

2024

ARTEMAS

2025

A Student Journal of Writing and Art
at Young Harris College



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AT YOUNG HARRIS COLLEGE

Special thanks to Jo Bearse for her generous support and funding in honor of Danny Bearse, class of 1979.

Artemas, formerly *Corn Creek Review*, is created by and for the students of YHC and serves as a vehicle for their creative expression. *Artemas* accepts submissions of poetry, prose, musical composition, photography, painting, drawing and other art forms. Each year, the magazine is put together by a student group that gathers submissions, chooses the content for the magazine, and designs the layout. The magazine's renaming is in honor of Rev. Artemas Lester, who established YHC in 1886.

Contact Faculty Advisor Dr. Gale Thompson (gmthompson@yhc.edu) if you are interested in joining the staff, securing an issue, or submitting your work.

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Foreword

To create, one must first question everything.

—Eileen Gray

By serving on the *Artemas* editorial staff this year, we've also had the incredible opportunity to lay eyes on the creativity of our small community. This was our first time serving as Editors-in-Chief, and we are very thankful to have had the chance. For years, *Artemas* (previously *Corn Creek Review*) has been a place for art and creative writing students to showcase the pieces they've been working on; this is a space that we are truly grateful for, as it gives many students their first chance to be published. Culminating this year's issue has been a process of revelation regarding the topics and large questions that are on the minds of our students.

Repeated motifs and themes that you will see in the collection include fish, birds, cigarettes, loss, grief, faith, family dynamics, and so much more. We had some amazing submissions to *Artemas* this year which came together in theme and style even better than we could have imagined. An artist or writer's most profound task is to take their good, bad, ugly, and curiosities and wield them into something truly spectacular that touches the lives around them; we believe that every person featured in the collection has done just that.

We would like to give a special thanks to the *Artemas* editorial staff who put in the time and energy to make this issue possible, to everyone who bravely submitted projects dear to them, to the English, Creative Writing and Art Departments for reinforcing in us confidence and a love for craft, and finally to Dr. Gale Thompson who helped guide us through the process of putting the collection together.

And a special gratitude to you, reader, for picking up this journal with an open mind towards the collective creation of our students. We hope that you enjoy it, and we can't wait to see what the future holds for every author and artist at Young Harris College.

Laci Thompson | Editor-in Chief

Olivia Lamons | Editor-in Chief



Logan Foley, *Repository*

ALISON MARKHAM

Nantahala Aubade

Yes, I remember the rhododendrons
green. I grew up here, saw the river

stones tumble 'til smooth beneath the surface,
light dancing in a caustic network across. I spoke

my first words as the golden wings warbled, grey
squirrels rustled through the fallen leaves. The valleys

my childhood friends, these mountains watched over
me. I took my first steps with the sourwood tree

as it twists through the underbrush, giving way to sweet
honey and Appalachian life. My first breaths of woodsmoke

and cicada song air, I watched fireflies glow amber in the night.
Mama always said *quiet in the holler, no whistlin' after sundown,*

feared we might wake a panther or the spirit of Eric Rudolph.
He camped out here for five years, y'know?

Lived off the land after he blew up all those people in Atlanta.
Scared me to pieces, so I'd hush, hush 'til morning

when the mourning dove sings, when fog settles,
the trout start bitin' again, when the stars fade to dawn.

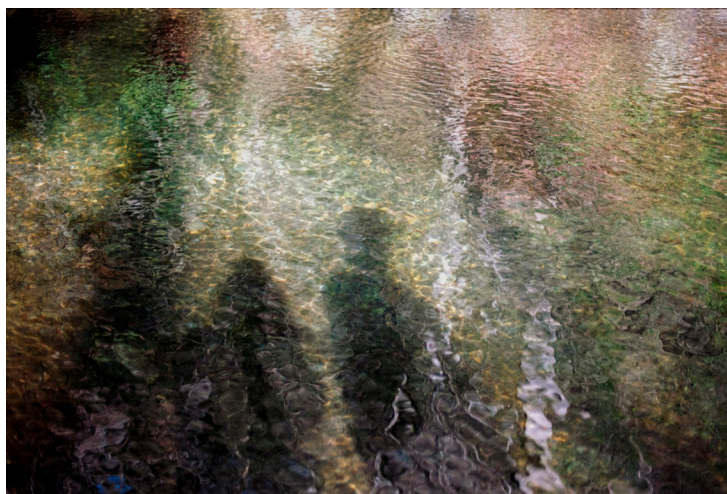
SKYLAR ALLISON

Once, Twice

You squeeze my hand, gentle like a kiss.
Once, twice, three times—your fingers like a vice.
I love you—my blood rushes in my wrist,
and this car becomes some sort of strange paradise.

As your thumb skates across my veins,
I squeeze back twice.
How much, I ask as you switch lanes.
You smile, eyes focused on the road, precise.

My heart aches at the sight
at how you squeeze my hand
with most of your strength, but not enough to bite.
You lift our intertwined fingers, my lungs expand,
you kiss my knuckles; you're from a dream.
That much—and the words float away, upstream.



Alison Markham, *Caustic*

ALLIE KILLER

Constellation

How old were you when they finally told you
you're not beautiful?

Maybe you were 17, white paper crinkling
under your thighs while the healthcare professional
prodded you with her eyes, asking

"Have you been prescribed anything for *that*?"

When pills burned your stomach like dread,
(*don't lay on your side or it will eat your intestines*)
when the tingling white cream turned your face
fiery and fragile, did you feel healthy?

Were you afraid

to smile? Could you feel it cracking at the corners
like brittle paper? Don't worry. Plenty of people
have had horrendous acne and were cured.

Or were you 18 in the dorm bathroom,
fluorescent lights glaring off your beet-red face,
blood dribbling down your cheeks like tears
as your fingernails excavated the mistakes?
Groping for the corner, you peeled off your face
like a sticker. Fingers growing slick with soap and shame,
you ripped that ruined skin off your skull
and dropped it in the trash can
with a *thunk* like an old issue
of *Vogue*.

Do you remember your best friend pinching
her skin, scowling, until it broke—
But you're beautiful, you begged—
sharing secrets and scars, spattered
like stars on your milky white faces?

You're beautiful, you lied to your mirror
with all your heart, until it broke.

When did they finally tell you that living was hazardous
to your beauty? How devastating to discover
sugar would carve divots in your skin.
How old were you when Hannah Montana
painted over her blemishes,
or when the woman at the grocery store turned
her eyes, sick with sympathy,
on you to say “Oh honey, I used to look
like you. But I swear by Clinique #2.
I got my face back.”
Until that moment, did you realize your face was lost?

Did you flinch when the Ulta makeup artist,
glass foundation tubes clinking in her hand,
offered you a bottle of white-out,
full coverage, like a paper bag?
The Colgate smiles, jeering from the posters on the walls,
watched you trace where God must have written
Horrendous across your face in braille.

How old were you when your best friend,
dewy-faced and smooth zoomed in the FaceTime call,
exulting, “It was only puberty! I was scared it’d last forever”?
Forever is so awfully long.

Do you remember the curious little eyes
of the boy you babysat: the naive finger
that wandered and lingered on your cheek?
Your stomach tensing when he boldly asked
“What’s on your face? Is it bug bites?”
Of course, you nodded—exhausted—
but without reprimand he beamed
“Yeah. I get bug bites too.”

Brittle, scorched, the side effects of beauty,

cowering from the sun, scouring for a solution
to being human—forever seemed
so long to worry
the whiteout might wear through.

When did you scoop your face from the trash can?
How old were you when you taught your fingers
to be gentle, to simply feel cool water
basking down your skin?
Tilt your head back and wear it
like a rag to quench your fever.
You deserve to smile again.

Tonight, walking on gently jagged gravel,
letting random dandelions drag your heels,
do you see it?
Do you see what they never told you?
Watch—God peels back
the gray night to reveal a million specks of light.
And no one ever told you, but
you are a constellation too.

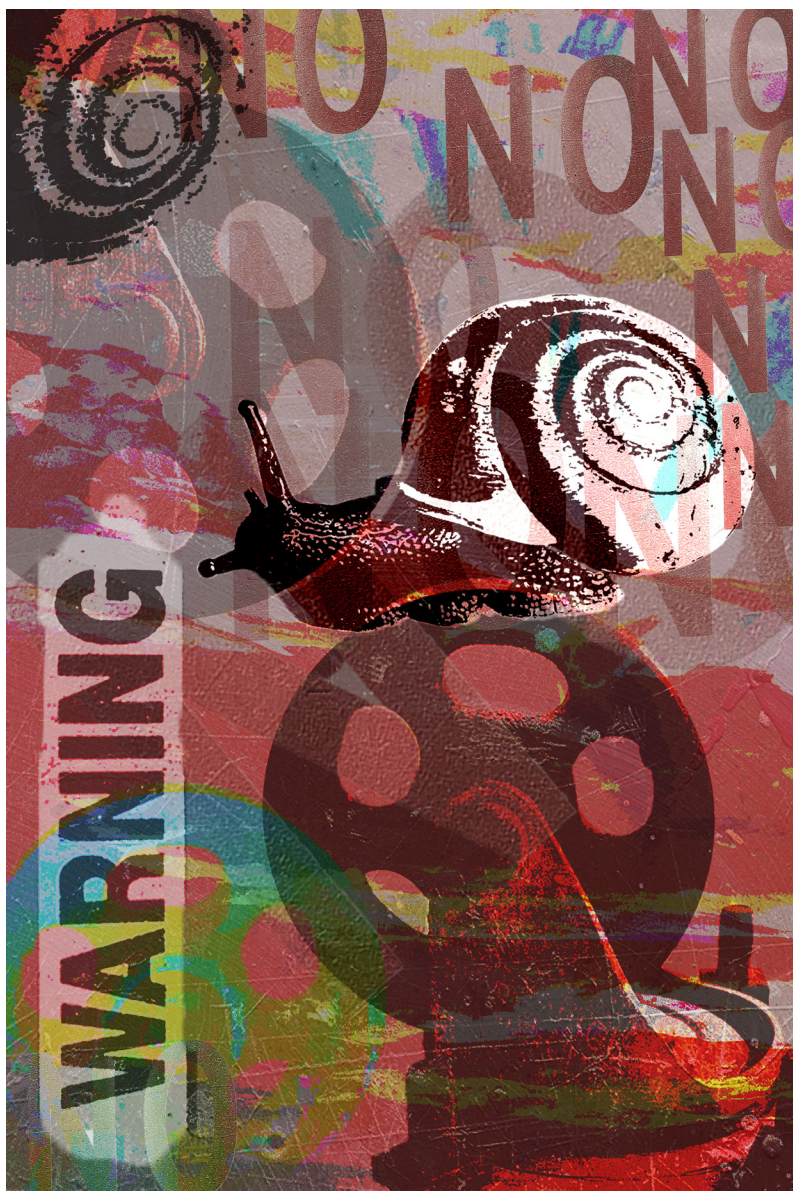


Natalie Payne, *Me but a Little Funky*

MILO SILL-FOSTER

Open Heart Surgery

Dig your fingers into my chest.
Hear the crack of my ribs, seams coming undone.
And the soft groan of the heart
Ready to be relieved of its duty.
Thrust your hands into my chest cavity with desperate disregard,
Blood pittering down your wrists.
Squeeze and pull but I feel nothing at all.
Pluck my veins like violin strings and find them hollow
But the heart beats its sad thump evermore.
My open heart keeps beating,
Pumping questions of self-doubt through an unwilling circuit.
Peel away the layers of my heart,
Prod and tear and feel how my glistening flesh jumps away from
itself.
Ready to be examined,
Ready to be medicated,
Ready to be nurtured.
Ready to learn what is so wrong
That my black hole of a heart destroys everything in its path,
Delicately caring for my many loves before distorting them
so terribly,
Stretching them out until they are a point of light in the infinite
universe and then
Nothing.



Cassidy Bishop, *Snail on a Wheel*

HALEY KELLEY

Mad Woman

Containing lyrics from "Mad Woman" by Taylor Swift

the sweat pours down my spine as i look ahead and meet the eyes of my not-so-uncle, uncle danny. the years of belittlement and torture have all come to this moment. the game winning point is on the line, and i have the birdie. *they strike to kill, and you know i will.* The birdie goes flying, and *Boom*, i did it. *no, that's not how the game works... it was actually my serve, not yours, so let's redo that.* absolutely not. *danny, we all know that's bullshit. Let's be so for real right now, you only play by the rules when they benefit you, is that right?* "women, am i right? she must be on her time of the month," i hear come from my brother's mouth. *and you poke that bear 'til her claws come out, and you find someone to wrap your noose around.* i walk away because that's the "ladylike" thing to do, but in all honestly, i'm over wasting my breath on men who view me as having no value. i'm over the hysterics. i'm over being viewed less than because for years now my aunt has let him walk all over her. i'm angry because my grandmother did the same thing, and my mother, and my great-grandmother. i'm over watching men think that they deserve more rights than me. i deserve to command a room. i deserve to have a voice in this darkness that is infiltrating everyone's head. so, yeah, i'm mad, but i'm not mad at myself, because this is just the shitty world i was brought into—now i just have to figure out how to fix it. good fucking luck trying to get me to stop. this is a man's world, but soon enough, i'm going to strike down every oppressor, and watch their cold dark blood seep from their poisoned veins, and maybe then i will finally be given respect.



Abby Thompson, *Rainbow Girls*



Laurel Sanford, *Consumed*



Laurel Sanford, *The Creation of You*

ELI SMITH-FOOT

Cigarettes

“We were in Korea, and my translator and I were bar hopping. I don’t remember the year and his name escapes me, but I’m sure I’ll remember after you’ve gone home.”

I bark out a quick laugh, even though I’ve heard the story before. We’ve been in the car for hours, me driving and you sitting shotgun slowly working through a pack of unfiltered Camel cigarettes, muttering the odd joke or story, anything that could kill the silence. But after a six-hour drive to the Florida/Georgia Line and five hours back, we both were just plain exhausted. After all these years (six), I don’t even remember why I had to drive you all that way, but it had to have been before the cancer got bad. Whatever the reason, seeing your old stomping grounds, even if for an hour or two, had made you more than a little reminiscent. And for a man as old as you that meant something.

“Anyway, we’re on the beach, just finding a new place to get drunk when a soldier stumbles right in front of us. And if we’re drunk, he’s shitfaced. I mean couldn’t even stay upright, let alone walk in a straight line. Well, his CO comes running after him and sees us. Now, the war was pretty much over by that point, but I was still in the Army and in uniform. So, the CO just sees an American GI who’s high enough in the chain of command to have a translator.”

“So, the poor bastard’s commanding officer just starts beating on the guy, punching and kicking, dragging him back to his feet just for him to flop right back down. Telling him to ‘Get up! Get up!’ At least that’s what my translator told me, but I have a feeling he was saying a little more than that. Remember, Korea had been ruled by Japanese for years, long before we ever came in to fight the North, so, a lot of these officers remembered or had been at one time trained by the Imperial Army. So, they hold themselves and their guys to a very strict standard. Throw in one of his men being drunk in front of an American soldier...they wanted to impress us, I guess, show they were

worthy of fighting alongside Americans.”

“So, what did you do?”

“Mostly just laughed, which didn’t help the situation. We were not much better than that poor bastard ourselves. But eventually we got the two separated and back to the barracks before going on our merry way.”

He takes what little’s left of the cigarette clutched in his thin lips and buries it in the car’s ash tray. It’s the work of a moment to slip another from its pack, light it, and lean back with a sigh. But not without a short-wet cough that shakes his whole body. Most of the smoke flies out the cracked windows but the stench of burning tobacco fills the air regardless. I’d been working for this old man for years, so I was more than used to it. Hell, I’d even started to use his smoking to classify just what he was going to talk about.

If it was some long-winded joke or hilarious story, the cigarette would point from his mouth like an exclamation. But if he remembered something less pleasant, it would drift down till ashes rained on his leather shoes. Sometimes he’d wave it around like a professor’s pointer, but if a point needed making or a lesson needed learning, he would just sit and puff away. Hell, we must have made quite the pair; this eighty-year-old man in plaid button-up shirts, khakis, and leather loafers with his frazzled white hair and a cigarette always perched behind his ear. And me at sixteen, towering over him with a buzzcut and blue jeans, not to mention whatever graphic tee or sweatshirt I’d managed to throw on that day.

As miles of road stretch before us, I can’t help but sink back into memory of just how I had gotten here. We had first met at church; me a kid just out of middle school, and him a seventy-year-old man in recovery from a horrible knee surgery. I was told that he needed some odd jobs done around his house that he just couldn’t do anymore, from pulling weeds in the garden, to shifting furniture from one room to another and back again. I’d been hesitant at first; I had never even seen him before that day in the pews, til he offered to pay me fifteen bucks an hour in cash and promised that he’d only ever need me after school. A couple of years and quite a bit of money later, most of it spent on food or comic books, and now he’d give me a call just to drive him from Dawsonville and back and still pay me a few bucks.

Except now I had the bonus of becoming friends, which made even the most difficult of jobs much more tolerable.

It became quite a routine. He'd give me a call and I'd drive over, do whatever he needed doing, whether it was pruning roses to planting trees, drive him to lunch, and then either we'd head back to work or I'd just drive him around town, picking up groceries or dropping in to see old friends (and me inevitably helping them with odd jobs too). And the whole time, we just talked about everything we could think of. Whether it was me explaining what these "Marvel" movies his grandchildren were so fascinated with were, or him telling me endless stories about living on the endless beaches of Miami and Korea, courtesy of the Korean War, I can't even remember just what all we have talked about. And the whole time I'd just watch him work his way through pack after pack of unfiltered Camels.

Which meant there were other things I noticed, too. Like how his hair started to get thinner and frizzier, until finally I had my father come and shave every last scrap of hair on his head off. Or how his voice got weaker and scratchier, the coughing fits between cigarettes got longer and more violent. How some of those road trips stopped being for groceries and started being doctor's visits, or to family or friends he hadn't spoken to in years. How those stories started getting muddled and confused, told over and over again as it got harder to remember where he'd laid that pack of cigarettes or his lighter. But I always just kept my mouth shut and just helped him the best that I could.

Just like I never told him just how much I hated smoking. While I am blessed that my parents never picked up the habit, I cannot say the same for grandparents, aunts and uncles, or an endless ring of cousins that somehow make up our family. I've spent more time than I could ever tell in houses and trailers where the stench has sunk in so deep for so long you could taste it just walking in the door. Or on the other end of the spectrum, watching elders struggle to keep their oxygen tanks always beside them, dangling from walkers and banging against doors and walls. But I know you had your reasons why you smoked, and when you weighed that cigarette against everything else in your life, the pack of Camels came up lighter. It won't be long after this car ride that I'll be carrying your own oxygen tank and making

sure your cane is always by your side or in my hand.

But that's not right now. At this moment I finally reached your home, pulled right to the door of that old brownstone building. I'm handing him his cane and watching him hobble all the way to his front door. Already I can see the cats clustering at the front windows, hear the keys jangling as they sink into the lock.

"Is there anything else I can help you with, Mr. Jones?"

"Please, Foot, you've done more than enough today. Have a blessed night and I'll see you around."

"Yes sir, I will."

He cracks the door and just squeezes his thin frame through it, already cooing at the cats swarming about his feet. I wait til the doors shut and slip away to my own car and prepare for my own drive home. I know I won't have to work tomorrow because he has a doctor's appointment, a rare day off for me. By the same time tomorrow I'll get a phone call telling me that my friend has no more than a few months, a year at the most, left of his life and what relief I had over such a break will sour into regret. Now I'm writing all these years after this one car ride, and old Mr. Jones will have been dead for almost as long as I had known him. But every time I see that little yellow pack hanging behind some cashier's head, I remember.

LACI THOMPSON

The Verge

I always try to push my feelings for someone over the line where they never want to cross. Because

someone always ends up crossing me. But, here I am doing it again. Taking a step closer to something I don't actually desire.

To the tip of the iceberg i go, glancing out over the shining, shivering, skin-aching sea.

Like Rose, I could make room for you on the grand door of my heart, but maybe I just couldn't force myself to love you

that much. Instead, I don't belong in the cold winter ocean, but in the blistering summer sun like the Asian brown

marmorated stink bug. Let me explain. If you don't caulk up any little opening in your home: the edges of doors, windows,

even utility ducts, they can meander in unannounced and in large volumes. This is exactly what I did with you. I think I

accidentally let you believe that I was interested in your mind, your hobbies, your touch. But the truth is, I just wasn't that much. It

just took me a bit longer to access the information I needed and by then I started running. The stink bug has no real

predators and neither do I. Trying to figure out my real feelings for a guy, I could probably inadvertently play all of them

until the day I die. So, I am genuinely sorry that after a mental breakdown the size of the "unsinkable ship" I had to be the one

to tell you that there isn't going to be any "us." But don't
be fooled if you treat me petty just because I didn't reciprocate,

I will still leave behind a hurl worthy, sorefully distasteful
stench. Just play nice please, and leave me be in

this mediocre coffee shop. The saffron sun beams through the wide-
open windows, and yet the autumn breath sends a chill down

my spine each time the next customer comes in. I've been sitting here
all morning and checking boxes and furthering my education.

And please accept the fact that this is more important to me than you
are right now. Because otherwise, I would be sprinting away

from the books and into the arms of my new distraction. And the fact
that I'm not tells me everything that I need to know.



Skyler Wolf, *Untitled*



Joshua Harris, *Ode to a Statesman II*



Natalie Payne, *War Within Peace*

MILO SILL-FOSTER

Clay Figures

Fingernails dig into soft, malleable clay.
Pull a lump away from body
And smooth over the indentation.
Like it was never there.
But clay holds memory.
Fire ignites remembrance
In the blazing eyes of the hardened pot.
As it stiffens,
Glaze melts and bubbles
Leaving a scorching, teary line
Beneath the alcove made by wanting fingers.
A tear wells at the seam,
Pressed and smoothed with slip and water
And forever leaves a scar
Streaming down this tragic work of art.

ABI ADAMS

PopRocks!

Left foot, right, left, right
Wind shooting through each blonde ringlet tied
in a teeny plastic elastic
Mini dust clouds forming under each slam of my foot to the gravel
Left foot, right, left, right

Blood pumping through my veins, harder and faster
Grammy's house sits at the end of our grey gravel road
Each of my steps copy and pasted by my brother,
only a foot behind
Push your body harder, and faster.

Running faster and faster, the road is coming to an end
My brother is caught up with me, smiling preemptively to my left,
He cannot beat me; he will not beat me; he gets his wins served
hot on a silver platter;
he always wins, but he cheats.

My arm stretches out and my fingers snatch his shirt back,
slamming my brother face first
into the scattered rocks just before the concrete driveway.
the sound was sweet like pop rocks crackling on my tastebuds,
a taste as sweet as victory, until his face was doused in blood

the gravel rocks slithered into his face sitting under several layers
of his now severed skin.
no one had cake or confetti for me, I was a cheater, a liar, a snake.
Instead, I was scolded and carried off to be engulfed in flames

at the stake,
while the angels took him away to his castle and tie in his stitches.

I still have never won, and I never will
I might be two years ahead, but I will always be one step behind.

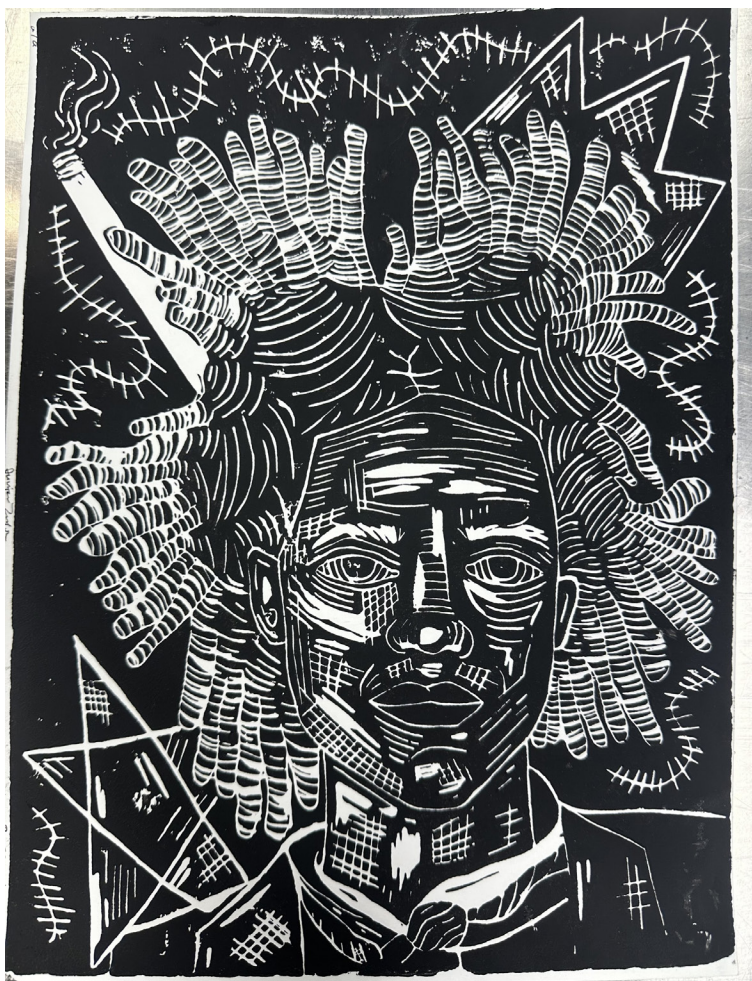
HALEY KELLEY

i just need time to bleed it out

enjoy your youth

the three word phrase
echoes through the hard
wires of my brain
I'm saying too much
all the time and nothing
slows down
the cars on the highway
mirror my inner thoughts
they are racing and fast
and they crash into oblivion
my organs long for a
vacation or for the
spiritual police to arrest
the inner anxiety feeling
of the morning
the gut punch to the soul
rattled my spine when I
realized I was having my
first panic attack in a year
my breathing sounded like
a balloon losing all of its
air and my head pounding
like a toddler playing drums
sometimes I wish for the
grim reaper or a black cat
to attack my veins and let

them bleed out that way
all the venom of my youth
can drain and I can start over
younger, yet older at the same
time.



Juniper Taylor, *Basquiat*

ANSLEY GASTON

A Simple Passage of Time

I. It is December 2018. The temperature is getting colder every day, but the heat in my room is broken so I use my PS4 to warm me up. I have just downloaded a new game called *Red Dead Redemption 2*. It's a prequel to the first game, set in the year 1899. I'm not sure what to expect, but my naivety works to my emotional advantage. I see the western landscape, soft green grass flowing in the wind, horses snickering and stomping their hooves as they pull wagons full of families. I see the group of characters I will spend countless hours with, all dressed in ragged blue jeans and ripped, white collared shirts, cowboy hats and grime. I meet Arthur Morgan for the first time.

II. The black screen illuminates, the soft beep of my console signaling that it is turned on. I open the game and am met with a mission titled "The Fine Art of Conversation." I watch as Sister Calderon sits down on the bench beside the railroad tracks, her bags safely tucked beside her. Arthur Morgan, renowned outlaw and fugitive, sits beside her. *What's wrong?* The Sister asks, noticing his breathlessness and intense coughing. *I'm, uh... I'm dying, Sister.*

III. I watch as a crow lifts off from the fencepost, his black wings allowing him to soar up higher and higher until he disappears into a cocoon of clouds. Is this how death works? Will we sprout two black wings and lift off into the sky, flying from our Earthly bodies and into our Heavenly ones? I would rather think that and be at peace than think that our wings are clipped, our bodies forever stuck in a prison underneath the grass.

IV. I pause the game, wiping a stray tear from my cheek. The dampness on my fingers brings me back to reality, and I sniffle in the silence of my room. This is my third time I have seen this moment, and yet it feels like the first, when I was young and innocent and in love with the personality of a fictional man. Why does his inevitable death affect me so much? I sit and ponder on this thought, until I realize that I am too empathetic for my own good.

V. *Yeah, I got TB. I got it... beating a man... to death... for a few bucks. I've lived a bad life, Sister.*

VI. Mr. Thomas Downes, the debtor who owes the gang money. On his horse, Arthur rides up to the Downes' small ranch house, telling him that his gang is not a charity. Downes is incapable of paying his debt at that moment, but Arthur Morgan does not care. Punching him once, Downes falls on the dirt floor of his small garden, pleading, *Please, I have a family sir, please...* Arthur replies, *I don't care about your family.*

VII. Sometimes, I lay in bed at night, and I get hit with a flood of unwavering unsettledness, and my heart inverts. I catch myself thinking of the end of the world and asking things like, "What is the point of anything if we all are going to die anyways?" My heart rate *ba-dumps* ever faster, echoing in my brain. My ears catch fire, and the blood rushing through my head sounds like an ocean flooding my eardrums. I feel like I am nothing, floating in an endless abyss of particles just like me, waiting for their turn to die. When will my time come?

VIII. As the screams of Thomas Downes' son and wife echo in the background, Arthur's fists collide with the face of a lost man. Blood and spit sprays onto Arthur, unknowingly infecting him with an incurable disease. The debtor's lungs constrict in on themselves, and his wife begs Arthur to give them more time. She tells him that her husband isn't well, and, luckily for them, Arthur leaves. But, he leaves with his death in hand, his future now set in stone.

IX. *We've all lived bad lives, Mr. Morgan...we all sin...but I know you. You don't know me.*

X. Someone close to me has died recently in the cool month of October, the sweltering heat finally gone and the chill, crisp air slowly arriving again. His son, my boyfriend, wishes he could talk to him one last time. I also wish I could talk to him one last time, despite only knowing him for a year. A year ago, he was alive, and I met him with butterflies flapping around in my belly, colliding into my insides.

The weather then was colder, harsher and stinging. Now, in the cool breeze that is visiting once again, I wish I could hear his raspy voice. He would always joke about his parents and sister. I wish I could sit in his Jeep, American flag waving behind it proudly, reflecting his own illustrious personality. The smell of cigarettes brings me back to the time I sat on the front porch with him, looking out into the vast expanse of solitary trees, the noise of dogs running and panting the only thing that could be heard. He would always tell me after he took a drag, "Take care of my son for me." I would always laugh it off, but I knew how much his son meant to him. The love and adoration shined in his eyes every time he mentioned him to me. At his funeral, I cried during the service. Hot, salty tears running down my face in waves, dripping onto my black dress. I held his son's hand tightly, our tear-stained hands clasped in an unwavering embrace. The weather is colder now.

XI. Arthur Morgan returns to the Downes household a few weeks later, after being told that Thomas Downes has passed away. Arthur does not know yet that the same fate awaits him. Thomas' wife and only son remain, the debt fallen onto their shoulders now. They have sold their house and are packing their belongings to move. Reluctantly, Mrs. Downes hands over the remaining debt.

XII. Annie Dillard wrote, "Why do we concern ourselves over which side of the membrane of soil our feet poke?" On one side, we are living, breathing animals. On the other, we are infinite.

XIII. I imagine our souls to be covered in gold, the metal forming a hard covering around our delicate forms. I saw this in Tommy, whose soul was rough but accepting, at war with itself and yet glistening through his many trials. When I first met him, I was so afraid he may not like me—his approval was something that mattered greatly to my boyfriend. Luckily, I think we immediately clicked, for I could see his golden soul dripping, yearning for someone to take his son and love him like he did. And when he passed, his soul dripped onto ours, and now we take his roughness and his warring heart in our own hands, smoothing out the edges with a love that has nowhere to land but in our own golden souls. It permeates through the black abyss of death.

XIV. I am not used to death appearing in my life. I am not used to funerals, to black attire, to the deepest type of sadness that freezes the heart and pierces the soul. We were plunged head-on into it in October, and my heart is still thawing. I do not think it will ever be what it once was. I see now that the crow, bringer of death, takes a piece of our hearts and carries it to the grave, then up into a heavenly oasis.

XV. Arthur Morgan asks the Sister a very simple question. *What am I gonna do now?*

Be grateful that for the first time... you see your life clearly.

Arthur Morgan sighs. *I guess I...I'm afraid.*

XVI. Arthur Morgan, the epitome of masculinity and strength. He was the brawns of the gang, the debt collector, the one they turned to if they needed someone dead and buried. With all his unwavering loyalty, the gang had still failed him completely. As I listen to him admit he is afraid, I know that I could pause the game. I could never play it again. I could leave Arthur Morgan alive, riding his horse and shooting the people that want him dead for eternity. That is not how death works. It will come for us all. So, I pick back up my controller, unpause the game, and continue this journey with him. He deserves a peaceful ending, and so I will give one to him.

XVII. Is it not something to think that this death that impacted me and my partner so heavily, did not even move a hair on your head? Yes, you may feel sad, but that sadness is fleeting, washing over you and then beyond in a matter of mere seconds. To Annie Dillard, "Anyone's close world of family and friends comprises a group smaller than almost all sampling errors...an invisible group at whose loss the world will not blink." I will not blink at the loss of your family member. That is a fact. However, I will blink at your sadness, and I will let myself feel it, if only for a second. To know that you may also blink in sadness because of my own is enough consolation.

XVIII. Missions later, Arthur Morgan gasps for his last breaths on the cliffside after being shot by a traitor in his gang. The leader, Dutch, is also there, staring down at the sick and dying man who he once saw

as his own son. Arthur struggles to talk, but turns to Dutch and says, *I tried... in the end... I did.*

XIX. We all try when it comes to death. We all try to stop our worry, our sadness, our regrets. We try to imagine the future, where our loved ones are free from their hospital gowns and IVs and breathing tubes forced down their throats. We try to look happy for them, and we try to love every single second that they are still walking on this Earth with us. But, in the end, trying will never stop the inevitable. I have learned that as the sobs echo through the wooden pews and Tommy's bedroom door stays open, never to be closed by his hands again.

XX. The sky, a collage of yellows and oranges, lights up Arthur's dying face. The sun slowly begins to rise, signaling a new dawn. This is the most peace I can offer him, and yet it does not seem like enough. His entire gang has either died or betrayed him. Would any peace be enough for him, for you, for me? Death's talons are wrapped around our throats and squeezing more each day, yet we can try to be ignorantly blissful. I know that death's malicious eyes never look away from us. I must try to find some solace in that fact, knowing that death may take us from suffering and pain, just as it did for Arthur and Tommy.

XXI. My boyfriend tells me that he is constantly thinking of his father. A crow, a cigarette, a Jeep, a plastic duck, an American flag, and everything else in the entire world reminds him of the man that took his last breaths at home after months in the ICU. A week before his death, we went to see him. I know now that he was experiencing turmoil lucidity, or a brief spark of energy that tricks the hopeful family into thinking their loved one is going to get better. He was walking, talking, smoking cigarettes, and taking selfies. A bright, loving smile illuminated his tired face, and my heart warmed at the sight of him and his son taking a picture together, a solemn memento. We left that day thinking he was going to survive. We left saying that the doctors did not know what they were talking about with their "a few more weeks" verdict. A few days later, his soul reached Heaven.

XXII. Grief does not lessen with the passage of time. Instead, life

begins to slowly grow bigger around it, bringing new memories, new life, and new love. The grief, dark and thundering, can still strike at a moment's notice. It is still potent, poisonous, and agitating. Life, however, is ethereal, dipping its wings into the darkness and dripping gold onto the rough layers.



Heather Parker, *Purpose*

LACI THOMPSON

A Poem for My 21st Summer of Life

I glide into the creaky wooden double doors of the *Camp*
Rock-style cafeteria, and for the first time in a while I am

overwhelmingly intimidated. I've been here a week, and the initial
fear of meeting my co-workers for the next three months has worn

off. It peels back like a banana, like the sun when it disappears
and the shimmering stars above are showcased—each one ever so

slightly. And suddenly, I know how Moses felt. I glare forward at a
table of 10 girls. “Hawksbill 26” scribbled on a centerpiece. It's my

first cabin. 10 souls I can impact in 14 days. I've given up my whole
summer—the beach, church camp, VBS, summer nights with my own
musketeers—

to be here. Invading my sense of reason is an urge to take off my shoes.
To feel the glossy wood that was perfectly mopped and polished for the
arrival of

500 campers total. The place I stand, much like Moses in Exodus 3,
is holy ground. A place where the Lord would move through His

willing vessels. He came as strong as a burning bush in front of me,
months prior, asking me to take this scary step. They teach you in

school to follow the golden rule. It originates from Matthew 7:12
and so that is why whether or not I get to see the fruit of my labor,

the sweat in the summer scorch that brings the sweetness in

the fall, I go on sweating anyways. I go on being good as

much as I can. I'm not perfect. Neither is the world. Only One is.
But I do my best and maybe my kindness is only

meant to reflect fullness of the joy You offer me, Lord, and not for me
to receive back. And I'm okay with that. There are things I want in life,
but that's not special,

everyone has that list. And as David asked, *Oh Lord, how long?*
must I wait for the icicle to melt on the window pane and for what's
inside

the house to burst to spring? Will You strengthen my heart like the
brittle branch and make new leaves where bareness resided? The lifeless
limbs hanging

from the tree of my heart are waiting for You to fill them with golden,
crisp, undeniably delicious, apples. Lord, will you make them manifest
for me in the

restoration of my family? Salvation of my friends? Peace and stillness
in my wandering mind? Someone with whom I can share this life and
the passions You've

given to me? Those, Lord, those are the kinds of apples I want. But, I'll
keep waiting and keep being obedient. Because not yet from You, does
not equal not

ever. Ever greedy, ever inconsistent human that I am. Forgive me,
Lord. I will wait. And I will serve wholeheartedly. Because regard-
less

of my circumstances, it's all worth it when a little red-headed, wide-
eyed middle-schooler pauses after I finish playing a melody with voice
and with strings,

and says to me: “Wait, so how do you get saved?” and in the stramineous light of an AC-less cabin, I get to read her Romans 10: 9-13 and explain it to her

as simply as it was once explained to me.



Dylan Lewallen, *The Sign of Life 2*



Dabney Chevere, *Untitled*



Ian Pierce, *Myself I Think*



Alyssa Makina, *Self Narrative 0.1*



Alyssa Makina, *New Zimbabwe: A Generational Story pt. 4*

ABI ADAMS

Family Ties

My father used to tie my cheer shoes for me when I was younger.
It was a little lucky charm for me, a simple tradition
until one day, our relationship just changed, forever.
I don't know what happened; maybe it was his hidden addiction.

I don't think he realizes the respect he's lost from me
now I resent him relentlessly.
I crave the validation of *any* man,
putting that minor feat first at all costs,
and it always ends with the same feeling
of being abandoned or lost.
I know those pills were taken because of me,
but they took my father away from me.

I didn't realize how much I missed him until now.
A father who can be physically there,
but his love for me lost up in the cumulus clouds.
The storm only he wrestles has left my mother and me,
empty somehow.
He's been three years sober now,
but my anger still wants to be allowed.

I brought back out my cheer shoes for the first time in years.
While tying my own shoes, my eyes filled with tears.



Samuel Hall, *The Lucky Dragon* 1954 (Japanese)

KAMAR HOOKER

Taketh

My twin brother is dead because of me. *You killed him.* My grandma spat the words from her mouth. Those words tied themselves around my neck, hanging me in silence. My grandma continued. *All the nutrients went to you, Kamar. He wasn't even a whole person, I think.* In the dark vibrant womb, my twin's body lay next to me like the moon sliced in half, but the moon is only crescent when the sun refuses to share its light. I imagine his body starting to malfunction, yet I lay next to him full pull pork bellied as he starved helplessly. What right did I have to take your life, dear brother? What gall did I have to take the moon from the sky and to drown it, vacant and abandoned? Come back to me, I beg you. My tears aren't worth a damn, but they bleed scars across the night sky. I think about all that you could have been. A lawyer, doctor, firefighter, a man for the people. I imagine you as someone better than me and when I take a breath, I feel the resentment of my own oxygen. My bones shudder like the rattlesnake backed into a corner, shaking its tail because it knows that it is inferior. What have I done with the life I have ungratefully stolen? I became a mediocre writer. How can I ever face you and tell you this? Both our umbilical cords tangled and souls tied but this time I hold on to you. But this time I saved you and you float and I'm the one who sinks and drowns. Ohh brother I want thou to taketh what I stole from thee. Taketh my body and make it yours. Taketh my life and be better than me. Taketh our mom and sisters and giveth them the wealth that will end generation poverty and suffering.

But most importantly, my dear brother taketh me.

JUNIPER TAYLOR

rev•er•ie

rev•er•ie |=| *n.* 1. The state of being so delicately lost in one's thoughts; that peaceful daydream, as in when you watch out of the window from the school bus seat, absolutely engrossed in the trees and cars zooming by: that leaf caught in a languid current, wandering freely in waking slumber, that sanctuary of slowly dissolving time / Your empty gaze, that Sunday afternoon, / this quiet place, this soft air. / When you run your hands through, / the trance you cast, / just before I go away again.

2. A soft instrumental piece, glittering in tranquility: the sweet rays of sun that cut through my window, the tender purr of the tabby cat napping in my lap, / the murmur of running water, / the lullaby of the ceiling fan, the masterpiece that is a ticking clock in a quiet classroom / The composition of the sand-blowing winds of the islands we visited.

3. An impractical idea or theory, as in flying cars: Complete world peace, time travel / Reading your mind, / fully automated societies, fleeing the country with nothing but paintbrushes and passion, / commitment to just one dream / A fountain of eternal youth, / utopian societies, / learning how not to be selfish.

ALLIE KILLER

The Red Room

Based on Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre

I perch on the corner
of the bed my uncle died in:
the mulberry-red sheets
peeled back like the curtains of the underworld.
Light taunting me, refracted in the broken
mirror, haunting my pockets of solace.
It's a howling sort of silence
that rattles its cold fingers
against my cage
to prod and pluck me.
I am ruffled by the darkness, the click
of the lock still lurking in my mind.

Like a bird
sacrificed in the temple,
split down the middle for your sins,
I crumple.
My blood sprinkles the altar, dripping steadily
from my temple.
Does it make you holy?

If I were a bird
would you still believe me evil?
A plain-Jane brown, invisible, forgettable.
On a lonely promontory,
premeditating, praying,
but not prey,
I'd be a falcon and my

talons would protect me.

But I am not a bird
and I cannot fly at your head
like a book or an insult.



Heather Parker, *Resilient Beauty*

JASON ANDERSON

Give Me a Reason

Tell me why I shouldn't become the next disaster,
my arms a summer typhoon traumatized by coming after
generational struggle, my legs not needed in the
march for civil rights, my eyes blind to the carcass of Emmett Till,
my nose foreign to the smell of dog saliva mixing with
black blood, my ears unexperienced in the art of
bullet casings slapping the ground and police batons bruising
bodies.

Tell me, am I justified in the poison that boils within my blood,
stories about my dad, my momma, my auntie, my uncle
and grandparents
searing my soul with hatred for the White people who beat
them down,
under the steel-toe boot of oppression,
bloody with my people's noble blood and guts,
no different than roadkill spoiling in the summer sun?
Give me a reason or I will assume there isn't one.

OLIVIA ALVAREZ

What's Your Favorite Color?

"Sometimes, I wonder what it would be like to see." Ann rubs the soft petals between her fingers, carefully feeling out the shape. "Tell me." She holds up the flower. "What flower is this?"

A deep voice echoes from behind her, growing louder as his footsteps draw closer. "Uh," Carter chuckles softly. "It's a rose. I'm sure you already knew that, though." His voice grows a bit fainter, pulling away from her.

Ann hums, "Yes, I did."

"Then...why ask me something you know the answer to? Seems a bit odd, I must admit."

His question rings true, but still, she smiles and shakes her head. "That's the thing. I don't really know, do I?" Ann sets the flower down, brushing her hand along the long grass in the process. "I can only go off what you and everyone else tells me. For all I know, what was in my hand isn't actually a rose, but a daffodil or a hydrangea." Closing her eyes, she listens to the wind rustling leaves as it tickles her face. "This garden full of red roses, a garden curated just for me, could be any other color or flower and I wouldn't know at all." When she opens her eyes, she wonders if the clouds reflect off them like everyone says.

Carter, for his part, mostly stays silent. He's always quietest when thinking, sometimes to the point she'll nearly forget he's there. "Well," he says slowly, "do you believe we would lie to you about something you obviously care about?"

The way Carter frames it makes Ann chuckle, shaking her head again like it's a silly question. "Of course not. If you were to tell me that these flowers are really weeds and they're purple, I would believe you whole-heartedly." His sigh is enough to draw a giggle from her. It was long and heavy, tired of a conversation that they've had far too often. Later, he'll probably give her another good-natured lecture about how she trusts too easily, but that's later.

Now, there's a hustle beside her, grass breaks underneath his weight until he stops. Wind picking up, the subtle smell of blueberries floods her senses. It's much stronger than when he was standing behind her.

Stretching out her arm, Ann brushes against fabric, squeezing softly to find a much stiffer shape underneath. Guess Carter finally decided to sit down.

Her hand drops and she pulls her legs to her chest, dress crinkling, staring into nothing. They don't exchange any words, opting to just sit in comfortable silence. A loud cawing is the only thing that interrupts it, wings beating as leaves crunch under the weight of their bodies. It's not a heavy sound, almost disappointing in a way. Such small and fragile things birds must be. Even so, they can fly freely and see the world, no one fretting over them about the dangers of the open sky. It must be nice to have that kind of freedom, too.

"Hey, Carter?" Ann's voice is meek, her attention solely on the grass tickling her fingers. Some blades are rough around the edges, probably due to excessive heat and drying out, but some are still soft enough to bend without breaking. "What's your favorite color?"

"What?" He chuckles, and his laugh is rough as he does so. It's deep, but it isn't harsh. Ann loves listening to his voice. "That came out of nowhere. Why do you want to know?"

Ann rolls her eyes. "Just answer the question. I'm curious."

Carter hums. "I thought you hated when people tried to describe colors to you. Last time some poor guy tried to do it, you went off on him." He laughs again, much heartier this time. "I don't think I've ever seen you that annoyed."

She pouts, heat rushing to her cheeks. Sighing, Ann raises her hand to smack his arm, scrunching up her face in the process. "Well, I'm not asking you to explain colors, I'm asking what your favorite color is." A gust of wind blows past them, her hair moving just slightly out of place as it whips around her.

She always hated that feeling when a hair strand moves wrong.

While the wind begins to calm down, Ann starts trying to fix her hair, growing increasingly agitated when that yucky out of place feel

that made her skin crawl refuse to go away. “Besides,” she huffs, “it was clear that man’s only exposure to blind people was through trashy television.” There was his laugh again.

“Here, let me help you.” Carter’s laugh shrinks into mere snickers as he brushes her hair out of her face. His touch was gentle, careful not to rustle more of Ann’s hair and make the insufferable tension worse. The warmth from earlier returns, but this time her heart beats slightly faster. “To answer your question, though, I... don’t think I have a favorite color.”

“Then... what color do you think had the most impact on you?”

The silence returns, but when Carter speaks up again, his voice is so soft it makes her heart melt and flutter at the same time. “... Yellow.”

Her chest tightens, and she wants to disappear. He once told her what colors he associates with those closest to him. She was red. He said it was because of her passion and love for what she does no matter how mundane. It was a warm color that burns with life. Ann told him that while she didn’t associate him with any color, he reminded her of blueberries. They taste sour when you pick them too early, yet sweet on the tongue the longer they grow and their scent gentle on the nose. She remembers that, at the time, she made a joke that he was just as sour in the morning.

That ended in Ann getting shoved, tripping over her feet, yet still having Carter there to catch her. She was so offended by this blatant disrespect, she half-heartedly pushed him away, leaving him fumbling through apologies that neither could really take seriously.

She doesn’t think she ever told him that blueberries were her favorite fruit.

Then...there was yellow. A color of endless kindness and positivity. One that embraces you unabashedly, kissing your skin while telling you everything will be okay. A color that seems to know everything, one that you can trust with your life, heart, and soul. The color of the sun, one that lights up even the darkest of places and leaves you wondering how you ever fell so far to begin with. A color he doesn’t associate with her. A color she wants to hate, but she can’t.

Nathan was yellow. He was the one that made Carter's heart race, beating so fast that Ann could imagine it was a drum if she listened hard enough. It was him that made Carter's voice soften every time he was spoken of, adding a light lithe to his tone that she heard almost nowhere else. A tone she so desperately wished was directed towards her, instead. Alas, she learned long ago that wishing for things never works out for her.

Constricting. That's what her throat feels like it's doing. Her heart wasn't breathing, all the air trapped inside before it could enter her lungs, leaving her suffocating. She was drowning under the weight of her feelings for Carter, the tears in her eyes a toxic reminder that no matter how much she might wish for it, he will never be hers. Ann takes a deep breath, willing the tears back, refusing to let Carter see how stupidly emotional she was getting over an answer to a question she asked herself.

Ann stands without warning, the wrinkled fabric of her dress growing smoother as gravity takes over. "Y'know," she takes a deep breath, "I've decided that sight isn't all that important to me." She stretches, focusing on how her muscles in her back pull tight, loosening in a satisfying manner as her arms come down. "It's quite overrated, actually. Plus, I can still see shadows moving in front of the light, so I say that's enough for me. At the very least, it's enough to allow me to tend to my garden." Ann closes her eyes, listening to the chirping birds that continue to grow more distant after she stands. They'll probably be back tomorrow.

"Can't argue with that." Carter sighs, mumbling a small *up we go* so Ann can know he was standing up as well. "Plus, your garden of purple weeds is quite beautiful." The amusement in his tone was just obvious enough to know that he was joking with her. Rolling her eyes, she snorts and holds out her hand, waiting for Carter to grab it.

When he does, she stomps out the butterflies that try to rise in her stomach. She is not dealing with this right now. Instead, Ann leads them down the memorized path, away from the grand wisteria tree growing in the middle of her garden of roses. If there's one place she is proud to say she doesn't need anyone guiding her through, it's here.

She tugs on Carter's hand a little harder. "Come on, Nathan asked that I don't keep you too long. Said something about wanting to show us a thing he found."

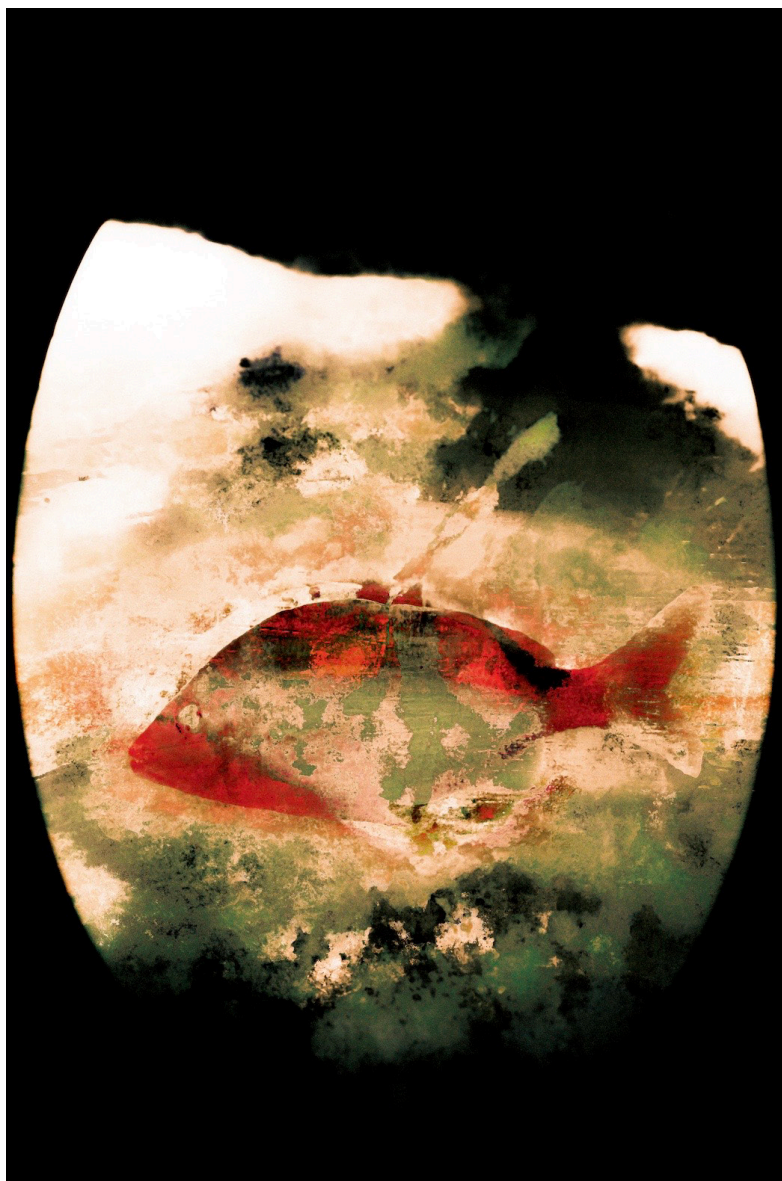
"Really?" Ann bites her lip, hating how Carter's voice immediately perked up at the sound of his name. So excited, and he doesn't even know what Nathan wants to show them...

Turning her head towards him, Ann smiles widely. "Yep! I'm quite excited myself, so let's hurry!"

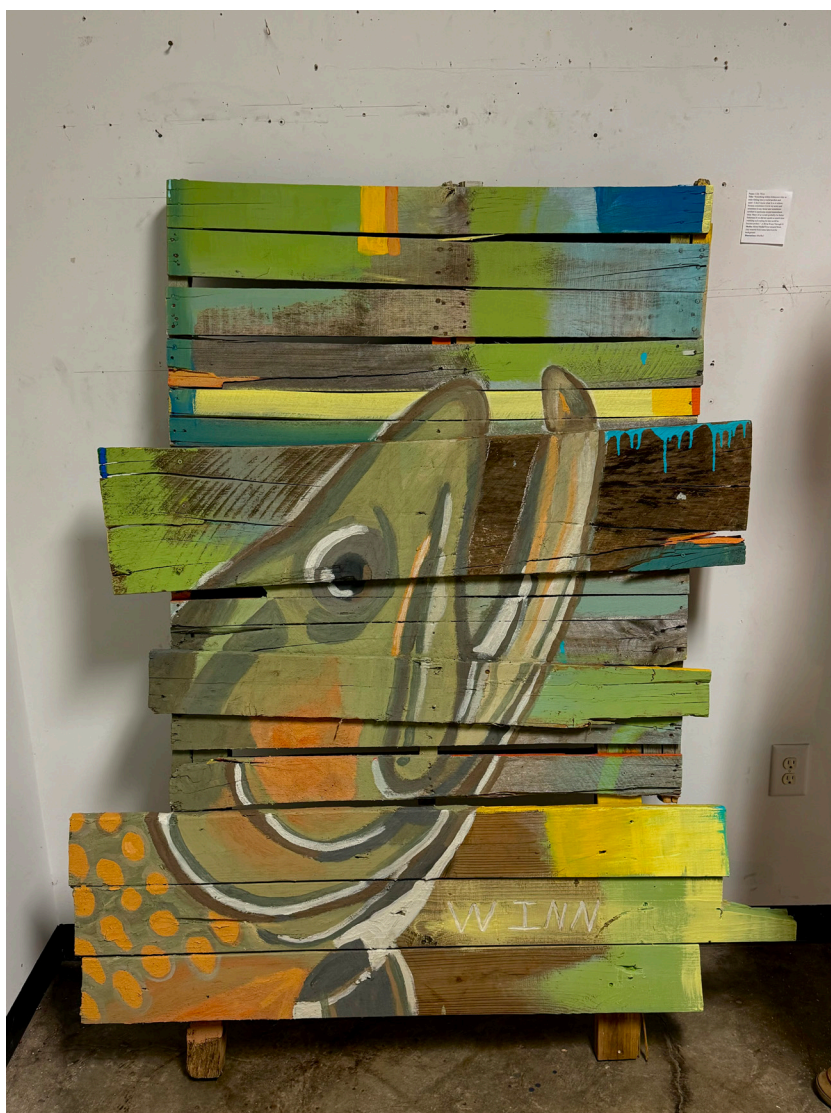
Yeah... Ann doesn't wish to see anymore. She doesn't think she could handle seeing the expression that matches that soft voice, anyway. Especially when it's not directed towards her. She'll just keep on pretending, like she always does. Why? Because she's not yellow... Ann will never be yellow.



Rin Schutz, *Dirty Sink*



Corissa Pritchett, *Fishbomb*



Lilly Winn, *"Something within fishermen tries to make fishing into a world perfect and apart—I don't know what it is or where, because sometimes it is in my arms and sometimes in my throat and sometimes nowhere in particular except somewhere deep. Many of us would probably be better fishermen if we did not spend so much time watching and waiting for the world to become perfect."*—*A River Runs Through It*

K. GOGGANS

Finny Smith

I'm reaching out from down below
Praying you see my signal
I refuse to believe that you're really gone
I'm holding onto hope.

Scratching at my skin
The places you touched
Wishing your fingertips were tainted
So they would have left your mark

Praying for it to go away,
Cause I can't take the pain

Knowing
You'll never touch me again
With your unnaturally cold hands
You'll never say that you love me again
With your skin-torn lips

It's killing me
Still hearing your whisper of promises
"You have to let it go" is what mama says.
I spend hours staring at old pictures
Yet I still read your old letters like scriptures.

I can't, I won't
Take this pain on my own

I need you here with me
More than ever before

I'm incapable, I'm prone
To be on my own.
Come back. That's all I ask.

ABI ADAMS

Wild Woman

wild daffodils are found
in the most unlikely places,
like a crumbling house on the outskirts.

wisteria dies with the chill of the winter,
yet grows back with the warmth of the spring
always returning strong and plentiful.

the story of the phoenix,
returning from ashes fiery and strong.

the girl who was lost
to a disease of the mind
learning to fight for her life

like daffodils,
growing in places she never thought she could
a wisteria heart,
growing back with grace after a bitter chill
a phoenix created
from ashes and dust

although she finds herself happy
in the most unlikely places
surviving through hell
and back,

she repeats the cycle
again and again.

HALEY KELLEY

Pepaw is in his Coffin on the TV

Did you know that it takes 5-10 years, sometimes even 100, for an embalmed corpse to finally decompose within that coffined-up hellscape they put you in when you die? yeah, i didn't either until my morbid fascination took ahold of me. I remember walking in my room and seeing you upon my tv. your corpse was in perfect condition as you were laying in the coffin unaware of all surroundings. Sometimes i wonder what you look like now. Is your skin still attached? Are your nails still growing? Are you a ghastly shade of greige? The earth is supposed to take our body and soak it all up when we die, which is why the concepts of coffins freak me out, but i guess without them, there would just be a million little corpses laying around, but, hey, maybe that's what it was like in the olden days. It's odd to think, pepaw, that you are just lying in the ground right now. You must be cold. In that little stone plot, there you are—all alone. I know you're waiting for memaw, but please let me keep her just a little bit longer. She's all i have left of you, other than that pillow made out of your shirt that doesn't even smell like you anymore, or that bachelor shirt i got you that year. I wondered why memaw took that picture of you in your coffin that day, but now i almost understand it. She just misses you, so maybe that grossly morbid picture of you with your smile all stretched back will help her. Maybe she looks at it sometimes, and wishes she was back with you, but let me have at least 10 years with her. I promise you'll get her back one day, but for now, she's here for me, and my brother, and my mom, and my aunt, and my cousins, and without her, i don't know what i'd do.

LACI THOMPSON

i don't know don't care

I think you're split fifty-fifty,
right down the middle. Not
unlike an Andes candy.
You can't decide if

you want to be piquant or
peppery. Sweet or
savory. Gorgeous or
ghastly. When I enter my
regularly scheduled day-
dream, I see a rottweiler in

my head the size of an ant and
that seems like you, doesn't
it? Thinking you're all big and bad,
all tough and showy? That's just
it, it's all talk, all show, and

no mojo. Do you realize how
quick you could get stepped on?
In another life, you've placed
a spell on me. Some potion from

some crooked cauldron, and you
forced me to drink. There was
something in that vanilla
protein shake that
made my brain ache, but to
your twisted disbelief and self-

esteem, I fell—not head over
heels—but face first with a
SPLAT on the hard, cold

concrete, right

at your waiting feet. Just
peachy. You can't deny that
you love to see me undecided,
after all, you're getting a taste of
your own medicine. You love
the way it hurts when my outright

rejection makes you cry, because
it helps you get to sleep quicker
each night. Well, I'll have you
know, I finally get good sleep
too, because I found surety

like raspberry lemonade bursting
and leaving behind a sweet tang.
There was a day when your 50/50
would have been aspirational
to me. I would have taken your

word that your mind was made up,
even though your actions didn't
match it. But that was a different
me. Today, I'm here to declare that like

the "in conclusion" of an essay you're
scared to submit, I've decided that
you're not it. And I'll
just be here under the

inhospitable icy AC inside
this Olive Garden. I'll be
twirling my pasta. Not waiting
for you to appear, but for someone

better to walk through the gaping
double doors.

MILO SILL-FOSTER

Fallen from the Family Tree

A dove lies broken in my hand.
I stroke it gently
And still my breathing,
Check its delicate heart for beating.
The dirty thing throbs and twitches,
I don't know what to do.
The poor thing is dying, I fix it.
I always do.



Joshua Harris, *Study after Van Gogh's Self-Portrait in Arles*

CHIARA RIZI

Flooded

I know the sound of rain against my bedroom window as well as I know the syllables of my own name. The rhythm never changes. Its cadence is constant—a steady hush against two-paned glass, a whisper in the sewers beneath town, a pulse in the puddles that line residential streets.

It never stops, not even in my dreams. Sometimes, as I teeter on the edge of consciousness, I think I see the rays of sunlight the myths speak of so fondly. Then I realize—the yellow of the sun is the same shade as the lamp that haunts the corner of my bedroom.

I'm not sure if there's anyone left who remembers what life was like before the rain. Even my grandmother, the oldest person I know, only gives a small shake of the head or a tight-lipped smile whenever I ask the wrong kinds of questions.

"Grandma," a five-year-old asks, opening her soft pink lips. *"Why is it always raining?"*

"Best not to dwell on it, dear. You'll only make yourself miserable."

As far as I can tell, no one seems to mind. They don't rush through the rain—they dawdle. They stop to chat with friends from work or to pet a dog whose owner always promises is very friendly. They walk through the world like they've always known the ground would be soft beneath the soles of their shoes—like the damp embrace of mud is more natural, more elegant than silk at their throats.

Umbrellas are relics of another time, abandoned like brittle bones. Each day, fewer yellow raincoats linger on door hooks, the weight of wet clothing no longer a burden. The rain does not disturb. It does not intrude. It just *is*.

The rain makes everything feel smaller. I feel like a child being washed by their mother in an ancient claw-foot tub, soap and shampoo stinging my eyes. Every time I try to speak, bubbles come out of my mouth—*glub, glub, glub*—and my words are swallowed whole.

At school, years ago, when the undersides of my tired eyes weren't

a molted purple, I tried to skip in circles with the other children. We linked arms and sang in shrill voices beneath the cloud-choked sky. I don't remember the lyrics. I remember trying to mimic their carefree smiles, echo the pitch of their laughter as they splashed in the water, while I felt like I was standing at the edge of a room no one had invited me into.

The rain has a voice. Not the deep rumble of my father's, or the false cheer of the women selling fruit beneath green-and-white-striped awnings in the market. The rain speaks in shivers, in the way it slips beneath my collar, small droplets running down the shallow valley between my breasts. It speaks in the lulls between conversation, its soft murmur louder than a heartbeat but quieter than a footstep, reminding me that nothing is ever truly silent.

At night, when the world is asleep, and my memories roll down my cheeks, it whispers my name like a forbidden prayer. *Mira. Mira. Mira.* I ask it questions, *what* and *why* slipping off the sores on my tongue. It doesn't answer. Rain doesn't bend—it falls in straight waves.

But it beckons me. *Come*, it says, its soft breath flirting with the shell of my ear. I follow it the same way I have bemoaned it my entire life: sure-footed, steadfast.

It guides me, a soft tug on the frayed edges of my worn sweater. It takes me past the tired corners of my bedroom, past the empty road of the cul-de-sac.

The streets are quiet, save for the gentle tapping of rain on asphalt and steel roofs. In the distance, a strange light glows—faded green, the mossy forest of eyes that are done seeing. I chase after it. Of course I do. I run, arms pumping, hands curled into fists. My lungs strain, breath caught in a trap with no way to escape.

I run until I no longer recognize the path beneath my feet, until the ache in my chest is swallowed by momentum. I leap over rocks submerged in the shallow river. I push stray branches out of my face. My heart hammers as the light grows closer.

I imagine it as a firefly caught in the persistent grip of a storm, begging for the warmth of dry leaves. I imagine it as my sister gliding through the air on a metal swing, pleading to go *higher, higher*,

higher.

The rain presses against the small of my back, urging me onward. *Mira. Mira. Mira.* I take one final step—it is harder than all the ones that came before it put together. And then, the world opens.

The sky is blue. More beautiful a blue than I thought possible. Unblemished. A blank canvas stretching farther than my eyes can see. The sun—I don't know how to describe it. When I stare directly at it, it is formless. The more I squint, the less I understand what I see. Its gentle warmth touches my brow, mingling with the shadows resting there. The colors are bright, vibrant. The ground beneath me is firm.

But the stillness is what captivates me. Does absence have an echo? Because that's all I hear. It leaves room for my thoughts to flood the spaces between lines. They circle—around, around—a tornado leaving behind shattered barns and broken foundations. *I don't know. I don't know. I don't know. What if? Where? When? Why? How? Help. Help. Help.*

I stand in the midst of a world where my name does not belong. My heart is thundering in a chest that is suddenly too tight for all the questions it holds. The silence is so, so loud. It's screaming in my ears, forcing me to listen.

My breath catches in the stillness, and I realize I am afraid. It is not the fear of the monster under the bed that I held onto for my first six years. It is the fear of options, too many paths for me to take, when I just want to lie down and close my eyes.

I have always known the rain—known the words it paints in broad, sweeping strokes. It has kept me grounded.

But now in this new place, in this stillness, there is nothing. Nothing to grab onto and hold against my chest. Nothing to take a deep breath from and savour its scent.

It's a feeling I can't explain. One that exists in the darkest corners of my mind, in the clotted blood of my arteries. I feel it's pull the way I hear my mother saying *I love you* after I do something I shouldn't be forgiven for. The call comes again. Not from the light. From the rain. *Mira. Mira. Mira.*

I turn my back on the world whose grass I've always thought I

was meant to sink my feet into. The warm breeze, the light, the hush of quiet pressing against my ribs—I let it all go. The first raindrop hits my cheek, and the world snaps back into focus.

I feel the rain through the fabric of my clothes and through the layers of my skin. I take one step, then another, my feet sinking back into the earth.

The rain is alive, thoughtful, and pensive. *Was it worth it?* The question is almost silent, disappearing behind the muted green of wet leaves. I don't have an answer as I stand there taking it all in. I don't have an answer as I start the long walk back home. I don't have an answer as I reach the gray door of my house and slip beneath the soft fleece of my favourite blanket.

My thoughts return, not as loud and insistent as they were beneath the endless sky, but still there, keeping my eyes open.

I know I won't ever leave. The rain keeps me safe—from what's out there, or myself, I'm not sure. But I can't help wondering—if I'm not the girl who wants to be somewhere else, who am I?

I've always been here, waiting to drown. Perhaps I've forgotten what it means to want anything else.



Cassidy Bishop, *Rebellion*



Heather Parker, *Refuge*

ALLIE KILLER

Your Love is as Steady as the Seasons

Your love is as steady as the seasons.
This fickle world around us, ever-changing,
It has always been my deepest grievance.

Spring brings with it troops of flowers – legions,
Life and noon-day warmth sustaining.
Your love is as steady as the seasons.

As summer reigns vibrant over conquered regions,
I wish I could omit all tasks but playing:
It has always been my deepest grievance.

Colder winds soon smolder vital leaves in
Autumn-gold: pure decadence decaying.
Your love is as steady as the seasons.

Living things march toward winter without reason.
And it haunts me that we, too, are graying-
It has always been my deepest grievance.

Ever-changing, eluding completion,
A revolving grave of everything:
Your love is as steady as the seasons-
It has always been my deepest grievance.



Cayla Jones, *Time Warped Garage*

