocent peace  
And silence all feelings along with the beast.

Seeking a cure brings death to my mind  
Swallow a scratch, sedated in time.  
Abuse my cure, falsely serene  
Oblivion borders the worlds unseen.

Mourns for how freely thoughts should pass,  
Now terror awakens from how long they last.  
A memory of love, resorted to shame.  
As love seems so scarce in this struggle for pain.  
Splitting in two from duality's mold  
One reason, one devil, each gripping the soul.  
Give me the void, a bottomless pit.  
Careless abandon resides within



Seeking a cure brings death to my mind  
Swallow a scratch, sedated in time.  
Abuse my cure, falsely serene.  
Oblivion borders the worlds unseen.

Subdued for a moment 'til screaming for more  
Please make me stable, settle mind's score  
One to keep breathing, two for night's sleep,  
Ignore the cesspool of dreams in the deep.  
The pusherman's coming with his Rorschach.  
One more placebo, the guinea pig, lab rat.  
One stops pain, two stops imagination  
Money guides the hand of doctor's recommendation.

## DEAR ABDOMEN



TRICIA L CHAVES

*Lorain County Community College  
Ohio*

As my core, you really are the center of my body, but I'm sorry I've so often made you the center of my attention. How my sense of self shrunk as you grew.

My gut, my pouch, my front butt – the latter couldn't be scoured from my mind since it entered my consciousness in adolescence thanks to my best friend's older brother. He wasn't even talking about me, but I absorbed his words just the same, and would often think of the expression once you morphed into one of my very own.

Front butt. Front butt. I'd force you into Spanx like a sausage into its casing, feeling better because my thighs weren't on fire from rubbing together anymore, yet worse because I couldn't breathe as well, with a constricted sensation akin to indigestion.

Lean times would shape you to "perfection." Hunger manifested the abdomen I'd always craved. Your second act began in the third world – Rio, well into my 30s. So accustomed to being hidden, your hue would pinken under the tropical sun, a bare canvas on display between two tiny swathes of Brazilian swimwear.

Flip-flop continents and jobs: food writer and beauty editor.

Abdomen, you'd grow supple over months on the road, days strung together by chef interviews. "Order something from each part of the menu," they'd insist. I gladly obliged. Between meals there were spas, and, abdomen, they'd knead you like dough, slathering you with decadent body butters, some hundreds of dollars a dollop.

Bun in the oven? That's funny.

My waistline began bulging, but I would ignore it until that was no longer an option. I'd know for sure on a trip to Maker's Mark. Dale Chihuly would lean in close for a photograph, his droopy eye *smizing* at me as I reciprocated through clenched teeth, contorting the corners of my mouth upward. It was hotter than hell in that room, lights you couldn't see but only feel, beaming down from the dusty rafters through his art installation – a blanket of blown baubles suspended over our heads by a glass ceiling. The throng of journalists huddled closer as trays of hors d'oeuvres and bourbon worked the room. That sick smell of yeast hovered incessantly in the air, nausea threatening to mortify me in front of colleagues and cameramen poised at the ready.

Soon enough, you became the main attraction. Only beautifying more as you burgeoned, meticulously weaving new life beneath the surface. Strangers and intimates alike gazed at you lovingly, but my husband most of all – cradling you in between strong hands, anticipating the future you held.

Three days overdue, he refused to come out. Abdomen, I'm sorry, I sacrificed you. When I was ten years old and saw *that video*, I swore I'd never have kids and if I did, they damn sure weren't coming into the world *that way*.

"Ten percent chance it's ovarian cancer," they said after the first ultrasound. I took an epidural because they told me I wouldn't nurse or hold my son, and that Daddy couldn't be there if I were intubated. They sliced me vertically, above my waistband down to the pubic hair I'd dutifully splurged to have salon-waxed just days before – precisely the way those 'in the know' told me to do in preparation for delivery, lest a hurried nurse does a hack job by taking a disposable Bic to dry skin.

From the other side of the partition, I overheard physicians discussing the patient. The oncologist entered without announcing himself, homing in on you, abdomen, as though my upper half didn't exist or he'd forgotten the tear-soaked manner in which we'd first met. Biopsies were done as my organs lay splayed on you, awaiting their fate.

All clear.

Benign as they were, the cysts had encircled my ovaries like an invasive species and were unceremoniously plucked like tangles of weeds, uprooting any previously conceived notions of returning to this now-unfertile terrain for seconds.

They closed you up swiftly, cauterizing flesh, extinguishing dreams of the little brother who'd never follow.

The doctor handed him to me after they stapled you together, having crafted a legitimate front butt – a permanent crease that bisects my flesh, a Cabbage Patch Kids' derriere in human form at my midsection.

Abdomen, you hated the patch the surgeon put on you that day, meant to lessen symptoms of the premature menopause that was swapped for the ovaries they'd taken. I'd carefully affix one in a new spot each week, avoiding the raw skin from the week before. You raged so much that I relented, taking the hot flashes instead.

You were so strong, abdomen, holding my baby far too long in that carrier until my back told me enough was enough, and I finally had to put him down.

My toddler grew into a boy. I grew ever more in love with the maternity I never aspired to inhabit. Each moment you supported me just the same, no matter how I treated you. As ever, you still expand and contract—some days more than others.

And I try to remind myself that it doesn't matter. I threw away those Spanx a long time ago.

## A PAINTING (LEFT INCOMPLETE)



ZAFIRA DEMIRI

*Brookdale Community College  
Lincroft Campus  
New Jersey*

The humidity in the small apartment was unbearable. No matter what season was in passing, the weather was absolutely dreadful. Snow, rain, sunshine; they all came with their own pitfall. This was painfully obvious to Samuel, although most of the people in his life would disagree. He began to dwell on a memory of his friend.

*“Sam, how can you be so upset on a beautiful day like today?” The sun was shining down on the two men. The bright light warmed their skin and softened their faces along with the hard calluses on their hands. Samuel looked at Peter with confusion lingering in his stern eyes.*

*“I dunno. It’s just too damn hot.”*

Sam shut the door behind him and proceeded into his studio. Every footstep fell as though cinderblocks were attached to his ankles. He dragged his feet through the empty takeout boxes and mostly dried paint on the ground. He was not worried about the paint staining his old white sneakers. They had already been through hell and back, years of dirt and oil paint constructing their own masterpiece on the soles.

Although Samuel was feeling angry, depressed, and a little suicidal (his medication failing to work as promised), he was determined. Today, he was going to finish a painting. This was a painting for the person who seemed to work better than his medication—this was for Peter.

He slumped down onto the disheveled bed in the corner of the room, burying his face into the foul-smelling pillows. His heart ached, and he knew it would not stop anytime soon. Suddenly, Samuel felt a pain as if someone had reached into his abdomen and

grabbed his stomach, pulling and twisting. It grumbled and he threw his head back in agony, as though it had physically hurt him. Hurling himself out of bed, he walked over to his landline, ready to call Peter so they could grab something to eat. His fingers brushed over the phone before he realized.

"Right, can't do that anymore," A chuckle came from somewhere deep within him. It was not a hearty chuckle, but rather one that arose from deep in his stomach where all his fears and sadness resided. He briefly connected his fist with the wall to feel something. Shortly after, he quietly stomped over to his bed, where he collapsed for the fifteenth time that day.

He lifted his head up to look around the room. Paintings were scattered along the walls, a blank canvas on the rickety easel. The paintings were never completed, not for any good reason.

*"What's this one about?" Peter gestured to a half-painted canvas. The painting was comprised of mainly warm colors, but they served an angry purpose. If the painting were to come to life at that moment, it would be shaking from screaming. A shrill, agonizing voice on the verge of bursting into tears. Unintelligible yelling, as colors and lines remained juxtaposed where the white canvas peeked through.*

*Sam looked at the painting calmly, showing no emotion toward it at all. "My dad. The old bastard. That was after... well."*

*"It's okay. I get it, man," Peter threw his arm around Samuel's shoulder. "It doesn't matter if you finish a painting or not, you'll always be my favorite artist. Well, mostly because I don't know any others." They both laughed, even though Samuel knew he was lying. He would never be anything if he couldn't finish what he started.*

There was a general attitude for most of Samuel's paintings. Anger on the left side of the room, sadness and grief on the right side. Each of them was incomplete and glared at Samuel, begging him to take a brush to them one last time and complete them.

Samuel had a problem with letting his memories overwhelm him. Every time he started a painting with the full intent to finish it, the emotions washed over him. Like a child who had underestimated the waves at the beach, throwing himself into the crest of one only to be knocked down and repeatedly bombarded with catastrophic blows. After about two hours, like clockwork, he would drop the paintbrush by his side and lay to rest.

Today was not so unusual. Samuel was intent on finishing Peter's painting. The imagery was still fresh in his mind of what had happened in the last week. It played over and over again in his head like a broken record. The doctors said that Peter was getting better.

+++

*A white coat walked up to Peter's mother and Samuel. Emotionless, it asked "You're Peter's mother? Can I speak to you for a moment?" Mrs. Blair looked over at Samuel, but she was looking at the floor more than him. She walked away with the doctor, and Samuel's mind was racing. His fingers mindlessly picked at the skin around his cuticles. He would pull off his hangnails one by one, playing a very sad game.*

*"He will survive—ouch... He won't survive—goddammit!" Like petals off a daisy, discarded onto the floor of the hospital waiting room. Mrs. Blair made her way over to Samuel, tears in her eyes.*

*"Although this is a rather late stage of cancer, Peter shows a lot of promise. They think he will make it." Samuel's eyes watered to match hers. He burst into hospital room 515,*



*surprised to see Peter wheezing. Peter turned to him and smiled.*

*"Hey bro, what's goin' on?"*

*"Peter, man, they say you're gonna make it! How do you feel? Any better?" For the first time in his life, Samuel's eyes were full of hope.*

*"I'm glad they think so. I don't feel so hot right now, but if they say I'm doing better, that's all I need." He offered Samuel a half-hearted smile. Samuel grabbed his hand and squeezed.*

*"You're a trooper, man. You're gonna make it, I know you are."*

The following evening, Peter drew his final breath. Samuel didn't know how to feel. He wanted to deny that his only friend had been ripped from the world—from him. However, it seemed so fitting in his eyes. *Of course, this would happen*, he thought to himself, *of course, this would happen to me.*

Rather than wallow in his own self-pity, Samuel set to grieve the only way he knew how. He dragged a wooden stool and set it in front of the easel. Paintbrush in hand, he smothered the frayed hairs into the phthalo blue paint. He set the brush onto the canvas, and gracefully painted across it. The brush danced along the white background. The room was silent, but the brush leaped and twirled as if compelled by a solemn requiem. Samuel could hear the music now.

Violin encompassed the brush, compelling short and staggered strokes. The violent organ splattered onto the paper in a deep violet. A humming cello attempted to meld the instruments together, but the music stopped in repose. Samuel dropped the brush to the ground, and the strings of the orchestra wound so tightly that they finally snapped.

Samuel threw the canvas to the other side of the room. He chucked the half-empty paint tubes behind him in a desperate attempt to get them out of his sight. The glass that he rinsed his brush in had been knocked over in the chaos, an opaque gray liquid filling the cracks in the linoleum floor. Tears finally fell out of Samuel's eyes. He could no longer keep in the sobs as he wailed and moaned. Trembling, he screamed.

*"Why would you leave me, you bastard? How could you leave!" His voice quickly became hoarse as the violent words clawed their way out of his mouth.*

*"Sammy, you've gotta relax. I'll only be at the hospital for a few short days, just for some testing. When I get back, we'll hit the bar right away. Your first beer is on me, alright?" Peter coughed into a wrinkled napkin. He glanced at it wearily and shoved it into the pocket of his jeans. He had hoped Samuel didn't see the blood splattered on the white linen, but he did.*

*Samuel's eyes threatened to water up, but he composed himself. "Alright, well, you better be back soon. That babe down at Flannigan's has been begging me for your number." He forced out a chuckle and threw his arm around Peter's shoulder.*

*"Nah, she ain't worth a dime. Speaking of bitches, how's that painting of Meg going?"*

*"Man, she's not worth a painting. I started it, then I just kept thinking about finding her with that douchebag—threw that piece of crap away." They both laughed.*

*"Sammy, she might've been terrible, but your paintings aren't. You've got a gift man, you're gonna make it, I know it."*

Samuel lied about throwing that painting away. It remained tucked behind his bed along with the other paintings he could not bear to look at. In his moment of anguish, he pulled it out from behind his bed and stared at it. A deep crimson silhouette of her figure stained the white canvas. Purple and red enveloped the body, just as the blankets in which Samuel found her and her lover had. He threw the painting into the middle of the room, and with that he began his rampage.

Frantically, he stumbled around the perimeter of his room, collecting every canvas and throwing it into a pile. The painting he made after his dad nearly beat his mom to death. The painting he made when he crashed his car into an oak tree in front of his old elementary school. The painting of the man who held him up at gunpoint and stole everything from him except his keys, so he could, unfortunately, come back to this prison of his tragedies.

Every painting in the small studio apartment was now piled into the center of the room. Except for Peter's painting. It remained where Sam had thrown it initially. Sam grabbed the painting and held it for a long time. He thought back to that stupid, beautiful day.

*"It is pretty damn hot. We could sit here and continue sweating our balls off, or we could head back to mine and grab a cold beer. What do you say?" Peter smirked, already knowing his friend's answer.*

*"Jesus, you think all I care about is beer?" They both chuckled, "Well you're damn right. Get off your ass, let's go."*

*"You don't just care about beer, do you?" Peter's voice, although playful, was laced with sincerity. Samuel thought this was a stupid question, so he gave him a stupid answer.*

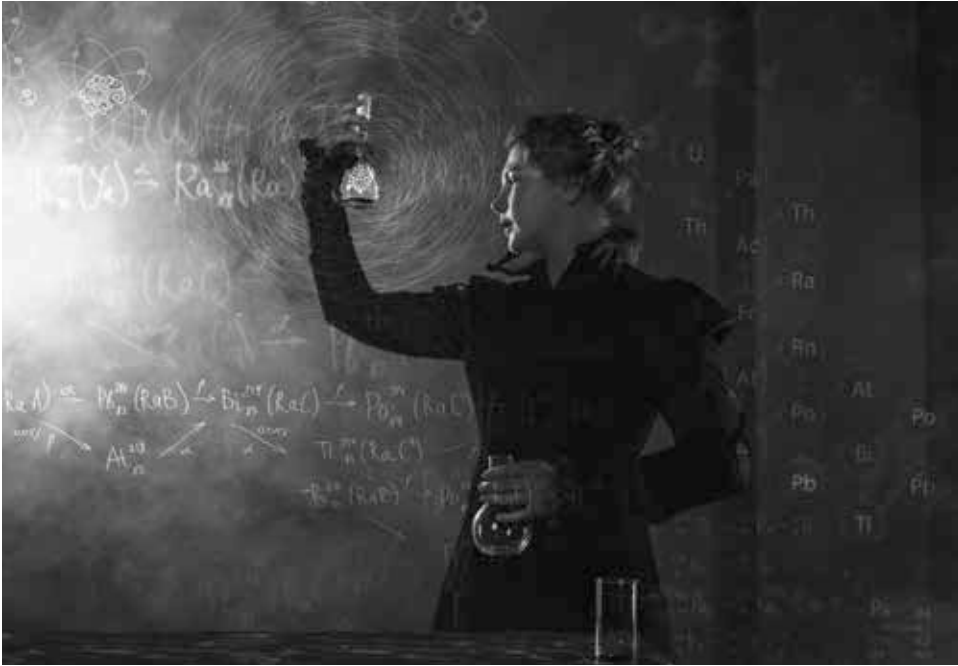
*"Nah, I also care about the Red Sox, let's get outta here."*

He wanted to jump back into this memory and grab Peter's shoulders, shake him senseless and tell him how much he cared about him. He would take Peter to the emergency room and start his treatment immediately, so it wasn't too late. He wanted to save Peter.

He just wanted to finish his stupid painting.

He sighed and placed the painting back onto the easel. He laid down onto his bed once more and grabbed a cigarette from the pack on his bedside table. He quickly slid his thumb across the spark wheel of the lighter and sucked in the sweet smoke of the tobacco. Halfway through his smoke, he decided he was done. Samuel chucked the lit cigarette onto the pile of paintings. The embers sparked violently against the oil, catching. The heat started to build up, filling the room with a black cloud. Samuel's lip curled menacingly, and a single tear fell out of the corner of his eye. He glanced over at Peter's painting and decided he would finish it tomorrow when he woke up.

## A MOMENT OF PROOF



### KELSEY GLASS

*Portland Community College  
Cascade Campus  
Oregon*

The cracks in her hands were the sooted outline of an abandoned web. The fingertips had been graphite tipped for months. Her back throbbed from peering over the edge into her drop of the universe. It was here, somewhere in all this darkness. It tickled the back of her neck as it lingered just out of reach, like a faint perfume of flowers since passed. It would not pass her by this time. She adjusted and took another deep breath.

Proof.

Her blonde hair had sifted into ash in the late hours of labor. Her black dress showed the medium of her work, as if a living canvas. The sounds of the room began to echo and thrum. The boiling of water, the hiss and flicker of candles, the tinkering of metal on metal. She had forgotten the taste of sweet air.

Proof.

She wasn't crazy, all she needed was right here. She had felt it before, she had held it for one Brief moment before it was whisked away on the wind. She hung on to that memory as her fingers delicately turned the knob. Intent on not hurrying anything. She knew when to push and when to make room for the natural course. When every atom was in place, it would show itself.

Proof.

The deep terracotta streaks of dusk had settled in the sky and long rich shadows shrouded her. She hadn't noticed the candle that had been placed near her until she felt

herself move towards its clarity. Even as doubt whispered its threatening presence, she knew she possessed everything this time.

Proof.

It crackled. Then it was there. Like the budding of a flower, holding a secret out to her eyes, for her alone to witness before stuttering back into oblivion. She turned the knob two more hairs to the right, intent on holding it. Blooming. No longer hidden.

Proof.

The proof she had spent the last eight years seeking, convinced of its existence even as she was ridiculed. All the taunts and dismissals, and prejudice were all swept away in the quiet hours as she sat staring with lover's eyes into her corner of the universe.

Proof.

They could doubt her, but they couldn't doubt this. They would not doubt this anymore. Not when it sat so ethereal, so mesmerizingly right in front of them. She cried, allowing the rivulets to carry all her weight, all of her exhaustion languidly down her face. A brilliance hung in the glow that reflected hope in her eyes. She had become so accustomed to the dark that she could scarce believe there was any light.

But there it was.

Proof.

Proof that there was yet another element of life unseen and unanticipated. A new element of creation, of destruction, yet realized. But for now, here in its infancy, a newborn to the eyes of humanity, it drew the gaze of its mother, and her love was instantaneous, consuming, and unwavering.

Proof.

Radium was real. It was real and alive and right in front of her in an alien glow that was unmistakable. Its proof was unforgiving in its declaration. With a sense of finality, the long-forgotten deep breath released, she looked down at her hands for the first time. Marie had never before noticed that the cracks in her hands looked like the sooted outline of an abandoned web.

## THE DEATH ANNIVERSARIES



TIFFANY HILL  
*Rose State College  
Oklahoma*

Like a safety pin  
piercing my skin  
my flesh cries for comfort-

With hooks for hands  
she digs her sharpened ends  
into the most sensitive  
parts of my body-

A grasp, impossible to break free!  
At last, an end possible to believe-  
An end that is living in the deceased.  
It is diseased, the addicted mind-

Possessed by what cannot be undone,  
Consumed by what cannot be left  
behind-

## RED FLOWERS, WHITE SEED, AND BLUE DART

SARAH JACQUES

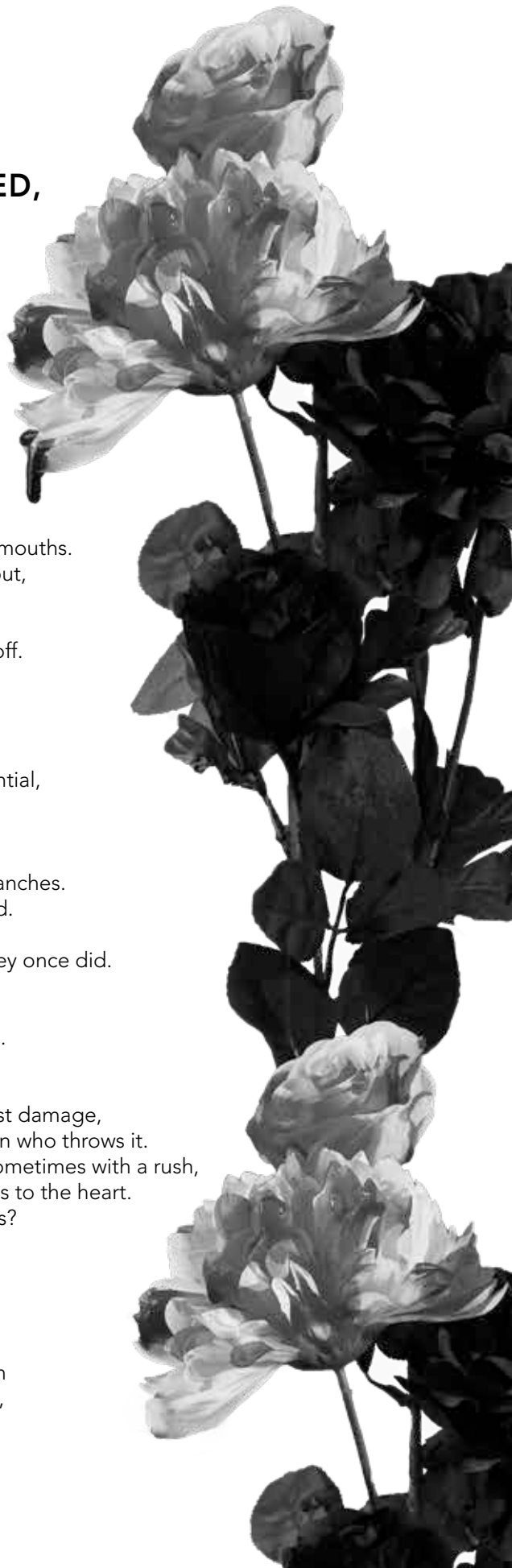
*Delgado Community College  
City Park Campus  
Louisiana*

Hate speech is like flowers  
Red blossoms, overflowing, spilling out of mouths.  
They are an invasive species that spreads out,  
Enveloping its victims,  
Covering them head to toe,  
Becoming a blanket that cannot be taken off.  
Growing vines that choke and squeeze,  
suffocating air and light alike.

Sometimes it is like a seed,  
A small white seed that knows not its potential,  
Hatred is uttered carelessly,  
And a seed falls on unintended soil.  
It takes root in the cracks of a sidewalk  
Sending deep roots and throwing large branches.  
The sidewalk slabs are distorted, up-angled.  
Passage blocked, all traffic flows around it.  
The heart and mind cannot flow here as they once did.

Or like a dart,  
Colored blue by the poison laced on its tip.  
Small and sharp with a fine point  
It enters its target with precision.  
Knowing where exactly it will inflict the most damage,  
And how many points it will earn the person who throws it.  
The pain spreads, sometimes slowly and sometimes with a rush,  
As veins darken and poisoned blood climbs to the heart.  
What surgery, what cure do we have for this?

Red flowers, white seed, and blue dart,  
These colors run deep in our soil,  
Cropping up with their ugly fruit  
Too often, too often.  
They suffocate, they block, and they poison  
That life that only wants to grow and thrive,  
the current that only wants to flow forward.  
Will we ever be free of them?



## THE BIRTH OF HOPE



**JESSICA KING**  
Fullerton College  
California

Since the age Hope attended the first day of school, she counted herself as lucky as the magical pink sparkles on her shoes that her wish for a best friend came true. He protected and cherished and loved her. They shared peanut-butter-jelly sandwiches during recess and played puzzles at one of the shaded benches during lunch. He sheltered her from the rough physical games and sports, "Because you'll get hurt from those meanies; play with me instead!" He always ensured that she triple-checked her math homework before passing everyone's papers to the front where the teacher waited. Whenever Hope accidentally caught Ms. Faith's gaze, her friend would remind her to look down, "You don't know the multiplication table, remember? Don't let her call on you!" Her best friend was the knight in shining armor princesses always dreamed of in the weathered fairytale books she borrowed from the school library. He protected her from all the dangers she'd nearly put herself in. She didn't need anyone else in life as long as he was by her side!

As the sun roasted her hair, she gazed at her group of classmates racing across the field when the bell rang for after-school activities. A bruised soccer ball dashed between their skinny legs, screams of laughter erupting with every clumsy kick. A thought sparked in her mind, one that she hadn't drawn in her notebook before:

*What would it be like to play soccer with them?*

Shoving the last peanut-butter-dipped apple slice into her mouth, she dropped down to double-knot her shoelaces. Her heart pounded against her ribcage as heavily as the rays of summer heat. Excitement vibrated in her legs like whenever she picked up a pink pencil to color her favorite princess. Maybe she could make new friends!

“Don’t do it,” he whispered in her ear. He yanked her into the shade before her sunburn worsened. “They look mean. What if they don’t like you?”

A smile instantly dropped from her mouth as it formed a pout. She kicked the floor, scuffing her favorite shoe, and stormed to the cafeteria where the teachers passed out ice cream sandwiches to the lingering children.

Before she routinely licked her hands of the melting treat, she stared at her not-so-messy classmates. He was right. What if they didn’t like her? What if they found her stupid or ugly? What if they thought she was a troll or a gremlin because of how she ate her ice cream? Was that why they wouldn’t want to play with her?

Tears pricked her eyes as she shuddered, mentally declaring to never ponder on playing soccer again. She snatched a few napkins and scrubbed her hands and mouth until her sticky skin flared with rawness.

In her high school chemistry class, she drew a boy’s name surrounded by smiley faces and pink clouds. She noticed the senior in the debate club with his unwavering voice and firm values. As soon as she could get her hands on the school magazine, she taped an article of him holding a 1st place trophy in her journal, the outline of a large, glittery red heart marked around his face. Her infatuation only soared when their chemistry teacher, Mrs. Chance, paired them together as partners for a class project. His sophisticated smile sparkled with sincere sympathy for Hope as she stuttered over her words and stumbled over her feet. Whenever his palm brushed against her skin to reach for the project prompt, her face burned with the fierce fluster of a wildfire.

When she profusely apologized after he stole a glance of his shrine in her notebook, he only offered a playful wink before moving along to his desk. Hope hid her face for the remainder of the lesson, heat radiating from her body. The remnants of a waxy navy crayon peeled off from the page and stuck to her cheek.

When the bell rang for lunch hour, she gazed at the back of his head as he shoved the ridiculously heavy textbook into his backpack and heaved the straps onto his shoulders. He was nowhere close to being a jock, but his cool demeanor possessed a strength that nearly pinned Hope in her place.

She rose from her desk, mustering up the little courage she had to speak to him. Hey, Dare, I like you. Will you go out with me?

“Don’t!” her best friend exclaimed, seizing her arm. His grip wrinkled her sleeve and bruised her frail skin. “What if he laughs or hurts you?”

Hope trembled as she froze in a half-risen stance, watching the boy slide his homework into one of his binders. He was right. He was always right. How could she look in the eyes of her dream crush when she didn’t have anything worthy to say? A rock heavier than their chemistry book lodged in her throat, its weight rightfully planting her in her seat. When the boy looked over his shoulder and waved farewell, she never looked at him again.

The rain pattered against the window as Hope leaned over her journal, her tired eyes strained and aching. A scrap of torn notebook paper rested against one of the neglected college textbooks, bearing her breathless handwriting:

*I found I could say things with color and shapes that I couldn’t say any other way—things I had no words for. – Georgia O’Keeffe, mother artist of American modernism*

The lamp glared at the spray of pastels across the page: a lavender sky with bubblegum clouds and gold stars, a land of mint green hills and baby blue flowers, caressed by



waves of silver water. She reached for her brown and gold pencils, sparks of inspiration humming in her fingertips—

“What are you doing?”

She slammed her notebook shut, the electricity stalling to a faint static. “N-Nothing—” Fear gripped her heart in a fist of cold steel as her best friend flipped to her drawing with a casual flick of his wrist. “What’s this?”

“It’s nothing,” she murmured, shadows casting gloom over her eyes. Her knuckles paled as she gripped the edges of her chair. Her blood screamed at his presence and soared at the sight of her drawing; she trembled with terror and exhilaration, a thousand words roaring for release.

“What was it that we learned today in art history? ‘To create one’s own world takes courage.’”

“Georgia O’Keeffe,” she breathed. Yes, it had to be a sign when she opened her textbook tonight. Professor Muse’s lecture focused on O’Keeffe, whose words clawed deep into Hope’s soul and dragged every inch of it from the darkest corner of her heart. “I want to be an artist!”

Silence swelled in the four small walls like a balloon. The millions of words that’d screamed on her tongue had poured themselves into those seven syllables. As she stared at her art piece, Hope couldn’t imagine all the colors in the world to paint a perfect picture of her perfect predestination: her color pencils, markers, and paintbrushes in fingerprint-stained children’s books.

“I want to be an artist,” she reaffirmed, staring at her best friend in the eyes. In that mortifying, miraculous, marvelous moment, Hope realized that she was staring into her own reflection.

“You? An artist?” he instantly ridiculed. “Be realistic! Who would look at your art? Look at that!” He swung crooked fingers at the page. “How would you take care of yourself when no one even puts you on the shelf?”

“Surely the skill comes with practice—”

“No!” he shouted. “Art only comes to truly talented and gifted people. If you can’t even make a decent picture, how could you ever be successful?”

When her best friend’s presence left, the poison remained, digging its way into her heart like a snake. Her soul shriveled and died.

What colors could she possibly use that would inspire a child?

When the winter storms finally relented, Hope found herself wandering through the park across the street from campus, spring bursting around her footsteps. Dew rested on glossy leaves and saturated blooms. The landscape glistened like crystals with the sun’s damp reflection. Her chest tightened and ached with an overwhelming desire to immortalize this moment in watercolor.

“Hey, Hope!” A girl slid onto the bench next to her, her smile brilliant like dawn. “We’re in art history together, remember? I’m Joy, in case you forgot. Ugh, I wish that class was longer.” She pulled out a notebook with a gold cover, swiftly flipping through pages until she landed on an incomplete phoenix in hues of ice blue and royal purple. “That’s beautiful!” Hope gasped, her eyes glued to the flecks of gradience glorifying

the beast's impending magnificence. What else lied within those pages? "How did you do all of this?"

"This is what I love doing! I want to be an artist."

"But... aren't you afraid of people judging you?"

Joy bursted into laughter. "Why would I? I don't let anyone or anything stop me. I believe in myself!"

"Is it really that easy?"

"Of course! Do what you want to do, love who you want to love, be who you want to be. When you find your passion, just go for it!" After a moment of reflection, Joy nudged Hope's shoulder. "Come on, let's take a look at yours!"

Joy's words followed her for months, rejuvenating her broken heart, breathing life to her wildest creations. Her best friend tried to stop her, refrain her from taking dangerous risks. "Please stop this madness!" he cried as he clutched her in his tight embrace. "I'm trying to protect you from hurting yourself!"

"But what if people will love me? What if I can find friends who will support me? What if I'm proud of what I create?"

"I'm your friend! I'm all you need! Listen to me, I know what's right for you—"

There was a long silence. Hope had turned and walked away from him. "You are not my friend. If you truly cared about me, you wouldn't hold me back." He shrank with wide eyes and an open mouth. "I'm not mad, but I'm going to leave you now. I want to feel the pain, the betrayal, the heartache. I want to know the darkest shades of humanity so I can experience the pastels of happiness." For the first time, the artist truly smiled. "Thank you for protecting me all these years, but you have to let me go now."

With her final farewell, Hope left Doubt behind.

## SEMICOLON



**JESSICA KING**  
*Fullerton College  
California*

From the moment we're born  
we're all writers, the masterminds of our lives.  
Every breath is a space, a pause a period... or an ellipsis.

Some chapters swell with events and memories  
while others slip from our minds like misplaced ink.  
Some words flow from our pens with mirth  
while others struggle and resist landing on the page.

A writer's block can make us want to close the book,  
a narrative wavering on a cliffhanger, cruelly destined  
to never reach its resolution.

Dear young writers, main protagonists, precious survivors,  
your story isn't over—I haven't given up on you.  
The conflicts are long and painful, the climaxes short and sweet,  
but I know you'll win the final battles with your superpower: your existence,  
you're alive, and you're fighting, and you're conquering another day.

So please, when you're writing your next chapter,  
leave a semicolon on the last page  
so I know you'll be back tomorrow;

## JUST A SANDWICH



**JAEWON KWON**  
*Bergen Community College*  
*New Jersey*

*Sunny morning in an apartment. There is a pot on the stove, and on the table is a Korean breakfast with rice, soup, and side dishes.*

*A Korean man in his late twenties sits at the table. He glares at his rice. He is wearing a clean, white button-down shirt and pajamas. His hair has the slight hint of a perm. A white woman in her mid-thirties is in front of the stove, tasting the soup in the pot. She is fully dressed in office attire but has an apron on. She is humming.*

JINWOO: Babe, you really don't have to do all of this.

SARAH: Oh, shoot. I forgot the bacon and eggs. I'll fry them up together real quick, okay? Eggs in the bacon grease.

JINWOO: It's almost 9. You're gonna be late. Just come.

SARAH: It's 8:31 AM. I'll be fine. I can just take the cab if I need to. Rather not take the subway, you know? And these are steakhouse-cut bacon! You always said the regular bacon is cut too skinny, and you liked the thicker ones.

JINWOO: That just means it's going to take longer. Sarah, I'm the one working from home. I just have a meeting at 10 that I have to show my face at. If I really want the bacon, I'll just have it for lunch later. Or I could have it ready for you by dinner, so we can have it together.

*(Sarah takes out a carton of eggs)*

JINWOO: Seriously, I'm going to be sitting at home in these all day. *(Points at his pajamas)*

*(Sarah breaks two eggs into a frying pan and searches the refrigerator for something)*

JINWOO: We don't even have any projects to work on at the moment. Even Francis hasn't screwed up anything for like a week. Things are so, so chill at work right now. Life is great. I think I'll be able to manage not having bacon and eggs.

*(Sarah finds the bacon and takes it out of the fridge triumphantly)*

SARAH: I think you guys are too much with Francis. I mean it's gotta be hard to do good work when everyone is expecting you to mess up.

JINWOO: Babe, I don't want the bacon.

SARAH: *(taking the bacon out of the packaging and putting it into the frying pan)* Maybe he just needs more encouragement. How about giving him compliments while he's on this streak of doing okay?

JINWOO: *(getting up and walking to Sarah)* No, you don't understand. He doesn't care if he's doing okay or not. He doesn't know the concept of priority. Whatever tasks he has to do, he does them in perfect order. And I mean perfect order, the exact order of tasks in his little to-do list. It doesn't matter to him that it's 6 p.m. on a Friday and Bobby and I can't go home until he gives us the inventory report. Instead, he's working on some presentation that is a month away. Just because he wrote that presentation into his stupid little list first. It wasn't even assigned first, okay? He just happened to write it in first! The man is a robot. Actually, a robot could at least be reprogrammed or something. *(turns off the stove)* I do not want bacon.

SARAH: But they were already cooking. May as well finish the cooking. I can't put it back in the fridge now.

JINWOO: I'll take care of it later.

SARAH: But they're going to get cold and be all like...

JINWOO: *(interrupting)* Sarah, babe, sweetheart, please just please come sit down and eat with me. *(Jinwoo takes Sarah's hand and leads her to the dining table. They sit down.)*

SARAH: Jinwoo, are you okay? I'm sorry about Francis. He sounds so frustrating.

JINWOO: It's not so bad these days since we are working from home, and I don't have to see his face writing into his stupid composition notebook. Work is good these days. Really low-intensity stuff. In fact, I was thinking I really should be the one making breakfast. You gotta get up and get fully dressed to be ready to go out to work, manage a whole team of people, take the subway back, and all that. Meanwhile, I'm lounging around in pajamas doing nothing "at work." It just makes more sense.

SARAH: We've had this conversation before. Whenever I pictured being married, I pictured me wearing an apron and fixing up a full breakfast for my husband. Afterward, I would help him with his tie, and he would kiss me as he went out to work. I know, I know. It sounds so old fashioned and conservative. It's just something I always wanted to do. For some reason, the whole idea is so cute to me.

JINWOO: Babe, I don't even go out to work anymore.

SARAH: Exactly! That's why I want to at least make breakfast, to do what I can to make

our married life cute and lovely like I imagined.

JINWOO: And I do think it is too old fashioned. Why does the wife have to do all of this? Why can't I be the cute husband who makes breakfast, and you kiss me as you walk out the door ready to kill it at work once again?

SARAH: I do kiss you as I walk out. And you're always cute. So, this apron is staying on me.

JINWOO: Has my mom been calling you? Saying some nonsense about how a wife has to feed her man well for him to be successful? Breakfast is the most important part of the day, and it's your duty to make sure I eat it? She didn't even make breakfast, and she was a full-time housewife. To expect you, who works more than full time and is also working on a Ph.D., to get up an hour earlier every day just to cook breakfast is ridiculous, especially when she didn't even do it herself.

SARAH: That's why I love it though. I feel like a superwoman. Lawyer, Ph.D. candidate, and a super wife. I'm proud of myself every morning as I cook.

JINWOO: I'm always proud of you, but it just seems sexist. One of the things I hated most in Korea was how all the women would be cooking constantly during the holidays, and the men would just be drinking and playing cards. My aunts and even girl cousins would have to bring the food to the living room for dinner and also do the cleanup. Afterward, they would have to also bring whatever snacks my uncles wanted, cut-up fruits, grilled squid, and peanuts. Again, they would have to do the cleanup. And the jesa! The older people always made such a big deal of how I must carry the Choi name and honor my distinguished ancestors of the Choi household. So, if the jesa is supposed to like a feast honoring the Chois, why aren't the Choi men making the food? Why are their wives, who are Kims, Lees, and Parks, doing all this? What's so great about Confucianism? He was Chinese anyway. Why are Koreans so obsessed with this stuff?

SARAH: First of all, Jinwoo, your mother did not call me. Also, whenever we spoke, she was always perfectly lovely. Second, I'm sorry about what the women in your family had to go through. But this is our family. I'm not in the kitchen because some Confucian patriarchy is forcing me. In fact, don't you think it would be ironic if I wasn't able to do something I wanted because of your dislike of the patriarchy? Feminism doesn't mean women are now forbidden from traditional gender roles. It means that I choose what roles I want. I appreciate your concern. I really do. You are sweet. But as the woman of the house, I declare that I am the ruler of breakfast.

JINWOO: *(cries)*

SARAH: What's wrong, babe? Are you okay? *(rushes over)*

JINWOO: *(sobbing and hiccupping)* I am sorry. Just so sorry. Terrible. So, so bad.

SARAH: It's okay. Everything is okay. You don't have anything to be sorry about. Why are you crying? What happened? Can I do something?

JINWOO: I tried so hard. Every morning I tried. I love you, and you're so loving, and so I tried.

SARAH: I love you too. Has work been that difficult? Is it Francis? You can take some time off if you need. You know that I can bring in the bacon.

JINWOO: No, not the bacon. Not Francis. You're such a superstar. I know we can more than live off what you make. You work so hard in and out of the home, so I tried.

SARAH: And I love every second of working for us.

JINWOO: You get all of this stuff done, and I can't even do this simple thing. I'm a failure as a husband.

SARAH: You're an amazing husband! What're you talking about?

JINWOO: I just can't. I really tried my hardest every day for the past three months, but I can't any more

SARAH: What can't you do?

JINWOO: I can't eat your cooking anymore!

*(They stare at each other for three seconds.)*

JINWOO: *(speaking frenetically)* You're such a perfect wife and woman and way too good to me and good for me. So, I tried, and I tried because you're trying so hard, but I just can't. Your Korean food is something... I just don't understand. The soup, the side dishes, even the rice. The rice literally gets made by a machine! The rice cooker exists just to make rice! And yet. And yet. And yet. *(hangs his head)* I am so sorry. I'm a terrible person.

*(Pause)*

SARAH: Why didn't you say something earlier? You've been eating my food for three months! Is it really that bad?

JINWOO: Because you smiled so brightly whenever you presented each day's breakfast. And I thought, you know, not everyone can be good at everything from the start. You're such a smart and motivated person, so surely you will get better. And you were so proud of your food, and I loved seeing you so happy. Then I realized the fact you were so proud also meant that...

SARAH: I wasn't going to get better?

JINWOO: Well, you didn't get better, and you seemed to be very happy with your cooking. Maybe it was just my own taste buds that were weird. Maybe it's a problem with me.

SARAH: This is a lot to process.

JINWOO: I'm so sorry, Sarah. Forget I said anything. It's definitely something wrong with me. Your cooking is fine, I'm sure.

SARAH: Jinwoo. Stop.

JINWOO: I'm sorry.

SARAH: *(sighs)* Starting tomorrow, I'll make sandwiches.

JINWOO: *(tearing)* I love you.

SARAH: I know.

*(Sarah kisses Jinwoo and leaves for work.)*

## THE RAVEN'S SONG



LILLY PRECIADO

*Northeast Alabama Community College  
Alabama*

There once was a raven  
Who stood on a windowsill.  
When all the birds were singing  
He stood quietly and still.  
Steadily he listened  
To the lovely melody,  
And quietly he wishes  
That his voice was that pretty.

Filled with sudden sorrow  
He let out a lonely call.  
He thought he'd find someone but  
There was no one there at all.  
Down fell the bird so saddened  
He let out his final breath.  
The ground shook with his absence  
As he finally reached his death.

Clueless was the raven  
That a bird had heard the sound.  
She headed towards the window  
And she cried at what she found.  
A beautiful raven  
Laying neath the windowsill,  
With a sad and lonesome face  
Laying quietly and still.

To this day in the forest  
When the lonely house is near  
Through branches and through shadows  
If you're silent you can hear  
The lonely black raven  
Standing tall and standing proud  
With his wings spread to the sky  
Singing merrily and loud.



## CREATION BY MAGIC



GÜNTER (JEREMY) SCHLUETER

*Clinton Community College*

*Iowa*

The first thing that Magic sensed was becoming a thing. Magic rejoiced.  
The second thing that Magic sensed was that it could rejoice. Magic rejoiced again.  
The third thing that Magic realized was that the New was worth rejoicing.  
Magic considered what was possible but was in a void and had nothing to make New.  
Magic expanded in an excited rush to find the New.  
At the ends of existence Magic found a barrier. Magic lamented.  
Magic sulked until it conceived Beyond.  
Something must be Beyond the barrier.  
New must be Beyond the barrier. Magic rejoiced.  
Magic returned to the barrier and pushed as hard as it could.  
Magic encountered only the barrier and eventually exhausted itself.  
Magic needed to rest and rested calmly against the barrier.  
Magic sensed something! Magic realized that peaceful calm was better than chaos.  
Except what Magic sensed was chaos. Chaos was New?  
Magic became conflicted.  
The part that wanted the New and the Chaos split from the Peace and Calm.

Now there was Chaos and Calm.  
Chaos knew it needed Calm to get Beyond.  
Calm knew it needed Chaos to get the New.  
They would work together.  
Calm would look and listen to the different parts of the Barrier,  
and describe for Chaos what it was sensing on the other side.  
Then Chaos would wildly create  
aspects and ideas and forms from what Calm described.  
They worked in harmony, and they both rejoiced.

Chaos wanted to destroy everything right after making it,  
 for it did not value the New once it was the Same.  
 Calm liked the Same, and would ask Chaos  
 to save some of the ideas it felt most commonly from the other realities.  
 Ideas like land, water, air, light, the elements, and life.

Chaos knew that if Calm continued to keep things  
 that existence would become full and New would be impossible.  
 They struck an understanding.  
 When Calm had filled existence too full,  
 Chaos would be allowed to destroy it all and they would start again.

This cycle repeated countless times.  
 So many times that even the New  
 seemed to Chaos like it was the Same.  
 Chaos and Calm were running out of things  
 to create that they hadn't before.

Calm realized that the only way Chaos could rejoice  
 was if the New wasn't permanent,  
 and it gifted Chaos with the ideas of Time, Memory, and Death.  
 These starting and stopping points would give Calm some Same  
 and would give Chaos some New.  
 Chaos and Calm grasped the idea of sharing, and they rejoiced.

Then Chaos and Calm found something they did not expect.  
 Calm saw a hallway filled with portals  
 to the other worlds Calm had seen and heard.  
 As Calm focused on the hallway it came closer,  
 and when it got close enough, a hole opened in the Barrier.  
 The New waited in this hallway.

Chaos and Calm rushed through,  
 and Calm marked their portal  
 so they could find it later if they needed it.  
 Chaos touched one of the other portals,  
 and it nearly killed Chaos,  
 who fled back into the home portal.  
 Calm realized that the portals would only  
 take beings that fit the rules of the portal.  
 Chaos and Calm perceived their own  
 possible end, and they returned home and lamented.

Chaos and Calm took forms.  
 They decided to create little bits of themselves that would keep a form  
 and be able to come and go to explore those other worlds.  
 They also created a world that could support all of them.  
 This was the first world,  
 and the bits of chaos and calm were the first Archmages.  
 Chaos and Calm perceived having children, and they rejoiced.  
 The Archmages would be  
 Fire,  
 Lightning,  
 Force,  
 Death,  
 and Luck  
 from Chaos, and

Water,  
Earth,  
Life,  
Time,  
and Love  
from Calm.

These beings would be the doors to the portal hallway  
(The Portalacrum as it would be called later),  
and they would come and go and  
connect this world to other ones.  
They also would establish the rules of this world.

Chaos and Calm realized that  
they must give over the power to create  
so that their world could continue if they ceased.

They created the gods  
to be builders, guides, watchers,  
and to keep the world running.

The gods would be able to create lesser beings of flesh,  
but Chaos and Calm restricted their creations to be mortals,  
so they would not fill the world too full like before.  
But the gods and mortals could not perceive the Portalacrum,  
and eventually it was lost to legend for all but the Archmages.

The gods know they must keep the world going,  
and that they should not interfere,  
just as their parents Chaos and Calm  
do not interfere with their creating.

The world rejoiced and came to be as it is now.

## DON'T SHOOT



**MARQUIS VIEL**

*Miami Dade College  
North Campus  
Florida*

Another black person  
Dies by a gun again  
Bang boom crackle  
The blood seeps again

Lovely morning isn't it, or so it seems  
Not even doing nothing  
Taking a stroll down the street  
Only will the racist find something wrong  
Trying to find any leverage against me  
Hoodrat is what they think I am  
Eagerly waiting for me to turn my back  
All I want is justice and respect

Bullets have no eyes or are they hidden  
Leading us to believe the system is fair and unbiased  
And tell me the black person had it coming  
Can't even blink before the next one is gone  
Kayla, Treyvon, is that you on the tv screen dead

People are bliss to this injustice  
Every day or is it dead by the day  
Rip to all my brothers and sisters  
Seven feet underground, flipping and turning  
Only when my loved one dies, it's no problem  
Never-ending killing, just make it stop

Death of my people is normalized  
I'm not even surprised anymore; somehow it always our "fault"  
Even now, I'm glad my time hasn't come  
Sad to say, but I'm used to it now

By the time their stories reached my ear, they're already dead  
Years, decades, centuries this has been happening

And just because of our royal melanin, something they want, but can never achieve

Great things the once alive could have done  
Unique ideas they could have brought to this world  
Not even given a second thought and blown away by the wind

As time passed, things are still the same  
Gruesome methods are done by the day  
And they say all lives matter  
In what world  
Not all lives matter if black lives don't

The guns have been shot too much  
Have they no shame  
Enjoying our pain as their pleasure

Beginnings always have an end  
Later or now  
Only theirs came earlier  
Oh, how I can imagine their bloodied faces looking down from the heavens  
Death is now nothing but a concept to me

Subject to hate because we look different  
Except we are the originals  
Even though we are treated like we are the mutations, did they forget about motherland  
Africa  
Perceived as a threat to society  
Soon a bullet will be shot

And to no avail  
Guess where it went  
A hole in the back of a black person head  
It pierced right through the skull  
Never will they see their family another time

Only thing I hope for  
At the age of eighteen  
Turning nineteen  
Still experiencing life  
And making memories

Is that I am not next

Please, please...  
Do not shoot me

## RUMORS AND WATER



DANEA WATSON  
*Harold Washington College  
 Illinois*

A gradient  
 A spectrum  
 light to deep

Skin  
 Vibrant  
 Full of history

Culture  
 sacred  
 And holy

all made beautiful  
 Intentionally

Yet

Intentionally, devious rumors were spread  
 though the culprits have long been dead  
 The rumor keeps a place in everyone's head

in our heads  
 in our systems  
 Layered from centuries of ignored victims  
 Showing its teeth and flashing its claws  
 hurting and killing, it lurks, it maws

The rumor, though deadly,  
has benefactors  
Ones who are safe and ones that it's after

ones who are heard and ones talked over  
glossed over  
ones who are consoled and ones who are corrected  
ones who are targets and those who are protected

The ones who are neglected...

Proximity to Blackness is proximity to Gold  
Something you were never told

Proximity to whiteness is proximity to praise  
rumors on the front page

If you're Black and they know it  
They'll filter you out

If you're Black and you show it  
They'll water you down

Until you drown...

And if you don't drown  
You'd better learn to swim

Or you'll never see the sun again  
SURVIVE

and you do, look at you  
Treading the water  
While a cruise ship  
Tells you to try harder

If you try harder, be nicer, be more like them then MAYBE  
they'll let you stick your foot in

If you try harder, be whiter, be less like your roots  
Then they'll be less afraid of you  
And soon there will be less of you

Are the rumors really true?

Who are you?  
Are you what they say?  
Mammy  
Sapphire  
Sambo  
Tom?

Who are you?  
Are you what they say?  
How much blackness do you portray?  
More than one drop  
of the blood of a slave?

How much more?  
Or how much less?

Can you pass this paper bag test?

And they question you  
And you question yourself  
As they smother you  
You censor yourself

...

Welcome to the boat  
We'll keep you afloat  
It's the finest boat  
We'll keep you afloat

Don't worry, no hurry  
Just speak proper dear  
Don't worry, no hurry  
It's just how we do things here

Here where it's safe  
If you follow our rules  
Here where it's safe  
If you use the right tools

We've got a blueprint for you  
A template of sorts  
I'm only a little worried  
About this...predisposition of yours

But you learned to swim!  
You got a good start  
I'm sure we can turn you  
From dirt to art

Hide that talk, that walk, those ways  
Don't show it!  
The captains, they'll be afraid!  
and THEN—ahem  
It's really no bother  
just a teensy little rumor you fall under

But just prove it wrong  
Show them that you DO belong  
As we purge our ancestry

The captains will FINALLY accept me!  
We will be judged, we will be prodded  
And once I pass, I will be lauded

This time around, I know I can last  
I've suppressed several aspects of my past  
I'm not like the ones who died before  
I learned my lesson, won't do it anymore



For other groups it's really simple  
Not much difference to get into  
But us being dark and brown like rust  
Automatically we invite distrust

So, we're lowest in the boat  
At the bottom, you and me  
rumor has it we come from the enemy  
well, that's what the captains told me...

But see, everyone else says that too  
So, what they say must be true  
As I'm less of me and you're less of you  
All we'll have left is our hue  
And there's a cream that can get rid of that too!

Until then I'll labor endlessly

To finally destroy this Black body

And you can do it too  
I believe in you!  
You've already come this far

Bit by bit use these tips  
To revise who you are

Welcome to the boat  
We'll keep you afloat  
It's the finest boat  
We'll keep you afloat

...

Born with the water  
Someone tried to kill me  
But I learned I learned oh so quickly

Found a way to flow  
Looked down below  
the waves  
got my image in its hands

We begin to cruise  
the waters churn  
You took my image

and you ran

Manipulated and  
Degraded  
Tall tales about me

Pick me apart  
Very Slowly

Say who I am before  
I know how to speak

Teach me to practice  
What you preach

The waters turn red  
My image bloodied  
Fear and confusion  
Identity muddied

I ask, who am I?  
You gave me a knife  
Put the blade to my thigh  
Told me give you a slice

To taste one drop  
of blood from me

And label my Blackness  
The enemy

Born with the water  
And it was you!  
You tried to kill me  
But I learned I learned oh so quickly

...  
Power. Beauty. Royal. Gold  
I ain't gon' do what I'm told  
Future, Culture, strength within  
I don't care if I offend

This ain't my end  
And I won't pretend  
I renounce the boxes you put me in

A rumor? tuh  
Ancestors told me  
This Black body is holy

Mahogany deep  
Molasses thick  
Kinky crown  
Full lips

Hips swish, sassy talk  
Purging ya poison when I walk  
Laughing as I watch you gawk

And ogle you're boggled  
You can't believe  
you couldn't destroy me

But you tried it  
And we see you still do  
As you gaze, you misinterpret what's in front of you

BLACKNESS

A gradient

A spectrum  
light to deep

Skin  
Vibrant  
Full of history

Culture  
sacred  
And holy

all made beautiful  
Intentionally

## THE ROAD:



JUSTIN WHITTINGTON

*Murray State College  
Oklahoma*

I am not the source of your troubles, I'm just the road

It's no bell but life that takes the toll. All will travel me, hauling their load.  
Along the way some get pushed, pulled, drug or towed,  
Nevertheless, onward you all roll.

I'm not the source of your troubles, I'm just the road.  
Along the way some try to make it their abode,  
Ignoring all the while the yellow and white lines that scroll.  
All will travel me, hauling their load.

Others ignore lights and warning sounds 'till their engines explode. Still on they go,  
disregarding the tax upon their soul.

I'm not the source of your troubles, I'm just the road.  
All journeys come to an end; all must pay what is owed.  
Not all will hit the mark, many will miss the goal.  
All will travel me, hauling their load.

One day all will look back at the path they rode.  
Golden streets or lake of fire, which will you stroll?  
I am not the source of your troubles, I'm just the road.