

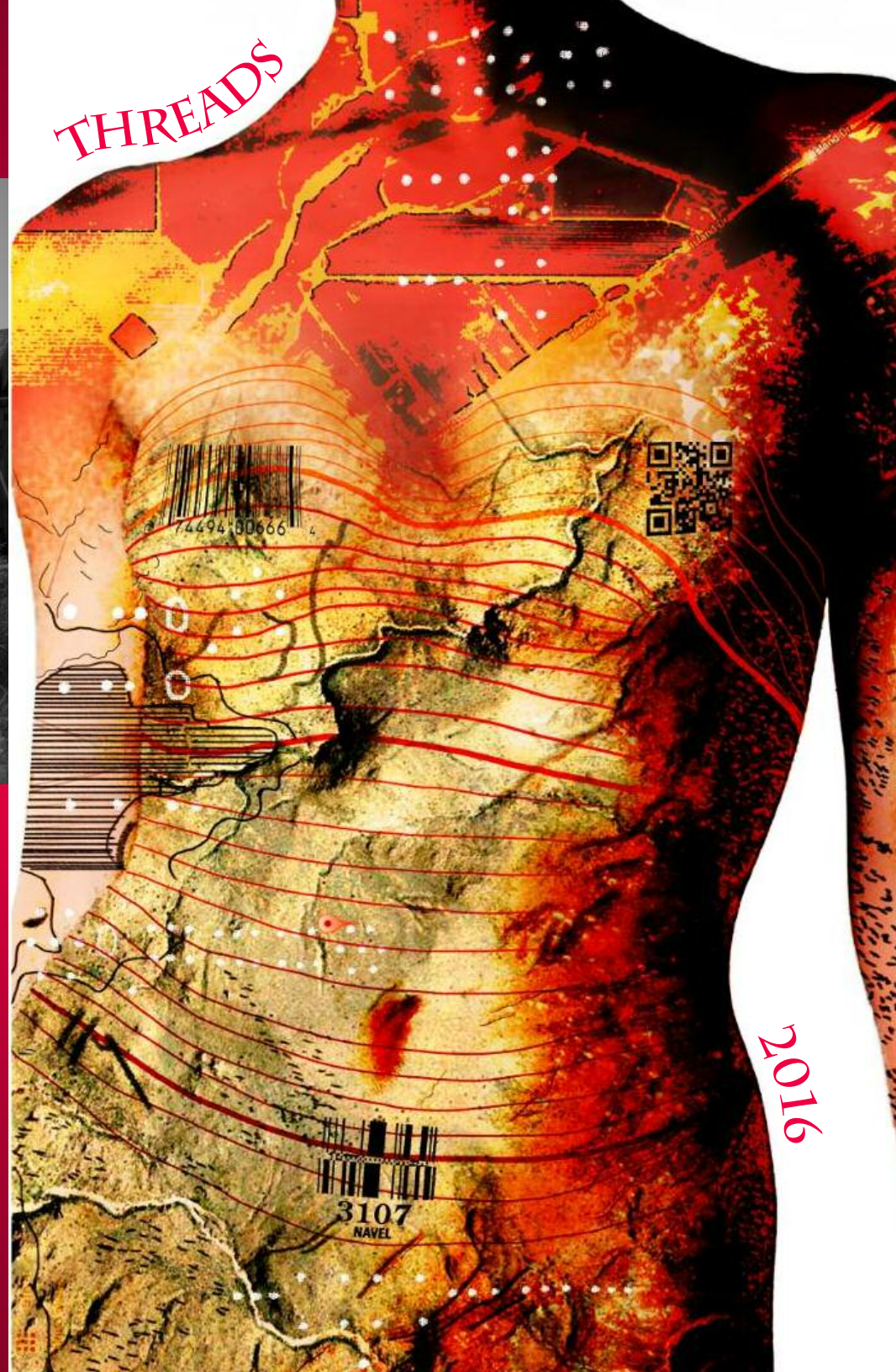


*"Untitled" by Jake Stockman*



**Be bold. Be a Viking.**

**THREADS**



**2016**

# THREADS

## 2016



**Be bold. Be a Viking.**

*Threads Committee*

Joshua Kohan

Noah Kucij

Sara Tedesco

Vonnie Vannier

*Threads* is a journal of student writing and art published by the English, Foreign Languages and English as a Second Language Department at Hudson Valley Community College, Troy, New York.

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Cover: "Form" by Carolyne Deitz

## Message from the Editors

We would like to thank all the students who submitted their work to *Threads* this year. We received many quality submissions, and we continue to read with pleasure the enthusiasm and creativity each submission presents. Of course, all pieces have merit, and we would like to publish everything submitted, but the limitations of space will simply not allow it.

It is important to note that *Threads* reflects works that are not necessarily perfect in their format and composition, but exhibit insight, creativity, social awareness, and a unique perspective. These works—of poetry, fiction, nonfiction, and visual art — reflect the range of experience, culture and imagination of the Hudson Valley Community College student. The editors relish the opportunity to travel and explore the territory each new issue stakes out.

Every year we are extremely pleased to highlight the exceptional work of the students at Hudson Valley Community College. Please plan your submission for next year.

Please submit your work to *Threads* electronically. Visit us at <http://clubs.hvcc.edu/threads> for more information.

Happy reading!  
– *Threads* editors

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**THREADS WRITING AWARD WINNER**

**Cigar Scented Stars**

*Leah von Fricken*

As if my brain was being pulverized like leaves of tobacco, my head pounded.  
I stepped onto the cool wood of the deck, needing not to travel far.  
There was something so soothing about the way his voice sounded.

My father sat facing away from me.  
He greeted me with a long drag from his fat cigar.  
As if my brain was being pulverized like leaves of tobacco, my head pounded.

I laid next to his chair on the unforgiving lumber so I could see  
the sweet smoke fall over my face like a hollow bar.  
There was something so soothing about the way his voice sounded.

He wanted to discuss the illusion of time, undoubtedly,  
I wanted to discuss the illusion of happiness by which I'd been scarred.  
As if my brain was being pulverized like leaves of tobacco, my head pounded.

The smoke formed clouds in front of the stars which were so free  
and relieved me with a sensation of insignificance I couldn't disregard.  
There was something so soothing about the way his voice sounded.

This is where I come when the world seems to swallow me  
and when I want to let myself drown in its tar.  
As if my brain was being pulverized like leaves of tobacco, my head pounded.

There was something so soothing about the way his voice sounded.

**Picture Day:**  
**After Sommer's 'Untitled' Girl in a Blue Dress**

*Leah von Fricken*

This isn't how my hair falls naturally.  
My mother has licked her fingers and pressed it down.  
It frustrates her that this dress never seems to fall properly  
on my hunched shoulder's she is always aligning to her taste.

Tell her, Bill, she's employed you to capture the essence of me  
not her own sculpted snapshot.  
She should simply let me be.

You will not produce a flat image  
of a flat image  
and flat hair.

My hands will press against the glass,  
rather than my lap.  
They will pull apart and splinter the frame  
she's so carefully selected.

I'll let you see my crooked teeth,  
the ones I'm supposed to hide at  
times like these.

Don't confine me to this perfectly composed cell.  
Unhinge this deceiving door  
she's tucked me behind.  
Wipe the fog from this mirror  
she's breathed on  
and you'll see my true reflection.

Bill, please,  
set me free.

*THREADS WRITING AWARD WINNER*

**The Crack**  
*Molly Schneider*

The mirror lies shattered on the bathroom floor. She isn't quite sure about the events leading up to it breaking. How had she broken it? It is all very hazy. She remembers looking into her reflection. She remembers hearing the sound of it echoing through the house. She remembers watching the pieces fall from the ornate silver frame into the sink and onto the floor, glittering in the morning sunlight. She remembers his face as he stormed out, twisted in pain and anger, still screaming words as sharp as daggers. But she doesn't remember how it broke, or even who broke it in the first place.

Maybe it doesn't matter. Maybe it was always meant to break. Now that she's thinking about it, she can't seem to recall a time when it was not cracked. She knows it couldn't have always been cracked, knows that when she opened the wedding present it had been perfect and whole and beautiful. Yet, though she knows what it looked like when they got it, whenever she pictures the scene in her mind the crack is always there, blatantly marring the reflection with a crooked, upside-down y. It was there, a fault-line in her smile as she washed off her make up from their first date as a married couple. It was there, a scar she couldn't cover up as she applied concealer over the bruises from the night before while he watched in the background, holding ice over the ones she'd given him. It was there as they brushed their teeth in cold, tense silence. It was there as she threw the blue glass vase at his head and he screamed obscenities back at her. It was there as he stumbled over apologies, his beautiful eyes filled with tears. It was there as she locked herself alone in the bathroom and cried and cried until she felt emptied out, but not better. It was there. It was always there. She realizes there was no way to have stopped the mirror from shattering. It was an inevitability. It's a shame; it really was quite beautiful.

As she kneels to pick up the larger pieces on the floor she notices a silver ring among the shards. She's tempted to throw it out with the rest of the broken pieces of her life, but stops herself and tucks it into her pocket instead. Maybe one day she'll sell it, maybe not. She doesn't quite care for it either way, but it would be a waste to throw yet another beautiful thing away.

## Commemorations

*Molly Schneider*

Today was the day. I'd pulled a comb through my close-cropped hair, but hadn't done much else to make myself presentable. I probably should have put on a suit or something, but I honestly didn't feel like celebrating. I just loafed around my empty room in a t-shirt and sweat pants, staring at the blank, windowless walls. The ceremony was at noon, so I had a few hours to kill.

I was sitting on my bed when suddenly I was accosted by a wave of bouncing black curls and pink silk. I groaned

"Urrrghh. Tina, get off me!"

"Nice to see you too," she said, giggling to herself. She sat up and gave me a disapproving once-over. "Hey! Why aren't you changed yet? Our party's in half an hour." I looked down and fidgeted with the hem of my bedspread.

"I, um, I'm not sure if I'm gonna go," I muttered.

"What!?" But it's our party. We finally get to move on, and we get to do it together. Don't you think that's something to celebrate?"

"No! And stop calling it a party. It's a ceremony if anything."

"Fiiiiine. It can be anything you want it to be, just please tell me you'll come?" She stuck out her lip and batted her big brown eyes at me.

"Ugh. Stop that," I said, rolling my eyes. "Stop making the face."

"What face?"

"That face! The one you use to win me over. It's not gonna work this time!"

"I don't know what you're talking about," she said, her pout breaking into a toothy grin. She leaned over and kissed my cheek. It was cold and startled me a little. I looked up, unable to stop the thought that tumbled from my lips.

"Why don't you hate me?"

Her eyes turned confused, then sad, and for some reason she looked hurt as well. "What? Why would I hate you?"

"Because everything that's happened to us is my fault!" I yelled, unable to contain it anymore. "The party! The accident! And now you're stuck here with me and we're going to a commemoration of all my failings and – mmph!" Tina had clamped her hand onto my mouth.

"Ok, Cam, first of all, shut up." She removed her hand, closed her eyes and sighed, then gave me a frustrated look. Tina has the most frightening stink-eye I've ever seen. "Look, I'm only gonna say this once, so you'd better get it through that thick skull. I. Don't. Blame. You. For. ANYTHING."

"But that night! You trusted me and then I went and got drunk, so drunk, and I didn't tell you 'cause I was stupid and embarrassed and then –" She grabbed my shoulders and looked me in the eye.

"It doesn't matter! Jesus, Cam, you really think that it was all your fault? I was drunk too! We were both stupid. Oh well! End of story. I don't hate you and I never have. Now stop beating yourself up about things that don't matter anymore and come have fun with me." She smiled at me. "I don't care where we end up as long as we end up there together."

I felt tears that had been building up flow down my cheeks. I hated it when she saw me cry, but I couldn't look away from her. She held my face and wiped away the tears with her thumbs. "Now will you change and come with me to the party?"

I gave a big sniff. "Fine. But I'm not wearing a suit." She giggled.

The room was sparsely populated with long-term residents and caretakers. Tina, with the help of a couple of caretakers, had set up streamers and a punch bowl in the corner. There was even music playing, but it was shut off when the viewing screen was switched on. A couple dozen chairs had been set up in rows facing the screen. Tina and I sat in the front, holding hands.

The view on the screen zoomed in on a church, going through the doors and focusing so that it looked as if we were looking up from the semi-crowded pews. I nearly choked on my punch. Gah, what am I wearing? I thought. Tina giggled next to me. Of course, she looked great on the screen, despite the scarring. A priest cleared his throat at the pulpit.

"Family, friends, we are gathered here today to mourn the loss of two bright and wonderful youths, Cam Burges and Tina Flores, who died five days ago driving home from Tina's 17th birthday party."

## Modern American Girl

*Danielle Chevalier*

What is a Modern American Girl? She thought, listening to the clack of keys throughout the classroom. Her eyes were fixed down on the sheet in front of her, rereading like something new would pop out of sentences she'd already seen five times over. What does that even mean, to be a Modern American Girl? What makes a girl modern? Is a modern girl the kind who follows all the trends of her day, or one who bucks them? Or would one who bucks them be timeless? Is that even the right word? What's a good word for out of time? A-timal? No, that's not even a word.

She tapped her fingers on the desk. Out of time? Ahead of her time? There's gotta be a word for that. I'm sure there's a word for that.

She contemplated opening an online thesaurus on her computer, but decided against it. She had enough distractions with the task at hand.

I don't know what makes a girl modern. I don't even know what makes a girl "American." Well there's the obvious answer of "being born in America" but I don't think that's the point here. This is more than geography. And not all American girls are the same. What's the common ground between a Texas girl and a New Jersey girl, and what makes both of them different from a Canadian girl?

Her mind whirled, sorting through ideas in the haphazard way it had of dealing with things. Something to do with social issues, maybe? Nationalism? Culture? She entertained the fleeting thought of saying "all girls are the same regardless of where they're from," but as soon as it flitted across her mind she shot it down with the accuracy of a sniper. I may be idealistic, but I'm not a naive idiot.

She leaned back in her chair and stared up at the ceiling. The assignment was still in her hand, the paper crumpled from where she'd held it. She wondered if she was supposed to base the assignment on herself. Maybe she was supposed to be the Modern American Girl.

But I'm not a girl, she thought, I don't like being American, and I still don't know what the hell makes someone modern.

She wondered if she would get in trouble for writing "Time-Appropriate Caucasian Androgyne" for her assignment.

The clock ticked. Her page was still blank.

And on that note, aren't girls what you call kids? Shouldn't it be Modern American Woman? Or is this trying to be all-ages? Great, do I have to take all the age demographics into account now? I'm still trying to narrow this down!

She bit her lip. Part of her wished that she got more freedom with her writing assignments. The other part of her realized that if she was given carte blanche she wouldn't be able to settle on one idea to write about, or probably end up writing about gay robots.

Her fingers hovered over the keyboard. The only things on the document were the heading with her name and the assignment number.

Wait, do I have to write about what it means to be a Modern American Girl?

She looked down at the assignment again. All it gave was a title. No elaboration.

I can just make this up as a go, can't I?

She started typing. The thoughts in her head still swirled, her questions transferring from fingertips to keyboard until they were all laid out in haphazard paragraphs, framed as a story.

I wonder if I'll get extra credit for being meta, she wondered a while later, as she keyed in the last sentence on the page.

## Where You Least Expect It

*Danielle Chevalier*

You try to remember what inspiration feels like.

It's been ages since a story grabbed you in the dizzying way that only a good story can, buzzing with pleasure as it settled into your soul. You have plenty of stories in there, things that you've read and things you've tried to write. They're the kind that stay with you, even years later. The good ones always stay with you.

It's like curating a collection, except instead of displaying stamps or butterflies in neat little glass cases you're shuffling around stories in a disorganized mess only you can see. They shift in and out of focus, sometimes overlapping to blend into something new. Sometimes they stay in the back for years before they burst forward like a prima donna to demand your attention.

Sometimes a bad one stays and you're reminded of a mess you read long ago, where you gave up a few chapters in because the main character had no personality and the author managed to suck all life out of a vibrant premise. Whenever you remember it you cringe and try to shuffle a good story to the front of the collection.

But you haven't had many new additions lately, and most of them have faded. Stories just don't grab you anymore.

You remember when you read fantasy stories about girls who were just like you, but they were magical. They went on adventures and fought battles and always married some boy who you thought was charming and mysterious, and you wished you could end up like that too. You tore through the stories, consuming them like they were ambrosia and you hadn't eaten in years.

These days, you hate them.

You've tried reading them. You try to enjoy them, to recapture the childish wonder you remember. But you realize the girls you used to idolize are the same thin pastiche of a heroine every hack author tries to pass off as special. Any interesting ideas are glossed over in favor of making their heroine a special snowflake or cramming in a love triangle. You've learned to hate the love interests too, always the same brooding

boy whose manipulative behavior is painted as romantic instead of abusive. You learn to hate the genre you used to love.

You try to love it again. You find yourself in the library, reading the backs of books and praying for a premise that isn't the same story under a different mask. You develop an allergic reaction to phrases like "X isn't like other girls" or "Y has always known she's different." At the first mention of a love interest you shove the book back on the shelf.

Even when you find a premise that seems like it might be good, you hesitate. You want to enjoy it. But there's only so much room in your collection for books you hate or can't even finish. You can't count how many promising books you put back on the shelf because you weren't willing to risk it.

Eventually you stop reading altogether.

You try to focus on the novel you've been writing for the past few years. You've spent months hammering out details, building the world it takes place in and laying down the rules it follows. You could write essays about the character arcs you have planned. You crank out chapter after chapter.

And then the chapters become a slog to get through. You'll put off writing for days only to slink back to your desk and tap out a few paragraphs, a page if you're lucky. Most of the time you're writing out of obligation. You've put in too much effort to give up, so you keep writing and remember what it felt like to get excited. You try to feel that way again and fail.

You stop writing.

You spend a few months miserable before you try out fanfiction again. You used to read it every day when you were younger, but after a while you lost interest. You hadn't touched it until your partner introduced you to Transformers, and you couldn't stop yourself from thinking Megatron and Optimus are so obviously ex-boyfriends, the subtext is screaming that they used to date...

You give in and start looking up fanfiction. It's a popular pairing so you've got no shortage of material, and you're surprised by what you find.

It's good.



You can tell at a glance what fanfics to skip over, but most of it is good. It's well-written, and more importantly, it's new. You see more creativity than you've seen in years and it's so fresh it makes you angry that authors who are this creative and this talented are putting their stories out for free while the hacks get paid for their half-baked ideas. You read a novel-length fic that ends with Megatron and Optimus Prime getting married and having thirteen children and you end up loving it. You read and enjoy and let yourself be self-indulgent.

The writing is slower, but you get back into it. You're still putting off your novel, but you and your partner like writing short scenes together over Skype. They're disjointed and messy, but it keeps you in practice. You write about mermaids and sky pirates and dragons that turn into humans, and together the two of you churn out enough material to comprise a novel. Some of the ideas you keep, added to the collection because they were that good and you'd like to develop them more sometime.

The collection shuffles, reorganizing the new stuff you feed it. It feels alive again. It circulates ideas instead of letting them stagnate, and it feels good. It feels inspiring. You feed it another fanfic about gay robots, close the tab you were reading it in, and pull open the dusty old document that contains your novel.

Your fingers flex, and you start writing.

## *THREADS WRITING AWARD – HONORABLE MENTION*

### **Boy/Girl: Genderqueer in a Cisgender World**

*Taylor Allard*

Have you ever had to stop and think about which public restroom you were going to use? I'm not talking about trying to decide whether or not to use the mall food court lavatory or the one a few stores down that might be less crowded, but rather something like a checklist going through your head, asking yourself questions such as, "Do I look more like a boy or a girl today?" "Which gender group would be more alarmed by me?" "Which space can I safely use without causing a stir?" These are the kinds of questions that permeate every aspect of my life that cause me to constantly reevaluate and reassert my identity as genderqueer in a society wrought with gendered criteria. In a world where men and women are separated by hard, defining lines, fitting in can be extremely difficult for anyone that stands in the space between these boundaries.

To clarify, though they share some social issues and are in ways relatable, genderqueer is not the same as transgender. I, for example, was assigned male at birth and have never actually felt as though I was female or, for lack of more politically correct phrasing, "born into the wrong body." As a child I never truly questioned my role as a "boy"; I simply aspired to aspects typical of femininity and thought nothing of it. I was happy when I could be "one of the boys" yet feel close with all of the girls in ways the other boys weren't. I idolized female characters in the media I consumed, always chose the girl character in video games, and once even asked my female friends how to act more like them. However, it was never about feeling more like one than the other. I enjoyed my space somewhere in the middle, and only now can I reconcile my early feelings with the modern knowledge that gender is not a binary, but rather a spectrum upon which I resided more so to the female, albeit not entirely.

It wasn't until I got older that the lines became harder to cross and gender roles became more defined. After puberty, the struggle began with questioning my sexuality, and further on into trying to find ways to express myself meaningfully without being stuck on the "male" end of the spectrum. I was bored with men's clothing, hated the boyish haircuts I had to get at the salon, and resented the rigid boy's uniform I had to

wear to my private Catholic school every day, so I turned to my hobbies and sought out some means of escapism. I remember the first time I wore girl's jeans, tried on my mom's concealer, and put a flat-iron to my kinky hair as liberating moments.

It was around this time that I discovered Tokyo's street-fashion and Japanese "visual-kei" rock music scenes – where the boys could be just as colorful and expressive with their clothing, hair and makeup as the girls and freely cross gender-boundaries with their appearances – which inspired me in my teen years to dress alternatively whenever I had the chance, to try to showcase a different side of myself. This made every "dress-down day" a high-production event. I'd plan my outfits a week in advance, showing up in a cut-up, customized top in bright orange with a cartoon character applique, or skinny, studded plaid pants with my nails painted black, or striped knee-high socks with laced-up platform boots. I felt different from all the other kids, and I wanted my appearance to reflect that.

Of course, this manifestation of self-expression didn't come without restrictions. Having politically conservative parents meant these "outlandish" fashion choices had to be hidden. Since I couldn't leave the house without scrutiny from my parents, often-times I'd take pieces of my outfit in a bag and change into them at school, or hide it all under a long coat. Years after high school, and some devastating personal experiences later, I still largely mirror this practice even as I've come to terms with what these urges developed into following my adolescence. Though my wardrobe is now almost exclusively made up of pieces found in the women's department, I have a full collection of beauty products to heighten my femininity, and I keep my hair long and typically dyed alternative colors, it is now even more of a conflict for me to be who I want to be around my parents. The more efforts I make to assert my identity, the more I am compelled to hide the truth from them and tone down my looks at home and when going out in their company. Even though I'm closer to the feminine side of the gender spectrum, I still have to make sure I pass as male to my parents, and only have the freedom to present the way I'm most comfortable in public or with friends when they're not around.

Unfortunately, the general public is not always so understanding either. It's easy to deal with when walking through a crowded mall or going to college where most people are strangers going about their own business. But when people are forced to interact with me, it can be

another story. Macy's in Colonie Center Mall hired me without ever questioning my gender identity, with management even assuming feminine pronouns when addressing me (which I didn't question to make things easier), but it was on the sales floor that I was reminded of what a conundrum I still was to the masses. Many women would look at me funny as I spoke to them at the register, call me by male pronouns and then double-check what I preferred, or ask me if I was transgender or transitioning. Men would call me things like "buddy" and "bro" as if to assert the maleness they perceived in me to themselves. Other "highlights" in public situations even include harassment from men that perceive my appearance to be an open invitation to personal questions and sexual advances.

Experiences like these made me almost wish I was easier to understand even to myself – I simply denied being transgender, simply told people that either set of pronouns were ok, and also had no real way of asserting my femininity to anyone that chose to see me as fully male without going into a deep discourse about gender as more than a binary to complete strangers. Every time a child innocently asks me if I'm a boy or a girl, I want to tell them that the concepts of "boy" and "girl" are not mutually exclusive, that the separation of genders is an illusion instilled in them upon birth, and to keep an open mind and ignore what society says about biological sex correlating to the toys you play with and the clothes you wear. Nevertheless, all I can ever give are simple answers that don't contain the whole truth, and only hope that I, perhaps, with my appearance alone, made them question the boundaries they're growing into, and that their parents won't keep them behind such lines should they feel the urge to explore themselves.

I remember years ago in an Atlantic City casino hotel, long before I knew anything about gender issues and started presenting more feminine, I entered the men's restroom with my brother. Two adult men, undoubtedly more "asserted" in their masculinity, looked at us with wide eyes as we turned the corner. "Hey, I thought this was the men's room," one exclaimed with a grin. They had a good laugh as they left, but it was a revealing moment for me – that no matter how I chose to present, whether I looked more like a boy or a girl on a given day, I would never be one of them and I never wanted to be. Yet while I am now more comfortable with who I am than I ever was, the restrictive standards of the binary genders continue to impact my daily life, including actions as "simple" as using the restroom.

## My Grandmother's Mansion

*Shilpa Dudi*

The famous Irish-Anglo novelist, Oliver Goldsmith, once said, "Such is the patriot's boast, where'er we roam, his first, best country ever is at home." For me, that place Goldsmith is describing is my grandmother's mansion in India. I've spent 3 weeks of every summer there since I was born. From the fresh scents of my grandmother's cooking, to the sounds and vibrations of the same red bus passing through the streets each morning, time seems to have no great effect on her house. As I've grown up, I realized how many things have changed in my grandmother's house, both literally and perceptually.

When I was a 5 year old child, my grandmother's house seemed like a mansion to me. Even though there were only three rooms, everything seemed extra big to the small girl I used to be: one big bedroom, big living room and a gigantic kitchen. My grandmother spent most of her day in the kitchen, cooking and cleaning for me and my grandfather. Every Sunday morning there was a fresh aroma of Indian bread, naan, and chicken curry to awaken our noses and keep us on our toes until lunch time. Every evening, my grandmother made sweet sweet Jalebi and Gulab Jamun to spoil me in ways my mother highly disliked. My grandmother's special hot mirchi bajji and samosas were everybody's favorite. They made us sweat through our noses from their spiciness.

Right next to the stove lay a big coal fire place which I used to cuddle near for warmth after I was given a bath each morning and night. It was always lit as it was used for cooking as well. There was one big bedroom in the house which we rarely used. There was a row of three empty beds with clean sheets and fluffed pillows. I don't remember ever sleeping in there because it was tradition to sleep on a portable bed in the living room watching the stars through the open roof in the middle of the house. My grandparents would tell me stories of their adventurous childhood as I cuddled up between them each night.

In the mornings, I was always woken up at 6 am by a passing big red bus. The dirt road which was used by the vehicles was three feet away from the steps of our backyard. I would sneak to the back of the house at the exact bus timings and stand near the doorway to wave to the passengers and feel the gush of wind as the bus passed by at 75 km/hr. I would spend the rest of my mornings playing with my dolls on the bed

in the living room as my grandmother kept close watch. Grandfather would come to visit once at two o'clock each afternoon from the farm for lunch and fill the room up with the smell of cigarettes. My grandmother hated it but I for one, found so much comfort in his secure aroma.

Now that I am an adult, my grandmother's "mansion" doesn't seem so big anymore. Although the layout of the house hasn't changed whatsoever, the three big rooms just aren't as big as they used to be. Every Sunday morning, the aroma of chicken and naan still tingle my senses. As an adult now, I have more appreciation for the fresh pollution-free air that surrounds the village. I pretend to breathe in as much air as I can to last me the rest of the year in the city. My grandmother doesn't seem to spend most of her day in the kitchen; instead, she goes to her farm and tends to her wheat and vegetables. Ever since grandfather has passed away, she would rather spend most of her time out in the garden.

The fireplace in the kitchen is only lit once a day for cooking dinner, but it still brings the same warm feeling after taking a bath at night. The once large bedroom seems like the smallest bedroom now. It is filled with all of my cousin's and my childhood toys and clothes and is always locked so that all our childhood belongings are kept safe. The beds from the bedroom are moved to the living room where grandmother sleeps alone every single night without my grandfather. I still get awakened at 6 am by the loud, red bus that passes by each morning, but now it seems dangerously close to the house. The once dirt road is now gravel road which makes the bus travel more quickly without the dusty feel of the gush of wind.

The passengers on the bus still wave back with smiles on their faces. The friendly nature of the village hasn't changed one bit. As my grandmother works on her vegetables and cleans around the house, I do work for school instead of playing with dolls. However, I still work on the same bed that I used to play in. The living room now smells of fresh wood and nature; the secure cigarettes smell that my grandfather brought with him is still in my heart after seven years of his passing.

Do you have a place you can go to, no matter what happens in life, where you will find absolute contentedness? A place that brings you a feeling of being home no matter how many years pass by? My grandmother's house is my home. Lots of things may change in my life, but that house will always bring me comfort and a feeling of being home again. Many things really have changed, such as my grandmother's daily gardening routine and the road while other things such as the relative size of the house are simply changes in my way of seeing the place. Yet the changes themselves are only natural effects of passing time, because the house itself still represents the majestic memories and feelings of my childhood years.

*Editors' note: The following four pieces, as well as Danielle Chevalier's "Modern American Girl," originated in a creative writing exercise inspired by Jamaica Kincaid's short story "Girl."*

## Prude

Amber Holt

Can you pass the turkey? I made two this year. One for us, and a vegan one for Victoria. She's been vegan for over a year now. Are you really going to eat everything on your plate? "Yes." New Year's Eve is coming up, is your resolution going to be to lose weight? "No." Why not? "I don't know." *Because my weight is nothing to be ashamed of.* Your younger sister is too skinny, do you think Rose is bulimic? "No." Why not? "Because I know she's not." *And you shouldn't assume so because she's skinnier than Victoria.* Well, I wouldn't be surprised if she was. Victoria has been with her boyfriend for three years now, and Rose can't keep one for more than a month. Do you have a boyfriend yet? "No." Why not? "I don't know." *Because I don't want one.* You should start thinking about it. Someday you'll want a nice husband and kids. "Okay." *I don't want kids.* Do you know why Rose dyed her hair again? "Because she wants to?" She's going to ruin her hair. *Victoria and I dye our hair too.* She's wearing too much makeup as well. "I don't think she is." Well, you don't wear makeup that often, so you wouldn't know. "I'm wearing makeup." *I know enough to keep my mouth shut and not put her down for the amount of makeup she's wearing.* "Yes, but it's not nearly enough to cover all those blemishes of yours. Just look at Victoria. Maybe she'll be able to offer some advice." "Good idea." *Copying Victoria wouldn't satisfy you anyways.* How are your grades? "Good." Did Rose get pregnant and drop out yet? "What? No, she didn't." *How dare you ask such a question? Rose is sitting just across the table. Why not? "Actually, I have a question for you. If Rose is the slut, and I'm the prude. What's Victoria? The favorite?" What did you just say? "Nothing. Can you pass the turkey? I think I'll have another plate."*

## Modern American Girl

Julia Schofield

Make sure to set your alarm clock super early. You must remember to pick out your clothes the night before. I know you will be drowsy, but there is always a price to pay for beauty. You will learn that the bathroom is your best friend. Remember to take a quick shower, brush your teeth, wash your face, and never EVER forget to blow dry your hair. You can't straighten your hair if it looks like spaghetti noodles. *Why must I straighten it?* Don't you want to show people that you know how to look good? Anyways you're GOING to have to do your makeup. Never put your makeup on before your clothes. You can't chance an accident. Always start with your foundation. It needs to match your skin tone or you'll end up looking like an art project. I notice those dark marks on your cheeks. We need to cover that immediately. Nobody wants to see that. Then you have to move on to your puffy eyes. *But I like my eyes.* Shush now, if you want to be pretty you need to fix them. Now, remember to dab on eye shadow first and blend everything together. Blending is MOST essential. I hope you have a very steady hand to do your eyeliner. It may be scary to put something that close to your eye, but the results are worth it. Make sure to steady your hand. Steadier. Don't shake your hands like that. Forget it we'll get back to that. Let's work on your lashes. *Who cares what my eye lashes look like?* Well darling everyone! If you don't fix them everyone will think that you're just plain lazy. So put on mascara and make sure to crimp them. You need to hold it for 10 seconds. After that you're going to have to put on lipstick. Those lips need help. You are rather pale so put on something darker to compliment your face. *Compliment?* Yes! You don't want your face to look like a bozo the clown do you? I thought not. After that we must work on this head of hair. Make sure to divide it into sections with clips and clamp the straightener as close to your head as possible. *It is hot though, what if I burn myself?* If you don't get over your fears you'll have frizzy hair and no friends. Keep up! Make sure to brush while you straighten to eliminate knots. You want your hair as flat as possible. Natural hair is sad hair. Once you have completed this phase we can finally move on to your clothes. They need to help hide your stomach area. *Why am I hiding my stomach?* Dear no one needs to see your stomach. A flowy shirt will do and some tight leggings to hide your thighs. Make sure to accessorize with necklaces and bracelets. They always complete the look. This should take about an hour and a half so use your time wisely. Did you get all that? *Why can't I just go like I am?* Honey, don't you want to be beautiful?

## Parenting

Ash Barron

Wake up, already! Get dressed, you're going to be late. Are you really going to wear that? Well, I can't stop you- go brush your teeth. Don't you backsass me! Go have breakfast. Why aren't you drinking your orange juice? What do you mean it tastes funny? Hurry up already! You ought to get yourself an alarm clock, I'm tired of waking up this early. Get a job! Oh, you're leaving? Don't forget your coat. Hey! Stop! I said, "Don't forget your coat"! No, your sweatshirt doesn't count as a coat. Hurry and get your coat on. Don't ignore me! Don't you put those headphones on when I'm talking to you!

Oh, you're back. You were cold? Next time, wear a coat like I told you to. You'll catch a cold! What do you mean they'll make fun of you? Don't cry! Have a snack and tell me what happened. Just relax for a while, you can do your homework later. Okay, you should do your homework. You're going out? Be home by ten, and wear a coat, okay? Don't make such a sad face.

I told you to be home by ten, it's three in the morning. You look exhausted- just go to bed. You're not going out on a school night again, so don't bother asking. It's not that I hate you, okay? Stop frowning! Just. Sleep. Already! No, you can't spend all night on your phone. It's late enough as-is, and you have school in the morning! I can't believe you!

Hey! It's time to get up! Don't pretend to be sick! ... Oh... You really are. Just go back to sleep. No, you can't go to school today... I don't care how important that test is, you're staying home. "Why?"... Because you're sick! You need this test to pass? You're failing English?! I can't believe it, you're such a good writer, how on earth are you failing?! ... Fine. Get dressed, brush your teeth. You probably shouldn't have such a heavy meal for breakfast. Why are you giving me such an evil look? Take your medicine. Get in the car. You better pass this test. You studied, right?

You're home. How are you feeling? It's nice to see you happy, for once. Do your homework before dinner. You shouldn't bring your computer to dinner. No, you still can't go out. Brush your teeth. It's getting late, go to bed already!

Goodnight. I love you, no matter how bossy I may get or how angry you may become. Please don't forget that I love you.

## Modern American Boy

Jacob Tate

No you cannot have the Barbie doll. Dolls are for girls only. Don't cry, maybe we can work something out but you cannot break my trust, okay? Well fine, you can have it but you must only play with it in the car so your father doesn't see. *Why do toys have to have genders?* No, you cannot have the girls' McDonalds Happy Meal, you have to get the one with the monster truck. You know your father would never allow this. Cheer up, maybe we can work something out okay? You have to keep this between just us. I love you so I'll get it this once, but you have my trust. Just hide behind the front seat, okay? *Why can't I like what I like?* Dance?! Why the hay do you want to do that? Basketball, baseball, and there's even soccer, but dance? You're starting to worry me, but fine. *Sorry for the letdown.* You see a policeman costume, even a fireman's, but you want to be a princess? You know I can't help you with this one, how would you trick or treat? You want to wear this around our neighborhood? Bob, people aren't as understanding as me okay? I love you, I love you so much, but maybe just try on the policem- ..... Okay fine quickly go to the car while I cash out, hurry go! I'll be right there, I love you hun. *Sorry I did it again.* You're about to graduate high school, don't do this to me now. We've gone so far, why are you doing this? Why are you doing this to me Robert? Why would you even ask something as stupid as that? What, you expect me to say yes? To let you go to your senior year homecoming dance in a dress. You couldn't have kept it to yourself? Kept it at the back of your head? You really thought I would say yes?! You're worrying me. *Sorry.*

## My Momma

*Jacob Tate*

"People need to understand that drug abusers won't quit until they want to. Don't waste all of your money trying to cure them with therapy unless potential is seen. The only other possible opportunity to go clean is through a traumatizing experience, such as an overdose. Sometimes abusers are already too far down the wrong path to change. Their stubborn and selfish mentalities are heavily increased, but are not an excuse. Drug abusers lose their pre-existing morals," muttered the talk show lady host right as I turned the television in my grandad's living room off.

I try and keep away from reality television being that it ironically comes off as the fakest to me. Before my momma got sick she used to always tell me, "Don't watch that reality tv shit Aaron, you'll lose your decency." At times I really do miss when my momma gave me stupid lectures like that. It's those weird ways about someone that individualizes them from everybody else that you grow to love.

I have to keep myself busy somehow because my momma doesn't get home from the doctor's until late tonight. My grandad had to take her to the doctor's this morning because she had one of her attacks so I'm staying at his place. She has attacks like this sometimes because they are a symptom of her illness, I think. I remember several years ago I would fall asleep standing up against my momma's bed until she noticed my little head sharing her pillow. Her face was as pale as a ghost's with eyelids blacker than tar. I would keep trying to get her attention by snapping my fingers but it's almost like she was swimming deeper into her own black hole. Her shrill voice piercing the air like a sharp needle as she grasped for a breath.

I just live with my momma, but I like it that way. Well my momma's new boyfriend stays at our apartment now because my momma just needs a lot of attention. That's not surprising because she always needed attention from my father, it's because she's a Leo. I'm a Gemini, the hardest astrology sign to read, which all makes sense. But Leos carry this big fear of being ignored by the ones they love. If you ignore her needs, the chip on her shoulder grows as big as a boulder. My grandad threw away one of my paperback astrology novels because to him it's junk that messes with your brain. I just like to tell myself that my momma's new

boyfriend doesn't live with us; he just shares a little bit of the apartment. It's stupid that he gets to stay in my apartment whenever he pleases. I wonder if he's going through my stuff because I'm not there to stop him. One of those, "Because I'm a grown up and not a child like you, I have power" excuses. It's not even like I'm a child, I'm thirteen years old. His name is Dolan but he gets worked up if you call him that. He wants to be referred to as his street name, Dolomites, but I have yet to call him that. I came to the conclusion to just call him DJ to make both of our lives easier, especially mine. It's not even like he's important to me, he's just there like an assigned roommate in college. Besides the fact that roommates are permanent and it's almost guaranteed that my momma will throw him out in the blink of an eye. I'll give it the most two months before the next guy lives with us, so I try my best not to let him get to me. We don't even simply share a smile when we pass each other in the apartment; he just looks at the ground and continues to walk like I don't even exist. Why do grownups do that? I swear adults have more social problems than us teenagers.

I know that there is something going on with my mom, but whenever these worrisome thoughts come to my head I immediately put them to the back of my brain. I'm actually really good at it, try letting a school teacher teach that instead of the Pythagorean Theorem. Even when I was a little boy I knew that I was raised different. I would always compare my life to James'. Our childhoods were dissimilar even when we would never spend more than two days apart. Whenever I went over to his house, his mom would cut up peanut butter and fluff sandwiches for us and pour us each a glass a milk. I remember every time I came over she would ask me if I wanted the crust on my sandwich peeled off. James wasn't allowed over my house, nobody was. It wasn't a problem until he started to question why we always had to have our playdates at his house or at my grandad's. To make things easier I just told him that it's nothing personal and that my momma is really sick, but if anybody not related to her came over they would catch her sickness.

My grandad's been trying to convince me to stay with him my entire life. "Trying" as in sending my momma to court for a custody battle two days before my sixth grade graduation. You'd think I'd hate the guy but you can't choose your family. I don't know what I'd do if I couldn't live with my momma, she needs me. He's also done a lot for my momma so I can't dislike the man. He's driven her and stayed overnight with her for her doctor appointments. Sometimes they would last weeks, even

months. I know that doctors help, but I miss my momma when she leaves me for over a month's period of time. The only nightmares I get are when she's not here and I don't know when she'll be home. I really hope she comes home soon. I feel my anxiety skyrocket as I swipe my hands against my pants getting rid of all the nervous sweat. Call me silly, but I sometimes wait up all night lookin' out my grandad's huge bedroom window. I can't say that I love having to stay in his house alone when he's gone, but Tigs, his Golden Retriever, keeps the bed bugs from biting. Tigs jumped up and sat with me on my grandad's bed as I continue to look out the window.

I see headlights pull in the driveway as Tigs jumps off my lap and barks down the front door. When I walk downstairs and peep my head out of the front door I see my granddad get out of his grey Volkswagen and slam his door. "You promised me you quit for good this time Kimberly. I thought we agreed, this was your last chance. Your last goddamn chance Kim! What about Aaron? What about your son? You were supposed to do it for him," he yells at my momma. He paces back and forth through his front yard crunching the crisp grass with his shoes. He rubs his hands through his hair trying to calm himself down, but just makes things worse because I see my momma start to cry.

I desperately ask him what's wrong which just seemed to add more fire to his flame. He stopped pacing for a minute and looking my direction. "Ask your mother," shouted my grandad. Foam flew from his face as he barked again, "Ask your goddam mother." I could feel an unconfident teardrop start to form right on the apple of my cheek. He points to the passenger side of his car and continues to shout, "Ask your goddam mother, let her tell you."

I want to tell him to stop scaring us and drive me and my momma home, but I can't seem to form the words with my mouth. He looks at her as if he's expecting her to respond, but she's probably just scared like I am. His eyes grow larger and start to pulse as the silence continues to last. She goes to move her crusty lips, but her face just turns sour like she's too disgusted with herself to speak. I could smell the uncomfortableness pouring out my momma's skin in the form of sweat. The most potent smelling sweat one could imagine.

Impatient as ever, my grandad turns to me and says, "Your mother has a problem, a serious problem. She doesn't go to the doctor's. I don't even think they could help her. Aaron, your mother is a drug addict."

Now silence has stopped time and I blackout for a second. The only thing I could hear were a family of crickets singing against the moonlit sky. As they proceed to sing, I feel cold energy surround my calves, as if a ghost was breathing on them. My grandad walks over to me and kisses my forehead.

Time is still deader than ever. I think my silence gave him the impression that I agree, so he tried to take me inside. He mutters, "I'm sorry, but it's about time you know the truth. Aaron, don't you see now that it's time you live with me?"

No, I told him. She needs me.

When my knees eventually give out, I fall down on the mahogany wooden porch and cry at the sight of my momma.

Why do tears taste like pennies?

## The Iguana

*Kevin Buchan*

Jack sat on his bed wondering what to do with the Iguana. His best friend Todd, also in the second grade had snuck it in and out of school successfully, and Jack transported it home undetected on the bus. Todd was great at sneaking things, but Jack had thought he'd get caught for sure.

The green, scaly lizard looked very uncomfortable all squashed up like that inside the plastic storage container into which he was crammed. At least Jack thought it was a "he." He'd have to ask Todd if he knew one way or the other. Even if he didn't know, he'd make something up and Jack would pretend to believe him. What difference does it make to a lizard anyway if you're a boy or a girl?

If Mom found him, she'd absolutely bug out! Lizards, toads, frogs, worms, snakes and pretty much anything that slithered or didn't have fur was off limits. Mom liked using the word "verboten", which Jack assumed meant not allowed under any circumstances. Best to find a good warm place to keep him. Jack had decided the iguana was a boy.

Jack found a good, sturdy wooden crate under the stairs in the basement. It had a latching top and gave the little guy enough room to walk around. A water bowl was easy enough to sneak out of the kitchen; Mom wouldn't miss one of the green ones she never used. Camouflaging a spot in his closet with dirty laundry, Jack made a home for his new pet. With any luck, Mom wouldn't find it for a few days. If he took care of the little guy for a week or so without getting caught, maybe she would let Jack keep it – as long as he kept it out of sight.

Jack heard the car pull into the driveway and started to panic, running back and forth between his bed, the closet and the window. Looking out, he saw that his Mom had gotten out of work a little early. It's Friday, Jack realized. Of course she's home early. He closed the closet door where his iguana was neatly hidden away and waited for his mother to enter his room while he pretended to read a book.

Jack realized his mistake when his mother caught him pretending to read. Math no less. How could he be so stupid to believe that his mother would think he was innocently sitting in his room on a Friday reading a Math book?

She stood in the doorway, looking first to Jack, then surveying the room in minute detail. Jack could feel his ears getting warm and the room felt stuffy all of a sudden.

Jack's Mom asked him what was going on and the look on her face let Jack know that she'd know he was lying when he answered her. He swallowed hard.

It took her about thirty seconds. It was like she was playing You're Getting Warmer, You're Getting Colder by reading his face as she walked through his room. Jack remembered his father telling him that it's so much easier to always just tell the truth. Just take what's coming to you – it's easier.

The iguana is no longer in residence at Jack's home. If you'd asked Jack what he'd learned from the ordeal that Friday afternoon, he would have answered that people sometimes pee their pants if they get scared enough. And although Jack took what was coming to him, when he thinks back to his Mom's lunatic frenzied screaming reaction when she opened the crate and realized in utter horror that it was an iguana, it was all worth it.



## The Moment

*Brianna Staley-Ross*

“Grammy, what is wrong with Mama?”

Here I am, fifteen years old. I do not know much about the world yet, but I do know that something is not right with my mother. She has been transferred to a step down unit, recovering from gastric bypass surgery. By now, it is post-operative six hours, and my sister, grandma and I are finally allowed to see my mama. We were all expecting to see a woman lying in bed, rosy cheeked, perhaps somewhat fatigued from the anesthesia, but overall in favorable spirits, excited to begin her new journey and healthy lifestyle.

However, what we saw was quite the opposite.

My mother was gray, the color of the clouds before an April shower storm. Her entire body was shaking with effort as she tried to catch her breath, rattling like an old car that could barely manage to make it up a mile-high San Francisco hill. She could not speak. It was terrifying. My grandmother, who had just retired from her nursing career of thirty-some years, paged in a fellow nurse. Upon arrival, the nurse reported that my mother was fine, and there was absolutely nothing of concern in relation to my mother’s condition, as expressed by the surgeon. My grandmother was furious. Beads of sweat lined her forehead and bulbous nose, and she became the one with the rosy cheeks, only flushed with anger. My sister and I were shoo-ed back into the dark waiting room, leaving behind my mother, her mother, and my mother’s nurse. At that moment, I sharply inhaled the distinguishable hospital stench: a mixture of sterility, bodily fluids, hope and death. Of these, I realized why the last scent smelled so familiar: it smelled like my mother.

Minutes later, my mama is rushed back into emergency surgery, as insisted by my grandmother. All I can see is someone pushing down on her chest, hard, and I am hearing the sound of her ribs cracking, one by one. The wheels of her hospital bed are spinning in rhythm with my head, fast and squeaky. I cannot think, yet questions are whirring through my mind as fast as my mother is dying. Will my sister and I be forced to grow up in a matter of only days? We are not prepared for this. But no one ever is, right? The only answer I have is that I know that I want to leave, and I never want to come back.

Hours later, my mother is in the surgical intensive care unit. We are told what no mother and no daughters want to hear about their loved one.

“The surgical team and I only expect a 10% chance of survival. We are going to do everything that we can to ensure that she is as comfortable as possible. We’re sorry.”

Just like that, I taste the salty waves of my tears crash down on my face, and I can feel myself being caught into the riptide of the unknown. Grammy asks if my sister and I would like to see my mother. I do not want to, but I know that my mama would have liked to know that my twin and I were there before she took her last breath, as she gave us our firsts.

We walk in. Slowly. Are we even moving? This must be quick sand; my feet are sinking as fast as my heart. I can see my mama now. She has a tube shoved down her throat, taped onto her frozen cheeks. It looks like it is sucking the life out of her, even though I know that it is putting her life back in. Now, all I hear is the humming of the machine that is keeping her alive. It is deafening. As cacophonous as the breathing machine is being, what scares me the most is the sound in mine and my mother’s body: silence.

Weeks later, we have developed a routine. My Grammy picks up my sister and I from school, we go to the McDonald’s Drive-Thru down the road from the hospital, and ride the elevators to the third floor, where my mother and her coma await us. However, today is no ordinary day. Today is THE day. My mother will be extubated, because she is now breathing on her own. She has miraculously woken up from her sedation slumber. Not long ago, my mother was practically dead, only kept alive by the memories I had played on repeat since her surgery. But today, she has proven us all wrong, a very motherly thing to do.

Months later, my mother is still unable to function as she once could before. The road to recovery is a slow and painful process, and it is every bit as painful for me to watch my mother be so helpless. One day, as my sister and I are by her side, she motions for us to bring the garbage can closer to her. She cannot speak, can only just barely lift a finger, gentle and weak. She wants to throw away a tissue that she has grasped in her hand. As we bring the trash bin closer to her, she hurdles the crumpled piece of recycled paper into the bucket with all of the energy that she has gained since her ballet with death. My mama thinks that she is a

basketball star with her slam dunk. Except for her crowd, the reality is that she merely dropped the tissue, where it fell right to the floor, a wounded butterfly.

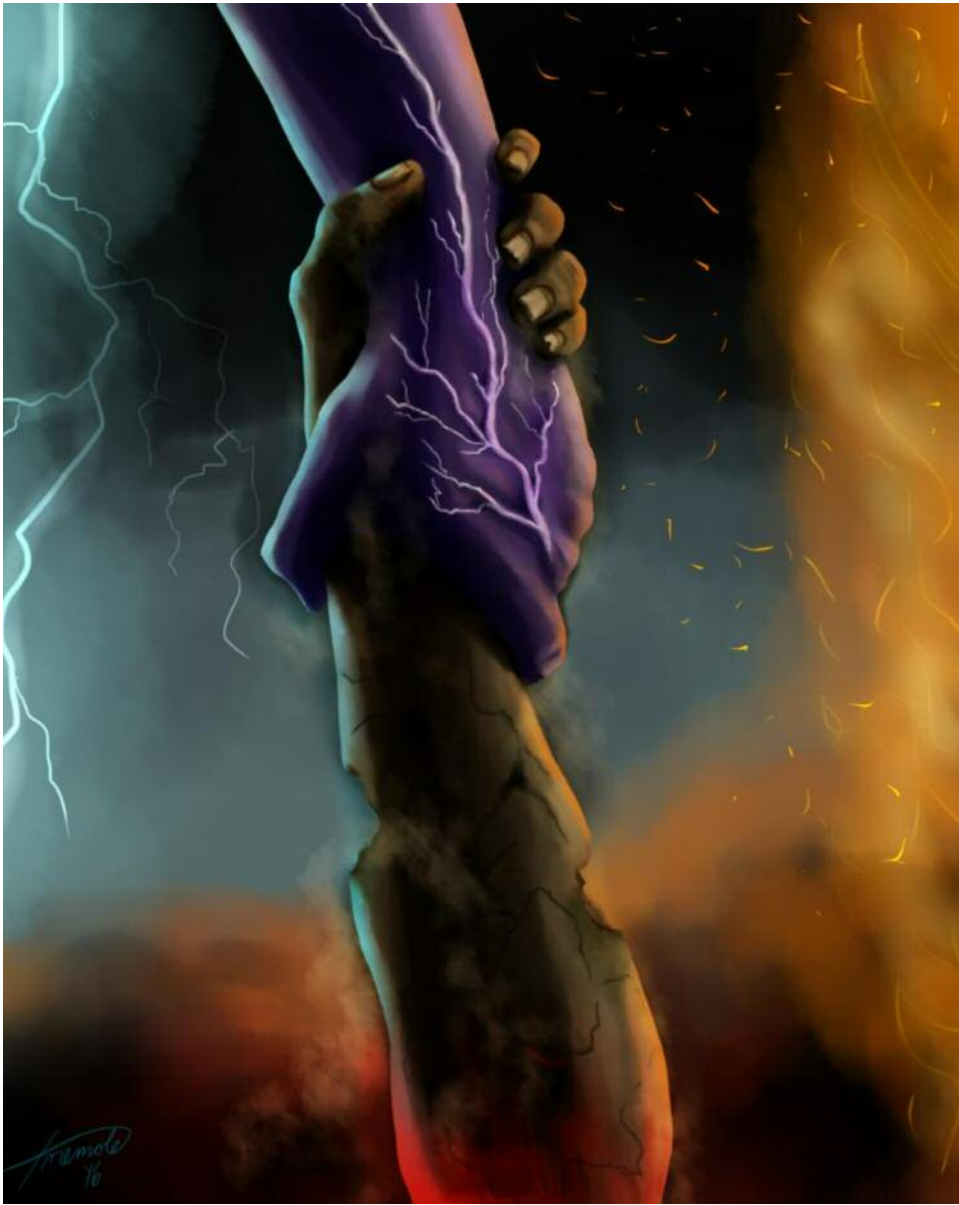
It was the saddest, most pathetic thing I had ever seen in my entire life. I could not help but to cry once again, a familiar routine. This was not my mama. She would never be the same. I could not look at her. But as I lifted my blue eyes to look at hers, my mother had the most tremendous smile painted on her face, a true artist. She was so proud of herself, her happiness as tangible as the sun's gentle rays brushing your shoulders on a warm summer day.

It was in that moment that I knew what I was going to do for the rest of my life. Here was my mother who, only months before, was dead. And now, here she was, beaming with pride at her mucous filled tissue that had landed on the floor. She was undeniably full of life, blooming like the flowers of early spring. So I covered my mother's weak, but also strong, hands in mine, gave her the same smile that she had given me and said, "Mama, I'm going to be a Nurse!"

## **The Moon**

*Kaylynn Lawson*

I affect the world in many ways.  
I show you the way in the dark of the night.  
I pull on the waves that roam the seas.  
I reveal to you my various faces.



*"Elemental" by Teresa Memole*



*"Untitled" by Katherine Eisenrod*



*"Table of Healing" by Teresa Joy Richards*

## The Invitation to Grow

*Teresa Joy Richards*

I am lying flat with my eyes closed shut as if they are chiseled from stone. My hands are at my sides and too heavy to lift. Why can't I move? It is as if my whole body is a stone relief. Strong emotions of frustration and anger begin to swell in me causing me to want to scream, but I cannot scream. If I become angry enough I might melt out of the icy stone I am trapped in, but no, I cannot move. My heart becomes greatly distressed and saddened. But now I must trust and move on. Then, I feel a drop of liquid at the base of my eye running quickly down the side of my head and tickling my ear. As the tear releases, I release my grasp on pain, and my eyes begin to open. More tears gloss across my eyeball. My forefinger twitches. This is what it felt like to awake from my former circumstance full of heavy, stone-like barriers. And this difficult circumstance was an opportunity to grow and build my character. A tick bites, a disease contracts; there is nothing one can do to prevent the start, when it has started. But there is a thing one can do: grow. Without this turn of events, opportunity to grow in certain specific ways could not have happened and character would not have developed.

August of 2007 gave a whole new set of strange experiences starting with a bull's eye rash encroaching half of my back, and three weeks of a high fever to follow. Shortly after, I was diagnosed with Lyme disease. When I heard the news, the first thought that came to mind was along the lines of hopelessness. Feeling like my life was over, I was deeply discouraged and even angry. I knew I was in for a bumpy ride. The pavement was gone; I was about to embark on a dusty dirt road. Along this rough soil path, I would soon find many mountains blocking my way. People call these mountains symptoms. And these symptoms caused many troubles, one of which was the difficulty of absorbing information. Trying to absorb information became like trying to catch air with a net: it went through, but that's all it did. Also, I began having neurological issues and my coordination decreased. I would stutter and fumble over words and struggle with mental clarity. And to top off the tip of the mountain, I was extremely fatigued. Because of all these symptoms, operating as a normal person was near to impossible.

This was my circumstance. It tempted and tried me to halt perseverance and patience, and to drop hope and faith to the ground on

which I stood. But the ground is where all trees grow from. This hard circumstance was a bed of fertile soil ready for strong, sturdy trees to grow from. I was only a seed; how was I to accept this reality with physical, mental, emotional and spiritual battles suffocating me from above? How else do we grow though? I must have faith in God; that is what I would say to myself. Faith without the actions following from it is dead. So I kept my feet firmly planted in the ground and did not let go of that faith. Never give up, this was the first step; it was the first challenge.

That 2007 school year was my last year in a school. I couldn't handle the work load. The plan was to focus my time as a home-schooled student with a curriculum I would study at home, supplemented with a weekly class in a home school group. We thought if I did these things that I would finish up high school more easily. But it was minimal activity and I still found myself not able to operate as most people could. And after three years on medications, I wasn't getting better; my health even worsened. By the time 2010 rolled around, we dropped class after class, leaving me cut off from most activities. And loneliness for people became the hardest struggle of all. Except for two or three others, my mother, father and sister were the only people who could really understand and comfort me and who opened their hearts to me. I was cut short mentally and physically, which affected me emotionally and challenged me spiritually.

While "never giving up" was the first step, I now needed to learn how to keep on going. To persevere and to develop patience during this event was the next barrier. Perseverance and patience rely on the attitude of faith, and the seeds of faith are planted in me. Seeds are planted under, not above, soil. They seem to be smothered on all sides. When it rains, they seem to drown. But the soil that surrounds them and the water that soaks them, edifies their growth. They absorb the minerals and nutrients and eventually they poke through to the surface to show their face to the sun, which is waiting for them. The soil was only a temporary barrier: a temporary wall, which when knocked down, can be used to make a bridge. This is what the seeds do to grow into beautiful trees. Similarly, difficult circumstances challenge us and show us that if we are patient and persevere we can advance further than we thought we could. But in order to do this we must recognize potential in it. We must absorb the nutrients in the soil surrounding us and persevere through it to reach the sun.

Around the spring of 2013, I began to feel better. But although I was praying and praying to be healed, I was not healing the way I wanted. I had to ask myself, what is the learning potential in this trial? How can I embrace the struggle as a teaching tool? What is God showing me? But all throughout life, the road blocks don't ever go away. There are seasons of resting and seasons of growing. And I was in growing season. In order to produce fruit I had to have gone through that growing season. I realized that I developed character through this circumstance's struggle. Character cannot reach certain depths of fortitude and strength unless it is challenged. My character was challenged through this event and it created tone in my character.

By 2014 I was seeking out God for the next step in my life. I had completed one semester at Hudson Valley Community College and was about to take a course in the fall. During that summer, I remembered that faith without the actions following from it is dead. This phrase helped me not to give up, but the Lord was now showing it to me in a different light. I realized that my prayer, no matter how sincere it was, was not a prayer of faith. I was asking for something, but not believing that God could do it. God is not restricted by my preconceived idea of when or how I would be healed. So I decided to pray in faith. I prayed to the Lord asking that He would heal me that fall semester if it was His will. The Lord provided some holistic methods of healing and now I am healed.

When my eyes began to open from that nightmare of stone, originating from a mere bite, I realized that this circumstance was a tool. But often, we let similar tools control us instead of controlling our attitude going into it. If we are always fearful going into a hard circumstance, we will come out of it learning less than we could if we change our attitude going in. I now say to myself: Next time a challenging event befalls, don't allow that challenge to become larger than what you and God can do with it. God allowed this situation to show me that when I look to Him, my strength was found. He showed me that I could grow more and that He is larger than any circumstance. He was refining me through the fire, planting me in the ground so I could grow. My faith and strength comes from Him. Because I trust Him and absorbed the trial, I have come out of it stronger. Any difficult event is an invitation to grow into a strong, sturdy tree even when you start as a buried seed.

## The Blue Hortensia

Nicole Casale

There have always been times in my life when I felt the weight of the world atop of my shoulders. Always that feeling of having a heavy heart that never ceased to rise. The dark cloud that loomed over me on this day had been lingering above me for nearly three months. The fatal monster that once lay dormant in my grandmother's abdomen had a revival. As the warm summer months shifted into fall and the leaves began to fall, so did grandmother. Down went her health, her positivity and her freedom. What once was the happiest times of the year became some of the most depressive as dancing Christmas characters and carolers seemed to mock her in their movements with their happiness while she lay motionless, bedbound to her favorite armchair that resembled her classic pea soup recipe.

Life had begun to feel draining, with simple tasks such as climbing the stairs exhausting. Every day began to feel the same. I would rise from my bed each morning blankly looking out the frosted window only to discover that yet again the skies matched the bleakness of my life. Another day and another hour spent driving down the overly salted highway into downtown Albany. The Hospice wing of Albany Medical center was riddled with Bibles, snotty tissues and a few broken chairs in the lounge. I had my usual spot by the west wing window that loomed over the street watching snowflakes drizzle from the cool evening sky.

That winter came and went and soon we were left with one less happy soul. I found myself retreating inward unable to escape my depression. Spontaneously, I'd decided to sign up for a class trip to Costa Rica and then two weeks after my grandmother's death, I found myself on a plane 1500 miles home with yet again a bleak expression upon my face. The story does get better, I promise you.

I'd have these moments of pure self-reflection, walking along dingy broken cobble stone streets in la Fortuna, in small hostel bathrooms and in the many hours spent riding along in the guided tour bus. Each time I found myself alone, and I would think, "Is this how the rest of my life will be?"

There came a moment I would never forget, as this was such an awakening moment. Hour four of being cooped inside of a tour bus, we pulled over on the side of the road. Winding gravel roads frantically teetered along the edge of the mountains and roadways carved into the vibrant sides of cliffs. Each turn and twist revealed miles of dense lush trees that make up the cloud forest. Beyond those mountains lay the large expanse of ocean that stretched as far as the eye could see fading into oblivion. But what lay at my feet was what brought life back into my eyes. The bluest, most vibrant flowers I'd ever seen came sprouting out of this ugly mass of dying leaves. Blue, like the color of the sky and my grandmother's eyes. Blue Hortensia, a cousin of the Hydrangea, is what I'd found that day. It reminded me of the very same pink ones we'd grown at my home in the springtime, Grandmother's favorite season, as she grew flowers of all varieties for a living for twenty years. This was the first year she wouldn't be able to tend to her creations.

That day set the tone for the rest of the trip. No longer did I allow myself to feel suffocated by my sadness because I knew it was time to heal, time to create something better than the feelings that held me down. Costa Rica will always hold a special place in my heart as its beauty started a fire that I could not put it out. It's a country bountiful with rich beauty, discovery and *pura vida* as the locals would say, pure life. That is how I chose to live my life from that moment forward only *pura vida*.

## Barren Trees

*Kyle Farnell*

I see, I smell, I hear.  
The trees are now gone,  
Leaving me to fare for myself,  
Leaving me to challenge the frost.

The leaves are dying so it may seem,  
The depleted branches now reach to the stars,  
The once prominent fertility swiped away,  
The trees are ominous.

The soft cracking, the microscopic decay,  
I hear the death around me,  
I hear the whispered cries of waning life,  
The sound, it seems to envelop me.

The scent of summer is leaving me now,  
Reminiscent of the warm humidity,  
My nose begins to fill,  
It is engulfed in the beauty of the pungency surrounding me.

The cold draws nearer,  
Leaving me to fare for myself,  
The cold materializes,  
No longer do the sights, sounds nor scents arouse me.

It is neither summer, nor fall,  
The desiccated bodies, with limbs of iron are barren,  
The long awaited sleep has begun,  
Until the sun warms me once again, I am the numbed.

## The Absence

*Kyle Farnell*

And exactly what is one to do with the vacancy in their heart?  
The shared laughter, synonymous thinking and loss haunt me.  
The missing part of my heart,  
The bottomless, unoccupied cavity.

The emptiness I feel,  
The untimely expiration of life,  
The unrelenting feeling of despair,  
The tear in my being.

To lose is to learn, yet what does one learn?  
How is this a lesson?  
The feeling of deprivation by unmentioned words,  
The thought of "one more time".

To dwell on such thoughts is unhealthy,  
To believe in redemption is unworthy,  
To think of such things is unproductive,  
To find that those thoughts are pointless, leaves me disheartened.

I ask once more, what does one do with the vacancy in their heart?  
That gash becomes a scar,  
That crater becomes a lake,  
That fissure becomes a rivulet.

That is the answer,  
The answer is clear,  
To deal with the loss of a loved one,  
Is to remember to have no fear.

## Overeverythinging

*Emily VanLeuven*

Overthinking is a dreadful, appalling mechanism to be a master at. Imagine having a modest scenario and turning it into a problematic consequence. Imagine continuously not feeling good enough for anyone; for friends, for parents, for teachers. Imagine ruining and corrupting something that has never seemed so perfect, so flawless, so pure in your life before.

In those awful, poor years of high school, I felt as if I was never smart enough, I was never pretty enough, I was never fast enough. I would stay home all night and not venture away out of my house on the eve of a test. I would drink coffee; energy drinks and eat pre workout supplements just so I could remain awake and stay up all night to study. Peeling my eyelids open in the morning from just the few hours of sleep I received I would journey my way to my test. Coming to find out all the questions were multiple choice. Which meant four possible answers to choose from. Which meant four times the thinking. Which meant I got them wrong.

Senior year I thought I learned how to deal and cope with my overthinking. I just had to relax. That was until I walked in on my boyfriend in the shower, with the girl he slept with the night before in his bed still. The sad part is, I wasn't even mad at him. My mind just went senseless trying to become everything that this girl was so he would want to be with me and not her. I thought if I dyed my hair to her brown locks, he would like me better. I thought if I threw up a couple times a day, I would be the same size as her. I thought I needed not to be so prude, so he would like me better. I thought I needed to be everything she is and everything I'm not. Yet little did I know that I still wasn't good enough.

I was supposed to go somewhere; I was supposed to be somebody; I was supposed to make him a proud father. I played as hard as I could. Came out every game with blood, sweat and tears left on the wooden court, literally. No matter how hard I played, no matter how many points I scored, no matter how many rebounds I banged around for, no matter how many assists I passed, it still wasn't good enough for him. The car rides home were the worst; I had to sit next to him and listen to everything I did wrong. Even though I made eight baskets, the two I took and missed were the only ones he cared about. The turnover I

caused was all that matters. Not how hard I worked to get the ball after that.

You see, it didn't matter how hard I worked to be the perfect son he always wanted, I was never good enough.

With all of these situations in the past it still affects my future. I still stay up late worrying about grades, I get so worked up I become sick. I still never think I'm good enough for the person I'm with. There's always going to be someone better than me out there. It's just how long it takes them to figure that out before they leave. Because of this I create problems that don't even exist. I sit and I think about everything I didn't know on the test, I think about how he's at the bar right now surrounded by other women, I think about how disappointed he is that I never pursued my basketball career. All of this is because I'm not good enough for them. But what they don't get, is that I am good enough for me!



## Paradox

*Jason Gohra*

The more I write poetry  
The less I like It  
I feel my lack of flow with every stroke  
Like teaching rhythm to the deaf  
I press my ear to the paper  
For if I cannot hear it  
I need to feel it

The more I read poetry  
The less I feel a poet  
I feel I have the trench of thought  
But I don't use the words they do  
My stanzas are broken when they should be whole  
I make  
All  
The wrong breaks

I don't have the time for a book  
If I did  
I would waste it  
Like leaving the light on  
In a well-lit basement

Most would skip the pages I spent the longest on  
But, I don't blame them  
The longer I work on a piece  
The closer it is to trash

## Sweet Surface, Bitter Core

*Jason Gohra*

Hand covered ears, but still you ask  
Control you wish to grasp  
Foundation placed on round ground  
Yellow bottles, white tops  
Colored rocks  
Pandora's Box  
Chalky, but sweet  
Enjoy...  
Repeat, repeat, repeat  
Repress until all colors start to undress  
Kaleidoscope vision is pretty  
But, beauty comes at the price of dizzy

You had dreams  
But, now you can only visit  
You had potential  
But, now you're at the bottom of the hill  
Only thing that picks you up is another pill  
I guess that is why it's called a high  
Say goodbye before every time  
For it may be the last peak you ever climb

Survive in tongue split lies  
Enjoy the rise  
Dance to the snap of the child proof cap  
Click clack, click clack, click clack  
Could it be an echo?  
Yellow never lets go  
It starts with a click  
A devil's lick  
Like glue to your brain... oh does it stick

Breathe in  
Air rushing to numb chilled lungs  
A pumping heart  
To a tapering pulse

Shaking legs  
To an unsteady core  
Weary eyes  
Behind a fragile mind  
Sacrifice the gift of life  
Euphoria achieved through test  
The closer to death, the better it gets  
You don't want a touch from death  
Only wish to be grazed  
You will be amazed at how bad his aim  
There is no gain when all is but a net loss  
Yellow will always smile  
It's up to you to frown back  
To the click of the cap

## **My Battle to Love My Body**

*Amy Briggs*

So there I sat, looking at the plain white walls of the exam room, nervously waiting for the doctor to return. I had just been weighed for the first time in about a year and I was very anxious to hear the number. "109 pounds." That was what that cold metal scale pointed to with that cruel little red arrow. I turned my head to inspect a diagram of a stomach on the wall, then Dr. Alger came through the door. She was a sweet woman with greying brown hair and a long paisley blue skirt. "Well, with all the data that we've built up, along with the testimony from the therapist..." she began. "You have anorexia Amy, we're not making this up." My mother leaned in and put her hand on my upper back, this made me flinch "Honey, you know deep down that you're sick. I mean look at you! You're-" "I know." I said with irritation. "I'm fat."

I was probably about eight years old when I first started to hate my body. I was a chubby kid, I got called names, and I was cast out by the rest of my peers in my homeschooling group, eventually I began to believe the things they called me. This is such a common problem that people of all ages, sizes and genders face nowadays in our modern world. A "problem" that will stay with us our whole lives. Our own bodies. It's sad that we live in a culture that often praises money, thinness, good looks and popularity. Because that unattainable standard is the core reason why so many people, primarily young women, develop eating disorders like anorexia and bulimia. One of the rather common symptoms that comes with eating disorders is something called body dysmorphia. Body dysmorphia is when a person literally views their body to be larger, disproportionate, and in general has an irrational picture of what their body actually looks like. If you've ever seen those depictions of a skinny woman staring into a mirror that shows her with a much larger reflection looking back, that's what it is probably referring to. I, too, had this problem, though I didn't actually believe I did at the time. My mother had to take all the full-length mirrors in the house down, so that I wouldn't break down from looking at what I thought my body looked like.

It wasn't until after fighting the disorder for over a year and a half into my four-year recovery that I finally saw it. Saw what my body really looked like. It was only a second, maybe less. I had been walking

through a mall headed for a store at the other end of the building when I walked through a clothing store. Out of the corner of my eye I saw myself reflected in a large glass mirror, but something was off. Off enough to make me stop in the middle of the crowded shopping mall to stand there in disbelief. I had seen a young girl who looked to be about 14, but her body looked younger than her face. She had thick pink hair and was carrying a plastic CVS bag. She was small and somewhat boney, her eyes looked faded and she held an unconvincing straight face as she trudged through a crowd of people, people that she could feel judging her and whispering amongst themselves about how ugly she was. This was but the first of many glimpses I got of reality and how deep in I really was. Around two years later, I would begin to see the real, inner me coming back and stretching her wings after so many days of battling herself.

Even though I'm mostly recovered today, I still have days where I can't look in a full-length mirror. There are still little impulses to check the calories, to exercise for just a bit longer, or to wear baggy clothes so people don't see what my body looks like. Or at least what I think it looks like. Even so, after all of the pain and hardships that my anorexia and bulimia put me through, and still puts me through, I'm still thankful for it. Because in fighting the battle, I was also fighting so much more. I was fighting the entire notion that our physical appearance is what gives us worth and strength, a concept that many people will never be able to fully realize. Having this insight this clear at the age of 17 will give me a better foundation for the rest of my life. Without having hit rock bottom I may have never found my passion for psychology and clinical therapy. I may have never learned that I need to accept myself to be truly free. Without having had an eating disorder, I may have never learned to love my body and myself for what I am, or grown a love for helping others to find this truth too. That is something I'm deeply thankful for.

## Angel of Life

*Danielle Hilt*

An earthly glow from the auburn rays  
Glinting innocently beneath the lashes  
Blackened speck below those orbs  
A crescent aperture, allowing life's embrace

Tresses of gold, upon the soft coiling spirals  
Bounce with the motion, unbounded by age  
A smile of hope, love and affection  
Opening the gate, unconditionally inviting

Entrances for sound, bordered by locks  
Flopping and waving, streaking of amaranthine  
The purple of hope, of survival for some  
Supporting unknown, but forcing the same

## Combat Boots

*Steven Nobles*

Many people can remember growing up and becoming attached to a particular item, whether it was a toy, a blanket, or simply a certain song that made them feel secure and comfortable in some of the worst situations. As we grow into adults, we still tend to rely on particular items such as our favorite coffee mug, cell phone or iPod to help get us through the long days of being a corporate zombie and a parent of three mischievous children. But as a soldier being deployed thousands of miles away from home, it wasn't the sound of electronics or a Starbucks coffee that got me through the day; it was my boots, the boots that I refuse to throw away regardless of their condition or how they look.

Tan and weathered, my boots were made for me, to get me through an eighteen-hour mission as comfortably as possible. I would sleep, eat, and fight in my boots, and when I took them off after the mission, I knew I have survived another day. They began to turn into a good luck charm of some sort, like a lucky rabbit's foot. They were warm and suede, and wrapped around my feet like a latex glove. They were so worn and broken-in that they started to remind me of an old pair of handmade moccasins; they were as comfortable as a pair of house slippers. The terrain was rough where these boots walked, and they had conformed to the twelve thousand feet of elevation where we hiked every day, through the dry, rocky desert of the lower Hindu-Kush mountain range. My feet would never hurt in these boots because they were a part of my body.

Today, away from all of the action in my military days, the boots still sit in my closet. Every time I look at them, I see the tan and grey color of the mountains and feel the sweat from a long foot march to the top of an outpost or village; my boots and I hold many memories together. If I take the insole out of the boots, I can still find grains of Afghan dirt and tiny pieces of rock dust that I refuse to shake out. On cold snowy mornings my boots and I will get together and reminisce about old times while I shovel the driveway with my children. But now I can put on my boots and make new memories—much better ones with my kids, and I can remember what my boots have helped me get through when I didn't have the comforts of being home.

## A Special Day

*Amanda Young*

"No running! Boys and girls, please, no running!" My teacher, Mrs. Distefano, yelled as the twelve o'clock bell rang.

But how could I not run? Today was a special day.

My parents owned their own landscaping business. My father, being the muscle, working long hours every day, and my mother, the brains, worked hard too, but from home as the bookkeeper; here she was able to take care of my older sister and I. It wasn't too often, and certainly not when the weather was this nice, that my dad would pick me up from Kindergarten.

I darted out the door to my cubby and grabbed my backpack. My classroom was at the end of the hall, so it took some serious maneuvering and control to make it out in a timely way. I zipped around Mrs. Russo's class and quickly turned the corner, and respectfully slowed down while passing the safety patrollers. Out the glass doors, I was met with three large, yellow buses and the smell of diesel in the air. To my left was a crowd of parents walking closer to the pickup spot. I squinted a little, and there he was.

Six and a half feet tall, sandy haired with bronzed skin from working outside, my dad was wearing his signature green cotton "Lawn Man" t-shirt and light blue jeans, worn with grass stains and dirt in the knees. He had his glasses on, with the shade clip flipped up. My sister and I told him he looked like Mickey Mouse when he did that, which was why he probably always did it. I could hear his boots thud as he got closer. With each step he took, a clunk of dried, brown mud fell out onto the sidewalk, leaving a trail behind him.

"Hey Kiddo!" he exclaimed. He was smiling as big as I was. I could tell by his appearance that just in the few short hours since my day had started, he had already been working hard, and to my excitement, had worked up an appetite. "What do you want for lunch?"

Within seconds, as if I was rehearsing this one line for the past three hours, I screamed "pizza", and we hopped in his truck towards the deli in our single stoplight town.

There was a bell on the door at Bonfare, and it sang as we walked in.

“Hi, Bob” said Mr. Griffin, the owner, as we walked in. “What’ll it be for you and the little one?”

“Pizza,” I reiterated gleefully. Mr. Griffin threw a couple slices into the big oven, and I began to salivate in anticipation.

While they were heating up, my dad and I walked to the back of the store. He grabbed a Peach Snapple from the cooler and I followed.

“A whippersnapper!” he joked. I laughed, even though I didn’t know what whippersnapper was. Everything my dad said was funny.

As we circled back around to the front of the store, we passed the pastry window. I put my face up to the glass. It was filled with twisty sugar doughnuts, freshly powdered linzer tortes and my absolute favorite butter cookies. They were a shade of lime green that you most certainly do not find in nature, which made their leaf shape almost humorous. The bottoms were dipped in chocolate. Sometimes, on hot days like today, the chocolate would melt a little, stick together and form a sandwich, so, sometimes, when you asked for two cookies, you’d get an extra one. That happened today.

Dad paid Mr. Griffin for our lunch and dessert, and we headed downtown to the boat launch. He parked the truck and we got out with pizza, Snapple and cookies in hand, and plopped down on one of the docks. Dad told me stories of when he was little. We laughed, played “I Spy,” and ate pizza except the crust which we fed to the ducks. Most importantly, we saved room for cookies. It was a special day.



Last summer, I was out shopping and stopped into a small coffee shop. I glanced over to their pastries, all delicately lined on top of brown parchment paper, and something lime green caught my eye. Butter cookies, shaped like leaves, dipped in chocolate. I asked for two, and paid for them and my iced coffee. I got back in my car and took a look in my bag. Much to my delight, and thanks to the July heat, I was staring at three cookies. I smiled. It was a special day.

On the way home, I called my dad.

His wife answered, “He’s still out working.”

## Three Words

*Nastasja Desch*

Unlike most teenagers, when I was eighteen, I was spending my summer at U.S. Army Quartermaster School instead of partying or heading for college. It had been over a year since I enlisted in the military and I was training to become a mortuary affairs specialist. Even though I cannot speak much about what I saw there, I can tell you what one of the first sights I noticed upon entering the port mortuary was: the creed of the mortuary affairs specialist. Despite the creed only being three words long, those words humbled me and I even got goosebumps. Ever since then, this creed has become part of who I am.

Roughly one year later I walked into a local tattoo shop with my close friend, Tovah, to get our first tattoos. It was a small shop in Troy, New York, with walls so decorated with brightly colored artwork that your eyes went insane just trying to focus on a single one. None of these images interested me, however. I already had my heart set on what I wanted from what seemed to be a whole lifetime ago.

Since there was only one tattoo artist free that night and could only do one tattoo at a time, Tovah wanted to go first. Even though I was slightly nervous about getting my tattoo done, watching her get her Emily Dickinson quote tattoo soothed me. At first, I was overwhelmed by the buzz of the equipment, which sounded like a mighty swarm of bees, but then I noticed that despite the bee stings getting jabbed into her skin several times a second, she showed little pain. Less than twenty minutes later, it was my turn.

For the placement of my tattoo I decided to get half of my collar bone inked (my friends would later make the joke that I got a collar bone tattoo at a tattoo shop called Collar City Tattoo, but what are friends for?) As the artist made the stencil for my tattoo, I kept asking Tovah if the tattooist had spelled all the words right. Despite her constantly reassuring me that nothing was misspelled, that did not stop me from double-checking.

Next, the stencil was applied to where I was getting my tattoo, leaving a near perfect blue replica of my soon-to-be body art. For a second, I felt like a little kid getting a peel away temporary tattoo, “Not so temporary anymore,” I thought to myself. I vividly remembered thinking about how angry my family was going to be when they found

out, but at the moment, I could not care less. As I lay on the tattooing table I felt like some kind of strange specimen on display for the world to see. The smell of hospitals filled my nostrils. I heard the swarm of the bees arrive again only this time they were closer and seemed much louder than they did only minutes ago. It was too late to back down now, however, and I just focused on how badly I wanted this tattoo. Finally, after what seemed like minutes instead of seconds, the needle reached the sensitive skin near my shoulder. At first, I wanted to jump but I quickly got used to the unfamiliar feeling. Instead of bee stings, what I felt was like a cat's nail scratching into my skin. After a few minutes the pain no longer bothered me that much to the point that I nearly fell asleep. I ended up asking my friend to talk to me to keep me awake. I also kept asking Tovah if the tattoo was almost done, and finally it was.

After the tattoo, I walked over to a full body mirror that hung in Collar City Tattoo to examine the new artwork on my body. It felt strange to look into the mirror and know that my new tattoo would never leave. Despite the tattoo feeling like the hot sting of a sunburn, I instantly loved it. I may not be at Carson Port Mortuary anymore, but the words "Dignity, Reverence, Respect" still mean as much to me today as they did then. Sometimes I still even get the goosebumps.

## Acid Spit

*Sabrina Jones*

gurgling, thin, thick, it weeps  
flowing, it melts through, down under  
animosity, a stranger yet my friend—  
perhaps, maybe, soon  
it comes

deep, deep;  
deep-seated, disrepair  
elsewhere it lurks in despair  
chuckled whispers, bubbling taunts  
babbling ears, and unresponsiveness

hurling, retched, vile  
absolute, degenerating and rotten  
bad blood with thickening bitterness  
parting, splitting, my reality  
in mild isolation, i know nothing

not a thing at all

## A Scent of History

*Laura Cerezo*

How does one place hold remembrance value? From person to person, memory tends to have its own form of power. One simple pass by a fig tree can bring you back years merely with its scent, urging your mind to reel back to a time once believed to be forgotten. I carry quite a number of memories as any person my age does. There is no unique pattern in saying I recall my home, my father, or the strange yet distant connection I hold with the rest of my family. In my early years, a trip of eighteen days brought me through a good portion of Europe, something that carried normalcy in my rhythm given I myself am from Spain.

Although the purpose of this trip for most of my classmates was simply to say they traveled and went shopping across the world, I had a different reason for being there. It was one that had me speaking more to my teachers rather than those my age in every historical landmark we visited. One of the most memorable ones I had the honor of seeing in person was the Ruins of the Coliseum. I never really took the time to describe what exactly I absorbed from such a visit. Given it was the heart of summer, the place was naturally busy, movements of masses in blurs that much tourism always triggered in one of the grandest places to see in all of Rome. The sight itself from the outside was one of awe. I realized as I stood in line with the rest of my group staring up at the ancient structure that I was not alone in admiring the worn stone that blazed in the sunlight. Looking around me revealed this, numerous heads upturned, eyes observing and taking in the first glimpse before we would see the rest of it.

As the line began to move and our group was guided into the Coliseum, the modern banners and bright colors offering guidance were soon left behind. Through those narrow hallways there lingered a strong scent of stone in the momentary shades that we passed, something I recall as a welcome more than anything. I noticed as we walked that the floor went from wood to mere dirt, much of it being kicked up from the common habit of those around me dragging their feet. As we stepped back into the heat of the sun, the ruins at long last lay before us, the center being the first impactful sight to take in.

A large deck of wood allowed us to get closer and absorb the grandeur of the vast, open cavity that once was hidden beneath panels

and sand. Nature had done its part and grown weeds and moss all throughout, though I can honestly admit I felt a stronger appreciation for it. Stepping closer to the deck's edge allowed me to closely see the running hallways and trap rooms that once lingered beneath this colossal structure. It made me wonder about the endless beings that were forced to participate, to those who sat down below in chains holding on to their prayers and hope that they would survive one more day in the sun after their trials in the Coliseum.

One particular trace in this place left me strongly impacted beyond words. It lingered in the warm air, the coppery scent clinging strongly to the stones that surrounded us. I never believed that after such a profound amount of time had passed that the scent of blood could still remain. A conversation with one of my professors confirmed to me that I was not alone in taking notice of this. He reminded me of all those who had fallen here, the endless battles, spars, challenges. Even with most of history being spoken between the two of us in known comfort, it was enough to leave a lingering chill in the afternoon warmth. Observing the withered stone banks where so many once sat, I found myself imagining the cold judgment of nobility holding the final decisions over those who fought, their lives hanging by a thread tailored from sheer amusement for those who could afford wine to fill their chalices.

As I patrolled along, I let myself run a hand over many of the walls that still stood to show us this crumbling edifice. There were no tiles along the ground anymore, no soft surface to feel beneath my fingertips as I touched the stone. I could hear the rest of my classmates indulging in picture taking, yet a part of me knew that this was something I would never truly capture in mere imagery. Soon enough, reminders were shouted about the rest of the day's schedule and we were urged to filter out.

Leaving the Coliseum on that warm day was one experience I remember to this day. Where the eagerness from the rest of my class lingered on our next destination along with the countless shopping they longed to indulge in, I honestly felt like a piece of me was emptier. Even from the windows of the bus, the colossal ruins to me held a strange sadness I struggled to shake off. A part of me wishes I could have brought something back with me to remember those stones, perhaps even the scent. However, as I sit here and write this experience that took place over thirteen years ago, I realize that I brought something much bigger with me, a memory.

## clockwork

*Alana Snare*

The ticking echoes in your head  
The clock consumes your every thought  
Time, time, time  
Racing,  
Demanding,  
Controlling  
But where's it going?  
Lost inside your  
Mind, mind, mind  
Ticking,  
Buzzing,  
Ringing  
Choke down the pills  
This makes you real,  
Lies, lies, lies  
Masking,  
Ignoring,  
Pretending,  
Burning through your skin,  
You feel their  
Eyes, eyes, eyes  
Darting,  
Rolling,  
Staring  
Hidden behind the veil,  
Perception is reality  
Tied, tied, tied  
Restricting,  
Constricting,  
Suffocating  
Deceived by precarious illusions  
We see nothing,  
Blind, blind, blind  
Delusions of freedom, but there's nowhere to hide  
Only safe inside your  
Mind, mind, mind  
Play the game and avert your eyes  
Clutch their shiny distractions, and never ask why  
Follow the rest of the herd to the water  
And drink in their  
Lies, lies, lies.

## Closet Confessions

*Maureen Chaisson*

I'm not gonna lie, it took my friends and me some time getting out of The Closet. We got so comfortable in our world that we never wanted to leave the safety net that was that closet, where everything was safe, and our lives were kept fluffy and light. It was never the intention to display so much of ourselves to each other, but the more we stayed together the more bonded we became. The more bonded we became the more world we saw, only it was from the eyes of each other. We became a pact, one person a twin for another. We were something indestructible, something outstanding. All of this, all of the exploration that helped us wander into life, all of the freedom to express ourselves, was done in a small, cramped, occasionally hazardous, walk-in closet.

The world morphed from something of innocence to something that was filled with dirty humor. We talked about stories we heard from our families, whether that had been from sisters, cousins, God forbid parents trying to be "up to date" on what was "cool." We talked about our fantasies of skinny dipping in the ocean, running across soccer fields stark naked, lesbianism, going to India to be in the festival of colors or to ride on elephants; to hold protests for one ridiculous thing after another. We talked about our preferences of boys for the future boyfriend: how some of us liked the gleaming muscles and chiseled jaw, while for others it was the furry Spanish men that would be able to smooth talk a lion into submission; occasionally, the strong silent broody type made the cut; the kind who made one question if he wanted a sandwich or to ravish a body; OR the hunt was on for a very pale, very fluffy, super dorky, very genuine mama's boy; yes, that was a preference in the circle.

We had used the closet like one would a support group, changing and growing on each other. As our confidence grew, we were eventually able to get ourselves boyfriends. This victory proved to us that our awkwardness wouldn't last forever. With the talk of conquered boyfriends we marveled how fantastic it is to hold hands; that lips were the softest things in the universe and that it was a curse that chapped lips could ever occur. When we started to be confused on why they had the warm fuzzy feelings, we compared our bodies, we shared our flaws, to try to see what they saw. We all stood in front of a mirror and displayed our concerns and discomforts. We had compared our noses, nipples, arms, legs, butts, stomach, the amount of control we had in our butt fat



when we tried to twerk. We started to compare our voices, our skin texture... from everywhere. We advised each other from how to dance like a temptress to coaching each other on making "flirty eyes."

We used this portal of safety like a confession box, telling our dirty secrets and hoping that we wouldn't get into too much trouble. The Closet had become a place that was free to us, where we all cried, where we all vented, where we were able to relieve the harsh realities that life was giving us. We went to the place where we told our worst nightmares, where we marveled at the similarity of our fears. This was the place where we told our explorations about the when and where of our sex lives, the place where we vowed on things like, "I would never do that because it would be degrading for all women everywhere." This was where we revealed that we had actually tried what was forbidden to ourselves and found that it was surprisingly very satisfying and, quite frankly, fantastic. We trusted each other to be our back ups for when we wanted to sneak out so we could fool around with our boyfriends without our parents knowing. We had used each other as a crutch for things like pregnancy scares and heartbreak.

Looking back, we took for granted the ease we had in that escape, before we had to move on with our lives. The silliness that we had given ourselves and each other was forced to be abandoned in the dust that was our happiness. Left to our own devices, it was only there that we could turn to vent about the stress and anguish that was starting to become our lives. Before we knew it, our boyfriends, school, family, people we hadn't even cared about, were able to make our days miserable without even trying. The Closet had become a place no longer wanted; it was a place that we had resorted to telling something that was unfortunate to us, things that were difficult, or nearly impossible to lighten. Leaving something that had become the foundation to the way of life is so extremely uncomfortable. Through the discomfort, we explored ourselves to places and ideas that were foreign. We explored the wonders of life, we explored the freedom that was given to us and we played with it. We started to express ourselves as new people without the help of The Closet and in each other, we are forever a family.

## Thoughts Under a Hidden Place

*Danielle Sodergren*

There was a hidden place full of foliage and stars  
Only could it be seen by those who dream, desire, and love  
This hidden place was soothing as the calm seas  
And beautiful as one's smile  
Untouched by greed and selfishness  
This place lived in peace and harmony  
I laid on the grass as the gentle breeze hugged me  
The fireflies danced under the shades of green  
Under the tree that was next to me  
One firefly flew down and asked, "What's on your mind?"  
I looked from behind as I answered, "I wonder what the future will be like in the next few years."  
The firefly answered, "Only time will tell."  
The fireflies continued to dance, in a lit up celebration  
Looking back up at the stars above me  
I believed to keep living in the moment  
Because if you keep pondering about the future  
Valuable time will drift away into the unknown  
Let's try making good memories and live life to the fullest every day  
Many good thoughts entered my mind  
As I drifted back asleep into the grass  
Awaiting a new day

## The Kitchen

*Amelia Restaino*

The kitchen is the hub for much of the activity that goes on in a house. And as a child, I spent many hours in it, cooking, baking, cleaning up, and eating with the whole family. It is where I learned so much and made so many memories. To me, a kitchen means family and memories.

Each time I walk into our small kitchen, I don't know what kind of delightful smells will meet my nose. Some days, it's the aroma of freshly baked bread, or the scent of my mother's early morning coffee, or the aroma of sautéed onions destined for dinner. And whether it's the slamming of the worn cupboard doors, the quiet rumbling of the tea kettle, the clattering of pans, or the sizzling of dinner on the stove, I find a kind of harmony from all the motley sounds. As I enter the kitchen from the back door, my eye is always drawn to the oblong wooden table that sits underneath a black iron chandelier. At that table, I've eaten most of my suppers with the whole family, surrounded by old-fashioned wallpapered walls. The tabletop clearly shows how much it's used with its numerous burn marks, furrows from knives, and water marks from our glasses. Along one side of the kitchen is the countertop. It's made of laminate designed to look like marble, but it's clear that it isn't the real thing. On one end of the countertop is a white, worn KitchenAid mixer that we have used daily for 20 years to make bread, pie dough, cakes, and all manner of things.

Further down the short length of counter space, I see the well-worn sink smack dab in the middle of the stretch of counter. Since we don't have a dish washer, there is always a never ending pile of dishes either expecting to be washed or waiting to be put away. From those many loads of dishes, I have learned to be an efficient dish washer. At the end of the counter in front of a large window is a wooden table; on it sit my mother's African Violets, basking in the afternoon sunlight just like cats. They thrive and flower in that spot and add a splash of bright color to the dull hues in the rest of the kitchen.

Close to that table is the refrigerator, decorated with pictures, grocery lists, and bright magnets. On the other side of the room, directly across from the counter, stands the oven. Many times I can find a warm kettle of water on the stovetop, ready to be poured for a pot of tea. Above the stove hangs a mantle which my mother decorates with mix

and matched, white and blue antique china. It gives the kitchen an elegant but still very homey flair. The 1850s wood floor was recently refinished, yet it is already becoming scuffed and scratched from all the traffic that goes through every day. Some days the floors feel a bit dirty to my bare feet, maybe from crumbs from my breakfast of toast or maybe from rice from last night's stir-fry. I absolutely love the built-in floor to ceiling oak cupboard that looms over the kitchen table. Inside its glass-paned cabinet doors, my mother hung white sheer curtains to hide what is inside. But anytime I open the doors, on the shelves, I see a colorful array of home-canned goods, the fruit of our work from the summer months. Above the doorway leading into the dining room is a red painted sign which reads "Faith, Family, Friends," signifying in which order they each take part in our lives.

The kitchen is small and simple; yet it has such a huge part in my life. I've learned to know this kitchen like the back of my hand. Each significant or insignificant part of this kitchen is important to me. Ingrained in the floors and in the watermarks on the table are memories of my family; all those moments in the kitchen have been painted and etched into a huge canvas that can never be erased.

## Squirrels

*Ivy Collins Poitras*

I was a child once  
I was a child when  
One day, the scratched up  
Table in our kitchen cubby  
Rings on it from sweatin' glasses  
Had sittin' on it  
A squirrel.

We walked into the kitchen where  
The squirrel wasn't exactly  
Supposed to be  
Me  
My mother (my mama then)  
My wee babe sister  
And maybe my big brother  
But he was always playin' hooky  
Even b'fore he was gone for good  
So maybe not.

I screamed and  
My mama shrieked (my  
Mother would too) and  
My sister squealed so high-  
Pitched, I almost couldn't  
Hear it. The damn thing  
Stared back.  
The damn thing  
Didn't give a single damn  
About the nuclear family's  
Nuclear kitchen  
And the nuclear family in it  
Shriekin' in turn.  
The squirrel, graying brown and  
Bushy-tailed, its eyes  
Black 'n' beady, its tail a head of  
Indian summer corn  
Fallen forgotten on the grass,  
Stared back.

(The window was  
Left open too wide.  
Sorry, mama.)

It'd been so hot that summer  
That day was hot as all hell set on fire  
(Mama said that a lot.  
The heat made her grumpy as a cat  
Takin' a bath he don't want.)  
Not a drop of rain, not once  
That whole summer.  
We had all our swimming suits  
By the door, every day, but  
There ain't a pool or a lake 'round that house  
For miles. And whew, that summer.  
Hot as all hell set on fire.

Mama got a broomstick  
Nobody moved a single inch  
(Like when we were at the elementary school  
Where the teachers'd slap you red  
With them rulers  
If you talked a single word outta turn)  
Until  
Mama took a jousting recoil and  
Gave it a good ol' whack  
Over its pointy, twitchin' snout. (Shouldn't  
It have seen that coming?)  
(I sure did.)

When the broom's head  
Beat loud on our frozen squirrel  
The room erupted.  
Not cheers, screams  
"Get 'im, mama!"  
"Don't hurt 'im, mama!"  
But it did get hurt, I'm guessin'  
Whether it was the sting of the broom  
(hurts bad, it does)  
Or good ol' fashioned squirrel pride

Bruised in battle.  
That little bastard's bushy tail  
Whacked the window  
On his exit through it.

"Damn rat," Mama said  
Shuttin' the window tight.

I didn't say nothin' 'bout how I learned at school  
That squirrels ain't rats.

I nodded instead, staring at the stage of its  
Swan song  
(Squirrel song?)  
As my wee sister whispered to nobody, "Squirrel."

Now, in the dark of night  
With a spurious light beside me,  
As I read great literature with great skill  
To distract from the pulsing remembrance of  
Everything now gone  
And everything that went wrong,  
I suddenly describe myself, all  
These many distancing years later,  
These many years I used  
To change myself  
To improve myself  
To shed myself  
Of who I was,  
As I am.

"Squirrely."

I am still, but I am running  
I am shaking, but I am frozen  
But at least  
I ain't no trespasser.

## I'll Bundle Up Your Fairest Heart

*Ivy Collins Poitras*

And keep it safe and warm,  
Where ne'er will it be tossed or lost,  
Cradled in my own.

I swear to lose not me in you,  
Just keep two hearts in my chest,  
As I wasn't made to let you fade,  
You'll lift me past my rest.

When no more for your loving arms  
Can I mournfully, willingly pine,  
It'll be your ghost I'll look to most,  
Your heart carrying on inside mine.

I can preserve no more of you,  
Not your eyes of cloudless green,  
Your golden hair, and skin so fair,  
I cannot treasure inside of me.

I know there'll be days when my bones will crack,  
For two beats are heavy to bear,  
Yet some burdens are worth hurting for,  
And I'll bleed to know you're there.

Though such is the nature of hope, I won't  
Imprison myself nor you,  
You my grief will no longer keep,  
Even when I have naught more to lose.

I'll carry your heart like a golden sparrow,  
Perched in a golden nest,  
Singing tunes that ring of ruins,  
Chirping in my chest.

So I vow to you, my sunset love,  
You'll be carried in me to my death,  
It matters not what is forgot  
By you, shall I have breath.