

# *Tellus*

2024

The Cuesta College Literary Annual



*Chrome Skeleton Chair*  
Ella Kahan

Issue 30

# Tellus

ISSUE 30

2024

This 2023-24 release of *Tellus* is the thirtieth issue to be published since the magazine's debut in 1992. It was called *Word of Mouth* at the time, and it received nearly 200 submissions. Thirty issues later and under a different name, we see that some things have remained constant. Cuesta College students still abound with creativity, and we are thrilled to showcase their work in this volume. Other things change: we have new faculty leadership, a new collaboration with Cuesta's fine arts department, a new fine arts submission category, and a renewed sense—especially in these post-pandemic years—that art in every form is vital. It brings communities together with the future-tending belief that what we make—the stories we tell, the creative impulse we capture with a word or a color or a shape—matters. The act of making moves us forward and teaches us something about our next move.

For those of us who are working on *Tellus* for the first time, it is humbling to contribute to a piece of Cuesta's history that has, itself, been more than thirty years in the making. It makes us think of those first student winners whose work appeared on the original pages of the 1992 edition. Where have the last thirty years taken their lives? Where have their voices travelled in that time? Maybe some of them, like Kathryn de Lancellotti and Luke Johnson (former Cuesta students who graciously read their poems in early February at a *Tellus* fundraising reading) became writers. Perhaps others used their voices to speak on behalf of what was right, or good, or necessary. Maybe they used their voices to encourage others. Maybe one or two did all of these things, and then allowed themselves to rest in a full and observant silence. After all, thirty years is a long time. After all, thirty years is no time at all.

It makes us wonder where this year's writers and artists will be in thirty years. To the students whose wonderful work this issue contains: thank you for what you've made. And be sure to drop us a line in 2054. We'll be thinking of you.

# TELLUS 2024

## Poetry

|                   |                                             |
|-------------------|---------------------------------------------|
| First             | <i>Copycat</i> by Paige Ernest              |
| Second            | <i>Cinco Minutos</i> by Luke Mellom         |
| Third             | <i>Dear Sophie</i> by Hannah Emmack         |
| Honorable Mention | <i>My Sole Tells a Story</i> by Luke Mellom |

## Fiction

|                     |                                                 |
|---------------------|-------------------------------------------------|
| First               | <i>"Don't You Remember?"</i> by Bradly Pearson  |
| Second              | <i>"When September Ends"</i> by Tedmond Fleming |
| Third               | <i>"Hope on the Horizon"</i> by Jonah Jenkins   |
| Honorable Mention 1 | <i>"The Darkness"</i> by Jonah Jenkins          |
| Honorable Mention 2 | <i>"Cigarettes"</i> by Ava Minter               |

## Creative Non-Fiction

|                   |                                                   |
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| First             | <i>"Dearly Departed"</i> by Keoni Rock Fisher     |
| Second            | <i>"The Peacemaker"</i> by Rodi Bragg             |
| Third             | <i>"Monstrous Boulder"</i> by Sarah Harvey        |
| Honorable Mention | <i>"My Four Walls Surrounding"</i> by Mia Becerra |

## Visual Arts

|                     |                                                                       |
|---------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------|
| First               | <i>Skeletal Chair</i> by Ella Kahan                                   |
| Second              | <i>I Am the Eviscerated and the Eviscerator Too</i><br>by Renée López |
| Third               | <i>Atticus and their Hands (diptych)</i> by Casey Velte               |
| Honorable Mention 1 | <i>Almost Perfect</i> by Emma Kahan                                   |
| Honorable Mention 2 | <i>Mortality is a Question</i> by Sophia Lamore                       |

# Poetry

First *Copycat* by Paige Ernest

Second *Cinco Minutos* by Luke Mellom

Third *Dear Sophie* by Hannah Emmack

Honorable Mention *My Sole Tells a Story* by Luke Mellom

You dug through me like  
the blackened dumpster  
behind some takeout place  
rooting around for  
the gleam of  
something valuable  
it hurt much less,  
your rejections of me  
my sharp, my used, my worthless  
no, where I really felt  
the sting  
was in the hollow spaces  
of what  
you stole from me  
and, how you'd turn after

and call me junk.  
your mockery never left me  
flattered  
more often I was flattened  
snow scraped aside,  
a nuisance  
but oh, how pretty as it falls!  
I,  
picked and sorted through  
chilled by my own emptiness  
And you,  
wearing my coat  
asking how someone could be so  
cold

# Cinco Minutos

Luke Mellom

All it takes is 5 minutes  
5 minutes to get out of bed  
Brush your teeth  
Put on yesterday's clothes  
Run downstairs to your dog  
Mix up an over sugared coffee  
And scramble your eggs

All it takes is 5 minutes  
5 minutes to walk to class late  
Drive to work all in messy hair  
Catch up with a friend and their life  
Write out a feeling no one could understand  
Crack a bottle then forget about it  
And end a day that felt the same

All it takes is 5 minutes  
5 minutes to lock sights of eyes  
Stir in a seat of butterflies  
Struggle with lipless words  
For two souls scared of their desires  
Watch them go out the door  
And give up on what could have been

All it took was 5 minutes  
5 minutes to stare in awe at that voice  
5 minutes to leave me surreal  
5 minutes to embrace those notes all in air  
5 minutes to fall in love with that stranger  
And 5 minutes to leave that concert in infectious bliss

All it took was 5 minutes  
5 minutes for me to leave that show so happy  
Starting my car  
Turning on the ignition  
Putting on the bands music  
Smiling all the way out the parking lot  
Then turning a left in blind joy  
Then get hit by a car

And your left in smoke and blown up bags  
And screaming so fast its silent  
And the concert goers are yelling at you angrily  
To get out of the road  
They want to beat the traffic  
And you just sit there 5 minutes at a time  
Till 5 minutes turns into police questions  
Asking you to do things you'd never believe  
You'd do in your life  
5 minutes of line walking  
5 minutes of keeping balance  
5 minutes of flashlights in my eyes  
5 minutes of asking all the stupid numbers  
That make up my life  
5 minutes of things I thought were fictional  
And 5 minutes to recount it all  
Just 5 minutes after it happened

All it took, was 5 minutes  
5 minutes from close love  
And 5 minutes from close death

All it took was 5 minutes

# Dear Sophie

Hannah Emmack

Dear Sophie,  
Am I already gone?  
What if he wins?  
Can I still slice off my bruises?  
What if I  
Can't?

Sophie, am I still sweet?  
Do I taste fresh?  
Do I taste bitter?  
Do you?  
I miss you—

*You?*  
*What if he does?*

*Were you ever sweet?*  
*Do I?*  
*Do you?*

Sophie, am I still green?  
Do I still have any fight left?  
Do I still sing?  
I'm sorry for  
What happened to you,  
I'm trying to  
Fix it.  
It shatters me—  
Like you.

Sophie, are you safe?  
Do you hear the bees?  
Do you see that you're  
Beautiful?  
I remember you, you  
Young  
Fragile  
Little flower.

Sophie?

*Were you ever green?*  
*Did you ever have fight?*  
*Yes.*

*Trying.*

# My sole tells a story

Luke Mellom

I remember wearing shoes when I was a kid  
Till the rubber sole met the bottom of my heel  
That's when I got new shoes  
From one pair to the next  
Burning that plastic till it broke  
The rubber bottom flipping off to the side  
Till my socks got torn  
And feet painted in blood  
I don't have shoes like that anymore  
I have too many to choose from now  
Those old shoes told long stories  
I can't make my shoes have stories anymore  
Except my work boots  
Whose chunky soles are loosening  
And flattening my heels  
Every time I go into my 8 hour shift

Kicking at the shutter doors  
And crushing grocery boxes  
They run like no other  
For they hurt me  
Blisters and all yet they protect me  
With a steel toe tip  
To fend off drunkards when I go out drinking  
All it takes is one shot below the belt  
How bad ass

I love them  
I love the shape of them  
I love feel of them  
I love the extra inch that they give me I love them  
I love them because they tell a story

*Chrome Skeleton Chair*  
Ella Kahan



VISUAL ARTS

BEST IN SHOW

# Fiction

First *“Don’t You Remember?”* by Bradly Pearson

Second *“When September Ends”* by Tedmond Fleming

Third *“Hope on the Horizon”* by Jonah Jenkins

Honorable Mention 1 *“The Darkness”* by Jonah Jenkins

Honorable Mention 2 *“Cigarettes”* by Ava Minter

# Don't You Remember?

Bradly Pearson

It was the end of a bright, sunny day as Ernest drove into his parking lot. Finally able to take a deep breath, he pulls out his keys, locks his car, and makes his way to the door.

"What a day," he said to himself, sorting through his keys. As he unlocked the door, it quickly swung open to reveal two eager children, ready to greet the person they knew would be at the door at this time of day.

"Yay, Daddy's home!" The boy says, giving his dad a big hug.

"Mom, look, Daddy's home!" The little girl says, jumping up and down with joy as she gripped tightly on her dad's jacket.

Clara couldn't help but laugh at the two kids' excitement as she stood in the corner of the kitchen pouring popcorn in the air popper. "Welcome home, honey. Oliver, Hazel, give your dad a little space."

"Aww...! Yes, Mommy." The two kids replied, making their way over to the couch where their older brother sat.

"Hey Dad!" The oldest son said as he searched through the variety of channels looking for a movie to watch. "How was work? Hard as usual?"

"I guess you could say that," Ernest replied as he hung up his jacket in the closet, soon rubbing his eyes. "Sorry, I'm not in my best shape, guys."

"Work is hard; that's just how life is," Clara stated, making her way to Ernest as she handed him his bowl of popcorn. "I'm just glad to see you at the end of the day."

Ernest couldn't help but smile at his wife's remark. He soon heard the pitter-patter of paws scampering towards him until, before he knew it, their bouncy and energetic family dog was right at his feet, begging for affection. "Molly, there you are! I was wondering where you were. You've been waiting for me to come home, haven't you?" Molly barked in response, hardly able to stay still. "Yes you did, yes you did!" Ernest said as he set down his bowl of popcorn before eagerly petting his dog's belly.

“Hey Mom, Dad, since the whole family is here, wanna watch Up again for movie night?” Charlie asked as he held the remote, ready for it to play.

“Sure honey, if your brother and sister want to watch it as well,” Clara questioned, looking back to the other two kids.

“Yeah, I wanna see the talking dog again!” Hazel cheered excitedly.

“Let’s watch it, let’s watch it!” chanted Oliver, nearly shaking the couch.

The couple looked at each other, smiles crossing their faces, as Ernest made his way onto the couch. After turning off the burner and cleaning up the kitchen, Clara served everyone their own popcorn bowl before cuddling next to Ernest, quickly followed by Molly who laid on top of Ernest like a giant furry blanket. Soon everyone was huddled comfortably on the couch, ready to watch the movie together. Charlie pressed the play button, and the room fell silent as the intro started rolling.

Ernest opened his eyes as he let out a deep yawn, easing into the new day. He looked around his empty room before getting out of bed. Was someone missing? After making his way to the living room, he spotted Clara on her way out the door.

“I’m gonna go out to get some eggs, ok? Is there anything else that we need to get?” She asked her husband as she slipped on her shoes.

“Not that I can think of. Maybe some bagels, but other than that, we’re good on groceries,” he replied, opening cabinets and looking around the kitchen to see if anything was missing or almost empty.

“Ok, then eggs and bagels it is. I’ll see you in a few, darling.” She said as she opened the door on her way to the car.

“Wait, Clara, before you go, do you know where Molly is? I haven’t seen her yet today.”

Ernest said to his wife, rubbing his forehead and unable to make eye contact.

“What do you mean, Ernest?” Clara said, making her way back inside. “She ran away a couple of months ago, don’t you remember?”

Ernest took a good few seconds to react before making eye contact with her, then once again breaking eye contact. He clenched his fingertips to his scalp as he tried to think of

something, anything, anything that would allow him to say: Yes, I remember,... but no such memory came. "I don't remember. A couple of months ago? It was that long?"

Clara took a deep breath before responding. "You called the police yesterday asking if they found her yet, don't you remember?"

He quickly went into his phone's recent calls to look for what she was talking about. "When did I make all these calls?" he mouthed to himself. After a few seconds, he found the police's number in his recent calls list. In an attempt to rationalize the situation, he replied. "I remember now. I'm sorry, I haven't had my morning coffee yet. I love you Clara."

Clara smiled at Ernest. She felt sad seeing her husband like this "I love you too Ernest. I'll look for Molly again while I'm out. I'll see you in a bit."

"Alright then, see you when you get back!" He said, kissing his wife before she shut the door. He had another thing on his mind, another thing to think about after his morning coffee. He looked to the coffee maker before he noticed something. "Is this my same coffee maker?" he asked himself as he fiddled around with it, trying to get back into the usual routine he had to make himself a nice hearty cup of coffee. As he put in just a few dashes of creamer and started stirring, he noticed the weather outside was thick and overcast. Despite the gloomy weather, it was nice to have some peace and quiet. He savored every second as he took a sip of his signature blend; it was just how he liked it.

"Good morning, Dad!" Charlie said as he made his way into the living room, his two siblings following behind.

"Good Morning!" Hazel greeted.

"Morning, Daddy!" Oliver stated.

Ernest looked to his three kids, a faint smile appearing on his face. "Morning guys, have you all eaten yet?"

"No, not yet. Can we have some french toast, please?" Oliver requested with a slight glint in his eye.

"Alright, you all want French Toast?" he turned from Oliver to ask the other two.

"Yes, please!" they both exclaimed, eager to have a special breakfast.

“Alright then, I’ll whip you all up something special,” Ernest said to the trio, feeling joy in being able to make this special breakfast for his kids.

Once he was all done, Ernest served up the special french toast to each of his children. “Blueberries and whipped cream with strawberry syrup. Just how you like it.” He cheerfully exclaimed before getting his own plate and sitting down with the rest of his family.

“It’s strange. Your mother should be home by now,” Ernest said, looking over at the front door.

Charlie looked over to his dad, midbite, before putting his fork down and swallowing his food, all without averting his gaze. “Are you ok, dad?”

Ernest looked over to his oldest son, confused by the question, but decided to give a straight answer. “Of course. Why wouldn’t I be? I’m just wondering what’s taking Clara so long to get eggs.”

Charlie looked down at his food, still hungry yet unable to take another bite. “Dad, Why would Mom go and get eggs when you were able to make us all french toast with no problem?”

Ernest tried to rationalize it. He asked himself the same question, and he couldn’t think of an answer then. How could he possibly answer his son now? “I-I... I don’t know...” He rubbed against his neck, feeling the tension of the situation. Another thing he couldn’t remember.

“Charlie, what are you getting at?”

Charlie let out one deep, long breath before deciding to break the news. “Mom isn’t going to come back. She’s gone. She got hit by a drunk driver a year ago, don’t you remember? You couldn’t have forgotten again, have you? You went to her funeral! We’ve already been through this!”

Ernest tried to remember the details, but none of them could come to mind. Drunk driver? Funeral? And it happened a year ago? “I should be able to remember,” he thought to himself. “Why can’t I remember something so important?” He continued asking himself.

“Charlie, what time is it?” Oliver asked, getting up from his seat and washing his plate.

Charlie quickly looked at his phone to check the time, realizing that they were all already late for school. “Holy crap, we need to get going. Dad, why didn’t you tell us?”

Ernest's eyes fluttered, trying to process everything going by so fast. "But, I thought it was Sunday. That's why I made French..." The more he sifted through the fog in his mind, the more lost he became. He looked down at his untouched plate, the strawberry syrup caked into the bread like a stain on clothes. He felt an unnerving pit in his stomach as his breathing became slightly more labored. "I-I think I've gotta take a rest," Ernest said, struggling out of his chair before lumbering his way over to the hallway.

Charlie turned his gaze to his father as he trudged down the hallway before letting down a large, bellowing sigh.

"Charlie, is something wrong?" Hazel said, looking up to her oldest brother.

"No, not at all. Let's get you to school. We don't want you to miss class any more than you already have." Charlie said, picking Hazel up before grabbing Oliver's hand, escorting his younger siblings to their new family car.

Ernest made it to his room before flopping down onto the bed. After adjusting his sheets, he felt a pain in his chest. It was as if his heart were being squeezed of all its life. Despite the heaviness he felt from being under so much mental stress, he felt no physical presence. He had no one to comfort him. The only thing that could give him comfort now was the blanket that covered him. "What am I forgetting?" he asked himself. "What don't I remember?" Ultimately, he fell asleep, having gotten no closer to his answer.

Another day. Ernest woke up in his empty room, looking around before taking a deep breath. He got up and walked out of his room. He closed the door behind him as he went into the kitchen. Out of the corner of his eye, he noticed the weather. It was raining. He walked towards his coffee machine, the coffee ready to be brewed. He didn't remember filling it, but he appreciated it nonetheless. He turned on the coffee machine. He walked over to the couch. There was a crumpled-up note on the couch. It had some burn marks and coffee stains on it. He picked up the note, opening it. He read the note:

"Dad, I'm sorry that I'm having to write you this letter, but we can't stay here anymore. I can't describe how much pain I have had to go through watching your decline, knowing that there is nothing I can do to stop it. We lost Mom so suddenly. Now we are slowly losing you and it fills me with dread. I want to help you, but after searching for so long, I have to step back. As a big brother, I've made the choice to take care of Hazel and Oliver first and foremost. I have been supporting them all I can, but they need more than just me to rely on.

They still have a full life ahead of them, one that I'm afraid that you won't remember. We will visit as much as we can, but it's too hard to live under the same roof as you. Even if you don't remember me, I'll still remember you, Dad. I'll remember all the good times we used to have. When we see each other again, I'll do my best to remember, for the both of us. I love you, Dad.

Sincerely,

Charlie, Your oldest son."

Ernest read through the note. "Who's Charlie?" he asked himself. "Maybe someone sent this to the wrong house," he continued. He put the note down, going back to his coffee pot. The coffee pot was full. He took out a coffee cup and poured all the coffee in. He went to grab the creamer for the coffee. Not knowing how much to put in, he did a little at a time. After just three quick pours, he took another sip. It was the perfect mix; no sugar needed. He took his coffee over to the couch before sitting down. He searched for a movie to watch. He decided to pick his favorite movie, Up. He pressed the play button. The room was silent. The intro started rolling.

*I Am the Eviscerated and the Eviscerator Too*  
Renée López



VISUAL ARTS

SECOND PLACE

# When September Ends

Tedmond Fleming

We were at the library when he disappeared. I remember the day in explicit detail. It was mid-September, the thirteenth, and the leaves had just begun to turn. Everywhere we looked, vibrant shades of yellow, orange, and red greeted us with the familiar warmth that welcomed the beginnings of autumn. This was our favorite season. I think it will always be my favorite season, because of him.

Dev and I were coworkers first. I had been working at a coffee shop down the street from the library, and one early fall day, Dev was the new guy. He was quiet, and kind. His voice came out almost like a whisper, but nothing short of poetry came with it when he spoke. He marveled constantly at the books he read in between rush hours at work, and he offered the most sincere compliments to everyone he came in contact with. It didn't take me long to like him, and soon we were making small talk, which quickly transformed into long conversations and laughing and the usual stop-and-go of "chit chatting" on the clock. It was one of those conversations that revealed to us that we lived a block away from each other, and so hanging out at work became hanging out at one of our apartments. And that turned into the occasional "why don't you just crash here for the night?" which turned into "come stay at my place this weekend!" which turned into "we should move in together," all the while being totally oblivious to the fact that we were absent-mindedly falling in love. Typical for two anxious queer boys, too terrified to speak their feelings lest the other reject them. But it turned out yet again that it was nothing to worry about, because eventually our two-bedroom apartment became a one-bedroom, our hands found each other's in the dark, and the new guy at the coffee shop was now my very lovable boyfriend. The boy I secretly hoped I'd spend eternity with, talking and laughing the same as we did the day we first met.

## September 13th, 2017

I begged Dev to go with me to the library that day, though he was hardly difficult to convince. I needed a book for one of my classes, which I put off buying to save some extra money, and I figured it'd be a good time to get some studying done. Dev and I were both starting our second year at community college, and with the semester's coursework getting more intense, it seemed as good a time as any to turn a trip to the library into a study date. I think the promise of coffee on the way had made the suggestion more enticing, at least for Dev.

"It's so bitter today," I said to him, grimacing at the latte that supposedly had maple-pecan sweetener in it.

"You can have my chai if that sounds better," he had replied, gently pushing his cup into my hands. "Here, try it."

The rich warmth of cream and cardamom relieved my tastebuds of the sharp acidity that came before it. I wanted to trade with him, but a pang of guilt forced the sweet drink back into his gloved fingers. We entered the library through the revolving door on the side, which would take us straight to the circulation desk.

"I'll find us a table," Dev whispered, pecking me on the cheek. "Meet me in the study area when you get your book?"

I nodded, reaching down to kiss his hand before we let go. I wish I had known it would be the last time.

After a short back and forth with the person at the desk, I retrieved my book and walked up the stairs to the second-floor study area. It was a spacious room, with couches and comfortable chairs arranged about tables of varying shapes and sizes. There were bathrooms along the back wall, and an emergency exit to the right that led to a secluded stairwell on the side of the building.

I found the table with Dev's belongings, a dark green backpack and black zip-up jacket, and got settled in a chair next to the one I assumed he would sit in. I figured he was in the bathroom; the library wasn't exactly a place notorious for petty theft. I got through the first twenty or so pages of my book before I started to wonder where he was. I checked my phone. No notifications. I opened a message to him and sent it: where'd u go?

Twenty minutes passed. Then thirty. By forty-five, I was restless. I went to the bathroom and knocked on the door. Vacant.

"Dev?" I called out, anxious for a reply. Nothing.

I rushed out and approached the first person I saw, a girl sitting a few chairs down from where our stuff was. She was wearing headphones, but took them off when she saw me.

"Sorry to bother you, I was just wondering if you happened to see my partner anywhere? He's about my height, dark hair, he had a black hoodie on when we came in?" I think she could hear the rising panic in my voice as I spoke, because she looked apologetic before the words even left her mouth.

"I'm sorry," she said, shaking her head. "I've hardly looked up from my laptop since I got here. Maybe ask someone downstairs if they've seen him? If he left, he probably passed the circulation desk."

That was just it, though, I thought. If he had left that way, I would have passed him on the stairs, right?

"Thank you," I tell her anyway, and rush toward the stairs and down to the first floor.

"You're back in a hurry!" The person at the circulation desk chuckled. I get a glance at his name tag: *Stan*.

"Hi again," I say, exhaling quickly, "do you remember the guy I came in here with?

About my height, dark hair...have you seen him passthrough at all?" His grin fades.

"I'm sorry son," he shakes his head. "I haven't seen him since you came in together.

Have you tried calling him?"

I think of my phone and look to see if he's responded to the text I sent earlier. Nothing.

I shake my head.

"No, I sent him a text but I haven't heard back yet. He left all of his stuff upstairs, and it's been almost an hour. It's not like him to just disappear like that."

"Well, if you'd like us to call someone for you, I'll be here," Stan said, trying his best to be reassuring. "Don't worry, I'm sure it's just a misunderstanding and he'll turn up any minute."

"Thanks," I said, forcing a smile. "I hope so."

I tried not to panic as I walked back upstairs. *Where would he have gone? Why wasn't he answering his phone? Am I overreacting?* My thoughts were racing, and when I saw his backpack and jacket sitting at our table when I returned, I had a sinking feeling something was really, truly wrong.

### **September 19th, 2017**

"And you still haven't heard from him?" I ask anxiously, ready for the answer I don't want. "What did the police say when they came by today?"

There's silence on the other end of the receiver. Then,

"I'm sorry, Sam," says Mira, Dev's mom, "I promise I'll let you know as soon as I know anything. The police are almost as confused as we are. Nobody seems to remember seeing him that day, and the library doesn't have any security cameras...They just came by to look at his room and take some notes. Something about trying to find anything suspicious that could explain why he left..."

She's still talking, but I'm done listening. I can't bear to hear anything other than "we found

him, thank God, and he's okay." I can't take the unknowing. I can't think of anything other than him, where he might be, who would have tried to take him away...I want to call him a million times until he picks up, like I did the day he disappeared, but I know the police have it now. It was in his backpack the whole time, which ruled out any possibility of tracking him. A big piece of hope, gone in an instant. Just like him.

"Sam?" Mira's voice snaps me back to reality. "Are you alright? Should I come over?"

My voice catches in my throat, sticking like a wad of paper as I think of a reply. This is all too much.

"I'm sorry," I say, shaking my head. "I'm okay. But call me if you hear anything?"

"Of course," her voice is gentle. I find Dev's resemblance to her now more than ever.

"Please call if you need anything, Sam. I'm here for you."

"Thank you," I reply, trying my best to keep my tone even. "Thank you. I'll let you know."

I barely have time to hit the "end call" button before I hit the floor, tears falling faster than I can catch them. *How does anyone live through something like this?*

#### **October 27th, 2017**

I'm walking through our neighborhood, though "ours" is hardly how I'd describe it since he's been gone. The old Victorian houses seem less vibrant than they did when I first moved here; the gardens look less alive, their greenery shriveling in the first whispers of winter. The roads feel less steady under my feet; I can feel the weight of my bones with every step. It feels like he died, the way the air hangs heavy over my head everywhere I go; the looks of sympathy and sorrow seem to be cemented on the faces of our friends and neighbors. It makes me feel sick. I wish they wouldn't look at me this way. I wish they didn't feel the need to. I wish he wasn't gone. Or if he had to be, then I wish I could at least go with him.

Next thing I know, I'm hurling into some barren bushes on the side of the road. Nothing seems to stay down these days. Dev's mom notices that I've lost weight. She has too. I wonder how she carries on this way. She puts on a brave face, but maybe she's just as messed up about it as I am. She has to be; Dev was her only child. She never remarried after his dad. All we have is each other, really. The consuming feeling of loneliness empties my stomach once more.

#### **December 20th, 2017**

"I'm sorry Mom, I just don't feel up to doing the holidays with everyone this year," I say with

a fake cough. A weak move. “I think I’m coming down with something anyway. Best to stay home and not get everyone sick.”

“Samuel,” my mom sounds worried. I feel guilty for not going. But what else am I supposed to do? I can’t handle my family and the barrage of questions they’re sure to ask me, or worse, the uncomfortable silence that follows the death of a loved one, a person they hardly knew and one they certainly didn’t understand. But he’s not dead. I’m sure they think he is by now though. They just don’t have the heart to say so.

“Please,” my mom is begging for an effort. I know this can’t be easy for her. “Everyone’s coming out this year, even Charlie and Steph. You know how long it’s been since we’ve all celebrated the holidays together. Please just think about it, for me.”

“Okay Mom,” I say, even though I know I’m not going. “I’ll think about it. Can I call you tomorrow?”

“Sure honey,” she sounds relieved, but not entirely convinced. “I love you very much.” “I love you too.”

## **January 1st, 2018**

The room is still dark. It must be early. I turn over to look at the clock. 4:52 A.M.

*Happy New Year.*

I crawl out of bed and walk to the bathroom across the hall. I flip the light switch on and stare at myself in the mirror. My skin is a lot paler than it used to be. I have cuts on my hands from the glass I broke in the sink last week. The bags under my eyes are a constant now. My hair is greasy and unkempt. I look like I did when I was in high school, and for a moment I feel like the same scared kid that used to stay up all night because he was afraid of the dark. I’m still afraid of the dark. But it was easier when I had someone to hold. Or rather, when someone was there to hold me.

I take a short shower, a cold one, and dry off quickly. I go back to the bedroom and rifle through the dresser for a t-shirt, some sweatpants...I put on a pair of old black socks and my sneakers, and throw a granola bar and water bottle into my backpack. I grab Dev’s black hoodie, the same one he was wearing when we went to the library that day, and throw it over my shoulders. It still smells like him. I can’t stop the tears from falling, but I wipe them away without much thought. I have to get going.

I turn out the lights, lock the door behind me, and walk outside into the crisp night air.

**January 2nd, 2018**

"Sir?" An unfamiliar voice is pressing against my ears. "Sir, can you tell us your name?" My head is pounding. I feel groggy. *Where am I?*

"He's losing consciousness again," I hear the same voice fading in and out... Bright lights wake me the second time. It's in my eyes; I can't see.

"Sam?" A different voice asks this time. "Can you follow the light for me?"

"I-" A coughing fit seizes my body before I can continue. Everything hurts. *What happened out there?*

Multiple voices are talking over each other, but I can't make them out. And I still can't see...

I wake a third time. The beeps and hums of machines are oddly soothing, and I can hear someone breathing in the bed next to me, though a curtain is drawn between us. I'm in the hospital. *How did I get here?*

I open my eyes. I'm scratched and bruised on my arms, and there's a bandage around my abdomen. My body aches, but it's not the same searing pain I remember from before. It feels duller, more controlled. I must be on some kind of medication. I try to recall what happened, but I don't seem to remember anything. Not yet anyway. I wonder if they called my parents; if they know my name, then they'll have their information. Dev was my emergency contact, but they were second on the list...

*Dev.* Memories flood back as I sink into the stiff and unfamiliar bed. I went looking for him. I took the bus a few towns over, to one of the residential areas. Past the barrier of a dead-end street, there's a short walk through the woods that leads to a small lake. Dev and I would go swimming there in the summers, forage for mushrooms in the fall...it was one of the first places we went together, and the first place he told me he loved me. I hadn't been back since he disappeared; I couldn't bear to go without him. Or maybe I was afraid of what I'd find if I braved the trip. But I went this time, because I couldn't take not knowing.

Anything was better than not knowing...

"Sam?" A nurse pulls the curtain back. "You're awake. How are you feeling?"

"I'm okay," my voice cracks, and I grimace. It hurts to talk.

"You got pretty beat-up out there," she continues, offering a sympathetic smile. "We had to give you some stitches for the deeper cuts. Do you mind if I take a look at the incision site?"

I nod, and she lifts up the bandage on my stomach. There's a long gash below my chest, but

it looks like it's healing. There are a lot of stitches.

"Everything looks good here," she tells me, putting the bandage back on. "You have a minor concussion as well, but the imaging on your brain came back without anything concerning. We tried to reach your partner, but it went to voicemail. Your parents said they'd be here as soon as they could, probably later today. Can I get you some water?"

I shook my head, feeling guilty that my parents had to spend the money to get here for something as small as a concussion and a few cuts.

"Alright, well I'll be back in an hour or so to check in," she moves the curtain back to leave. "If you need anything, just press the red call button on the remote next to you." I nod a thank you. It's the best I can do.

My mind wanders back to my trip to the woods yesterday. I had sat by the shore of the lake to watch the sunrise, and the sharp coldness of the winter air left me wishing I had thought to bring more than just a light jacket. As the morning slowly progressed, I had noticed a ruckus coming from somewhere nearby, and when I went to investigate, I found a group of boys who couldn't have been any older than me hacking away at one of the trees.

"Hey!" I shouted, enraged that they would be so thoughtless. "What the hell are you doing?"

They turned toward me and laughed, continuing to swing their pickaxes haphazardly at the tree.

"What are you gonna do about it, faggot?" One of them jeered. He was tall, and stronger than me, I was sure. But the anger surging through me prompted what I had said next.

"You need to leave."

"Or what?" He said, throwing his weapon to the ground and walking toward me. He grabbed me by the collar. "I think you're the one who doesn't belong here."

"This place has more meaning than you could ever understand," I spat through gritted teeth. "You're not good enough to be here."

The next thing I felt was a fist colliding with my stomach with such force that I lost my breath and dropped to the ground. A shoe made contact with the side of my face, then another with my back. I tried to put my arms over my head, but I couldn't move. I could hear the boys yelling and taunting me as they kicked and punched down at me, but I was defenseless, and angry. Angry at them for picking a fight with me, angry at the world for being so cold, and angry at Dev for not being there to help me. *Why wasn't he there to help me?*

I could feel myself slipping in and out of consciousness, and the pain in my body had been replaced with numbness. I was sure they would leave me in a beaten heap out there, and I had no way of knowing how I'd get home. But just as I thought it, the noise that previously flooded my ears had subsided. I craned my neck to see what was happening, and above me the boys had been replaced by an older man who was looking down at me with grave concern. There was a kindness in his mellow green eyes, and I knew he had been there to help me.

All I could do was offer a faint smile of gratitude before I drifted off into lost consciousness.

### **March 13th, 2018**

Six months. That's how long he's been gone, and everyone else seems to have moved on. The police closed their investigation, saying they found no evidence that could even begin to suggest how or why he disappeared. Our friends have sent their condolences. My mom calls every day to see how I'm doing, but I can't tell her the truth. I can't tell her that I'm still hoping. That I'm still waiting for him to walk through the door, in the same t-shirt and jeans he left wearing. I still keep my ringer on for him, even though I have his phone; one of the many things left behind.

I've gone back to the lake a few times since the beating I took in January. I never saw those boys again, and the tree they had tried to knock down was healing from the notches they had left in it. I put a small wooden box next to it, and every time I went I would leave a letter for anyone who happened upon it. Sometimes I copied down other peoples' poetry on scratch paper, other times I would write about the memories I shared there with Dev. I tried to find the man who made sure I got to the hospital that day, but I haven't had any luck. Not yet anyway.

Mira and I spend a lot of time together these days; we take walks together, and she points out the places that meant the most to Dev in his childhood. She cooks dinner for us on the weekends; she offers to do it more often, but I decline. It's nice to have someone to share this experience with, but I still feel alone. At the end of the day, I am alone. I fall asleep alone and wake up alone. I'm attempting to live my life alone. I nearly ended it alone. But I'm still here.

And he's gone.

### **September 13th, 2018**

"How do you feel today, Sam?" My therapist asks. Her name is Angela. I've been seeing her since April, on Mira's recommendation. I had been in therapy before, but not for anything specific. This has been a very different experience, I admit, but I think it's helping. It feels like it's helping.

"It's weird," I answer honestly. "I feel like I should be experiencing something huge today, like some sort of nauseating grief or sadness or anger. But I don't. It feels like any other day."

"That's a normal thing to feel," she replies, to my surprise. "The anniversary of a traumatic event can be triggering, but everyone responds to it differently. You're not the first client I've had who expects something totally opposite of what you're actually experiencing."

"I guess that's odd to me," I say without much thought. "Won't it catch up to me eventually?"

"Sure," she starts, "but it may look different than what you expect. I don't think you should put pressure on yourself to feel anything in particular, but try to give yourself a little extra space in case you need it. It might be good to reach out to your friends, maybe take a day off from your responsibilities if you can find the time. I think you should set low expectations for what you hope to accomplish this week. Keep it as low-key as possible."

After our session, I walk home. I've rearranged a lot in the last few months; there are plants in the windowsills, some more pictures on the walls...I've packed most of Dev's belongings into boxes, set them aside in the closet and the corner of the living room. I'm not going to get rid of them, but I need some space from him and his stuff, at least for right now.

My foot catches on a box as I walk by it, and I fall. Pain shoots through my wrists as I catch myself, and I put my head down for a moment. The floor is dirty. I notice a small piece of paper sticking out from under the TV stand; as I reach for it, I gasp at the familiarity of Dev's handwriting. Without hesitation, I force the sheet of paper open to read its contents:

*"To my forever boy,*

*I love you, I love you, I love you. Through the infinite and impossible, my heart will always find its way back to yours. I found a quote from Silvia Plath recently that I thought you would like. Here it is: 'September approaching...I feel I owe myself a brief respite of leisure and no rushing around. I can't face the dead reality. I want rainy days, lanterns and hundreds moons twining in dark leaves, music spilling out and echoing yet inside my head.' I can't wait to spend a hundred more seasons with you. See you when I get home.*

*"Dev"*

I have no idea when he wrote this, or how long it's been sitting in the pile of dust bunnies beneath the TV. But I hold it in my hands, absorbing every word as my heart pounds inside my chest. This was so like him, writing the most profound confessions of love to me on a random Tuesday, only for me to find months after I thought the last of him had been packed away.

I grab my bag and his old hoodie, and I decide to leave the house once more. I stop at the coffee shop first, and I order a chai. It's smooth and rich, and perfectly warm. I walk to the

library, and I notice the trees; they look even more vibrant than usual today. I enter the library through the revolving door on the side, which leads straight back to the circulation desk. I greet Stan, who looks the same as the day I learned his name, and walk up the stairs to the second floor study area. I find a couch and table to put my things, and I sit down to write.

*We were at the library when he disappeared. I remember the day in explicit detail. It was mid-September, the thirteenth, and the leaves had just begun to turn. Everywhere we looked, vibrant shades of yellow, orange, and red greeted us with the familiar warmth that welcomed the beginnings of autumn. This was our favorite season. I think it will always be my favorite season, because of him...*



*Almost Perfect*  
Emma Kahan

VISUAL ARTS

HONORABLE MENTION

# Hope on the Horizon

Jonah Jenkins

Sounds swarmed like startled bats in a hot, damp room with almost no light. Beads of sweat swam down the neck of a kid so used to mental confusion that ‘up’ was a distant memory.

A flash of light revealed the rolling drove of dancing bodies in mock silhouettes. Darkness. Light. Their features blurred together in the intervals of illumination. They were a forest of hair and swaying limbs, pushed and pulled by a breeze that did not exist. Darkness. Light. Darkness.

Standing in the corner with only the lamp to keep him company, Sammy wondered why he hadn’t already left. He took a sip of whatever was in his cup. Maybe if he just saw her...

He strained his eyes in the next burst of color sweeping back and forth through the crowd. Her silhouette was nowhere to be seen.

Noticing the window next to him and aching for cool air, he pushed the curtain away and started to lift the latch. That’s when he saw her. She was pacing barefoot on the grass and staring up at the cloudy sky. Her smile was unmissable. Toothy, but sweet, like a crocodile with marshmallow teeth. The pale yellow light of the streetlamp lit up her face brighter than the fiercest strobe. She was a beacon, a lighthouse in the gray fog. She was a breath of fresh air at the bottom of the ocean. She was the first sunrise after the North Pole winter. He was transfixed with her until a bottle nearly grazed his head.

“Close that damn curtain!”

He scurried through the dark cloud of jumping bodies until the front door appeared. He squeezed past the smokers and dopers, jumping over one who had collapsed on the last step of the porch. Then he strode as calmly and confidently as he could toward the back of the house. The cold air on his sweat-soaked neck sent a shiver up his spine. He rounded the corner, then stopped as he saw her smile. Only God deserved such a smile. He probably gave it to her on loan. The boy stood in the shadow of the house, rocking back and forth. Courage rolled over him like a wave, and he strolled

into the half-light of the streetlamp. If she noticed him, it didn't stop her pacing and looking sometimes up, sometimes down. Another passing wind sent the boy's spine shivering again and he pulled his jacket tighter around him.

"Aren't you cold?" He asked. She was wearing a light blue dress which went down to her knees but left her arms bare.

"Only when it gets brought up." She finally met his eyes and the heat behind his ears bit the cold back. Nervousness and slick palms made his voice jump out of his throat.

"Why are you barefoot?"

She ended her circular route right in front of him. "It lets me feel more connected with nature."

Unsure if it was an invitation or an order, the boy untied his shoes and peeled the socks off his feet. The grass was cool, almost damp, and once again the cold air slipped between the cracks of his flawed armor. He naturally scrunched up his toes and felt the blades ticking him slightly.

"So, what do you think?" He was sure the face he was making wasn't a flattering one.

"Great."

"You'll never enjoy it like that, you know. Come on, walk with me." She took up her same track, a small circle in the middle of the yard and he followed close behind. Walking made him spread out his feet and he found the way the grass bent beneath his weight oddly satisfying.

"Have you ever paced around like this to think before?" She asked.

He remembered the many times his father paced back and forth when shouting at his mother. One night after a particular argument, he repeated the scene in his room. When his father came in and saw him, he was sent to bed without dinner. "Nope. Never." They passed the streetlamp two times in silence.

"Why did you come here tonight?"

He recalled how desperately he'd been searching for her in the crowd earlier. The echoes of the music that pulsated out of the wooden walls suddenly made his stomach turn. "To have fun." Another two times around.

"Did you have fun?"

"Yes. No. I don't know." He let them go around again before asking, "How about you?"

Why did you come just to walk around in circles outside?"

She stopped and he almost ran into her. She turned, her eyes only came up to his nose, but they were suddenly fierce. "Do you really want to know?" She asked. He nodded. She looked back at the grass. "To get away, I guess."

The words 'from what?' hovered on his lips, but he knew better than to ask them. He almost reached an arm out toward her, when the ringing of a phone froze him in place. She pulled her phone from a pocket in her dress.

"It's my mom," she said. Then with a sigh, "I'd better get home."

"Yeah, me too, probably."

She walked over to where her shoes sat primly beside the house. Before she turned to leave, she strode back to where he was standing with his hands firmly in his jacket pockets. She grabbed them and pulled them out so that they dangled by his side.

"Watch me," she said. "For when the place you're in feels awful and you don't know how to leave." She took her slender arms and placed them on her stomach. Then she closed her eyes and took in a deep breath. As she did she raised her arms in an arc into the air. He watched her loose bracelet fall down her arm and catch where it was thickest. Then as she exhaled, she folded her hands behind her head and took up that big bright smile once more. Then she popped her eyes open and stared at him. "You too."

"Yeah, yeah." He did his best to match her and lifted his arms up. Then he let it all out and placed his hands behind his head. He could feel his shoulders sinking as he did so.

"It's gonna be alright," she said.

“Yeah...of course it is. Why wouldn’t it be?”

Her smile dimmed a little and with a shrug, she was off into the night. For the boy, something was beginning to wear off and a headache told him home was the only place for him.

The next morning he was asleep. He was so asleep that his mother pounded his door halfway off its hinges. “Damn it, Sammy, if you don’t hit that stupid alarm button, you’ll get it.” The sounds of steps bounced off the hallway walls until they thundered down the stairs. The poor boy drifted back into the comforting warmth of his blankets. The next time footsteps hammered through the hallway, the door flew open and slammed against the door stop. “Get your ass out of bed now, or you’re walking to school.” She pulled the covers off of him and without closing the door, she left.

Sammy managed to roll out of bed and clutch his aching head. That was about all he was able to do as the loud noises were like daggers going into his skull. In that state, he was proud of himself for getting dressed and his teeth brushed, but when he staggered downstairs, he was in worse shape than he thought. Once his eyes adjusted to the light, he saw the bus parked outside his house, his mother speaking with the driver. Sammy ran into the kitchen, threw a few slices of toast into his backpack, and flew out the front door. He passed his mother with her hands in fists on her hips. He stared at the steps of the bus until he made it on and the door closed behind him.

After he took his seat, Sammy fished the slices of bread from his backpack and started munching on them. When he looked up, he saw the bus driver’s eyes fixated on him in the mirror. She shook her head at his reflection. “The things you kids put your mothers through,” she said. “I swear.” Then the bus smoothly pulled away from the sidewalk toward the high school.

Sammy finished wiping the bread crumbs off his shirt as he took his seat in home-room. He continued wiping the sleep from his eyes as he got his assignments in order. From the front, the teacher gave a few announcements and then made them stand and recite the pledge. Only half of the desks were full that morning. What else could the school expect when giving them a three-day weekend? The bell rang sharply in his ears and he placed a hand on his aching forehead. Then swung his heavy backpack over his shoulder like he was hauling stones on a hot Summer day. *Time for class.*

First and second period went by in a blur. Sammy never considered himself a stellar student, to begin with, but he usually tried his best. That day, however, the best his teachers could get from him were doodles and daydreams. Third period was biology, the class he shared with Arabella, the girl from the night before. Only, she wasn't in her usual seat by the windows. Even the teacher seemed to note her absence when taking role and Sammy spent most of the class tapping his leg and glancing over at her desk.

At lunch, he joined his friends in the cafeteria.

"Dude, where did you go last night?" a boy asked Sammy.

"Yeah, you should have seen it. You know that pole they had in the middle of the room? Jessica totally got on there and worked it." Said a girl.

"Obviously not her first time," said another.

It went on like that for a while. Eventually, Sammy asked, "Did you all have fun?"

"What kind of question is that? Obviously, yeah."

"How much of the night do you actually remember? How much of your great times are you going to be telling to your kids someday?"

"Dude, what's your problem? You were literally there too!"

"I know why he left," said one in the back who had been quiet. "I saw him outside with Arabella Langleigh. I heard she broke down crying in the middle of second period and got sent home. What did you do last night, confess to her?"

"Oh my God," a girl said covering her mouth. "Do you think he did? Look at his face, he definitely did."

Sammy raised his voice, "What do you know about her?"

"I know the friends she's got talk behind her back. They say she's going to church now. Probably thinks she's better than all of us. Probably thinks she's better than her parents. Hell, I'd leave too if my daughter was a stuck-up."

Sammy slammed his tray on the table sending out bits of food. He felt eyes pierce him from every direction. "Whatever," he said. He picked up his tray and found a seat

all by himself.

Sammy spent the rest of his classes stewing over the events of lunch. His friends were just being stupid, he knew that. He shouldn't have gotten upset in the first place. He knew that too. If he didn't focus on what the teacher was saying he wouldn't be able to make anything of that day. He knew that best of all.

As he passed through the halls between classes, he felt that every hushed whisper and covered-up giggle was directed at him. He managed to get some of his feelings out during football practice. He pushed himself in all of his drills going further and harder than what was required.

After running drills, they played a scrimmage game which finished around the time the sun started to dip beneath the far-off hills. Sammy followed his teammates, first to the showers, and then to the last bus parked in the near-empty lot. Clambering in, he picked a spot at the back, his home was one of the last drop-offs.

As he swung open the front door, his breath caught. His mother leaned over the kitchen island, her head in her hands. She shook violently as the muffled sobs came through in spurts.

"Mom! What happened? Are you okay? Did you get cut?" He reached for her hands, but it was not a knife that she was covering, but rather a note. It was written in his father's handwriting on a page of yellow legal pad. He scanned the page, imagining his father's voice narrating the lines. *I'm sorry, I thought I had more time. I know you'll never understand my decision, but you're better off without me.*

Teardrops stained the bottom of the page causing his father's signature to run. Sammy dropped the paper to the floor. "How could this happen? Why?"

"I don't know! There was a knock on the door and this note was left on the doorstep." She bent down and took the note in her hands with the tenderness only a mother can manage.

"So that's it? He's really leaving with no more than that?" Sammy watched something flash over her mother's face. She stared up at him. "What?" He asked.

"You came home late," she said, her lip voice quivering. "I heard him yelling, I

thought he was just... What did he tell you!"

"I went right to sleep! I don't... wait." suddenly memories flooded Sammy's mind.

Last night, the smell of stale alcohol stained his shirt as he stumbled through the front door. If he'd registered the living room light being on from the outside, it didn't deter him from shambling through in plain sight. His father's voice stopped him on the edge of the stairs.

"Son, come here." Sammy staggered into the living room and stood in front of his Father. The tough, broad-shouldered man was imposing, even when sitting. Sammy watched and listened to the man wringing his hands. Many days laying concrete had left them bone dry and that night they were still stained a faint gray. "I don't have to know where you were to guess what you've been doing. You can't just come home like this. You'll worry your mother sick. One of these nights it will be her down here and you'll break her heart. You're going to have to take care of her from now on. Are you listening to me?"

Sammy's head was starting to nod, his eyes starting to close. His father nearly leaped up from his chair and shook him by the shoulders. "Listen to me!" he said. Then in a lower, harsher tone. "I'm going to be leaving for a while. Don't expect me to come back. There's enough money left for you and your mother to get by for a few months. That's...the best I could do. Are you listening? Nod your head if you understand. Good." His father loosened his grip causing

Sammy to lean forward into him. His father stood him up tall, pressed his hand against his cheek, then said, "Goodbye." Sammy remembered hearing the rolling of bags and the sound of tires peeling away down the road.

Sammy recovered from his trance in the kitchen. His mother had gone back to crying which turned to slamming her fist against the countertop. Sammy let his bag slide off of his shoulder and hit the floor. Then he walked out of the house.

The sun had set fully leaving the sky to peel away into its true obsidian hue. Tired in both mind and body, Sammy started walking without a destination. As he passed under streetlamp after street lamp, he reached a part of the neighborhood that he'd never walked to. The houses were nicer, some even stretched up to three or four

stories. The sidewalk had fewer cracks, and fewer tufts of grass growing between the concrete. The houses had lots more cars parked in the driveway. As he passed them, he began to feel his skin crawl and his blood boil. His steps became hurried and as he rounded a street corner, he unclenched his aching jaw. On a whim, he tried repeating the trick Arabella had shown him the night before. He stopped, closed his eyes, and lifted his arms up as he inhaled. As he exhaled and put them behind his head, however, something rang hollow in his chest. He pictured himself standing in the middle of the sidewalk with his arms like that and shame crashed into him like a wave. Sticking his hands firmly into his jacket pockets, he continued onward.

Eventually, ahead of him, he saw a small building with a steep-pitched roof. At the top of where the two sides met was a cross illuminated by two small lights shining up at it. Even from there, he heard faint music coming from it. The tune was so vaguely familiar. It was for that reason alone he strode closer. Once he was half a block away, he recognized the song. It was one his aunt used to play whenever he would visit her. From outside he made out a few of the words. "Jesus, sacrifice, gain, cost." He was sure it was just like every other Christian song he'd heard in passing. But it reminded him of his Aunt. Of better times when everything wasn't so important. He wanted to get closer to that feeling. He maneuvered to the front of the church. The double doors were open revealing a hallway and a dimly lit room with several dozen people standing in pews and singing. A large wooden cross leaned against the back wall of the square room and just in front of that on a slightly elevated stage, musicians and singers were performing. After walking through the hallway, he passed through slowly and stuck to the outside wall before eventually slipping into a spot in the back.

Just as he was beginning to settle in, the song came to a close. Claps went up around the room and a bald man with a thin beard stepped in front of the musicians.

"Thank you all again for coming tonight," he said. "Before we come to a close, we're just going to play a few more songs softly in the back and open this time and space for healing. Here in this house, we believe in the God who made the lame walk, and the mute speak. We believe our savior rose up from the dead!" A few claps followed. "Our God is the God of miracles and we just believe right now that nothing is greater than Him! Not our sickness, not our relationships, not our pain, nothing. I just encourage all of you to find one of our prayer partners at the front if God is putting that on your

heart. Remember that we come to him because He is good, not because we deserve it. Let's enter into worship again." As he left, the musicians and singers got back into position and started playing a song that he'd never heard. Some older people lined up and faced his direction, and he watched a few people leave their spots to talk with them one-on-one. Others stayed, most of whom either held their hands up slightly or craned their necks downward. Sammy eyed them all as he scanned back and forth across the room. Most were his age or older, almost all of them more nicely dressed than he was. It seemed a decent enough place, but religion never was his kind of thing. Having made his assessment, he was just about to leave when a girl he hadn't spotted tore off of the small crowd she was in to talk to an older woman in the front. Even in the half-lighted room, he recognized Arabella right away. His sudden excitement at seeing her quickly faded as he watched her bury her head into the woman's shoulder, sobbing. Tears welled up in his own eyes and he forcefully wiped them away with his sleeve. Then he suddenly realized he was walking. He rounded the pew and walked on the outside of the square room towards the front. A man, one of the prayer partners was rocking back and forth and humming. When Sammy came close, the man reached out a friendly hand.

"Hello there," he said, "what can I be pr-

Sammy skirted past him and everyone else who was huddled together praying in the front. Eventually, he made it to Arabella who had her neck craned down and her eyes closed like the others. The woman had her hand on her shoulder and was speaking. She stopped suddenly and stared at him.

"Are you alright?" she asked. Despite his efforts, he felt warm tears streak down his face.

Arabella opened her eyes and blinked when she saw him.

"Sammy? What are you doing here?" She asked.

"You know him?" Asked the woman.

"Um. Yes." then kinder, she said, "Yes I do. Excuse me, Grace, I'd like to talk with him.

Thank you for your words, they're helping already."

“Oh, of course, dear,” said Grace.

Arabella took him by the wrist and led him to the back away from the others. He felt eyes watching them as they went and heat began gathering behind his ears.

“What’s wrong?” Arabella asked him. The care in her voice melted him and he once again unclenched his jaw. “You look scary when you’re angry. I’m sorry for what I said, I didn’t mean it to come out that way. I just didn’t expect to see you at church on a weeknight, you know?”

“What?” replied Sammy. “No, it has nothing to do with that. It’s...about my Dad.”

“Oh, you too, huh? We don’t have to talk about it if you don’t want to. How did you hear about this place? How’s that?”

“I didn’t hear of it, I just heard it. I was just walking through the neighborhood and they were playing a song I knew.”

“Oh, was that far? Also what song was it?”

“I don’t know the name. I just heard it when I was younger and remembered it.”

“Right, right.”

The conversation died just as the song did. More people shuffled out around them, some of whom waved Arabella a polite goodbye. Darkness filled his mind once more and his eyes fell.

“About your Dad,” Arabella said, “I may not know exactly what you’re going through, but I wanted to say that you can talk to me. I’ve got my own fair share of issues, you know. Wait, that came out wrong.”

Sammy chuckled softly but quickly retreated back into his shell. Another moment of silence passed between them. He opened his mouth as if to speak, then said, “I just don’t know what to do. I don’t think I’ll ever feel okay again. What do I do?” He wasn’t really asking her so much as he was asking the floor, the air, the universe. He put his head in his hands and choked his tears into submission.

“Sammy,” said, Arabella gingerly. “Would you pray with me?” He pulled his hands

away and blinked at her. “Listen, I’m new to this whole thing, but I think... maybe you’re here for a reason. Maybe we both are. I have... I am going through a lot with my family, and the only real comfort, the only real relief I’ve ever found was crying out to Jesus.”

“You really think some more words are going to help me?” Sammy asked.

“It can’t hurt to try, right?”

Sammy met her eyes. He saw something in them that he couldn’t quite name. He saw the sadness, the loss, but deep down was something brighter, stronger still. He nodded.

“Close your eyes and bow your head like this.” Sammy mirrored her. “Lord Jesus,” she said, “we know that we are sinners. We know that we have done terrible things. We pray that you would forgive us, Lord, and help us forgive those who sin against us. Help us forgive those who hurt us as we have hurt you. Say this part after me.” Sammy did. “We believe you died on the cross. We believe you rose again. We believe that you saved us from the cost of our sins. Help us, Jesus. We need you. Amen.” A moment of silence passed between them. “You can open your eyes now.”

Sammy looked up at the room around them. It was mostly empty. Then he looked back at Arabella. There was her smile again. It wasn’t as broad or radiant as it had been last night, but once again, something bright and fierce burned beneath it. He wished the same fire burned in him. He did, admittedly, feel a little different, but he still heaved against the aching scars of his heart buried deep in his chest. “Is that all?” he asked with a wry smile.

“No, it isn’t.” As his smile dropped, hers grew. “You have to promise to keep praying that same prayer every day. And you have to come back here again next week.”

“What? Why?”

“Because sometimes healing comes all at once.” She mimed rain falling around her. Then she poked him repeatedly on the chest. “And sometimes it comes through lots of little reminders.”

“Hey,” he said, as he shooed her hand away. “Reminders of what?”

"That everything is going to be okay." Her jaw was set with utter sincerity.

"Alright. Fine."

She flashed her full toothy grin at him and he couldn't help but return it with a slight smile of his own. Then she lifted her eyebrows and fished in her pocket. Pulling out her phone, she answered it quickly. "Mhm, I'm ready. Hey, can we give a ride to a friend of mine? He walked her, but he lives a bit far. Don't worry, I'll ride shotgun. Okay, see you soon." She slipped the phone back into her pocket.

"You don't have to give me a ride, you know?"

She held a finger to his face. "Nonsense. You'd do the same for me in a heartbeat. Now come on, she's already in the parking lot."

As they left the small square building, Sammy turned one last time to the wooden cross at the back of the room. At that moment, something welled up inside him, something different than the pain, but just as real. Someday soon he'll realize it was hope.

*Mortality is a Question*  
Sophia Lamore



VISUAL ARTS

HONORABLE MENTION



# The Darkness

Jonah Jenkins

The rain pounds on the roof of the car to a beat that no one will ever find. Skinner taps his leg to the sound of the phantom rhythm and traces the barrel of the gun with his fingers. His eyes are wide open while he replays the scene again for the hundredth time in his mind. As the sounds of bells and screaming flood his senses, he almost loses sight of the murky street projected throughout the virtual windshield. Almost.

He catches the briefest hint of movement, a water droplet ever so slightly out of place. It would have been impossible to catch with normal eyes, but Skinner's eyes are anything but normal, and this time he knows what he's looking for.

He tracks the movement more clearly now. Something moving at walking speed North down the dark street. Skinner waits until his gut tells him it is safe, then pops open the car door. Rain streaks down his face, the only part of him still covered in skin. For a moment, the plinking of the droplets on his frame stirs up his thoughts. Somewhere in the space between impacts, the same familiar voice echoes in his mind. He shakes it off. Once it is finally over, he can spend the rest of his short life questioning. Not tonight. Not when he's finally so close.

He pops up his collar and runs his fingers through his short hair. By the light of the last flickering streetlight, he glimpses his reflection in a puddle. A stranger stares back at him. Later.

Skinner begins tailing his mark from a distance by tracing the most likely path. Besides the neon signs beaming in the distance, nothing lights up this part of town at night. As they walk he passes the dilapidated building which he once visited often. He passes the tiny school with its rusted-over play structure and the hospital whose roof had caved in long before the rats took over. He bats his eyes only to wipe off the rain. Eventually, he catches up to the shadow ahead of him who slows, then ducks behind a corner. Skinner creeps silently to the edge of the building and steadies his breathing. He reaches his fingers around the corner and the tips slide open revealing multiple cameras. Setting them to thermal mode, he sees tiny green puffs of breath set against the sheet of cold darkness heading down the alley. Tracing tech is good, especially the stuff the feds use, but concealer countermeasures evolve just as fast. However, even without it, he places the familiar slapping of hands on the

rungs of a metal ladder. Betraying his cover for a moment, he spots it at the far end of the alley.

Skinner waits until the man crests the top of the building, then sets off after him. With his legs, he can easily leap to the top, but he knows better than to go in guns blazing. It may be a trap either way, but jumping up blind is the fastest way to catch a bullet in the skull. This is better. Unlike the shadow, Skinner has ways of concealing the sounds of his movements. Like a spider, he dances up the ladder and is at the top in a matter of seconds. He is met with an all too familiar scene. The assassin is lying on his stomach, a rifle already tucked between his shoulders. He is adjusting the scope while aiming up at a highrise building in the distance. Skinner follows the line of sight and zooms in to see an elegant-looking man in a black suit staring out his penthouse window. He doesn't recognize him, but that hardly matters. Only one person is going to die tonight.

He crouches down, then in a flash, Skinner is on top of the invisible man. He rolls him over and places his hand on the man's chest. A pulse of energy flows from his arms and the discharge causes the man to jolt and spasm. He screams as his concealer cloak short-circuits, furthering the electrical blitz. He kicks the sniper rifle across the roof, then grabs the collar of the other man and brings their heads close. For the first time, Skinner sees the face of his wife's killer. He brings the barrel of his own gun to the shaking man's head. He's still mostly human by the looks of it, with normal eyes full of fear.

"That's it?" says Skinner.

"Wait, wait," coughs the man. "You don't have to do this." When Skinner doesn't move, he changes tactics. "L-listen, just let me take him out and I'll split the money with you. Hell, you can have it all! Please, God, don't shoot."

His words bring a hollow smile to Skinner's lips. "You'd call on his name after everything you've done?" His voice is colder than the steel of his body.

"I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, just don't kill me!"

"Do you even remember her? When you took my Eliza from me, did you even blink?"

“Wait, Eliza... Foldridge? So then you... you’re that priest who married the billionaire? Look, it wasn’t my fault! I wanted to back out and deny them, but that’s not how this works. It was her life or mine! That’s always how it is. How it was, I mean. Your wife wasn’t like the rest of the corporate scumbags I normally ice. She was good. I swear that I regretted it the second I pulled the trigger.”

“Liar!” Skinner pulls back the hammer of the revolver. He can’t feel the rain beating on his head. “You’re still here! Still killing for cash!”

The man tries to remove Skinner’s arm from his suit, but it’s a vice closing around him. “You don’t understand!” he pleads. “This is my last job, my ticket out of this waste-hole city. I am telling you the truth. I mourned your wife’s death. I knew it was my fault a light got snuffed out. There’s a man up there in that building. My old employer. If I take him out, I get to finally put this place behind me.”

Skinner presses the gun against his forehead harder. “What makes you think you’re going to get out of this that easy?”

The assassin lowers his voice. “I know what I’ve done better than anyone. You asked me how I could call on God before, well your wife is the reason. She grew up on these streets before she made her millions, tough as nails, and only worried about the money. I spent months locked up in my flat watching her public appearances. Everything about her was different after she met you. After she met Him... I’m not running off to some half-rate paradise, I’m running into hiding. Maybe I should take a page from your book? I can’t pray enough, I know that. But I might as well try.” Then he closes his eyes and begins to mumble under his breath.

Former reverend Eric Foldridge, Skinner stares deeply at the other man’s closed eyes. It’s impossible to know if he’s telling the truth; no amount of money can buy him that enhancement. Instead, something else whispers in agreement with the man’s words. He feels the heart beating in his chest for the first time since he can remember. At that moment, he notices the cross that hangs from the assassin’s neck. It reminds him of the one he tore from his own neck the day she died.

Skinner slowly pulls the gun away and throws it off the building’s edge. Without a word, he rises, paces a few steps to the flung-away rifle, and smashes it in two with his foot.

“Hey, hey, hey! What the hell!” The assassin strains to lift himself, but a look from Skinner stops him. Then Skinner’s eyes fall like the closing of a curtain.

“No more,” he says softly.

“What?”

“No more killing. No more death.”

“What are you stupid! It’s a life for a life, always. You think my escape plan is going to work if he’s still breathing?”

“You’re still breathing. Count that as a blessing.”

The assassin covers his eyes and whimpers. “You monster. You’d save yourself the guilt by leaving me here to die?” Then his tone changes, “The tracker! They’ve got me pinned, always. Probably got someone watching us right now!”

“I’ve been blocking the signal since I saw you, and that electric pulse would have fried anything external. If you’re right and someone was watching, I’m sure they’d have pulled the trigger by now. You said before that it was a life for a life? Well, you’ve taken mine and I’ve just given you yours... Do I really need to say it? I forgive you.”

Skinner turns to walk away, then freezes as he hears the sound of a gun cocking behind him.

“You think your forgiveness is enough?” asks the assassin coldly.

“No. But Jesus is. Shoot me if you want. It’s up to you.” Skinner waits with bated breath as the rain continues to pour down around them. Memories of his love, his loss, and everything that brought him here flash before his eyes. Would it really be so wrong to die as penance for his sins? That same voice, louder this time, echoes in his mind. Live.

Suddenly the rain stops and leaves them suspended in a pit of stillness and calm. Skinner hears the gun clatter to the floor.

“Just go,” says the assassin.

Skinner leaps from the roof to the ground and disappears into the night.

# Cigarettes

Ava Minter

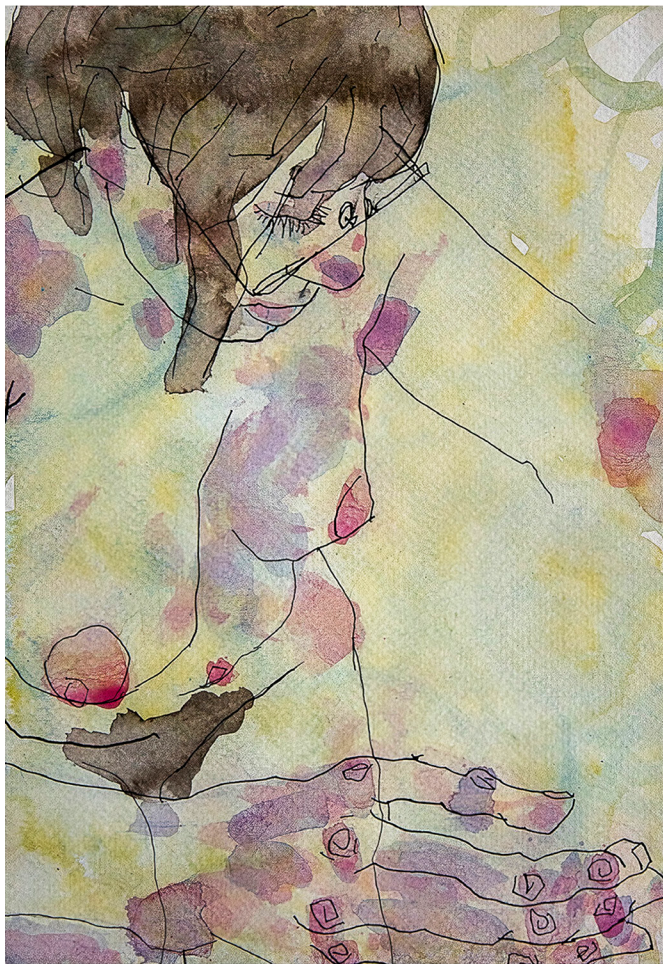
New York City, 1926

Cigarettes. They were the only constant in Natalia's childhood home. The suffocating smell and choking smoke that permeated the air was something she knew better than almost anything. She thought of them now, as she walked alone along the bustling streets of New York city. She inhaled the different scents in the air, the clashing aromas of different restaurants as they competed for attention, the accosting smell of car exhaust, the different scents of people, and of course, the ever-present odor of cigarette smoke in the air. There was a haze in the city, an electric buzz of energy that was always vibrating, day and night, it was intoxicating. On the surface, the activity of the city seemed pleasant, almost cheery. Families ate and chatted, friends smoked and laughed. For Natalia, though, the cloying smell was an aching thorn in her side, and an incessant reminder of her past. The sharp sting of cigarette smoke intertwined with every unpleasant memory she had. She'd never smoked, never even considered it, though most everyone she knew did. She was pulled out of her reflective thoughts for a moment as the soft lilt of jazz music drifted into the streets, leaking from the lively joints and businesses that got rowdy on the weekend nights. She smiled softly, remembering the last time she'd heard the music, she'd danced until her feet were swollen in her heels. Abruptly, a man on a bike came barreling along the sidewalk, going the opposite direction of traffic and making people jump out of the way. The man on the bike rang his bell loudly and hollered at people to make way. She dove to the side just in time. The bike and man rattled on, and she could hear it for a while before finally fading into the rest of the city bustle.

Down the road there was a commotion, honking and yelling, nothing out of the ordinary, except that, again, she heard the bell from the bike. She decided to walk toward it and see what all the fuss was about. The man was off his bike, having discarded it clumsily on the sidewalk and was now running up to an apartment door. She watched as he rang the doorbell and a pretty young woman answered. That was when she noticed the bouquet of flowers in his hand. The young woman smiled broadly and blushed, taking the flowers from the man and kissing him on the cheek. Then the man pulled

out a couple other items from his pocket, Natalia craned her neck to see what they were. In his hand was a box of chocolates, and a pack of cigarettes. There, she thought, here is one memory that she could pleasantly associate with the smell of cigarette smoke.

*Atticus and their hands (diptych)*  
Casey Velte



VISUAL ARTS

THIRD PLACE



# Creative Non Fiction

- First    *“Dearly Departed”* by Keoni Rock Fisher  
Second    *“The Peacemaker”* by Rodi Bragg  
Third    *“Monstrous Boulder”* by Sarah Harvey  
Honorable Mention    *“My Four Walls Surrounding”* by Mia Becerra

# Dearly Departed

Keoni Rock Fisher

I'm standing in the hot southern heat directly under the sun, not of my own volition, but because I gave my word. I took an oath and signed a contract that keeps me paralyzed, planted in the grass and heat like my concrete peers around me. Although they do not sweat, I can imagine they are equally unhappy to be here. While they are free of the oath and contract that keeps me stuck here, they stay put, unwavering and immobile just like me. I can feel the sweat gathering in my headband, compressed so tightly against my skull that the waves of a newly formed cranial ocean are churning with the pounding of my temporal artery. From the corner of my eye, I watch as a spider knits its delicate web from the brim of my hat to the front sight post of my rifle, unaware of his forthcoming eviction. I'm reminded of my boss's earlier words as we rehearsed for this somber occasion, "Head and eyes straight forward. Let the bugs eat". The pounding of drums and horse shoes in succession with a sad 1800's tune approaches as the rest of the procession finds us nestled in the cemetery. As we wait for the family members to settle into position, I take small glimpses of each and every one, as if knowing them visually ahead of time will somehow give me the strength to address them on behalf of the U.S.Army. By now, the living quarters of the spider are fully constructed, and the sweat pool pressed against my temples is at capacity.

While I hate to disturb him, the funeral has begun and my rifle swings up to render a salute, destroying his web in the process. While the chaplain delivers his speech and greets the family, the casket appears and is slowly marched over to its final resting place, to become another member of the concrete garden. As it is lowered into the ground, a wave of sorrow in the form of weeping and muffled voices creeps over the grass and reaches our firing party. Although this is just one funeral in the thousands I will participate in, anxiety still takes a firm grip on my stomach. The three shots divided between seven of us are expected to all be delivered at the same time, and unbeknownst to the family, we are all being watched and graded on even the smallest detail. My uniform has been neatly sewn and ironed, medals measured down to the millimeter in a frustrated night spent wrestling with the coarse blend of wool I'll be wearing all summer. From where we stand we can hear the speech come to an end and the chaplain gestures over to our spot in the grass. I take a deep breath, slowly, so I don't give the impression of stray movement. Our firing party captain orders us to attention and I hear his calm reassuring voice begin conducting us through our

volley of three shots. In just a few minutes, our years of practice shine through and all of our shots go off in perfect tandem. My ears give off a nice dull ring as I reminisce of the earplugs I was ordered not to wear that sit in my locker unused. Our job as a squad has gone off without a hitch and I return my rifle to a salute, alone, as the rest of my team is marched off to get ready for the next funeral. I search through the grass for our spent shell casings and neatly package all twenty one of them into a government issued black bag and prepare to hand them over to the family. The small glimpses of the family I took earlier slowly become people as my heart rate and anxiety reach another all time high. I take my calculated steps over to a grieving wife while they all look on, waiting to hear my words.

“On behalf of the U.S. Army, thank you for your family’s sacrifice”, I say as I’m met with a sea of out of place camera flashes and an almost silent, “Thank you”. I give my last salute, slightly longer than the others, and place that small black bag in her hands. The silence of everyone watching is deafening, and the stares into my back are almost palpable as I march away to meet my squad. What should have been a brief interaction done in minutes, felt like an eternity. Holding that salute while I watch countless people stare at me with mournful tears could have been years. As I march, I can’t help but think, “Who was this person to them? What brought them here? Was this another suicide? Drunk driving incident? Can I even care?”. I have six other funerals to prepare for, and that’s just today. Is it worth the emotional energy to even find out why I’m here six more times? I greet my squad as we form a line and match each other’s steps. Onward to the next one. We march through the garden in silence, the shots of countless other funerals ringing out in the distance. Visiting families of past funerals look on in remembrance as we pass by, and I wonder if they’ve received one of my black bags years or even days ago. We find our spot across the cemetery in a new field that bears an uncanny resemblance to our prior funeral and wait, loading new rounds into our rifles as I put another black bag in my pocket. I scan the grass for spiders in hopes that they avoid this stretch of grass and quickly readjust my cap to prepare for the upcoming humidity. The clotting of hooves approach as another horsebound carriage and new family appears, music and casket in tow. I scan the crowd once more as a new chaplain recites his specific religion’s rendition of final services. Our gunshots ring out, and again I find myself alone, watching as my team leaves without me, to a new wave of anxiety. “On behalf of the U.S. Army, thank you for your family’s sacrifice”.

# The Peacemaker

Rodi Bragg

My friends call me the Peacemaker. When I think of myself with that title, I feel like I might slip into psychosis or a delusion of grandeur, questioning my own sanity. According to the astrology book that I've owned since my sweet 16, *The Secret Language of Birthdays*, one of my weaknesses is narcissism. Perhaps that's why I'm telling this story about myself as a heroine. One thing I've learned in my 34 years of life is that storytelling can save your life.

I was born from a war, and perhaps I'm here to stop one. Even if it's small battles of power struggles between people every day. My father was a refugee from Guatemala, and fled to America when people began disappearing in his village. He was no saint though. Supposedly he beat my mother when she was pregnant with me, causing my premature birth. For some reason, I blame my mental health issues on my maternal line. To my father's benefit of the doubt, he is back to being a horse trainer and coffee farmer in his village in Guatemala, without phone reception or internet, but somehow he still has a Facebook account where he refers to himself as "La Puta de San Rafael las Flores", the slut of San Rafael las Flores, in English. At least he's no longer dealing coke.

My mother was a drug addict during her pregnancy with me, but somehow I was born clean. My mother and I are not particularly close, especially since after my maternal grandmother, her mother, passed away in 2016. My grandmother died of a heart attack. Her birth name was Mary, but she also went by Cecelia or Trudy. I often joke about how many different people she was before she died.

When I was 5 years old I remember her going to a funeral for a friend that had passed, and I told her that I was sorry about her friend dying and she said to me,

"When I die, don't be sad. I'll be happy to go. I won't have to go to work any more."

"No, grandma! I will be sad!" I told her. And I was. It is cliché to say a part of me died with her.

A few short months before she passed away, I moved to the Pacific Northwest. I lived in both Oregon and Washington over a course of 7 years. A debilitating depres-

sion forced me to reconcile my traumatic past here in San Luis Obispo county. I was born in Templeton and raised in Paso Robles. As a young adult, I struggled with homelessness, and even experienced a police assault, where I still bare the scar as a reminder. Moving back home has given me a fresh perspective on who I am, and who I come from.

Before the drug addiction and domestic violence of my parents, or the alcoholism of my great grandparents, my second and third great grandparents were Chumash and Salinan Indians. The Indigenous people of these lands. My great-great grandmother, Maria (also known as Mary Garcia), was born in a village site in Cayucos in 1886, before Cayucos was even a town. Cayucos was named after the Chumash tomol, or what English speakers like to call canoes or kayaks. My people were seafaring people, brave and one with the sea. The word, Chumash means seashell people. Her grandmother was from a village site in Cambria. As if by magic or destiny I relocated my facial spa business to Cambria when I moved back to the area 8 months ago.

Since moving back to California, my ancestors have been talking to me. Another reason I have questioned if schizophrenia may run in my family, which I understand is no joking matter, as I have had several friends and lovers with the disease, and have also had two of them hold me by knife point. Albeit, I was able to talk my way out of those knife fights.

Before I moved back to California, I only ever knew of the stories of my great grandfather Leo Morillo. He was Chumash, and grew up at the San Antonio Mission. Miraculously, my sister was able to send me his birth, death and military records. He was born in 1922, and fought in World War 2 as a rifleman. He became an alcoholic. He was baptized in 1946 at Saint Rose in Paso Robles. My mother has told me stories of him, of how he was a big man. When she was little she says that she would ask,

“What am I?”

He would say, “You’re American.”

“But I’m not blonde and blue eyed like other Americans. I can’t be American, I must be something else.” she would respond.

“Don’t tell anyone you’re Indian. You are American.”

By the time I came around, in elementary school, we were learning about tule huts the Chumash made, and did our 4th grade California mission project, in which I still have a

photo of me with mine painted with red nail polish and me wearing my pink leather jacket. Other kids would think it was so cool I was Chumash. As I grew older, I had people say things like “I was a Chumash or Native American in a past life.” or “I talk to your ancestors all the time!” My mother is the one to thank who first tried to unearth our ancestors’ stories, when she started collecting feathers and abalone shells and took our family to our first powwow in Santa Ynez.

“Our ancestors were slaves. They were taken from the Santa Ynez mountains and brought to the missions.” She told me over the phone when I mentioned to her and my sister that I was working on our tribal enrollment status. Although I still wait to hear back from various bands of the Chumash Nation about our status, I’ve continued to research my family’s genealogy. As of yesterday, I found out from a retired anthropologist and genealogist who has been studying California Indian families for half a century, John Johnson, that I am both Salinan and Chumash Indian, which makes sense as the tribes shared these territories.

One of my earliest memories is of a Salinan and Chumash burial site, right in Paso Robles, next to the Salinas River, where the Wal Mart has been since 1994. My grandmother drove me there as it was being built and told me,

“This is how much people hate us for being Indian.”

In my mind, I was only 5, so I had no idea what to comprehend. I just knew what she told me was important. And I still remember sitting in that car and staring at the parking lot. Although she taught me that valuable lesson, we still shopped there as poor people, supporting those who dishonored our ancestors. I haven’t been inside of a WalMart in years, only ever in nightmares.

So am I a peacemaker? I hope I can be. My ancestors survived quite an ordeal, from being servants in rancherias, to hostages in the mission system, surviving the Great Depression, World Wars and civil wars. They came a long way for me to come along. Somehow I’ve survived against the odds too. Perhaps talking isn’t the only thing I’m good at, like my grandma used to say.

Aho, to all my relations.

# Monstrous Boulder

Sarah Harvey

A few years ago, in the breaking daylight hours of a rainy winter morning, I stopped my vehicle to decide whether the small pebbles strewn across the road in front of me qualified as too many to drive across.

In the short time frame that debate lasted—five or ten seconds—a small spattering of rocks tumbled down the sheer cliff, and then seemingly out of nowhere a monstrous boulder the size of a small cabin fell out of the sky, straight down, and cracked the pavement twenty feet in front of me with the deafening sound of a bomb. The thing bounced like a ping-pong ball over the guardrail and was gone just as fast, a flash before my eyes.

This was followed promptly by my sixty-mile-per-hour K-turn accompanied by a repeating mental dialogue: Still Alive. Still Alive. Still Alive.

Returning to my driveway ten minutes later, lightheaded with adrenaline, I kissed the ground. Hours later the news came out that a mega landslide had destroyed the highway and crews were going to have to use dynamite to blast the dirt and rocks so that they could clear the highway.

I was there. At the beginning. And I could have been under all of it. It took me a while to believe that I was actually still alive.

I spent that week in a cognitive haze, unsure of how or why that boulder did not kill me; I would have been squished like a little tiny nothing underneath all of that if I hadn't paused to consider whether or not to drive over the pebbles. This could have been a story written by someone else about a woman who was in the wrong place at the wrong time. Now it's a story of chance—maybe just of pure luck.

Fast-forward to now and the road conditions remain unpredictable, as they likely always will be for this untamed highway built on and up against constantly moving earth. It used to take me about thirty minutes to get to a spot twenty miles up the coast, but these days there are a few major landslides between here and there. To get to that same spot now it takes about six hours of travel time, which consists of driving south, then east, then north, then west, and then south again. What used to be a scenic route

accompanied by sweeping views of the Pacific Ocean and dotted with redwood, willow, oak, and bay trees is now a route consisting of traffic lights, fast food, gas station bathrooms with foam soap dispensers, and eighteen-wheelers spraying mist onto my windshield from their mud flaps.

When I stop to get fuel, I see couples walking on seemingly never-ending mazes of asphalt and concrete with their immaculate shoes, the soles of which lack tread and are not designed for handling actual dirt. I see stray dogs with matted fur running full-speed on the sidewalks, knowing where to squeeze between the holes in fences. I see hooded people with lost eyes occasionally lit up by streetlights weaving in and out of the shadows on bicycles. I see movement everywhere; it borders on scrambling.

On the interstate, a car's headlights suddenly appear in my rear-view mirror so close to my bumper that I brace myself. Luckily, the car comes and goes, racing ninety miles-per-hour past my SUV as if it is just an obstacle in some video game with no real person inside.

Although I don't kiss the ground when I finally pull into my driveway, I sure am glad to be back. I wonder how long that can all last, out there. Out there, filled with exponentially growing numbers of human beings and exponentially decreasing amounts of nature.

# My Four Walls Surrounding

Mia Becerra

My room, once my place of comfort has been transformed into a shell. Nothing in it besides the four walls holding it together. Standing by the window and taking in the last moments I'll have in my place of peace, I see a familiar white range rover pull into our dirt driveway and I'm yanked back into reality.

Why does it have to be like this? It feels like I'm always fighting to survive, when can I just relax and enjoy my life? Grabbing the suitcase I placed outside the door of my room full of my bare necessities, I started down the stairs. Reaching the bottom, I felt my breakfast threatening to make its way up. Take a breath. It's okay, you are okay. Slowly reaching for the door handle, anxious for what awaits on the other side, I push down on the cold metal horizontal door knob and pull the heavy wooden door towards me; my heart's beat increasing with each movement. The sun hits my eyes causing the already brimming tears to spill over with the sudden change in lighting. Where am I supposed to go? How could they make us leave? Walking into the brightness and onto the front yard my mom spent her days perfecting. The luscious green grass that wasn't there before, the big pile of woodchips that was a home to millions of fire ants, no longer remains. She did that, my mom put effort into making our home beautiful and it feels like nobody cares to acknowledge that. The sense of hopelessness settled over me, knowing we'll be forced out no matter our pleas. I'm going to be homeless and these bastards don't care about the family they're kicking out, they care about potential revenue. Our house is property, land, not a home. Merely profit to them. Why would they care about you? Silly stupid girl.

I have the overwhelming urge to cry while I stand and observe the sight before me. My mother was talking with the man from the Range Rover, begging is a little more accurate. My mother is a woman of great pride so to see her so willing to be at one's mercy came as a shock to me. Her eyes twisted with the look of pain as she said loud enough yet still somewhat hushed, "We need more time, we have nowhere to go. Please just another week or two". She was holding her hands in a praying position looking at the man, wide eyed and hopeful. Met by a blank stare holding an undertone of annoyance the man who came to evacuate us gave the practiced answer of, "Ma'am it is no longer in

any of our control. We have a project to start, you need to get your things and go”

The man with pale white skin and copper toned hair walks to the entrance of the house, leaving my mom standing idly where their conversation had just taken place. Her face sunken and left frozen from the rejection she experienced. She made her way to the brick pathway built with bricks found in an alley, approaching the white picketted fence she spent her afternoons putting up and got into the car that awaited on the other side. A surge of hatred, hatred for these men, hatred for my situation and hatred toward Paso, passes through my body and without much thought I launch my suitcase over the fence. Not knowing how to throw things, especially those of large weight and volume caused me to hurt my back but in that moment my anger caused the pain to subside. I needed an outlet for my rage and the nearest thing was my luggage. Not realizing that the suitcase would take my anger with it, an unwanted sadness swept over me.

Falling to my knees in defeat. I put my head in my hands and let my body sink further into the ground. Why are they doing this to us, we take care of the house? My mom put in the work nobody else was willing to, she made this house admirable and all that work she did has to mean something. What are we going to do? Where are we all going to go? Sobs breaking through, still on my knees and asking aloud, “why?”.

The man who bought our house is named Chris. This man not only owns multiple properties nationwide but he also owns about three blocks of downtown Paso. In the span of two years we watched the surrounding neighbors be plucked from their homes, unknowing it was by force. For two years Chris was buying up and fixing properties like “The Stables” and creating new vacation rentals for tourists who so willingly spend their time drinking and making fools of themselves. We didn’t get worried until our two closest neighbors were gone and the loud guests made their presence known every weekend. We had a feeling that he needed our house to complete his empire and it wasn’t long after we left that the three blocks spanning from the Lions field to the DMV were completely owned by him. Family’s unwelcomed, that is of course with the exception of renting it out for the weekend.

I rise from my knees, wet spots left from the freshly watered lawn, and approach the man. He had a weak build, flimsy shoulders, thin legs, and sparse coppery hair. How ironic, a man with so little intimidation is here escorting us. Walking with frustra-

tion. Fast hard steps, toward the puny man, the grass sinking, soft, beneath each new step. Tears sliding rapidly and hot down my face, “Is this what you want?”. I say, giving my best look of innocent desperation while biting the bitter words. Hoping to show the state of need I’m in, having some hope that this man can stop all operations and future actions taking place because he wants to, because he can see that we too are just people trying to survive. Instead A cold glare is meeting mine, no emotion, no remorse.

He was here for a job and that was it. Suddenly, I knew exactly why they sent this sac of leftover genetics. He cared as much as the one proffitting, “It’s business darling” he said with a glint of humor, a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. What an asshole. He thought this was Funny. You silly stupid girl.

More tears puddling in my waterline, I turned my feet in a mechanical sort of way and headed for the car which was now loaded with the suitcase I had thrown into the road.

Getting in the fully packed car, bodies and luggage surrounding me. Still in my mind, dazed by how quickly our world was taken from us. Looking up at the window I was glaring down from just minutes before, there was no longer that connection. My stuff is now in boxes, my memories are stored deep in my mind, and I’ll never have the comforting feeling of that room again. I was staring into a window, the shell, and all four walls looking back.

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