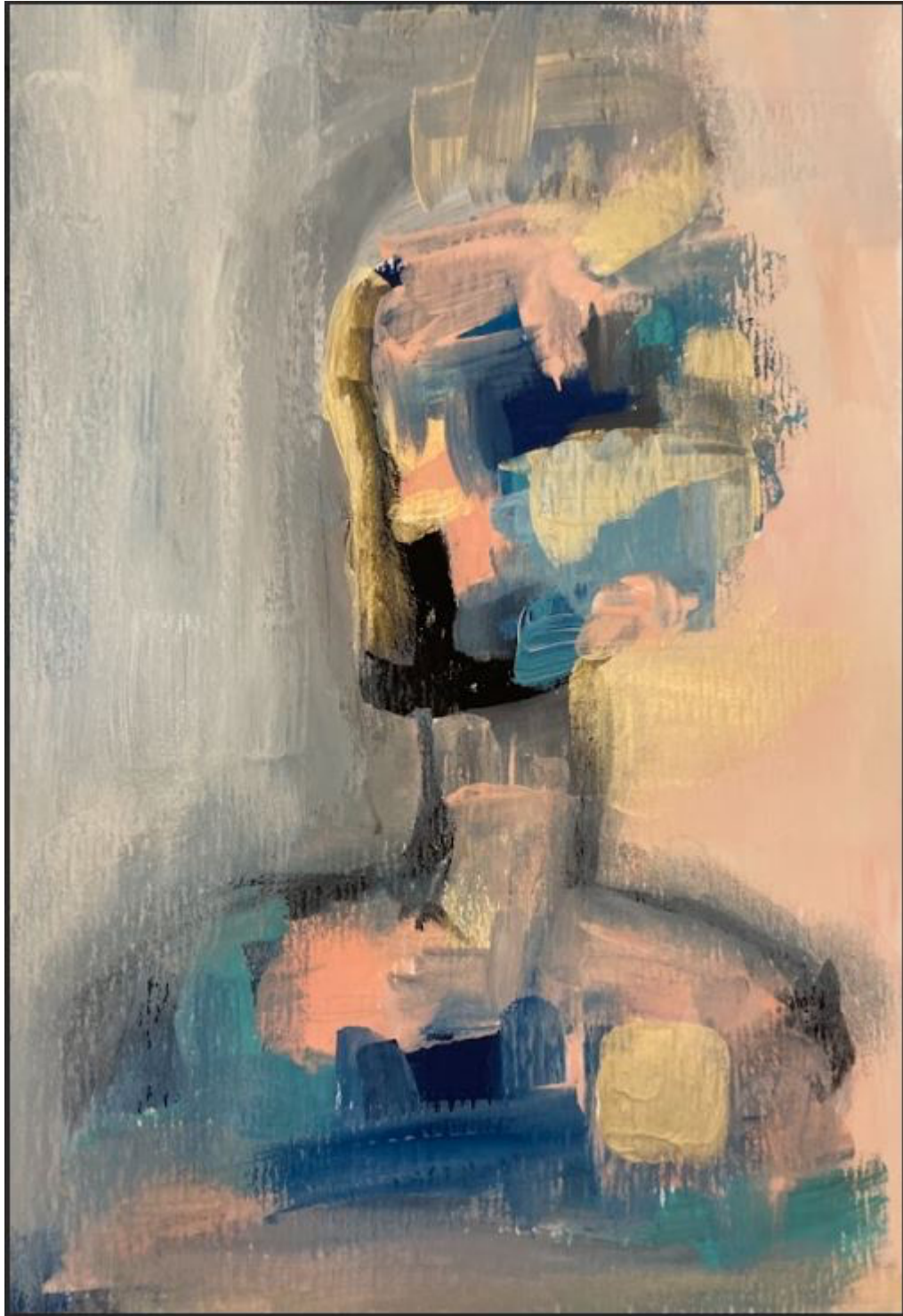


# Mosaic

The literary journal of SCPS



Martha Madigan

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Dear Readers,

Welcome to the latest edition of "Mosaic," our literary journal that celebrates the myriad threads of human experience. In these pages, you will find a collection of voices, perspectives, and stories that collectively form an intricate tapestry of life. Our contributors, much like skilled artisans, have crafted their narratives into this vibrant compilation. Each piece is a testament to the beauty found in the diversity of our shared human existence. We are thrilled to present "Mosaic," an anthology that weaves together the diverse voices, emotions, and creativity within SCPS that have emerged during and after the pandemic.

The poetry and prose within this compilation resonate with the echoes of the soul, offering a spectrum of emotions that have defined our shared struggles and triumphs. Poets and storytellers have poured their hearts into verses that navigate the complexities of love, loss, and rediscovery. Each poem is a lyrical tribute to the strength of the human spirit and its ability to find beauty amidst the chaos of life. As editors, we embarked on this journey with the intention of capturing the resilience, introspection, and creativity that have flourished in times of uncertainty and seen us through to brighter days.

The visual artwork showcased in "Mosaic" is a testament to harnessing the power of imagery to convey emotions that words often struggle to capture. Artists have utilized a diverse palette of perspectives. From vivid expressions of the self to vibrant abstract reflections, the artwork invites you to explore the depths of our shared humanity.

As you navigate through the pages of "Mosaic," we invite you to view this anthology as a rich tapestry of interconnected stories, verses, and visual expressions that collectively tell the tale of a resilient and thriving community. We hope you will find echoes of hope, threads of introspection, and fragments of renewal.

We extend our deepest gratitude to the talented contributors who entrusted us with their creations. Their voices, combined with the artistic vision of our team, have brought "Mosaic" to life. May this anthology serve as a reflection of the strength that emerges when diverse perspectives come together to form a harmonious whole. Let this collection remind you that life is a shared work of art that we all contribute to, and in each of you lies the potential to create something truly extraordinary.

Thank you for joining us on this artistic journey.

Warmly edited from the chicken coop,  
Charlotte, Michelle, and Genevieve

Monkey Bars - Liz Badley

The first bar.

I steady my breath and wrap my small hand around the cold bar.

Tippy-toey.

I'm excited to try and full of nerves.

The second bar.

I grab for it.

I release my feet and hang for a moment before I reach my feet back.

What if I fall? What if I slip? What if I can't do it?

She sees me and reads my mind.

"I'm here to help you."

She takes my feet when they leave the platform and I feel her support.

The third bar.

I'm doing it! I smile and I reach for the fourth bar.

I miss.

"What if I fall?" I say aloud.

"You'll land," she says, "and you'll try again."

The fourth bar. The fifth.

I know she's there, but my feet feel free.

I smile.

The sixth bar. I miss.

She's there. I'm safe. I try again.

The sixth bar. The seventh bar.

I'm on the platform.

I want to go again.

"You don't need my help, but I'll be right here."

The first bar, the second.

I miss the third bar and let go.

I land.

I try again.

One, two, three, four, five bars.

I hear my friends cheering my name.

Six, seven.

My feet are barely on the platform when I'm enveloped by hugs from my friends.

"You did it! You did it!"

Again and again, I count to seven and I fly from bar to bar.

Full of pride, with blistered hands, she taught me:

"If I fall, I'll land, and try again."

## Into the Everlasting Sky - Shaun Howard

Nothing quite compares to that first leap into a world you once only glimpsed. That moment when you start heading toward an emptiness that can only be described as inconceivable bliss. The ground rushes by you as your speed exceeds that which you find familiar. Your stomach shrieks in confusion as it begins to sink into your firmly planted legs. Staring out the window makes things more confusing as you watch the physical earth sink away into the shadows below. The white, fluffy pillows of wonder greet you as you cut through their ethereal forms. That is when you truly realize that the world is smaller than you ever imagined, and perhaps flight is not only reserved for those beings with wings protruding from their bodies.

You feel it must be time to cease your upward travel, but you are wrong. You continue to rise. Higher and higher you go into the unknown. The flight attendants' smiles meet your fearful eyes as they sit facing you in apparent boredom. You imagine a yawn escapes their lips as they chuckle at your unwarranted nervousness. Looking down for a moment, you witness your hands melt into the armrests beside you. The medicine you took before takeoff brings a dry sensation to your throat that initiates another concern.

“Did I forget something?” you say to yourself as you realize you will be trapped for fourteen hours in a small metal tube. The person next to you shifts slightly. *Are they asleep?* How anyone could find this relaxing is baffling to your self-diagnosed clever mind. Your ears bite at the exterior of your skull, begging you to set them free. Being the stalwart form that it is, your skull refuses to give them what they want. You bite your lip in frustration but quickly turn it into confidence. You can do this, and you will. Your fiancée is waiting for you on the other side of this mythical blue marble you call home. You think of the others who have experienced this for the first time. Twenty-five years leading up to now have prepared you for this flight. This is your time. The optimal height is reached, your insides settle, and your uncontainable smile returns.

Love in a Time of Overalls - Tiffany Porter

Jacob is at the office where it is warm and things make sense. I stayed at the farm where things are chaos. One failed fence gate and the world's least productive farm turns into a three-ring circus. After rounding up the string of horses, a herd of goats, and one unruly long-horn named Myrtle, I replace the culprit hinge. Hinging and hanging a 12' gate is a job that takes less than 5 minutes with two sets of hands. However, my suburban-raised and mechanically-incompetent hands stretch the project into the better part of an hour. Over the last few years, I've gotten the hang of throwing hay, riding a horse, and wrangling 4-legged beasts that would have chased me around the pen in a past life. I'm still woefully inept in the grand scheme of farm life, but I keep a sense of humor about it.

I text Jacob a picture of the gate laying in no less than three cow patties at the entrance of the pasture. He responds with an ellipsis and waits for the fallout. I send pictures of animals in places they don't belong. The horses in the garden, the goats in the forest, and Myrtle looking content albeit ridiculous standing atop an ever-growing pile of cut limbs and unwanted lumber waiting for a dry night and hot match. "She's so majestic," I caption the photo of Myrtle.

"I love our life," Jacob texts me back.

He doesn't ask how it happened. He isn't upset with the state of affairs of our livestock. The opposite is true. He's happy. I warm from the inside despite the frost on the ground.

I used to think that our love story was unconventional, something to put Paul Newman and Joanne Woodward to shame. But the longer I live this love story, the more I realize that it follows in the footsteps of the great romances that came before us. It's the scenery, the stakes, and the extremes of our story that make it feel otherworldly compared to the boy-meets-girl classics. That suits us though, we've always lived in the extremes.

I take one more picture of Myrtle, make sure the gates are locked, and walk back to the house. Jacob will be home soon. My fingers are numb inside my deerskin gloves. I think back to warm days we've spent under the Caribbean sun. I picture Jacob in his blue linen shirt and dark sunglasses, smiling at my child-like wonder the first time we traveled together. Exotic destinations wrapped in mystery and adventure.

*"Where do you want to go?" he asked.*

*"Everywhere," I said, emphatic. "I want to see every place that's made you who you are."*

*"You'll need more pages in your passport."*

It was luxury I never imagined, much less imagined for my own life.

In the house, I walk through the foyer, past the photos hanging on the library wall. They're so familiar now that I hardly notice them anymore. But they're there, standing as tribute to the heartbreak we've had. A silent reminder of years spent with the shell of Jacob, knowing that even though I was looking at him, he wasn't really there. His life - a free-fall tailspin - and me, drowning helpless under the weight of it.

*"I don't know how to come back from who I've been. I don't know if I want to come back. I'm broken," he said.*

*"I'll love the pieces then," I pleaded. "The pieces are enough."*

*“I don’t want you to. This is a liability I can’t afford.”*

It was a loneliness I never imagined, much less imagined for my own life.

The family we’ve created is a blended one, for years made of unwilling parties. Preexisting loyalties caused us to question whether our devotion to each other was sustainable. How do we account for the myriad of last names represented within our clan? How do we negotiate titles like “mom” and “dad” and prefixes like “step” and “ex”? How many holidays is a *sufficient* number of holidays to spend apart, fostering hope for future holidays spent together? So many years of wishing that he understood what I needed him to do. So many years of him wishing that I understood what he needed me to be.

*“I don’t know if the mantle is big enough,” he laughed.*

*“We’ll make them fit,” I replied, handing him another nail.*

*“One for you, me, the exes, and all the kids. That’s a lot of Christmas stockings.”*

After 7 years, we spent our first Christmas together. With it came a hope I’d never felt before.

This is our life. It’s lavish travel and it’s mangy goats. It’s months spent apart on different continents, and it’s years spent apart in the same room. It’s expensive sheets and its naps in beds of cedar and oak on forest floors. It’s Christmas stockings for the whole reimagined family hanging on the mantle. It’s Newman and Woodward, and it’s all the love and all the mistakes two people can make.

Jacob is home now. I meet him in the kitchen where he hands me cheap whiskey in an expensive glass. “The girls are coming for Thanksgiving,” he announces. It will be another first in our life together. Despite the cow slobber and stench of farm life that cling to my overalls, he pulls me into his chest, my filthy face pressed into his immaculate sweater.



## Bovine Behavior - Sonja Carrick

Have you ever wondered if cows can really be tipped, have four stomachs, can walk downstairs, or lying down means it's going to rain? I've always wondered about these old wives' tales, so let's explore some bovine behaviors.

The first tall tale, cow tipping, is nearly impossible. First, they don't sleep standing up. Second, you're not likely to sneak up on them because they are very vigilant animals. The average weight of a cow is 1,500 lbs. The heaviest area is in the middle of its body, and they can distribute their weight on all four legs. It takes approximately 1,360 newtons of force to get a cow to a tipping point. An average 145 lb. person can generate about 660 newtons of force. Mathematically, you would need two people to achieve tipping, but this assumes the cow is non-resistant. Once resistance is considered, over 3,300 newtons are needed.

A large contributor to their size is one of the compartments in their stomach called the rumen. Technically, cows don't have four stomachs, but have four compartments within their stomach. Since cows only have 32 teeth, mostly on the bottom, and a leather like pad on the top of their mouth they chew in a circular motion causing the molars to shred the grass. The digestive process, known as ruminating, is swallowing large pieces of grass, "un-swallowing," re-chewing, and re-swallowing. Also known as "chewing the cud." Ruminating is typically done lying down.

A cow's chest is the largest and heaviest part of its body, mostly due to the rumen. This weight distribution plays a big part in their behavior. When humans go upstairs, they don't typically look at their feet but when they go down the steps they do. Cows have the same tendency. The way cows are built doesn't allow them to look down at their feet. So, technically cows can go downstairs but it's frightening for them. Another way they have to compensate for their weight distribution is how they lie down and get up. To balance their weight while trying to get up, they kneel on their front knees (sometimes referred to as wrists), raise their hind end, and then extend their front legs. If cows lie down too long the weight on their legs can paralyze them.

A popular misconception is when cows are lying down it means rain is coming. There are a few theories behind this one. The first theory is the atmospheric pressure change causes them to lie down. Another premise is they lie down to keep the patch of grass underneath them dry, although there's no evidence a cow prefers dry grass over wet. The notion that makes the most sense is cows spend between 12-14 hours a day on their bellies (ruminating), so there's a good chance you'll pass cows lying down pre-rain.

On our farm they have names. Some of them are hand fed, follow you like a dog, or "talk" to you. They'll recognize the Kubota and associate getting fed. In what feels like a stampede, some come running, some are bucking for position, some walk quietly, and some are mouthy. It's like kids who spot an ice-cream truck. Cows go far beyond hanging out in a field waiting for you to drive by and say, "look, cows!"

Dear Penelope - Robert Bridges

Dearest Penelope D. Williams,

You've been gone for 31 years, but I can still remember lying out in the marsh tumps on a cold winter night together, gazing at the stars like it was yesterday. Mom named you Penelope Williams after William Penn because you were born in Pennsylvania. I'm not sure what the D was all about; Maybe it was because her maiden name was Dennis, or maybe she just liked how it sounded. Either way, we just called you Penny. You were only a dog, but we grew up together, and we tromped and rattled around the docks, marshes, and woods of our tiny little fishing village without a care in the world.

I'm writing to you because I would watch the planes fly over us while lying under the stars amongst the ghost trees on a soft bed of sea oats. I would look for their blinking lights and imagine them headed to places like New York City, Paris, Africa, and wish that I could travel there with them. I took a few trips, and life has turned out great, but I never went too far for very long. I was always afraid, trapped inside my head. I was ruminating on how things may or may not turn out, locked in fear like a deer in the headlights.

While I haven't overcome all of these fears just because of this last semester, it's been a long road. However, I feel like I've landed in a home at UVA. That it's safe to be who I am, and it's ok to question the status quo. Frankly, it's the only way society progresses and becomes fair and equitable for everyone. Before this semester, I was afraid of speaking out because the eastern shore is such a small community, and I would be labeled a liberal and never build another house again, which I couldn't afford. But marginalized communities can't afford those of us who have benefitted and prospered because of the way we look not to speak out.

If I've learned anything from this semester, my opinion is relevant, and it matters. The most significant change is that I've gained the tools I needed to put my thoughts down and organize them to chart a path forward for myself. Most importantly, I've learned to be courageous and share my thoughts and experiences with others. Before this semester, I never thought of myself as a fearful person or how much fear hindered me. I mean, I worked on a commercial fishing boat that capsized in the Atlantic Ocean on the last night of November. Chilly, I assure you. While it was overturned, I even swam into the cabin for the flares. But that was instinctual, and there were no social pressures—only the reality of life and death. I don't think I even thought about it. I just did it. You probably knew all of this already.

But it's true. I have been afraid of myself and resisted being vulnerable. It's as if a shell around my heart has begun crumbling away this semester. Leaving the heart of the boy, who loved to lie in the marsh with his dog, dreaming big dreams.

I hope you are well and mucking about in the marsh, living your best life. I look forward to seeing you someday, but not too soon, I hope. I think about you whenever I see a shooting star or plane flying over in the night. You were a great dog and an even better friend.

Love, Robert

## If Scars Could Talk - Monica Walker

I believe that scars tell a person's story. Scars give you a glimpse into a person's past; they show a person's strength. Each and every scar on a person's body has a story behind it. The stories range from children falling and needing stitches to car accidents to the cesarean section scar on a proud mother. Each scar and the story behind lets you a little further into that person's life. In addition, each scar shows a person's ability to heal, to bounce back.

I have so, so many scars. I see people notice them, how can they not? Yet, I'm not ashamed anymore. They show that I've been in horrible places in my life, but I'm not there anymore. They've healed, they've faded, but they're still there – part of me, forever. Some are self-inflicted, from times when the mental and emotional anguish was too much for me to handle. Some are inflicted by others, from times that led me to the dark and lonely path where I felt there was no escape but death. I spent huge portions of my life wishing I would die. I spent some chunks actively trying to make that happen.

These scars reflect that, but more importantly they show that these times are in the past now. That I'm finally at a place in my life where it's ok to be me. That's a surprisingly potent statement, and one I never thought I'd be able to make. My life is by no means perfect, but it's a life worth living. It's a life with a future that I want to stick around to see. So, when people's eyes perform the familiar flick over my scarred arms, I no longer burn with shame. These scars show that I have been through hell and back, and lived to tell the tale. Am I going to broadcast where they came from to everyone who sees them? No. I will, however, meet their eyes and make it clear that these are not shameful things to be hidden away and never spoken of. These are battle scars. I fought like hell for my life. It left its marks, literally. I believe the scars are like my past, they'll never go away, but they're something I can live with now.

Rock Bottoms and Guardian Snow Angels - Heather Hayes

I looked out of the glass from the side house door of our home. The silver dented Toyota Prius gathered dust down the gravel driveway. Then it turned right onto Irish road. He was gone. I was eerily calm as I gathered enough pants, shirts, underwear, and sweaters for three humans that I could fit in my big, black rolling suitcase. I walked upstairs to the nursery and peered into the gray crib of a sleeping one year old. I picked him up. Then wrapped his blue and white soft blankie around his sleeping body. Then started my old, trusted Toyota Matrix to warm it up.

I buckled my bundled bear cub into his gray and Cheerio crumb-lined car seat. "This will be an adventure! You get to have a sleepover with your best friends," I assured in high spirits to Brodie as he buckled in next to his little brother. "How did we get here?" I thought, as we drove to Sally and the Hsu's home.

Two days earlier, I was tucking in Brodie just as I did every evening, and he was more quiet than usual. His face was hiding under his blue, fuzzy blanket. I heard sniffles.

"What's wrong, Brodie?" I asked.

He uncovered his face and tears were falling down his freckled cheeks. Brodie rarely cried. I knew it was serious.

"I want to kill myself," he said through tears.

I knew. "Because of Rahul?"

He nodded and sobbed, "He makes me feel like a moron all the time."

Hearing this sent a knife through my chest. My son was my responsibility. "I'm going to fix this, buddy. I promise." I meant it. I held him and rubbed his brown shaggy hair above his forehead like I had since he was a baby. He was nearly asleep. I quietly shut the door and walked downstairs.

"It's time to change things. This is getting serious." I pleaded in desperation. I thought if I showed vulnerability, he would face this with me.

"Brodie's being dramatic. He doesn't like me, and he never has because I'm not his real Dad." Rahul had responded with a tone as cold as that January night.

"You promised in our vows to protect me and the children. Almost every day you break Brodie down. Whenever I bring it up, you pretend it doesn't happen. No more screaming and cursing. This has to stop, or we have to leave."

The next day after a violent outburst, we hid in the nursery. Brodie began collecting his colorful Melissa and Doug wooden blocks, as I held on tightly to my baby. We were scared. Rahul busted through the door and Brodie threw his blocks at him to protect us. Rahul began to scream curses at him. I picked up my phone and began taking pictures. Then texted them to my sister as fast as my shaking hands would allow. He glared at me and knew he was caught. He stormed out of the room, and I held onto my boys. We cried together. I knew we had to leave, but we had to wait until he was gone.

It took two excruciating days for Rahul to leave the house for an interview. A few hours after we got settled at Sally's, my phone began to ring. Rahul's name popped up on the screen. My heart sank.

"Be strong, Heather." Sally said to me as I walked into her guest bedroom to take the call.

"Where are you guys?" He asked frantically.

"I need you to find somewhere else to stay. You need to find a therapist and get help. Or we cannot come back." I kept my voice calm and repeated my negotiations three more times. He knew I meant it.

After I hung up Sally walked up to me. She knew what I was going through. She left an abusive marriage twenty years prior. She held my hand as I cried. She felt like my guardian angel.

"You know he probably won't change." She told me straight.

I nodded because I knew, "I have to make sure I did everything I could to try. For Ollie. Either he will realize this is rock bottom and get help or he won't."

This was my rock bottom. I knew it was time for me to get help. To break the toxic cycles inherited from my own parents. To save my children. I looked at my boys snuggled together on the couch watching a movie. I looked out of the window in fear of seeing his car. Fat flakes graciously fell in troves on the gravel road. I realized his Prius was no match for the guardian snow angels that were looking out for us.

## Home Fits In My Pocket - Monica Walker

As I open the cover of *A Wrinkle in Time* by Madeline L'Engle, the familiar smell transports me home. The slightly musty smell of an old paperback book is one of my favorite smells in the world. In that smell I can feel the hours of love, loss, and friendship that I've experienced in the pages of books. I remember the life lessons I learned from the authors who I felt were speaking directly to me. I can see my true homes in Narnia, Hogwarts, Prince Edward Island with Anne, or with the Murray family on their wonderful farm.

I moved for the fifteenth time when I was fifteen. I learned never to get too attached to a home, a school, or even friends. In addition to never staying in one place for long, my life was full of chaos and trauma. Rather than live in that world, I chose to lose myself in worlds where no one could touch me. Worlds where I learned about new and fantastic things. Many people believe that home must be a real place that you can see and touch, but they forget how a well written book can transport you. I can still smell the crisp snow and feel the icy wind whip around me when I open *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. The attachment that I form with characters, especially characters in series, is very intense. The loss of certain characters is still with me, often feeling like the loss of a good friend. The only times in my young life that I felt any hope was in the books I was reading. I would think, "Look at the protagonist go! They have so much stacked against them, and yet they persevere. If they can push through this awful thing and get some semblance of happiness, then why can't I?"

Picking up a book that I've read more times than I can count brings a sense of calm and familiarity that I associate with home. I know that I'm settling in to spend hours with people I love; people who won't hurt or judge me. The feeling of home is why I reread at least one of my old favorite series yearly. It is also why I am more attached to my books than any other physical object in my life.

When you walk into my bedroom, you are hit with the smell of books. Were it not for the bed in the center of the room, you would assume you'd walked into a library. One entire bookshelf is devoted to books waiting to be read. Another entire shelf is old favorites. When you look over that shelf, you'll notice that the books are in surprisingly good condition. Some of the books are a little too well loved. Roald Dahl's *Matilda* has the cover taped back on with clear packing tape. The *Anne of Green Gables* series has the box held together with the same tape. These are not the pristine books of a person who has books for display. These are the well-loved and well taken care of books of a true bibliophile.

I believe that home is where you feel safe. Home is where you can recharge. Home is where you refill your dwindling hope. There are a few authors that still make me feel this way. I will read anything that Neil Gaiman has written because his writing fills me with hope. I remember finishing *The Graveyard Book* and holding the book close to my chest, hugging it, smelling it, enjoying it. That book made me feel a deep seed of hope that I thought I had lost. A good author can remind you of feelings you had forgotten. They can teach you lessons you don't realize you are being taught. They can help pull you out of the gloom of your life and catapult you into worlds you could never have imagined. When I finish a good book, it makes me want to create something. I want to put something into the world, to give back to the world that gave me this wonderful thing.

Is that not what home is? The place you go to recharge, the place that gives you hope and creativity. Most importantly, the place you are safe. You are physically safe, safe to express any emotion, safe to create whatever strikes your fancy. While many people would feel sorry for me and my life growing up, I say I'm lucky. All I need to do to feel at home is bring a book with me. How many people can fit home in their pockets?

## Notion of Home - Kelly Dias

The open discussion and community cultivated in class together has felt like sitting down to a fire circle where the strangeness of strangers goes up in smoke. Each story shared is an offering to the flames between us to char away the nefarious doubt of not belonging. It has taught me the importance of belonging to the present moment. Belonging to my family and community, inherited or chosen, where leverage is gained across the fulcrum of authentically belonging to myself. This circle has been a sacred practice of holding space for those transitioning from house to house, season of life, or surfing the waves of grief. I have spoken, listened, and embraced the silence in between. I needed this circle.

Our exploration of what home means to me has largely been a practice of peeling away the layers of what home does not mean. In *Nomadland*, Fern's bravery on the open road taught me that home is not an address. The Kramer family taught me that home is much more than a last name. Maya Angelou taught me that home is not silent or trapped in scenes of shame. Jesmyn Ward taught me that home is not a collection of generational pain but the song that releases it. The things that do not define home make the most flammable and precious kindling. Perhaps home is not a place or a feeling but an action instead. The act of collecting the fallen debris of what isn't home and bringing it back to the circle as fuel.

Home is where I tend my heart's fire. I choose to consciously tend this fire so that compassion is available to me, for me, and from me. I require effort and I require rest. I am surrendering what needs to burn away so that I can breathe easy again. I will exhale away the ashes of loneliness and regret. I will inhale the gratitude that stokes the flames of my intentions with service, with action. There is so much fortitude to be had from knowing how to make, carry, feed, and share the hearth fire behind my ribs. It is this loving kindness that feathers my nest and is the container for all that I require to feel welcome and at home every and anywhere.

## Language Inadequacy - Michelle Roberts-Harrison

I have been a mother of sons for over thirty years. Wherever they are is my home, even though that is not where I live. Right now, my home is in Denver and Buffalo and Deposit. And if my number of homes fell to two, I am not sure I could survive it.

The English language contains words for people whose family members die: widow, widower, orphan. But we do not title the person whose child has died. It is as if such a state is so forceful that we cannot bear to give it voice.

Instead, we use vague phrases and euphemisms to discuss this, maybe to make ourselves feel better: bereaved parent, stricken parent, mourning the loss of a child.

These words do not lend newly-childlessness the gravitas it deserves. The word bereaved brings images of women in black veils and dark glasses, men with heads bowed and holding their hats in their hands. Mourning loss hearkens the soft grey of a dove, a lamenting song that carries on the cold spring breeze. Stricken comes a bit closer, evoking heartfelt wanting and regret – an image of sitting alone in a dark study or cold kitchen where the fire has not been tended nor stoked. But none of these words is enough. They do not do justice to the aftermath of a child's death. Perhaps this is just. Perhaps our language cannot conceive of a word that could carry enough weight to bear the gravity of the death of one's child.

That which more accurately describes the death of a child are not words but sounds. They are keening and wailing - the arrival of banshees, lightning attacking a stormy hilltop. They are the slicing and splitting of flesh that comes from self-flagellation in a dungeon of regret and confusion. They are guttural cries, primal screams of disembowelment and immolation. They are the retching and convulsing of our bodies and minds to rid ourselves of poison coursing through our veins.

The phrases we use often do not even take the dead child into account; the parent is bereaved, the parent is stricken, the parent is mourning. This is understandable because we, as the still-living, must concern ourselves with the pain and suffering of the parent who is left alive.

How do we honor the child of their heart if we do not have words of adequate magnitude for such a horrifying situation? It may feel like a betrayal for the very parent we are trying to console if we use words that are unable to articulate the enormity of such loss.

If our words lack referral to the child of their heart, does that mean we are attempting to erase that child from our lives and from the memory of the world in which they lived for such a minute amount of time?

To the parent, this seems an insult to the child, simply so we can make our continued existence more palatable and comfortable in the presence of such profound heartache. Perhaps our lack of adequate language means that we are able to give that parent something more potent and powerful than words. Perhaps we can just be with them in their grief and inexpressible despair. Silence may be the only tool we have to let them know we will hold them through their pain.



The Crime Scene - Timothy Dufresne

“If only we had some police tape,” says Jackie. “That would make this.”

“Next time,” I reply.

She smiles at me. “Next time.”

We walk into the alley—trash piles up against the graffitied wall of the Little Nugget. You can usually find one or two people in this alley, drunks sleeping against the bricks. But right now, it’s empty except for Jackie and me. The alley, the world, is ours.

“How about here?” she says, pointing at a spot on the ground without any puddles or stains.

I lie on the ground, performing my best impression of a dead body. Jackie takes out her stick of chalk and outlines around me. When it’s my turn to do the tracing, she lays down near where I was, placing her hand over where mine had been. I trace her body, my hand shaking slightly. I am overwhelmed. The smell of her reddish-brown hair framing her face at the shoulder, her round dark Velma Dinkley glasses, her soft, warm body, and every curve I encase in a chalk outline.

I finish tracing her. She stands up, and we look over our work, a make-shift crime scene. Two lovers, holding hands, dead in an alley. It’s a stupid joke, a macabre art project, but it makes our silly little emo hearts soar. Privately, I find it all terribly poignant. I think Jackie does, too. We are a pair of early twenty-somethings, each fresh off the heels of romance-starved adolescence. Our shoulders touch. We pretend not to notice. We are on the verge of spontaneous combustion.

“Pretty good,” I say.

“Not bad,” she agrees. This is our first date.

A few weeks later, we are lying in bed together, tracing words and pictures on each other’s naked skin and guessing what the other has written.

“This is fun,” says Jackie. “Kinda like Erotic Pictionary.”

I imagine a box for Erotic Pictionary on someone’s gaming shelf beside such tame fare as Life and Monopoly. I laugh. *What would the Settlers of Catan think?*

Eventually, Jackie traces an unmistakable three words on my chest.

*I love you*, she writes.

I hesitate. I want to write it back, say it back, sing it back. I know I should and that every second I don’t, risks breaking, or at least cracking, her little emo heart. Still, I stall.

She lifts her head off my chest and looks at me. *What do you think?* she asks with her big brown eyes and nothing else.

*What do I think?* I'll be honest. I think *love* is a vague word. I think it's a servant with too many masters. It can mean anything from "I like being here with you right now" to "I want to spend the rest of my life with you regardless of whether or not you make me miserable" and everything in between. It's as worthless as overprinted currency—lighter than the air it's whispered into before radiating out into space. It comes and goes involuntarily, like goosebumps across naked skin. It washes away at the first sign of rain, like chalk outlines in a staged crime scene.

Mostly, though, I think "love" means giving someone permission to obliterate you, and I do not wish to be obliterated. Not just yet at least. I am afraid; all dressed up as practical. I fall silent. My finger remains stationary on her skin, never to write on that canvas again. The first and only game of Erotic Pictionary ends abruptly after Round One.

To my surprise, she says she understands.

"I'm sorry," she says. "It was too early."

"No," I say. "It's fine. I'm the one who's sorry."

This is the script we've all performed. I am on stage, playing a role, not very convincingly. The stage lights are harsh and unforgiving—a man in the back-row coughs. I hear myself say some version of "It's not you, it's me" with total sincerity. My life has become a basic cable melodrama written by a hack.

It's three more weeks before we break up, but I suppose you could say the paperwork started that night. She would get married within the year. I would marry a few years after that. Jackie would work at the same coffee shop as my future wife, Meagan. One night, while closing together, Jackie would tell Meagan that I was a good guy, someone she could always trust. Three years later, Jackie would attend our wedding with her husband, Chris, and their two children.

At the ceremony, we would smile and take pictures together. We would hug, kiss on the cheek, say, "I love you," as easily as saying hello and goodbye.

## Liberation - Stanley Rugumayo

We landed at Bujumbura International Airport in Burundi, Africa. As we walked through a security check to reboard, a military police officer held onto my passport. He demanded to know who I was traveling with since I was a minor. I explained to him I was traveling alone. He appeared suspicious and went to speak to his superior. I was the last person waiting to board the plane as the rest of the passengers were settling in. As I waited for clearance, a flight attendant came calling my name "Stanley Rugumayo." I responded, "here." The officer informed her that I was not cleared to go. The flight attendant looked at me and whispered, "Is this all the luggage you have on you?" I replied yes. She asked the officer if she could look at my passport, and the officer reluctantly handed her my passport. At that moment, she grabbed my hand and said, "let's run." We ran towards the plane, and I remember the heels of her shoes falling off. We finally got on the plane. My heart was pounding; it was dark outside. I could see the red and blue lights of police cars. The plane took off. As the flight continued, the captain announced: "Ladies and gentlemen, welcome aboard Sabina Airlines. We are now crossing the Mediterranean Sea; sit back and enjoy the flight." I broke down and sobbed. The flight attendant sat beside me and held my head on her lap without saying anything. I saw my past grow faint as I embarked on a new life in the strange land. The United States of America.

The Gift of Choice - Susan Chisholm

Holding my newborn son, Patrick, I could sense that he was an old soul in an infant's body. His being was so different from his older brother's. From an early age, he showed me he had been here before. Yes, I know this sounds crazy but as a mother you sense things about your children that no one else can. When Patrick was about four or five, he finally confirmed my hunch.

When the boys were little, our Friday night ritual was to rent a movie, order a pepperoni pizza from Dominos or Anna's, and hunker in for the night. As we walked into the movie rental area at Kroger, the clerk was playing an animated movie on her small Sony TV near the cash register. After what seemed an eternity, the movie of the week was selected. As I was paying for the video, Patrick asked the salesclerk about the movie she was playing. The young teen didn't miss a beat and said the movie was about reincarnation. Ooh, a new word.

"Momma, what does re—in-card—nation mean?"

Oh my, how do I explain this one? Thinking quick so that I could answer the question and not the clerk, I did my best to respond on a topic I wasn't too sure of.

"Well, some people believe that there are people who have come back from the dead, living among us in another form of life." Yeah, I know. This was way too deep for a child to process.

The puzzled look on his face prompted me to try again in explaining to him my lame understanding of reincarnation. "You know how Casper is a ghost that only some people can see?"

"Yes."

"Well for some people they don't haunt houses. They come back in a body like ours where they can be seen and heard."

"Oh." I could see his little mind processing what I was trying to explain.

Expanding further, I added, "For those who have been reincarnated they get another chance to live here on earth again."

"Oh." No more was said.

Several months later and out of nowhere Patrick inquires, "Momma, do you believe in reincarnation?"

"Where did you hear about reincarnation?" Stunned that the little man sitting in his Fisher Price booster seat explores such a deep question.

"Don't you remember that movie we saw playing at the video store?"

"Hmm.... I kind of remember the movie." I don't.

Afraid of his piqued curiosity on such a deep provoking topic, I ask, "Do you believe in reincarnation?"

"I do.", without hesitation.

Gulp, “Wow. You must have been thinking about this for a while.”

The pressing question comes at me again, “Momma, do you believe in reincarnation?” I knew an answer was due despite my wariness on a subject I had mixed thoughts about until he was born. As I pulled my thoughts together for a response, I realized I was being presented a gift of choice. Two choices were in front of me: be like my parents and shut this conversation down or I could answer his question. I chose the latter.

“Well, P, I do believe in reincarnation.” Looking in the rearview mirror, the little man smiling at me is one of those people who has definitely been here before.

“You do?”

“Yes.” As much as I wanted to go further, I let this one word stand for my belief.

“Good”, came a faint response from the backseat.

Growing up my parents enforced the children are to be seen and not heard rule, which stifled my curiosity at a young age. Given my upbringing, I knew my boys would be raised differently. Through their inquisitive natures, the three of us flourished in learning things about the world around us. What a blessing it is to see life through a child’s eyes.

## The Thing Without Feathers - Megan Johnson

Mr. Elijah Spencer died on the twenty-first of October. He had spent the morning cleaning, and when he was cleaning, he liked leaving the windows open to let the place “air out.” He liked the cool breeze, and I didn’t mind. I couldn’t feel the chill from behind my glass, and I liked to watch the rustling curtains. I liked looking at the sky.

He was feeding his pet bird when it happened, a little sky-blue parakeet named Chicory. Chicory barely seemed to notice as Mr. Spencer clutched his chest in pain. He watched Mr. Spencer collapse on the floor, then he finished his seeds and made a break for the open window. He gave a snide little tweet on his way out.

I never liked Chicory, though we didn’t spend much quality time getting to know one another. Probably there was a concern for the pretty bird -- probably it was a legitimate concern. But I loved Mr. Spencer, and unlike the rest of the world, he loved me. Unlike the rest of the world, he thought I was beautiful. He marveled at my long, scaled body. He laughed as I curled myself around his arm. He was never frightened, never disgusted. He fed me, kept me warm, and talked to me like he cared whether I was listening.

He did the same for Chicory, but of course everyone loved Chicory. Pretty bird, pretty bird. The smug bastard. Only Mr. Spencer loved me.

While Chicory was cooed at and fawned over, people flinched whenever they came near me. Some curiously came and tapped on my glass and shivered when I looked up at them. They shrieked and jumped back when I flicked my tongue. Some brushed my scaly skin, just to say they had. Others stayed far across the room, acting as if I wasn’t there at all. Mr. Spencer would just laugh and pull me up from my glass cage and let me rest across his shoulders. He was never ashamed of me, and because of that I was never ashamed of myself.

I pushed up the corner of the black plastic lid covering my cage. Mr. Spencer didn’t know I could do that. I slithered down the table and over to his crumpled form. It was cold in the room with the breeze blowing in but there was still heat lingering in Mr. Spencer’s body as I wrapped myself around his arm. He didn’t laugh. I stayed there until his arm grew cold, and then I made my way towards the open window.

The room was growing dim as the sun started to sink. Out from behind the glass of the cage, I could feel the breeze. I flicked my tongue out and tasted the air.

I had never realized how alive the world was. I could see the tiny, framed square of the world from my cage, but I had never seen it, not like this. I’d never heard it, not above the hum of my electric lamp, but everything made noise— insects, trees, even grass. I didn’t know you could taste sunshine and the autumn breeze. There was so much life out there.

I looked behind me. There was no life left there. Just empty cages and open doors. But there was a whole world out here. A world more beautiful than I could have imagined. A world close enough to touch. And it wasn’t for me.

In the face of the world I had only just discovered, I saw for the first time how ugly I really was. My hideous scales, the way I slithered -- I saw myself the way the world saw me. I was a thing to be loathed and feared. I was a hazard and a pest. All the world held for me was hatred and heels to crush my head.

It was getting cold. I turned away.

I slithered back across the floor, back up the leg of the table, back through the opening of the glass cage. I closed it behind me. Mr. Spencer didn't know I could do that.

I knew that soon, the lamp in my cage would go out and grow cold. Maybe in a few days, maybe weeks. I knew I would starve long before that. Already I was feeling the edges of hunger. But for now, it was warm inside my little glass cage. I curled myself into a coil as tightly as I could. I stared at the lifeless body of the only person who had ever called me beautiful. I looked to the little framed square of sky, the only piece of the world that would ever be mine. A bird flew by. Maybe it was Chicory. I watched the curtains fluttering silently as I fell asleep.

The Banana Costume - Susan Chisholm

“I gave the baby some of my banana today,” Joe proudly announces as he walks towards me from the parking lot. He approaches with the baby snug in his baby backpack. The sound of our voices stirs him as he looks out and smiles at us talking.

“You did? Isn’t it too soon for him to have solid food?”

“Yes, but he was hungry. Your breast milk isn’t enough. He needs more.”

“So, did he like the banana?”

“Yes. He could not get enough of it. I had to stop feeding it to him. I was a little hesitant to give him more than a few spoons of the mashed banana.”

“Hmm...” I question whether we are feeding him solid food too soon. I hold my tongue.

After this first encounter with having solid food like the banana, our oldest communicates how much he enjoys solid food, except sweet potatoes. It is funny how babies will share their likes and dislikes. I finally meet a baby who says no to sweet potatoes. He continues to say no to sweet potatoes except for sweet potato casserole. What more could one want with sweet potatoes with all the milk and sugar that goes into this casserole? I like it too.

I hear music. I hear Raffi repeatedly singing about fruits. As toddlers, both boys love the Apples and Bananas song. There are days when I go into Raffi overload. However, to see the boys dance and sing along to the music swells my heart. This overload is worth it.

Years go by. I hear a growing boy say, “Momma?”

“Yes?”

“I charged a banana costume on your credit card,” my youngest states.

“Oh?”

“They are having a Halloween party on campus later this week. I thought it would be fun to dress up as a banana.”

Hearing his excitement at finding a costume that is uniquely him, I visualize him dressing up in his costume. This visualization makes me laugh out loud, as I see a 6’4”, 210 lb. yellow banana walking around the quad on campus. I need to remember to ask him for a picture of him dressed in his costume.

“Hey, Momma?”



“Yes?”

“Do you still have my banana costume and my Mexican poncho?”

“Yes, they are in the closet with the other things you left here.”

“Great. I want to take them with me when I head back to my house.”

When it was time for him to leave, I must ask why he wants these items. “Oh, I want them just for the fun of it.” The image of him and his brother dancing to Raffi flashes in my mind’s eye. I wonder if Miles still dresses up for Halloween. I need to remember to ask him when we talk next. The lyrics to Raffi’s song ring in my head, just as they did when the boys were young.

Not long after my youngest takes his banana costume, I receive a picture of him with his dog dressed up for Halloween. It is his first Halloween with his dog, Maui. He and Cara are living in D.C., so they want to have fun while handing out candy. Thank goodness for cell phone cameras. I now have a picture of him dressed as a banana. I receive a picture of the three of them dressed as pineapples. The reference to the Rock in Moana and Maui’s name makes me chuckle. The kids name the dog after the Rock. Raffi plays in my head since I do not know a pineapple song.

Reflecting on the banana costume makes me wonder if my son still has it. I will have to ask him when we talk next week. I now have Raffi’s song playing in my head. I don’t mind because I remember all the fun the kids had when they danced and sang along to it. I did too, so don’t be fooled to think otherwise. I smile as I hum that familiar fruit tune.

I think I will bake some banana bread in homage to the memories that flash before me. I think I will listen to Raffi as I make the bread. Like Raffi in the video, I wear my big fuzzy slippers.

Banana - Sam Robinson

When looking up what the word banana means, it is a tropical fruit with soft, pulpy flesh enclosed in a soft, usually yellow rind. I started thinking about bananas, and as they turn brown, their smell becomes denser and more intrusive. A banana starts so bright, and as time passes, it loses its oomph. The thought of the banana's smell takes me to a memory that is not a warm, cuddly one, instead a memory that is hard and angering at times.

My olfactory-evoked memory is brought on when I smell that sweet stench of a banana; that memory is of my mother's mom, whom I called Grandma. Grandma was short, like most of us women in that family. Grandma was around five feet tall, with black curly hair, deep wrinkles with many stories to tell, and a very Maryland nasal tone to her voice. I can still hear grandma saying my mother's name, Sarah, which usually follows with criticism of my mother or father.

The smell of bananas takes me to my first memory of my grandmother; Grandma had a two-bedroom apartment decorated with many greens and browns. The apartment had a small kitchen, often with old brown bananas rotting in a bowl. The kitchen was just big enough for me and my two older cousins to breakdance in; it was the 1980s, and breakdancing and rat tails were super cool.

We did not go to Maryland very often to see Grandma; we lived in Princeton, West Virginia during the 1980s, and it was a long drive for my mother. I also got the impression that going to see Grandma was more of a chore for my mother as Grandma would talk about how wonderful my Aunt Dolly and her sons were and criticize my mom for marrying my dad. My Aunt Dolly, my mother's only older sibling, married into money and stayed in Maryland; my mom did not marry into money, and they moved to West Virginia. My mom likely did not want to hear about Dolly's greatness and be reminded how horrible she was. One time, we drove over five hours to Olney, Maryland, to see Grandma; we had not been there more than a few hours when I made the fatal mistake of being a child and drew on the walls in Grandma's apartment with crayons. Grandma lost her mind, started shouting at my mother for "allowing" me to do that, and kicked us out of her apartment. I still smell the bananas, even while running out of the apartment, crying. My mother was forced to drive back to West Virginia for five hours because Grandma expected perfection; anything less was damned.

After some time had passed, my mom decided to make the trip back up to Maryland to see Grandma; I was never excited to go but always had to as I was the youngest, and anywhere mom went, Sam followed. I recall pulling into Grandma's apartment complex and running up the long sidewalk to Grandma's door. Grandma opened the door, and she had a smile on her face! As I walked into the apartment feeling a lot more aware of what I was not supposed to do, I went into the kitchen and was hit with the sweet smell of the bananas; did this woman ever eat the bananas or just collect them for looks? This visit went better as Grandma took Mom and me to her pool to go swimming and even took me to Toys R Us to get a Bigfoot monster truck toy. It was as if Grandma knew she needed to try harder, but being warm and fuzzy was not in Grandma's DNA.

These Maryland visits only happened every few years or so; being close to Grandma wasn't going to be something I would ever be able to achieve. My aunt Dolly had two sons named Ryan and Adam, who were the apple of grandma's eye. I tried everything I could to be like them; remember the rat tails I mentioned earlier? Let's say my mom refused to let me grow a rat tail like Adam and Ryan,

and I am so thankful as an adult that she stopped me. Rat tail or not, I wanted the same love that Adam and Ryan received from Grandma; sadly, so did my mother.

We escaped the 1980s and entered the 1990s Grandma period. Grandma in the 1990s was a different woman; maybe she was closer to her 80s, and life can sometimes make people friendlier. Grandma had moved from her tiny apartment to a cute ranch-style home outside of Olney, Maryland. This would be my last visit with Grandma before she passed away in 1999. We drove for five hours to see Grandma; she opened the door, and believe it or not, there was the smell of bananas in her kitchen. The kitchen this time was an eat-in kitchen, but the bananas were still rotting away in that same bowl she always put them in. Grandma was pleasant to my mom on this trip, and when we were going to leave, Grandma and Mom embraced and cried. Grandma would pass away from a brain aneurysm in November 1999, right down the hall from that kitchen that I bet still had rotting bananas in it that day.

Beer-eakfast - Genevieve Elise

A scraggy, tattered man sits placidly on a bench, arms crossed. Every few minutes he deposits a handful of seeds into his upturned mouth which he leaves wide open while the pigeons help themselves. They crawl, clinging to his threadbare hoodie, over his bony shoulder and hopping down the skinny ladder of his ribs, stopping to take a few seeds at a time while squabbling with each other.

A bubble the size of a VW Bug passes on its trek upward, shimmering with rainbow swirls until it pops on a branch overhead, showering the pavement below with soapy flecks. The man with a five gallon bucket of suds spins his soapy lasso again, releasing giant undulating cannonballs that hurdle slowly towards the outstretched oak tree.

The lithe woman in a silky flowered kimono unfurls her eight foot sleeves and waves her arms like a spell, snapping them over the crowd like Wonder Woman's whip. She dances on the edge of a cement wall, and when her wailing zither music stops, she jumps down blithely, shabby blue Skechers shaking the metal grate. She restarts the track and springs up to whirl her arms toward a group of tourists snapping her photo.

I am losing my buzz from what I exuberantly dubbed Beer-eakfast an hour earlier at Chelsea Market. Seph and I are eating and drinking our way through the congested stalls when the weight of currywurst, shumai, the press of hundreds of people, and two high octane beers start making me sweat. I quickly grow queasy and beg my friend to go somewhere with fresh air. She raises her head, sniffs, nods decisively, tells me to hold tight to her backpack. I barely hang on as she plows around corners toward the park like a faithful Saint Bernard leading me down the Alps to safety.

The fresh air and festive atmosphere distract me, and my nausea eases. Seated in sparse grass against a chilly rock wall, I dissociate to the heady hum of people talking and laughing. A saxophonist starts warming up about 20 feet away, mellow scales coaxing goose bumps up my arm. A little girl with a lopsided headband, about four years old, clutches a dollar in a determined fist and inches forward. She's working up courage to deposit it into the musician's upturned hat.

I sit in a tranquil haze, eyes closed against the peeking sun, heart rate slowing, sweat cooling on my brow. I float up up up like a wobbly bubble and pop on a scratchy branch, flecks of myself mixing with saxophone trills and soap and silk and seeds, settling on a dollar bill that's somersaulting into darkness.

## The Voice of the Moon - Shaun Howard

I was once barely a shadow of the person I am today. Glancing over this crowd below me I remember what it was like to be down there on the ground floor. A girl in clothes that barely fit my body, I was alone. The guards barely stepped a foot in the part of town I lived. A dagger at my side, I fought tooth and nail to eat another meal. The blood I drew, and the blood drawn from me painted my path through the streets I ran. I will never forget the night that I looked up into the sky and saw the moon beaming down at me. The figure I witnessed that night, dancing and smiling down upon that girl, will forever be in my heart. At that moment, I was not lying in a dilapidated building. I was up above it all. I was flying through the air and taking in the landscape beneath me with that moonlit figure at my side. This figure, this goddess, blessed me with the power I never knew I even had a chance of possessing.

I often wonder to myself who that figure was, for it was not one of the gods that are known to the lands I live. Some who I tell that story to, look at me with suspicion. They wonder how an orphan got her hands on the mythic drugs of yore that cause one to elevate themselves above the world of mortals. Others tell me it was most certainly in my head. That it must have been a symptom of trying to sleep in the streets that are often caked in shadows and plagued with the boisterous laughter of those who have lost their minds. I always shake my head at responses like those, I have always known better. What happened that night was real, I felt it.

The place I stand today is the proof I needed. Below me are faces I used to see on those streets. Today they smile at me with pride. The dagger at my side is now a shining sword and it is a symbol of the freedom I have brought and will continue to bring to the people of this nation. I am the Queen Knight to them all, but I am also that same girl with no home. I have many faces, but I am proud of them, and they are proud of me.

Will I one day reacquaint myself with the goddess who touched my very soul? I am regrettably unsure. Hope lingers in my heart for such a glorious reunion. For even though the streets are now full of laughter, the valley is full of darkness. The dawnless swamps bubble with irreversible horror as they birth the unholy *vorglyst*, their twitching bodies corroding all they touch as they claw themselves across the land in preternatural patterns. I long for the day that I can see them with my own eyes and put an end to their lingering threat. It is told that the day the Staff of Isolation lights up the southern sky is the day the streets will scream with torment once more. But I will be ready. I will be waiting. I am more than just the Queen Knight to these lands. I am the Voice of the Moon, and she is always watching.

## Silence is the Cage That Protects Your Heart - Jamie Jensen

“Silence is better than unmeaning words” (Pythagoras)

Silence can be terrifying. I grew up in a house with similar parents yet carried different personalities. It is hard to tell if they were similar due to the number of years they had been together or simply a coincidence. My mother is affectionate and outgoing, while my father is quiet and detached. Some have said he is like a hot air balloon tethered to the ground floating just above us so as not to interfere. Silence in our house meant things weren't going well. My father is a man that you wouldn't turn to for advice. When he was mad, the whole house seemed cold and icy. My mother would try her best to focus on light and airy things as if to convince herself that things were fine and they would be fine. As the years went by and resentment set in, there was no time for silence and unhappiness. Life must be lived and not be silenced by lies, guilt, and betrayal. Life would be different, but it would be better than living on a skipping turntable.

Silence became the new normal. After the divorce, I would spend my mornings alone in my father's house, which was dark, old, and quiet. Being alone with your thoughts can be deafening. When my father would come home from work, we would vacantly chit-chat. I grew to accept this gnawing silence.

It didn't come until I finally saw my father vulnerable years later. We took a trip to visit my grandmother, who wasn't the warm person you expect a grandmother to be. I never cared for her and walked on eggshells to not make my presence known. She believed children should be seen and not heard. At one point during our visit, I annoyed her, and she hissed that I was a spoiled brat, to which my father quickly defended me. This was something out of character for him. He calmly asked me to wait in the bedroom while he had a conversation with her. I remember sitting in her room listening. From her room, I called my mother on the rotary phone to tell her what was happening.

During their talk, he told her she was the cause for a lot of his downfalls, especially his marriage. After that trip, he spoke with my mother and told her about this conversation. It put things into perspective that he wanted to give their relationship another chance. Unfortunately, this request fell on deaf ears; there is no turning back once my mother moves forward.

I look back at this situation as an adult and can only assume that my father pushed his guilt down so far and lost track of how he was feeling. The hot air balloon he had been floating in ripped, engulfing him as it deflated. To this day, he continues to hold a grudge even though he is to blame for the demise of his relationship.

I see pieces of myself in his personality. Unfortunately, I tend to bottle my emotions until they erupt. I feel like silence is better than not being heard or understood. This is something I continually try to work on. I don't want my children to look at me as a person they can't turn to because I silently float above them, unwilling to be vulnerable.

## The Shadow on her Shoulders - Ariana Mitchell

At nineteen years old, I sat in the passenger's seat of the car with my mother behind the wheel in the parking garage of my university's hospital. Frozen, I tried to calculate how long it would take me to run to the security office that I could see just past the entrance to the parking garage. I gripped the keys to the car in my hand, keeping them away from my mother at all costs. She screamed at me to give her the keys with tears streaming down her face, beating the steering wheel with her hands. I grappled with the deafening sound of my blood rushing in my ears. My thoughts raced. My mother's voice sliced the air as she cried out that she wanted to die. She wanted to run the car into a barrier and kill herself. She didn't seem to care that she would kill me, too.

While legally an adult, I had never felt more like a child. So, I did what any child would do, I called my father. I begged for guidance. He was silent for a moment before telling me to hand my mother the phone. She didn't shy away from his voice, having no shame in her current state. She sobbed out her simple version of events. She wanted to die. I wouldn't give her the keys.

When she passed the phone back to me, he answered, "give her the keys." Stunned, I thought I must have misheard him. Yet again, he said, "give her the keys," this time with the added assurance of, "it will be alright." Unsure what else to do, I yielded and handed the keys to my mother. Instantly, the crisis seemed to evaporate. She pulled out of the parking space and dropped me off at my apartment as though nothing had happened.

The events of that day were traumatizing, more so because it was never spoken of again - by either of my parents. I was heartbroken, but more than that, I was angry. Angry that my mother could be so cruel, so unhinged. Angry that my father abandoned me to my mother at that moment. I didn't speak with my mother for nearly three years after that. As time passed, I came to understand that my mother was mentally ill. Until then, it had just been a shadow, always there never quite tangible, but slowly and surely, that shadow grew and consumed her. I was just a witness to the moment of complete consumption.

With therapy and medication, the shadow faded again and fell to the background. Realization dawned that while that was the first time I had seen my mother that way, it wasn't the first time for my father. Away from the eyes of my sister and me, my father had been navigating the highs and lows of her burgeoning mental illness for years.

For the first few years, I couldn't conceive the possibility that I would be able to forgive my parents. Yet, as time is wont to do, it dulled the anger and slowly transformed into acceptance. I can look back and mourn the relationship I had with my parents before that day but I can also be thankful for the relationship I have with them today. I have found that forgiveness isn't necessary. Perhaps in time forgiveness will still come; but in the meantime, I find myself content with empathy, knowing that her mental illness lies always in wait - the shadow on her shoulders.

## Tobacco, Kudzu, Tar Heels, and Pine - Matthew Martin

Nights, like days, were a ritual of jaunts in pickup trucks as soon as the adults were off work. Maybe to a movie store after an authentic Mexican restaurant, maybe to a minor league baseball game after scooping up friends, maybe to a game shop after charting a new fishing hole, but always returning to the farmhouse by the tobacco fields, friends in tow, by midnight.

Our nighttime distractions never suffered the lull of the oppressive summer heat. I'd be there only for a month or two, looking forward to leaving, but also looking forward to going back. Every year I returned, the setting was slightly different, yet somehow still locked in time. Summer heat is a calming daze that always adds to the ethereal feel of a place - it doesn't matter 'where.' There might be a new suburban housing development, or a chain supermarket opened to chase the threadbare-stocked county grocers out of business, but they'd always be enshrouded by the yellow rouge of mother nature's pine-pollen makeup just the same.

The summer heat was audible, creating mirages of hot distortion, the horizons shimmering, everything distanced. Sometimes the heat was louder than the breeze. During the dog days of summer, the breeze couldn't be bothered to cool our drenched skin. The breeze sheltered in the shade like the rest of us. We were invisible to those currents and convections. Thunderheads, cumulonimbus clouds topped off like tobacco, ascended to the forceful sheers of the jet stream's heights where they gathered and pronounced themselves almost every afternoon.

If the thunderheads bonded and unified, tornadoes were feared. Supercells were the lightning strikes of the southern summer itself. Individual bolts ignited often during the yearly droughts, concentrating where they pleased. Strange - to have droughts and daily storms at the same time. All houses had lightning rods; lightning rods exist to illustrate what it's like to be inside a light bulb when the power is turned back on for the third time in one week.

Heat parched the land almost as much as the kudzu. Kudzu is a parasite, an invasive vine that 'they' introduced 'back when' to 'fill in the bare spots.' It covers everything, kills all it can cover, and is tantamount itself to being unkillable. Even with a lightning strike, kudzu refuses death by fire. In rusting trucks, passing the square kudzu patches of formerly arable land bordering the highways, kudzu was usually a conversational metaphor for mankind. Many of the locals thought they had figured out a fix for the kudzu. The wise ones resigned that there would be no simple cure.

The red clay of the tobacco fields would crumble under a bare foot like a sandcastle cured in the kiln of the sun. Well water was rationed - so that it wouldn't turn red like the clay. Tobacco sap dripped and turned to darkened tar each time the fields were "topped off" by hand, encouraging growth. Late in the season, the trendy foodie traditionalists would scour neighboring fields alongside the impoverished for root vegetables left after harvests. Seeing the overturned fields was the unspoken signal for free food. The pines were everywhere else that the tobacco, kudzu, and food crops were not. For roughly half the year, everything would be covered in the pine's not-quite-golden pollen.

After the storms, the roads and beds of pickup trucks would dry quickly. As a kid with at least three friends sleeping over each night, high speeds in the beds of trucks was exhilarating. The wind was an inverse sauna; speeding at seventy on an unmarked rural byway was a bellows for our breathing. Our skin would tingle for a while after each trip. Nature was most open and thickest in these night airs. It



smelled like a garden concentrated and saturated within a perfumery, dozens of notes layered under a single top note of wildflowers. Honeysuckle's scent would hang on clothing. Despite the humidity that felt like a constant dew, the smell of wildflowers was a welcome sequel to the thickest waves of the pine pollen's never-ending haze.

One summer, I refused the use of shoes to "see if my heels would become covered in tar." I knew I could get away with this stunt as a teenager, but I also knew the origin of the term "tar heel." Clerks in country stores, who sleepily enjoyed their sixty-degree A.C., never bothered to look down at anything. I never troubled them about covering their own feet for that matter. Going from 110 to 60 degrees and back within 30 minutes was a cooling cycle used to invigorate morale, and the clerks were sympathetic to anyone who needed to briefly shelter from the sun. Locals, when asked about tar heels, were convinced their ancestors didn't have any shoes. One old fellow said, "it takes a lifetime for heels to dye black," which absolutely shocked me. Having never worked with pine pitch or in shipyards over centuries past, they seemed to regard asphalt roads as an ancient invention that predated written language. Long after the sun set, the adults would leave us to hours of spirit-recharging laughter before bed. Dreams were never covered with kudzu, storms, tobacco, or pitch, just the veil-piercing pixie dream dust powder of the pine pollen encroaching, ad infinitum.

Free - Dan R. Rice

Rippling reflections of faint golden light gently glisten on that hallowed horizon. Speckled silhouettes of sailboats and scattered seagulls scour the sacred sunset skies. Heaving heavy subconscious sighs, I lift my arms to the heavenly highs. Glowing embers of hellfire burn my heart alongside my aching ocean eyes.

In a fearful twist of fate, the promising child whom I had placed and prized had grown into some stranger who provided me nothing but dual-faced, mirth-laced lies. This taunting truth was the source and state of my imminent demise. Yet no one cries for the wandering youth who sulks and seethes beneath oak trees. Not wondering why my fair-weather friends always wither away to the earth and its ends, we follow the whims of the beach and its breeze.

So I step barefoot onto that lukewarm sand, traversing the stretch of war-torn land before the vast body of solace that soothes my soul. I lather the soles – rather, the palms of my shaking hands with coconut cream as my courage expands. I quiver as I gather the audacity to kneel into the edge of the James River.

I feel as though holy water has hollowed out my beating chest. This gaping hole that has been running through my senses without rest has overflowed to fingertips of mine to cleanse the crown they once caressed. My own temples pulse and perpetually dream of a time when windblown children had joys bursting as they seem.

Baptized by brokenness, I rise again to stand. The sun is dead, but in its wake is something that I had not brought or planned. Dripping salt water from dark blonde hair to fingers painted a pretty pale pink, my care takes the form of a simple thought. I am brave enough to think, with all the chaos in the air. May some small part of my hellfire heart evermore be claimed by me: wild, wet, and wonderful – and never to be tamed. I'm free.

Bloom Where You are Planted - Dan R. Rice

“Even sunshine burns if you get too much.” I think of this poetic quote, shared with me by a dear pal from another time in a former life when I was consumed by darkness and yearning for the warmth of the sun. Nowadays I tend to have a healthy harmony of light and dark, yin and yang, one within the other and both coexisting in peaceful abundance. In between that past life and my current reality, however, there have been many days and nights of oscillating extremes.

“Healing is not linear.” This was among the first and most permeating lessons during our time of healing at HopeWay. I remember watching therapist after therapist draw a graph on the whiteboard with various ups and downs representing the directions we may explore in our healing journeys. *If only the “downs” were as simple and cartoonish as the small blips in dry erase marker*, I often thought silently.

“Healthy microbes in the soil are absorbed through our hands and reduce the stress hormone cortisol in our brains.” Sunshine glared oppressively that first day in the gardens at HopeWay. At least it was a temporary escape from the therapy rooms and the whiteboards with silly sayings. I rubbed my hands vigorously through the fertile soil, willing the biochemical process to speed up, go faster, and more quickly reduce my own stress.

“How are we doing over here?” The horticultural therapist, Bobbie, inquires of me with a clarifying alacrity as she approaches my kneeling body, shaking hands, and watery eyes. Something in her demeanor allows me the opportunity to respond in kind despite my condition in this moment. We exchange bubbly greetings and authentic well wishes in a way that causes me to wonder if the microbes can be likewise absorbed through friendly conversation.

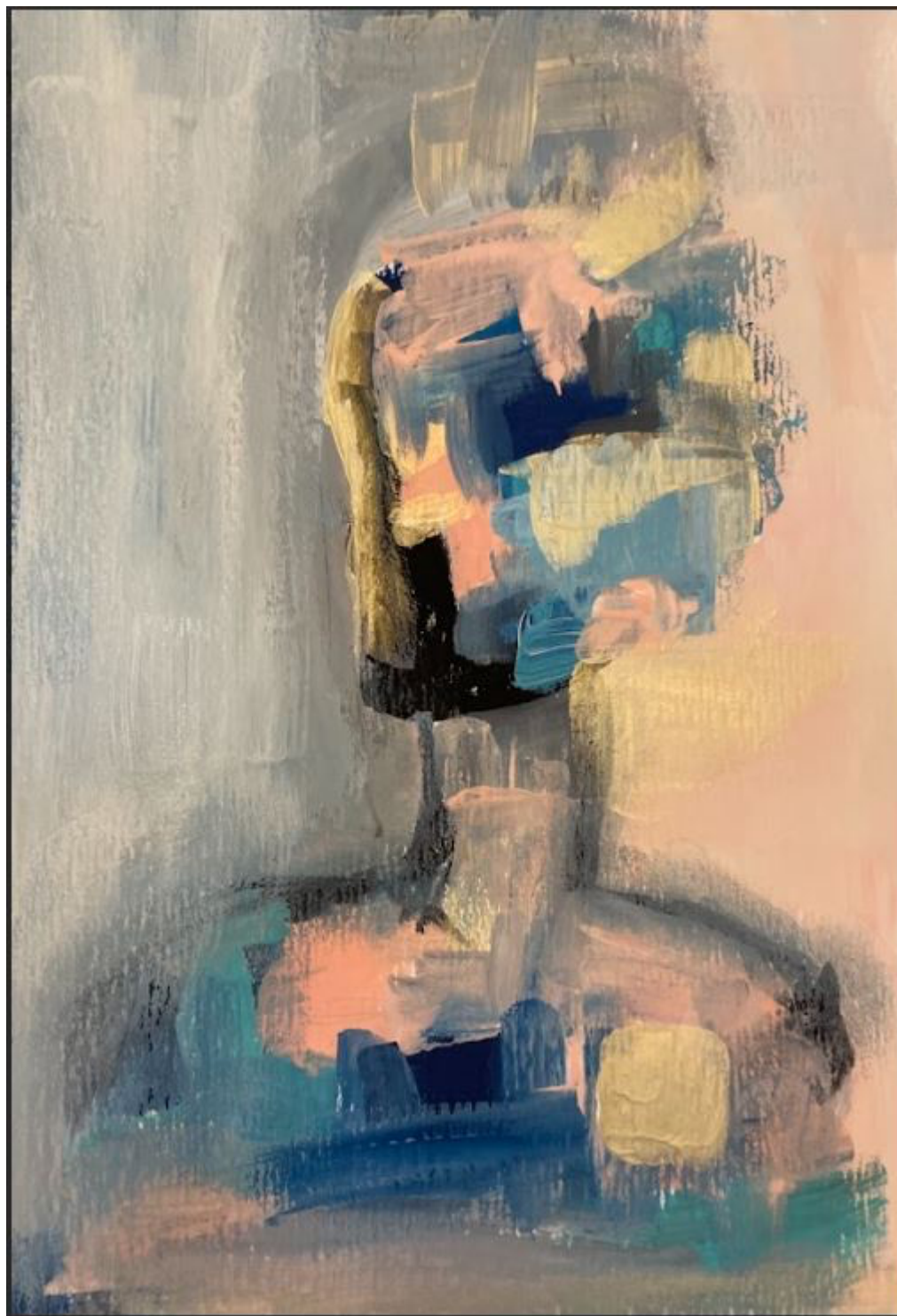
“Bloom where you are planted,” commands the embroidered piece of cloth in the stairway to the basement of my grandmother’s house. How wonderful it is to know and live as a testament to the healing power of sunlight, microbes, and caring support of such lovely people.

Calla Lillies by the Lake - Brittani Gowen





She Is - Martha Madigan



Trees - Daniela Naldoken





Sonya - Daniela Naldoken



Venus Fly Trap - Daniela Naldoken





Night Vision - Vivian Plante



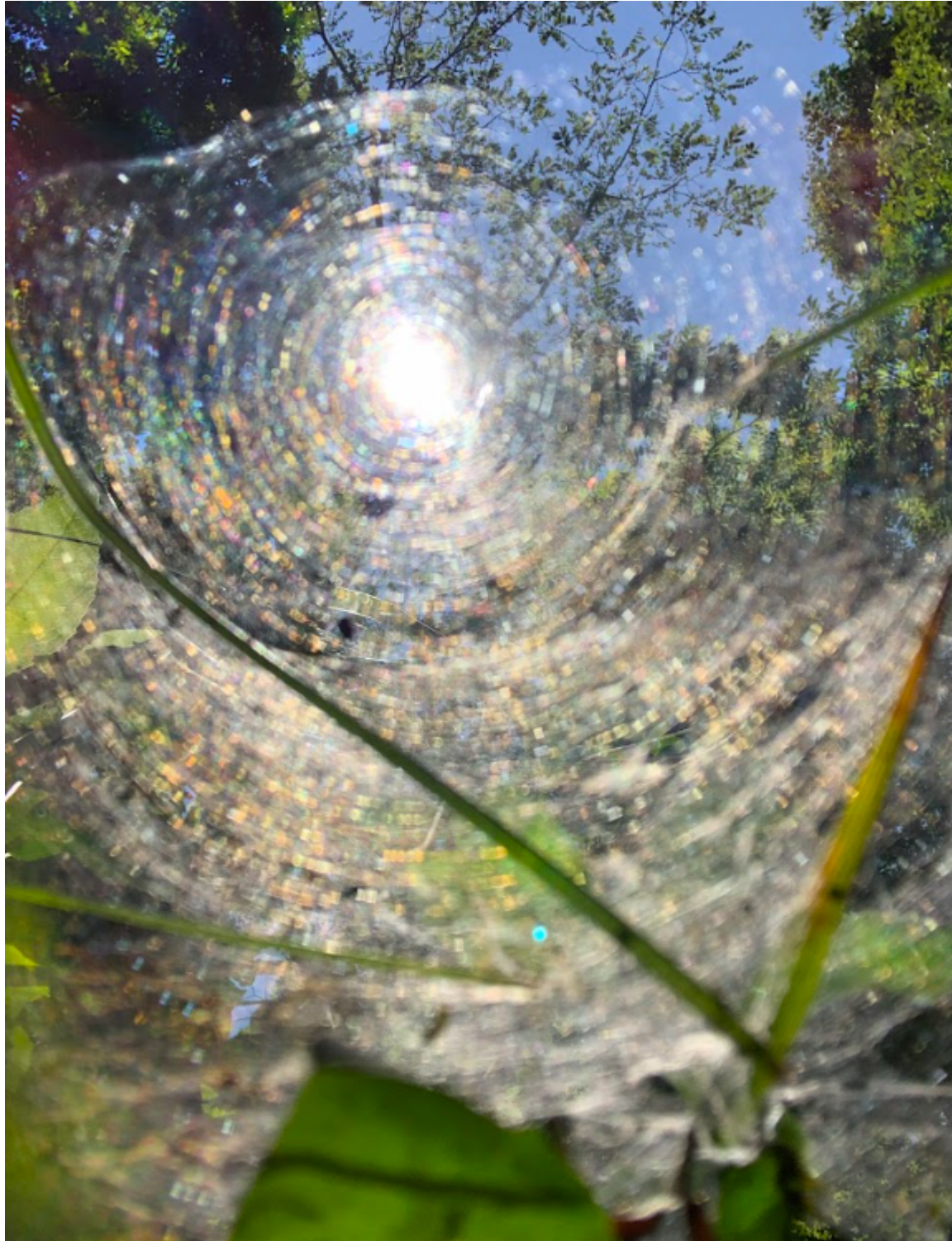
Night Vision - Vivian Plante

Seagulls - Vivian Plante





Spiderweb - Vivian Plante



Ancestral Gazette - Genevieve Elise



## The Family I didn't Know I Had

After I discovered that my Papa isn't my grandfather, I delved into the whispers of birth certificates, news clippings, and marriage licenses. In the midst of bureaucratic record-keeping, I unearthed the story of my previously unknown origin, a lineage etched in official ink.

Amidst the sepia tones of vital records and the fading ink of familial lineage, I embarked on an artistry of self-discovery. In a quiet corner of forgotten archives and family secrets, I created a canvas of the yellowed pages of printed documents. The art of self-portraiture on these historical pages became a communion with the ghosts of relatives I never knew, an intricate tapestry woven into the delicate lines of printed memory.

Breeze In Summer - Martha Madigan

To feel your touch  
as such a breeze in summer.  
To know your heart  
as the purist lyric of song.  
To breathe you in  
as my heart beat abandons.

Like barreling under that bridge -  
silence for a moment  
and the rain pours again.

To see your beauty  
through eyes unscathed.  
Whispering secrets  
for only you to know.

To gather kisses  
like a girl at the sea -  
looking and searching  
and wanting every color.

The song of my soul,  
of my heart, of my being  
unfolding like that star we saw -  
running and streaking  
searching for freedom.

Sing to me, my love.  
Sing your soul,  
your heart,  
and your being

Your song I long to know  
like the depth of the ocean  
out of reach for any other,  
but me.

Scattered - Shruti Prakash

Life manifested itself like a staggered piece of art  
everything seemingly misplaced  
scattered around like raindrops after a whirlwind

she existed somewhere beyond it all  
stepping into each drop  
trying to find its sequence, its message

but Life continued to be  
letting its raindrops sit in their disorder  
abstract until it was ready to reveal itself  
when it was time

The Runner - Shruti Prakash

The grim voice greeted her every night before she closed her eyes to sleep,  
and just like every night, she ran away to a world where the voice could no longer creep.  
It told her of tales where failure was the biggest foe and everything was dark,  
that no matter how much she tried to be different, she would never meet the mark.  
One day, the roaring voices that told her “no” started to lower to whispers hard to hear,  
for she had realized that the darkness was but an illusion to the doubt that masked her fears.  
Slowly, the whispers faded into the oblivion, no longer pushing her off her path,  
allowing the only voice that had ever mattered, to find its way back.  
The voice greeted her every night before she closed her eyes to sleep,  
But now, she listened to what the words had to say, for it was her voice to speak.

Blue Period - Dwight Kuhns

I hear my feelings  
In notes  
In song  
Through colors painting  
Faded blues  
Ending outlining  
Period sound  
Within those notes  
I searched for you

I too wish to paint  
Green clouds  
In a heathered sun  
White blades of grass  
Dashed in violet highlights  
Bound behind  
A red oxide sky  
Uneasy rhythms  
Flatly trebled notes  
Crying my heart hurts  
And I don't know why



Mattaponi Prayer - Dwight Kuhns

Through the light of the Great Spirit I bathe  
Through its proxy I lay my heart unto the divine  
Eyes of Perales deepen through a lens less defined  
The ease of each blade of grass rests my mind

From the grains of earth grow the essence of life inter-realized  
Through the love of its hands we grow with the untamed  
Every gift reverend, given and taken  
Parceled by man-made land lines

We are not the owners  
With every grasp of seed  
We thank with seraphic eyes  
Remain one orison  
Free us  
Not divide

Gypsy - Dwight Kuhns

We voyaged the highways  
Modern pirates on an asphalt sea  
Refugees on stage  
Pleading for a place to sleep  
Realizing Dylan was right  
Having nothing and nothing to lose  
Aerosol tagged walls  
Lining the overpass  
Claiming art is dead  
Hope is not  
The road never ending  
Tar and concrete of evermore  
Guided by notes swaying  
Gentle clicks of high-hat counts  
Only allowed to dream  
In a dream  
Yet art is story without an ending  
In art I'm free  
Yume

Ambivalent - Dwight Kuhns

These pills don't fix anything  
Numbing interloper  
Who preys through my veins?  
Disguising this disposition

Irregular angelicality  
To thirst for a brighter sun  
Is to cast down on heavy heart  
The vagrant arms shaking

From often avoidable handouts  
Lacking strength of these tiny voids  
Littered in an abundance of doubts  
Light blue, pale yellow, red, and white

Mixed and matched  
They change nothing  
Not even merely as casting a void  
Of self-doubt

Cast in disregarded shells  
That cradles to the left  
In droplets  
Forming specters  
That cast no shadow  
Except my own

Barometer – Michelle Roberts-Harrison

He feels pressure rising  
in his upside down  
barometer

Squeezing crushing  
clamping like a  
vise

It is coming panic rising  
a hydra from the  
depths

Coming from everywhere  
and nowhere and  
hell

Smoking and pacing  
and pacing and  
smoking

While the vise does its  
thing

Turning a man into  
a slurry of  
neutrons

Like uranium and plutonium  
bombarding his desolate  
desert

It's coming: the  
maelstrom.

The Showing - Vivian Plante

What mysteries does it hold?  
Covered in layers of rust  
an abundance of mites and dust  
It's a house no one can trust  
Only creatures of the dark  
call it their home

Little spirits come out to play  
when there ends the light of day  
Some say it's hell on earth  
but the residents say  
it's a place for rebirth

Nothing remains in its place  
with scratches and creaks and moans  
it all adds to the ambiance  
yet this house has never sold  
even though its layout is gold  
hidden passages never to be told

But that's not the best part  
None of the décor  
nor furnishings depart  
As well as the new friends  
you'll inherit there  
Oh, some things you should know

They like the floors tidy and clean  
The curtains must be drawn  
especially by the time of dawn  
Their portraits dusted  
and their shenanigans  
uninterrupted

If you do all these things right  
you'll be trusted and protected  
If you do all this and more  
You'll be welcomed through the door  
And be family forevermore

The Demon - Vivian Plante

You are not the voice of reason  
You are, in fact, the opposite  
The embodiment of chaos  
yet scared of the final prophet  
You there—gnarled, twisted, and misshapen  
One of the divine's forgotten children

With fire burning in your belly  
and your soul—oh so very heavy  
Too fallen to make a decision  
Waiting to be forgiven  
Roaming the world for  
the rest of time is your prison

With horns and tooth and claw  
upon many souls you have dined  
All done with a snarl  
it's enough to lose one's mind  
You are not the voice of reason  
rather the one of treason

La Raza - Mary Esplinclaros

In the Americas  
Discoverers from Europe  
became the fathers of the new land  
North, Central, and South America  
became the old land  
The Mayans, the Incas, and the Aztecs  
became the ancient culture  
Erased from their land

Know Latinos,  
Considered by some too white, too dark, too brown  
Became the race of mestizos  
Mestizos  
Became the new American race

Hard to recognize,  
easy to identify.  
They are today  
the mixed-race  
the half-blood  
that must live between two worlds  
to make the most.

Democracy - Mary Esplinclaros

Some may feel upset of what I have to say  
but my intention was never to offend people of what others cannot say.  
I just want to point out situations that happen in real life.  
I just want to describe the complexity of being alive.

I know in my heart I dream like you do.  
Under the same sky we hope those dreams to come true.  
We dream for freedom for this beautiful land.  
Where we promise to live  
and have our American dream life.

If there is no difference between you and me,  
why does democracy cost so much to set free?  
Maybe because we look so much different,  
but like you, I am not destined to be indifferent.

I know that if we look to each other,  
we can walk together without fear. So...  
let's be together under the same sky.  
Let's walk together to win this fight.

I know that if we sing together like we always do,  
we can lose our fears and fight for what we believe is true and right.  
Let's stay together to raise the same flag.  
Let's walk together and endorse democracy right.

We all have the same north.  
We all share the same moon.  
We all have the same dreams.  
Now let's walk together to rebuild a new bridge of tolerance and love.  
Now let's build a nation of love.



Letter to Stephen - Michelle Roberts-Harrison

Do you recall  
that September evening?  
Dressed in exquisite anticipation,  
my hand you held along the walk  
and pulled out my chair for dinner.

Did you expend  
much effort?  
Finding roses  
and wildflowers,  
matching bracelets,  
a beret.

Did you know  
that young girl?  
The one who cut  
bubble letters with Fiskars  
and taped them to the wall  
above her bed.

Did you think  
it was love  
the way she did  
when she assured her friends  
and her mother  
it was real?

Or was it  
just triumph?  
The other boys heard  
and said they knew.  
It became all of them  
instead of just you.

Nautilus - Michelle Roberts-Harrison

She surely should have shelved the shells, but could not put them down. They drew her in and held her dear, like sirens in their sound. As she burrowed deeper in the nautilus divine, fear crept through the beauty as she approached the shrine. There she found not beauty, but bleak and blinding salt, burned her wounds and caused her tears, flowing without halt. Desperate and drowning, still she stayed within, remaining there all her days, as death came creeping in.

She surely should have shelved the shells, but could not put them down.

Highlands Springtime - Michelle Roberts-Harrison

Behold the single reaper  
In his solitary chore  
Highland spring-time singing  
Just beyond his door.

He leaves his humble shady haunt  
Curved sickle in his hand  
Just as did his elders  
In this unforgiving land.

The reaper cuts these grasses  
As he mounts this olden hill  
And binds them while he trudges on  
'Til weary worn of will.

With grain sack overflowing  
He gently picks his way  
'Mongst boulders strewn from long ago  
And grasses as they sway.

While he treads his song is heard  
His music fills the air  
He sings of sorrow and of love  
To keen a maiden fair.