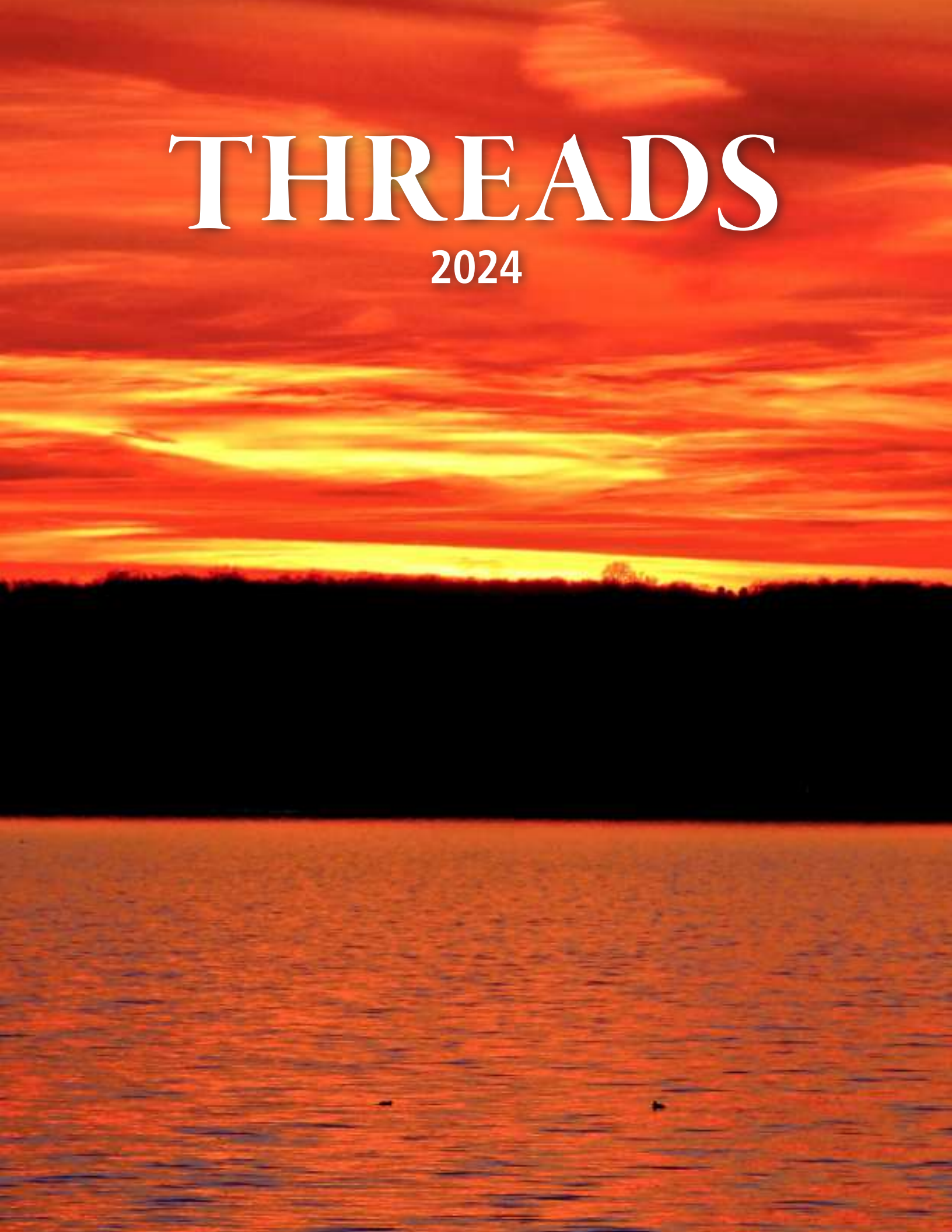
THREADS
2024

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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.

Special Thanks

Dr. Tyler Kessel, Dean of Business and Liberal Arts
Anthony Podlaski, Department Chair
The Graphics Department
The Print Shop
Judy DiLorenzo
The FSA

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Dr. Maria Palmara Award for Outstanding Creative Writing:
J'Adari Owens *"A Glass of Milk"*
*

Noah Kucij Award for Outstanding Poetry:
Stella Sanles *"A Mother's Changed Hand"*
**

Threads Creative Writing Award 1:
Vuong D. Lee *"Morning Dew"*
***

Threads Creative Writing Award 2:
Quentin Graham *"Class"*
****

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A Glass of Milk

J'Adari Owens

The vicious streets of Maryland did not stop the young man from trying to make a come up. After losing his home, he collected everything that had some type of value to sell door to door. After selling most of what he had, he managed to save some money. He came up to the last house on the block and knocked on the door. I'm just going to ask for some food, he thought to himself. Because he was trying to save as much money as he possibly could, he didn't spend much on food. To his surprise, a younger girl answered the door. She looked to be a few years younger than him, so he wasn't so surprised that she was home by herself.

"May I help you?" she asked the young man.

He couldn't bear to ask her for food when she looked like she needed the food more. Instead, he asked, "I'm sorry to bother you but the weather has left me thirsty. May I have a glass of water?"

The girl told him to wait and that she would be right back. She came back with a full glass of milk and gave it to the young man. With gratitude, the boy drank the milk and thanked her.

"What's your name?" she asked curiously.

"Micheal. What's yours?"

"Sierra." She gave him a soft smile.

The two sat on the front steps and made light conversation. Sierra asked about what he was doing with loose antiques, out of curiosity. Their conversation did not go beyond that. When Micheal finished his glass of milk, he offered to wash it, but she would not let him. Not wanting to overstay, Micheal collected the few things he had and waited for her to come back.

"Thank you, Sierra. I appreciate the hospitality." To his surprise, Sierra hugged him and told him the unexpected.

"Whatever is going on Micheal, I know that it will get better. Keep your head up." Before closing the door, she smiled and said, "And you're welcome."

With a warm heart, Micheal went onto the next house with Sierra's encouraging words replaying in his mind.

Years had passed and things were on the up and up for Micheal. He was able to save enough money and find a legitimate job and an apartment. It was smaller than what he was used to, but he was grateful to have a roof over his head again. He also went back to school and with a lot of hard work, he became a doctor. Wanting to stay close to home, he chose to do his residency at the local hospital.

The passing years were not as high quality for Sierra. She grew up to be a beautiful young lady but grew terribly ill. She had spent the last couple of weeks in the hospital receiving treatment for her illness. Worried about how she was going to cover the expenses, she continued to receive treatment because it was helping her.

Word got around from the nurses about Sierra and her illness. When Dr. Micheal heard the nurses gossiping, he asked them for her file. Sierra's name sounded familiar to him, but he wanted to be sure that it was her. Looking through her file, he couldn't believe that life landed them like this; the one who needed help is now able to help the one who helped him.

During his break, Micheal went to go see Sierra. She had always wondered how he was since that day. She had always hoped that things would be looking upward for him since he came to her doorstep. What she had not prepared for was Micheal, a successful doctor, walking into her hospital room.

"Sierra?" Micheal questioned. He was nervous to see her after so much time had passed but that feeling settled when he saw that smile on her face.

"Micheal!" she cheered. "Oh, my goodness, how have you been?"

"Well, it's Dr. Micheal, now." He smiled and showed her his Id.

"So, no more selling things door to door, huh?" They shared a laugh as they reminisced on that day. It felt nice for them to catch up after their last encounter.

Micheal was elated to tell Sierra about his job and how well life had been for him. Sierra was also able to share about her illness and the concerns of her medical bills but seeing him better than before made her heart swell. Wanting to do something to help his friend, Micheal took the lead on her case. As long as Sierra was willing to do better despite her bills piling up, then Micheal made sure he did everything he could to help her get better.

A couple months of treatment later and Sierra was not cured but her illness no longer required major treatment. With better health, she was discharged from the hospital. Before leaving she received the envelope she had feared for so long. Scared to read how much she would have to

pay from staying in the hospital for so long, she opened the papers. Reviewing her progress written throughout the pages, she was pleased to read that her health was improving. What she did not expect was how much her treatment and stay had cost her.

At the bottom of the page, there was a note that said “Paid in full, at the cost of one glass of milk. From Dr. Micheal.”

Class

Quentin Graham

I've never much cared for the water
The reflection in the holographic mirror of its surface
I suppose we're all equally nescient
the backward image of ourselves to leer at
bond and capture syndrome
to become fond of the imposal
You're supposed to like this?
To find my hands lacerated and eyes cutlassed
the cavity of my nose lacquered with a sulfur smell
left to cure.
The irony of being baptized here is not lost on me
the crashing of a body facing the sun
Impaled
Born Again
The surface of the ocean
and our desire to needlessly wade through it
the weight of our world shouldered just to
float on the top
I find beauty in the water the same way I
find beauty in the laboring of spinning synthetic cotton
seeing the hands whipped, eyes glossed,
the long hours,

the crashing

the olfactory notes of acetate and the fishy smell of formaldehyde.

There's an infinite ignorance to carry,

Floating will keep your head above the water

and sinking makes you a witness.

A Mother's Changed Hand

Stella Sanlés

The hand that holds mine
Is large and pale
Soft with
Short nails that remain
Unpainted.
They hold the butcher's knife
Fold dumpling skin
And peel oranges.
Splashing water
On freckled cheeks and
Running mousse
Through wavy black hair.
Our hands meet.
We cross the street
And walk to school
Every morning
Together.
I don't see them again
Until late evening.

Hands that were once small
And lived on
The other side of the globe.
Still peeling oranges
But not as frequently.
With a father
Across the sea
Working to afford
A life in America.
Gripping pencils and paper
Running over characters
I don't understand.
Painting a grandmother's hand
A color I don't know.
In a crowded apartment
I've never seen.
In a busy country

I've never visited.
Those hands are now
The same size
As mine.
Aged and weathered
Tanned from the sun.
Hardworking as ever
Tending to a garden
And me.

Our hands are apart
When we cross the street.
But now yours
Take my arm.
My elbow bends
In acceptance
And we walk together
Like we did when
Our hands were different.

You still peel my oranges.

Morning Dew

By Vuong Le

The dew wakes up, and the wind has just arrived to pick them up for a daily journey. The exhausting misty air returns home after its long adventure as it lays on my face for a quick nap. As the sun rises over Vietnam, the country's breathtaking landscapes are illuminated by the soft, early morning light. The country lay on a bed of mountains while it was tucked in by the blanket of ocean. The drowsy streets of Saigon begin to overflow with people as coffee shops and food stalls frantically open to welcome another morning.

Along the sidewalks, the sounds of people moving about their day fill the air. The distant echo of heels clicking and dress shoes stomping against the stone pavement. Phone calls and chatters fill up the air as a soothing ambient noise for those who were still asleep; office workers with their tailored suits and dresses stride through the neighborhood to get to the bus stop around the corner. Among a sea of black and white, are the bleached denim jeans, neon jackets and yellow hard hats. Their steel-toe boots chip away the asphalt when they cross the streets, as they march toward the nearby construction site. Amidst all, the hysterical laughter protrudes in this ocean of commotion when the children wave their parents goodbyes and gather on the street before heading to school. As the heat rays dove through the sea of clouds, perspiration has no mercy on the boys, sweat marks on their white button shirt becomes visible even from across the street.

No matter where they were heading or what they were doing, no one could resist the temptation from the aroma that was dancing in the air. Countless food stalls line up both sides of the street, people were congregating and chatting while they wait for their food; spatula clanging against the metal wok, pans being tossed around, the sizzling of meat over that charcoal grill create a special symphony that resonates through the streets. One stall radiates the fragrance of fried Vietnamese sausage, and egg combined with the smoke of hickory infused grilled meat would leave anyone passing by with an insatiable hunger. Another stall emits the sweet scent of pan-fried chicken and savory sticky rice, the beautiful aroma served as a reminder to these hasty workers and children to not skip breakfast.

As the young and children make their way through the morning, the coffee shops are crowded with elders and their idle chatters. The aromatic smell of Vietnamese coffee was so pungent, they could feel the kick as it traveled through their nasal passages. The rustic coffee shop embodies a remnant of the French colonization. The shop lay at the end of the street, hiding behind these large acacia trees. At the front, there are wooden armchairs, and round tables with umbrellas in the center to fabricate shades for those who can't stand the humid heat that is about to hit.

As the morning wears on, the pace of life in Vietnam seems to pick up. Motorbikes zip by, their engines roar like a dragon as they weave through the crowded streets. The honking of horns echoes through the air as drivers communicate with each other, making their way through the sea of people and vehicles. The roads are chaotic, with no clear lanes or rules, but locals traverse through the flows with ease, as if it is magic.

Even though I am a native to these lands, as I walk through the bustling streets, I am still struck by the vibrant colors and intricate details of the buildings around me. The architecture in Vietnam is a unique blend of traditional and modern styles, with ornate facades adorned with dragons and other mythical creatures, standing next to sleek glass skyscrapers. The contrast is jarring and beautiful, reflecting the country's complex history and rapid development.

Despite the chaos and noise, there was a certain charm to the morning in Vietnam. It was a time of possibility and excitement, of new beginnings and endless potential. As the sun rose higher in the sky, the energy of the city only grew stronger, and I am reminded of how lucky I was to call this place home.

My Dream

J'Adari Owens

I dream of happiness.
Natural happiness.
Not perfection, but loving my imperfections.
The happiness money can't buy.
I dream of peace.
A peace of mind.
To be in a state of being.
Always present.
I dream of love.
Love that's understanding.
Flowers and love letters.
Love that is patient.
Love that is kind.
Durable love.
Just because love.
The love you can't rationalize.
I dream of companionship.
My person.
My partner in crime.
My compliment.
I dream of intimacy.
Not sex but vulnerability.
Late night conversations.
Moments of being with you.
I dream of a future.
A blessed one.
A healthy one.
One filled with children.
A future of fulfillment.
Without regret.
I dream of beauty.
The beauty that has no standards.
No filters.
Raw.
The beauty I hope to find in myself.
I dream of being everything I dream about.
That would be a dream.

My Pink Paradise

Ngoc Dan Thuy Nguyen

After a long day of work or study, everyone needs a tranquil place where they can relax and unwind. For me, this is my cozy pink bedroom. The place where I can be myself, fulfill my personal needs, and nourish my soul. Whether I am reading a good book to getting a good night's sleep, it is my sanctuary.

The first time I saw this room with a four-leaf clover painted by hand by the previous owner, I liked it, but I prefer pink. When I told my mother and brother that I wanted my room to be pink, they did not agree. The good news is that my dad supported my choice and offered to transform my room to suit my style. While we were transforming my room, my dad and I encountered a few obstacles. My father had not expected it to be so difficult to paint over such a dark green. Despite this, he still attempted to paint the walls a shade of mulberry. The energy of the room changed with every coat of paint. Finally, the green was gone, and it felt lighter and more comfortable. In order to harmonize the area, he added a blush pink curtain and a white bean bag chair. In the end, it looked like a pink flower blooming in a green meadow.

My bedroom isn't just a bedroom; it's a paradise - a "staycation" spot that arouses the senses. Every time I enter, a jumbo pink stuffed cat. A soft plush carpet under my feet adds to the comfort as I make my way to the large, inviting bed in the middle of the room. A fluffy comforter embraces me as I sit on the queen size bed. The fairy lights in the room further enhances a cozy atmosphere and the air is infused with the fragrance of roses and white musk, creating a sensation of strolling through a rose field. I create a soothing ambiance by playing slow music softly in the room. For good luck, I clean my room once a week. This practice in Vietnamese culture it helps create a balanced and positive atmosphere. The pink color makes me feel hopeful and comforts me. I usually sit on the bean chair, drinking hot chocolate and reading while the snow falls outside, and sometimes I fall asleep with a pleasant dream. This cozy time is called "hygge time", which I learned from a Danish friend.

When I feel burned out or simply want to be alone and happy, I retreat to my pink paradise. Everyone deserves a place where they can be themselves, do what they enjoy, and feel at ease, a space where they can find peace and relaxation.

Crows On a Wire

Kamellia Barrett

It's an early Saturday morning two weeks into October. The chill and mist of the morning are slowly dissipating when I look up to the cable wires and see them. Crows perched gently on a wire. In a singular row as if children were waiting in line to be dismissed from school.

The sun is gentle, and the blue of the sky seems almost watered down. Allowing the birds to have this moment to themselves. Movement from the corner of my eye catches my attention. A bird in flight. The wings of the crow are magnificent. Although they are all black, from the right angle you can see the shine of the feathers caused by the rays of the sun. This bird joins the other in this calm line.

The road is quiet before me. Saturday mornings are always quiet. It seems the birds know this as well as they don't crow as they usually would on a busy morning. Quietly they shuffle and fluff their wings. Occasionally their beaks will open as if to yawn, or silently laugh.
I've always been fascinated by birds. The freedom to fly whenever they choose. To have the ability to touch the sky, if only for a few moments. They are both sky and ground. Today it seems they are more ground than sky.

A gentle *Whooo* of the bus driving down to meet me steals my attention from the birds. I take out my student ID and wait for the bus to pull up in front of me. Here at this moment, the blue metal is alien. A disruption of what is natural. I step onto this monstrosity, swipe my card, and sit down. Gentle motion begins to rock the bus as it moves. I glance out the window and catch a glimpse of the birds taking off in their flight.

It seems they are one with the sky once again.

Your Smile

Faith Adamczyk

Your Smile
is made of a thousand sunbeams.
They stretch and dance and cradle me as I
sink to my knees. In a moment I am lost
in the brightness and then I am home.
I want to see you smile; I want to make you smile
all the time.
But I don't know how to talk to you.

Your voice is chocolate that melts on my tongue.
I can taste your voice. Even when you're not around
it lingers and reminds me: I fucking love chocolate.
I want your voice to surround me like an orchestra
of bittersweet symphony. I want to hear your voice
all the time.
But I don't know how to talk to you.

Your hands are the gloves you lent me, warm and soft.
I watch as you trace them gently. I want to trace them too.
I want to hold them in mine as we sit in silence,
waiting for the train to stop. I want to
rub my thumb over yours and relish in the sweetness that
passes over my heart as you squeeze it.
Feel my heart in your hands because that is where it lives.
I wish I knew how to talk to you.

The Mothership

Clare Bruno

My joy began four and a half years ago when I saw those two pink lines. I had always dreamt of being a mother and finally it was happening. This was my first time being pregnant, so I was scared, anxious and I did not know what to expect. As I stood with my eyes glued to the white stick on the counter, my stomach began rumbling like two boots in a dryer. Was I actually ready for this? To raise a child, nurture them and care for them for the rest of both of our lives. I was only eighteen years old, after all, but we wanted this. My husband and I wanted to create a life that was half of me and half of him.

I was woken up at nearly midnight from what felt like a rubber band snapping in my uterus. And then, the gush came.

Did I pee myself? I'm only thirty-six weeks and six days, I should have almost three more weeks left, I thought.

Even though I had almost thirty-seven weeks to prepare for this day, I thought I would've had forty. Her room wasn't ready, her clothes weren't being washed, there was so much to be done but I could not wait to meet her. The girl who would give me the most supreme title, mother. My life would have a new purpose to it.

After scrambling to get the car seat and our bags in the car and let our dogs out to potty, we were finally on our way. A trip that is typically thirty minutes took only nineteen as my husband raced down the highway like he was evading police.

"May I see your I.D. please? And your passengers as well," mumbled the gate guard.

"Sir, with all due respect if we take any more time my wife might have our baby in the car," my husband exclaimed.

"Oh gosh, go ahead, good luck."

After parking just outside the front doors of the military hospital, we made our way inside and up the elevator to the Labor and Delivery wing. The pressure was so strong it felt as though at any moment her head would be hanging out like a dog's head sticking out of the car window. I have no recollection of the first hour on the Labor and Delivery unit. My first strong memory of that time was sitting up in pain and puking what little I had in my stomach into a small blue bag with a white plastic ring around the top. After that I could finally rest. After seventeen hours in labor, it was finally time to push.

“Alright mom, grab your thighs and take one big deep breath in then tuck your chin to your chest and push,” the doctor noted calmly.

“Again!”

“I see her head now, you’re so close,” shrieked a nurse in the back.

“Look at that red hair! One more big push for her shoulders and you’re done.”

Hearing her wail like a coyote making her presence known, my body was consumed with relief. Not only could I hear her, but I felt her. Her skin warm from incubation. She smelled as though she was dunked in a bath of oatmeal.

“Happy Birthday, Brooklyn,” said the nurses and doctor while cheering.

I did it. She looks nothing like how I pictured her, but she is my twin! Where is her dark Italian hair?!

I stared at her vivid red hair, shocked and speechless. I was always told that the day your children are born would be the most exciting day of your life. They were right. For eight months I could keep her safe inside. Now, it was my responsibility to feed her, nurture her and guide her through life on the outside. I had officially joined the mothership.

To a Stranger

Jason Rosamilia

I don't like it when you swear.
Not because I mind the cursing, but because
the words don't fit in your mouth,
or shouldn't fit, or maybe
have always fit and I just
never seemed to notice.

I've heard pages of your grief,
mountains of words which fail
to fully expose your heart's gaping wound,
dripping pain like oil from a truck pushed too far, too long.
So funny that just four letters
say more of your fractured mind than all the rest.

I am wishing the same wish again.
That I could go back to before him,
and meet that girl on some street corner or coffee shop.
I'd tell her how cool and rare and wonderful she is,
and maybe she'd explain to me how shooting a three-pointer works.
But to you then, I'd be as unrecognizable as you seem to me now,
a foreign conversation,
like talking to a stranger.

Grandmother

Jason Rosamilia

A tree,

knotted branches stretching outward,

frail and old and noble in their waning hours.

Laying down its red and orange blanket

for the final picnic of winter with little fuss.

But pain also, in forgotten memories

fallen limbs and peeling bark.

I wish I could have enjoyed the tree

a little while longer in its shade,

but a “thank you” must suffice.

Abandoned Life

Payton VanAken

Pulling into the parking lot, I experience the unfailing feeling of my throat closing. I continue through the rocky unkept lot before pulling into what I assume to be a spot. Stepping out of the car I feel the uneven gravel under my shoes as it upsets my balance. I begin to walk into the open field, the grass must have been mowed lately as the smell was invading my senses causing a lingering sensation of a sneeze. The closer I get the heavier the dread as it weighs down on my chest. I arrive at the aged white lines scurrying across the green.

The distant memories begin to surface as I can still hear the pants of my teammates bent over at the knee with sweat running down their faces. The taste of stale lukewarm water floods my mouth followed by an eternal dryness. Swallowing, I walk the field's distance, stepping over indents my body has seemed to memorize due to the sprained ancles my body endured. As I arrive at the end line I feel as if the world is collapsing on me, my hip twinges at the thought of countless nights spent being pushed to my limits. I bend over running my hands through the butchered grass filled with patches of dirt, its sharp and dry the ground hard as concrete. The indent of several pairs of cleats are easily made out, running up and down the same line beating the grass into the earth.

Closing my eyes, I push past the overwhelming memories to ones I wish to remember. I hear my teammates murmur in the distance filled with joy and energy. The fulfillment of praise and achievement warmed my bones. The countless days I showed up with a smile on my face that could light up the world to experience what used to be the most important part of my life. To know something of which used to hold such magnitude in your life can become your most dreaded memories is sickening. The source of such feeling appears in my mind. Standing at just 5 foot and yet holding such an aura to make me hunch my shoulders. Her gaze rips through me looking for every weak point to parade and confidence to stomp out. My stomach twists and I turn away needing to escape.

I arrive at the benches, perching myself on the highest one. The cold metal seeps through my clothes causing a shiver to be welcomed through my body. From here I can look across the field; I can make out the wood line running down the opposite side closing me in. There is an orange spec hidden among the green which I can only assume to be a soccer ball. For a second, I just sit there and allow my mind to wander away. I've spent years allowing a single person to devour memories slowly casting a shadow over every laugh and spout of exhilaration. Taking my childhood and making it seem bleak and miserable. The thought makes my skin burn I stand. I begin back to my car whether it be confidence or pure spite I scream. It's loud, wordless, but anyone who hears the vocalization can feel the waves of infuriation bleed from my mouth. As soon as it began its over, I glided the back of my hand against my cheek feeling tears, dry and fresh, that I had not felt descended from my eyes.

Entering my car, I welcome the soft seats as they wrap me in their embrace. I take the deep breath my lungs have been yearning for, with a slight smile I turn on my car and leave. It may seem small to those looking in, but I bask in the emotions the rawness and the beginning of a journey to escape the shade and welcome the warmth of the sun.

He Heard Me: A Tribute to Professor Noah Kucij

Frankie Coon

I remember he spoke

the whole room was in his grasp

he smiled

he moved like a dog's tongue

he had me believe I mattered

50 minutes a day

I told him I was frail

from the symptoms of my past

he led me to find shelter

the lectures, the essays

he cared about me

in the way my father never did

I was just a student

a weary eyed stranger

a never opened jar of wandering stars

he helped me fill the hole between me

and where I want to be

hope was free

En Route

Eli Horwitz

"Could you get the music going?"
"You got it,"
"So what I was saying earlier, about the Dead Kennedys,"
"Johnny F. or Robert?"
"Actually the ba- y'know what, speaking of Robert, you remember your cous-
"Yeah yeah yeah."
"Right, so Robert invited us to a Mets game on the 30th. If you could make sure you're not working that day, that'd be great."
"Sure, I'll let Tom know when we get back home."
"How's work going anyways?"
"Um, it's, it's not great. Tom's finally gotten some pushback from our new GM. Instead of being like totally noncommittal, he's just constantly supervising us. It's like he doesn't trust anyone to do something as mundane as 'stock the shelves'."
"Oh, well that's too bad."
"To be honest, I'm thinking of quitting. I don't feel like I'm getting a lot out of this besides a paycheck."
"Well, having a paycheck is nice, and I think it's good that you're saving up some money before next year."
"What do you think about that?"
"About what?"
"Me leaving home, like what are your thoughts on that?"
"I mean, I'm proud of you. I'm glad that you found a school that you like. Umm, oh could you skip this song? "I thought you loved Moxy Früvous?"
"I do, I'm just not really in the mood for them right now. Thanks, so yeah in general I'll miss spending time with you. I'll probably be spending a lot more time with Kim."
"How's everything going with her"
"Oh boy,"
"I know, I know, loaded question."
"No no, it's just that she wasn't really happy with me going on this trip with you."
"What? Why?"
"Because she thinks her mother is going to kill her or something."
"Do you think Susan is really capable of something like that?
"Well Kim certainly thinks so. I'm surprised she hasn't called yet."
"So why does she think Susan's gonna kill her?"
"She said it had something to do with the garage door. I can't be bothered to remember, you've heard me talk on the phone with her so I'm sure you understand"
"I know, it's typically you just going 'uh-huh' for like 20 minutes at a time."
"Are you gonna be busy with her this weekend?"
"Probably not, did you have something in mind?"

"I was just hoping to walk to the diner with you Saturday morning, we've only got so many Saturdays left."
"Of course."
"Great… do you think you'll still go when I'm gone?"
"Probably not just because my favorite part of our routine walk is the walk and not our destination. That's not to say I don't like Johnny B's, but the food isn't why I like walking there."
"Then why, oh shit mom's calling, hold on lemme take this. Hi mom… yeah… can you hear me…yeah I can hear you, what's up? Yeah, pretty good, we're on our way over now… I think we left at 10, gimme a sec. What time did we leave?"
"We left at 9:40"
"Dad says we left at 9:40… yeah we're looking forward to it. How's everything going there…? Good good, alright I'll talk to you later, love ya'… bye."
"Everything okay?"
"Yeah, mom was just seeing if we got on the road yet, also she says 'hi'.
"That's nice of her."
"Yeah, so Johnny B's?"
"What about Johnny B's?"
"Why do you like walking there?"
"Well it's nice to get outside when the weather's nice, but mostly because I like spending time with you."
"Boooooo"
"Wha-what it's true."
"I'm just teasing, I like spending time with you too."
"Thank you, I appreciate that."
"Or do you depreciate that?"
"I don't think it'll diminish in value."
"You're gonna diminish in value"
"You always say things like that"
"Like what?"
"I'll say something, and then you'll say that I'm that thing."
"What? I don't do that"
"You do it all the time!"
"You do it all the time,"
"You just did it again!"
"I don't know what you're talking about, maybe you're starting to go senile."
"If that's the case maybe you should drive."
"I take it back, I take it back! You're the healthiest man in the world, strong as an ox, or a bull… What is stronger, an ox or a bull?"
"I think they're the same animal."
"No, really? That can't be right."
"I'm pretty sure they are."
"Huh, neat. Where'd ya' learn that."

“I don’t know, I just know things.”
“Is the gift of knowledge a burden or, oh shit”
“What’s up?”
“Look up ahead, there’s a lot of traffic”
“Darn, I was hoping to get there a little early”
“Do you think there’s an accident?”
“It’s probably just normal traffic, I forgot that this always happens whenever we try to get back on 87.”
“I don’t mind, we’ve got some good tunes going to pass the time.”
“Wasn’t I talking about a song earlier?”
“Yeah, something or other about The Dead Kennedys.”
“Oh! I remember, so…”

A Day at the Office

Mark S. Goldman

The smell of reprocessed alcohol and puke wafted through his surgical mask, further adding to Stephen's misery. He'd been wrestling with this drunken asshole for more than an hour now and, even though it was only approaching 8 A.M. on a Sunday morning, he would have liked nothing better right now than to be back in his rack in his roach-infested call room catching some much-needed Z's. Instead, he had a belligerent drunken patient on a stretcher in the otherwise deserted treatment room of the ER who had put about 15 two-inch long gashes in his left forearm with a razor blade. Lacerations that he, Dr. Stephen Dupree, had the honor and privilege to repair with an interminable number of fine nylon sutures.

"Don't bother to sew me up", slurred the drunk, spraying saliva into Stephen's face, "I'm just gonna cut myself again later."

First year residents in Surgery were on-call to the ER and this was his weekend. Starting at 7 A.M. on Friday morning and extending until usually 6 P.M on Monday evening meant a continuous shift of about 85 hours. Oh yeah, he was allowed to sleep if he wasn't needed, and Stephen had gotten a little sleep Friday night, but then after midnight came the regular meeting of the Friday and Saturday Night Knife and Gun Club, and to say that Dr. Dupree was "needed" was an understatement. What with rounds on the in-house patients and dealing with the street warriors' euphemistically termed 'social altercations', his weekend had been, to quote his Senior Resident, "A valuable learning experience". Thankfully he didn't need to fight with this character on the stretcher anymore since by now the alcohol had firmly taken hold and put the guy in a snoring stupor that at least allowed Stephen to concentrate on his sewing.

Actually, it wasn't all bad. Sunday morning was usually a quiet time for an inner-city teaching hospital like his. The morning sun was shining through the windows, and everything was quiet; even the phones out in Receiving were either taking a rest or were out of order, Stephen didn't care which. He soaked up the quiet and was thinking about finishing up the dressings and the notes on this patient and maybe grabbing some breakfast at the *Skull and Bones* Restaurant down on the corner. That or working on his sleep deprivation, he wasn't sure which.

With a thud, the heavy double doors to the Treatment Room burst inward, having been popped open by the force of a gurney that was being hastily wheeled through them. Stephen was amazed to see the man wheeling the stretcher was Dr. Marmelstein, the renowned cardiac surgeon and head of the hospital transplant team. What was he doing manning a stretcher in the ER?

"She's been shot!", Dr. Marmelstein stated emphatically, and pushed the gurney past Dr. Dupree and his sleeping patient into the next open treatment bay.

As he passed by, Stephen got a glimpse of a blonde woman with a very white complexion bundled onto the stretcher, eyes closed and not moving. With a jolt of adrenaline that coursed instantaneously through his body, Dr. Dupree realized that he knew her! It was Serena, the surgical scheduler from the eleventh floor. He talked to her whenever he had a case to post. She had always been so encouraging to him!

As if it was a movie set and the director had just yelled "Action!", the room began to fill up with personnel. A nurse cut the woman's street clothes off her body with surgical scissors, exposing her chest in which, just to the left of center, was a red hole about the size of a little finger.

Under the command of Dr. Marmelstein, IVs were started, blood was drawn for type and crossmatch, O negative units of blood were hung inside pressure cuffs in an effort to force the blood in as quickly as possible. Anesthesia arrived and intubated Serena and began ventilating her with oxygen from the wall valve available in every treatment bay.

The cardiac surgeon looked around at everyone and held out his right hand. One word was all he said. "Scalpel."

The surgical nursing staff had arrived with their portable cart. One thrust a #20 scalpel into his outstretched hand. No gown, no gloves, no masks. He made a sweeping incision across the young woman's chest and through her rib cage.

"Rib retractor", he stated calmly, and this too was passed to him by a familiar-looking grim-faced OR tech.

The Dr. placed the retractor and cranked it open. There, like a living anatomy lesson, her lungs alternately inflating and deflating as the anesthetist rhythmically squeezed the bag. And there it was, her pumping heart, each ventricular contraction spilling blood into her chest cavity from the gunshot wound that had perforated her heart muscle.

Marmelstein grasped her heart in his two hands in an effort to stem the flow of blood from the wound, and still holding her heart in his hands, together with the anesthesiologist, the surgical techs and the blood bank people, they all slowly pushed the gurney out of the ER and down the corridor to the elevators waiting to take them to the eleventh floor OR suite.

And for a brief time, before the ER staff came back in to clean, mop and sanitize the cubicle, getting ready for the next case, the quiet peaceful atmosphere of the treatment room was restored. Except for the intermittent drip of the residual blood and IV fluid in the bags onto the tiled floor, and the muffled but still excited voices of the nursing staff out at the receiving desk, the peaceful, even serene Sunday morning that had existed prior to the event came back.

Ribbons of crimson flowed slowly toward the floor drain, and the faint hiss of the wall oxygen valve that had been left open lent a hushed and surreal atmosphere under the glaring overhead

lights as Stephen, his mind racing to absorb the events of the last half-hour, continued in automatic mode to dress the now completely inconsequential lacerations on the arm of the completely inconsequential drunk who was snoring obliviously on his gurney.

Later that day, Stephen found out the full story. Serena had worked the night shift and was headed for her car. Dr. Marmelstein had been in to check on a surgical patient in the ICU and was also walking to his car when he heard the report of a pistol apparently fired from a passing car and saw the figure ahead of him crumple to the sidewalk. Not even aware of who she was, he rushed to her, picked her up and threw her over his shoulder and raced to the entrance to the emergency room, threw her on a gurney and wheeled her into the treatment room. Despite his quick and decisive actions, she didn't make it, not with a bullet hole in her heart.

The police, with their customary dedication to action where gunplay was involved, discovered the shooter asleep in his car with the recently fired 9 mm resting on the passenger seat next to him.

Once they took him into custody and he sobered up enough to have a statement taken, he denied any knowledge of firing a shot out his car window but did have a lot to say about his former wife, how much he hated her and, because of her, all women in general.

Somehow, despite his upset and confusion, Stephen managed to finish out his shift Monday evening and went home. Was there a lesson here, was there anything rational to make of this?

In Stephen's earlier life, prior to his University days, he had heard about man's free will, something that God had bestowed upon mankind. And he had supposed that events were delivered by God as a sort of test. What path would be chosen with the exercise of free will? The easy way? The way of morality? The way of courage?

Whatever way was chosen was an indicator, a signpost showing God the character of that man for later judgment. That was the whole idea of free will; choosing the "right" path, wasn't it? To appear acceptable to our God, so as to be judged worthy.

But what happened to this hapless hospital employee was not anything she herself chose. She was going home to her family and was victimized by the insanity of the street. Was it possible that alongside the infinite power of the Creator of the Universe there could also exist Chaos that was random and without aim or purpose, only consequence?

The drunk chose to get drunk and to cut himself; he exercised his free will. Serena had no chance to alter the outcome, no say in the matter. She had spent her time working on the eleventh floor only to return there to die. An angry man, firing out his car window at a mere representation of her gender, ended her life. What did it mean?

Stephen shrugged and took a sip of his CC and ginger ale before shrugging off his clothes and collapsing on his bed. "Gotta be at the hospital for rounds at seven am," was his last coherent thought before his exhaustion overtook him.

The Craze

Rachael Petromelis

I still feel it,
After 240 days,
It's still there.

Months passed,
Time was anything but fast,
But you just moved on,
When my world stood still.

I remember the thrill,
And the knot in my stomach you left me,
Like my guts being sucked in and twisted,
Like losing all air I had to breathe.

But I knew you had to leave.

Now, every time the leaves fall off the trees,
I'll think of you in the autumn breeze.
And every time I hear your name,
Memories will flash back in a haze.

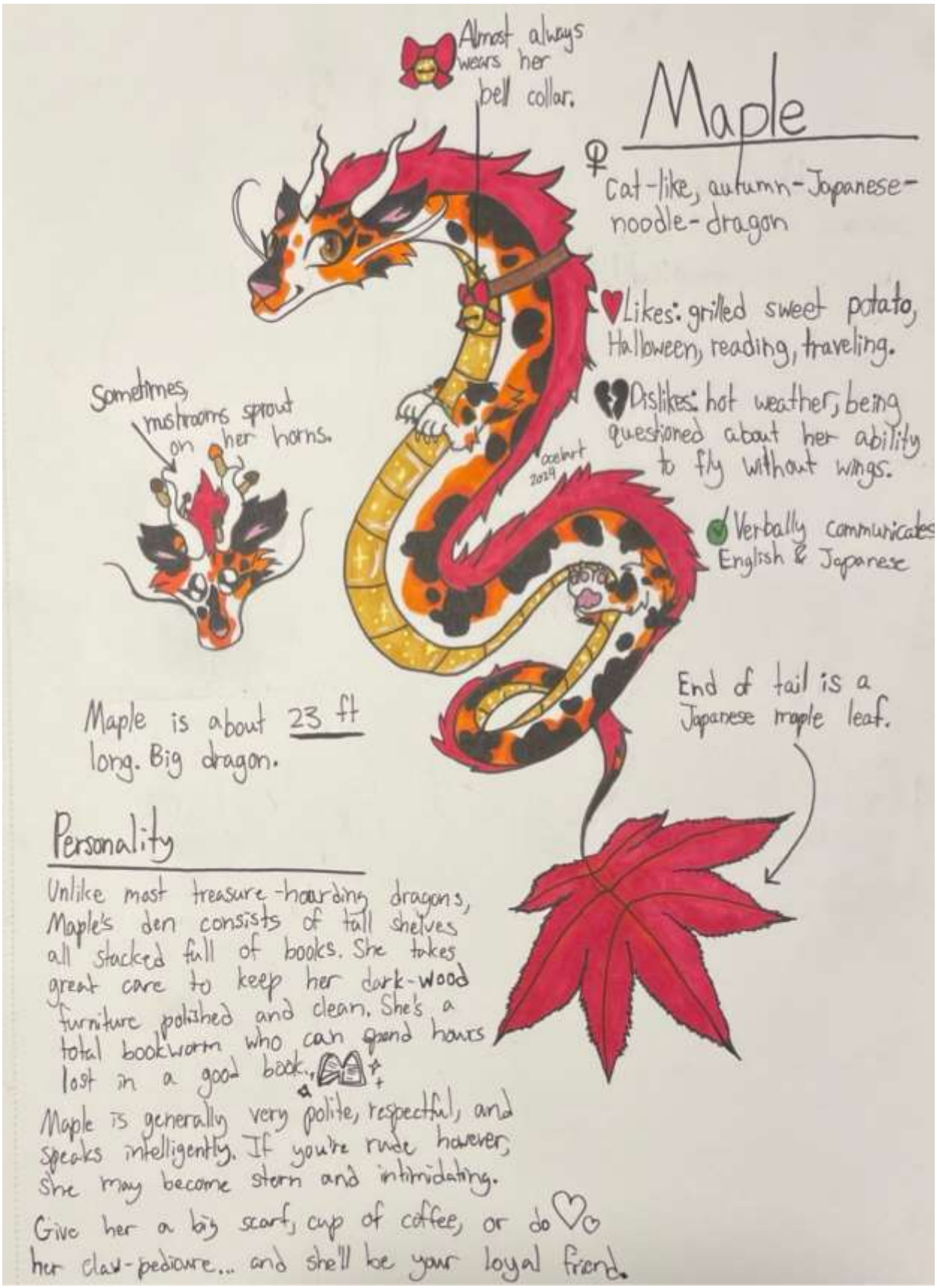
And I will finally think I got over you…

But one day when I see your face,
I'll still get the same twisted feeling inside,
Like I just got the wind knocked out of me.

I'll wonder if I'm in love,
Or if it was just a phase,
All these years later,
I'll still feel the craze.

Maple Character Sheet

Rhona Masterson



I Am Not Afraid to Keep On Living

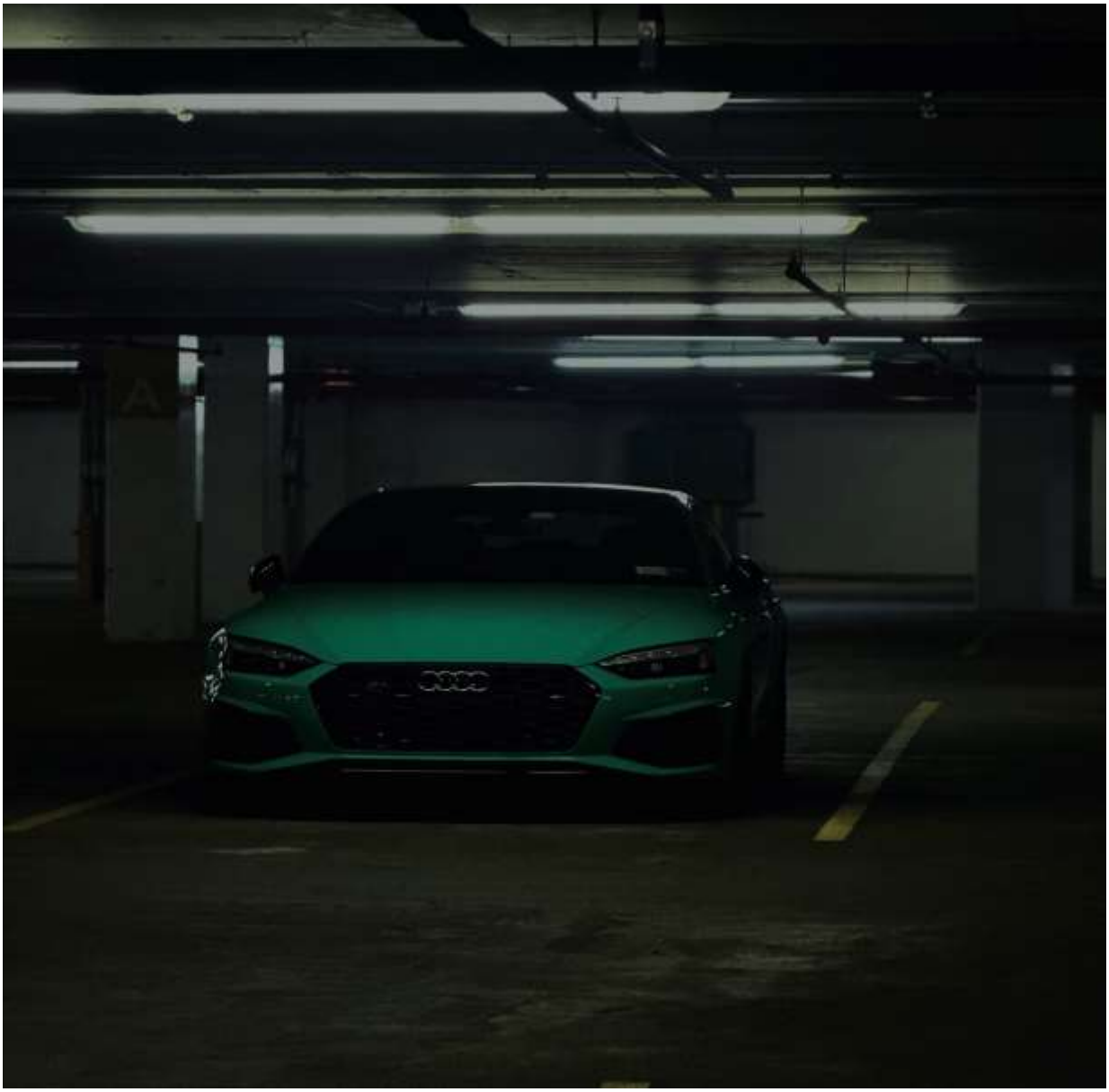
Rhona Masterson

9 Lives

Rhona Masterson

Audi

Malik Shehryar Awan



In the bustling streets of New York City, amidst the towering buildings and honking taxis, a sleek Audi stands parked gracefully by the side of the garage. Its polished exterior reflects the urban landscape, while its distinct contours hint at both luxury and performance. Surrounded by the city's relentless energy, the Audi exudes an air of sophistication, a silent observer amidst the chaos of the metropolis. Its presence, a symbol of refinement amid the urban hustle, commands attention and admiration from passerby.

Wind

Hunter Camryn

Sunset on Cayuga Lake

Leo Asaulenko

Orion Nebula

Leo Asaulenko

St. Maarten: 2nd Period

Iris Robert

St. Maarten: Rooftops

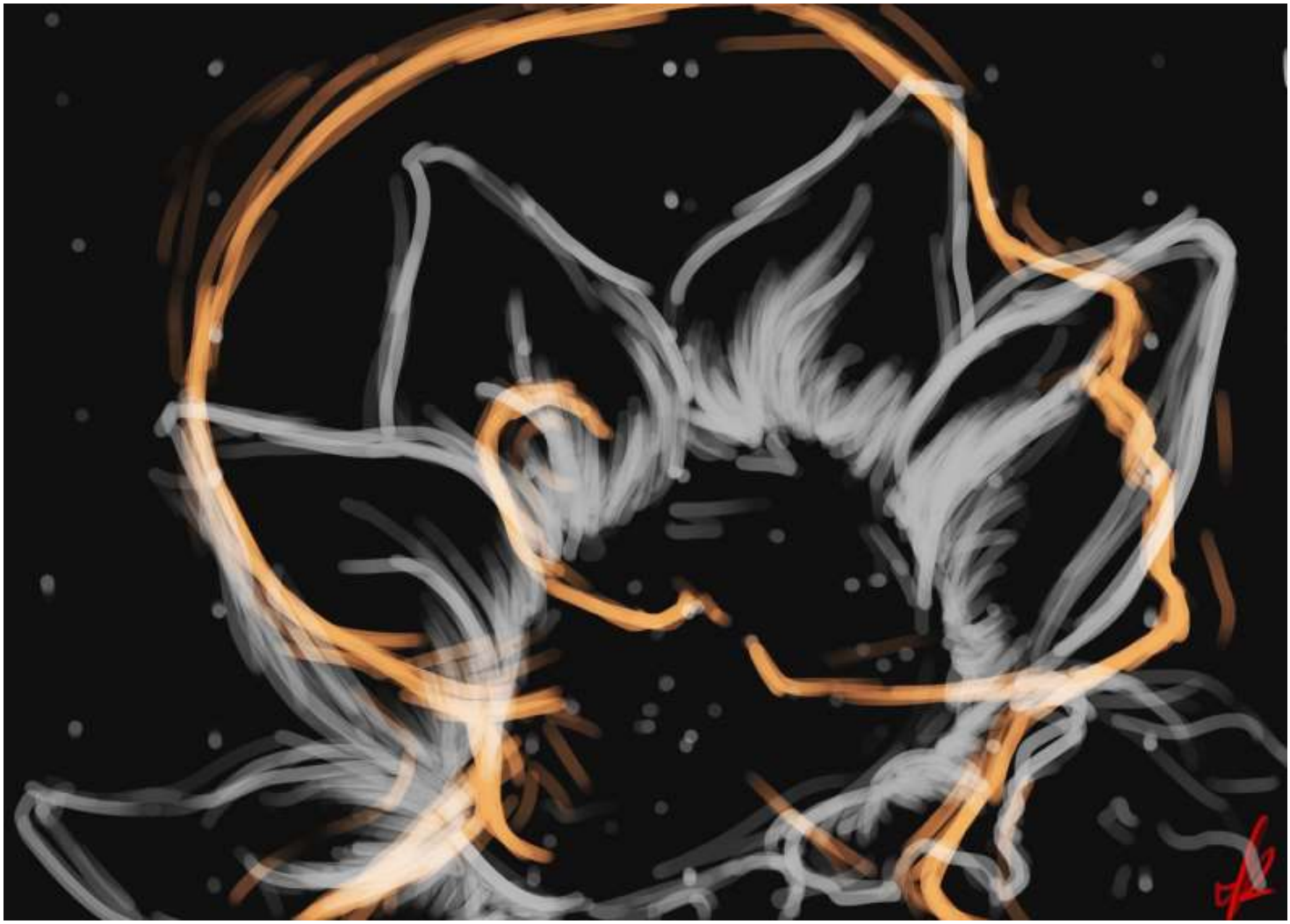
Iris Robert

St. Maarten: Laundry Day

Iris Robert

Midnight Bloom

Iris Robert



Gatorade

AJ Robert

The Wait

Derek Keegan

It was a calm morning, a gentle breeze calmly caressed the pine trees beyond the walls, the sky was serene with a few soft clouds dotting the sea of blue above, and the sun shone down upon the city with a warm embrace that seemed almost divine. To many, it was the perfect day, and although the weather was ideal on this day it was not a time for the joyful embrace of spring, it was a time for war. A silence seemed to grip the city, it stifled the birds, suppressed the church bells, and stalked every street. It was a silence that seemed to whisper the words "Something wicked this way comes" through the wind, and it was a silence that could drive even the most mentally fortified to insanity, yet that is what the guardsmen had to bear. They had been ordered to hold their positions upon the walls and await the arrival of their enemy that would surely outnumber them; for the king and his reinforcements would not arrive for another three days and the enemy could be upon them at any moment. It was a sickening position to be in, knowing that doom was approaching but not knowing when it would come. You feel helpless as all you can do is wait amongst a group of your fellow guardsmen who are all silently awaiting the same doom you are. Amongst the silence and the dread that filled the air, all one can do is try to think to pass the time: think about family, think about home, think about the weather, and think about who will survive and who will die. But none of it helps, none of it helps as no matter what one thinks it is impossible to deny the severity of the situation in which you find yourself. However, the silence would be broken by the most unlikely of things, a simple song. It was but one man at first, perhaps he was tired of the silence, perhaps he had no fear of what was to come, perhaps he was good at hiding it, but it mattered not for he sang a simple song that all the guardsmen knew. His singing echoed throughout the city and pierced the silence like an arrow pierces the hide of a fearsome beast. From this one man, another sang with him, then another. Until what began as a single ember upon a cold hearth became a brilliant open flame that instead of causing destruction nurtured warmth and kinship amongst the coldness of dread. The warmth of the flame spread from man to man, until all the poor souls locked within the walls of certain doom felt as though the worries of their world melted away like wax to a candle. As the company sang together, their long faces and feelings of hopelessness left in favor of smiles and a feeling of home. In that moment, a bond was formed between hundreds of guardsmen. Even though some of them had never met, they felt like they had been friends for a lifetime. As the night slowly set in, the company sang together without fear of what the morning may bring. If they were to meet their dooms, then at least they would die amongst kinsmen and not alone as they had thought before. So, on the company sang, their voices bringing about a light that permeated the darkness that had now set in around them, unafraid of whatever fate awaited them come sunrise.

Little Bird

India Honey

why are you crying, little bird?
why do you fret?
look to the sky,
see the mighty eagle?
see how he gracefully dips and dives?
you will soon grow to have more grace.
look to the pond,
see the beautiful swan?
see her elegant slender neck?
you will grow to rival that beauty.
look to the land,
see the strong ostrich?
see his powerful legs?
you will soon grow stronger.
stretch your wings, little bird.
take the leap, little bird.
you won't go far living in fear, little bird.
don't be afraid to spread your wings and soar.

The Getaway that is No More

Aidan Dempsey

I wake up with my neck stuck as if it had been bound by a cast for my whole life. Once I get my bearings, I open the van door and step out into the cool night air. The crunch of seashells beneath my feet, the sweet smell of plants relaxing from the summer sun, along with the taste of salt on my tongue reminded me exactly where I am. The first trip of luggage brings me through the front door, on the second floor, and straight to the cramped guest room I struggle to share with my brother. The subsequent four more trips for the rest of the family luggage pass by like cups of coffee and bring the night to a close on an old mattress that clearly forgot to clock in at work, the springs and bed frame easily visible through my back.

I climb the stairs in the morning to the familiar sight of the living room, the blessed smell of pork-roll luring me to float like a cartoon over to the kitchen table. The television is brimming with sunshine and its sound brings the only noise to the room, calming as though studying in a small corner café, as grandma and grandpa expectantly watch today's tennis match. Underneath the television lies the horde of family games, an unreachable prize guarded by the steady gaze of the television sentinel: grandpa. Next to the television is a love seat of clean linen that feels like I am sitting on a cloud then sinking halfway through it; this is my favorite watchpost to eagerly await more family.

The scene out of the window is very much alien to home, the day moves like pouring molasses on fast forward. All the cars drive slowly and with an aristocratic purpose, with no need to speed when the whole day is theirs. There's almost no grass instead of having been replaced with the old homes of the ocean's tenants. Where there are plants, they grow lush and tall, yet when the rain falls and the wind blows, they come down with the shifting sands. As the dreamworld of the day reaches its crescendo, the beach feels to me like the warm embrace of God during church. Each crashing wave's roaring temper tantrum coming to a swift close on the sand only to pass on to the next, creating a melody from the chaos to help lull away like a baby in his mother's arms.

Vainglory

Mollie Eagan

Will it cradle me tenderly or break my bones? The sand wet, the sky insipid. She leans over the rock's edge and allows herself limp. Her arms emphatically widespread only to be instinctively brought to her breast. Regret strikes sharply as she falls. Her query solved as her body softly smacks upon the sand. She lies still. The water crashes forward then pulls back once more. She watches, weightily holding her eyelids, distorting her vision with each shore break. She rises, staring at the frantic girl in the sand. *Christ, the ignominy.* The embarrassment more pain-inducing than where she will bruise tomorrow. Her cheeks flush as she envisions the amusement her imprint will bring. *They will surely look down at the stupidity of the one they presume fell off the rock.* She digs her foot in the sand, it seeps into her sock. Stomping harshly while finding pleasure in the sight of the now disfigured girl in the sand beneath her. She struts defiantly at the waves as sand crunches between her teeth. *I chose to fling myself off the rock due to free will, rather than a meek attempt to end all.* A strive to ease her mania. Her mind brims with morbidity accompanied by passionate romanization. Intrusiveness being her most persistent bite of all. She finds pure horror in the idea that her thoughts, her soul intimacies, are as frequent to others. Others who shamefully leave them unspoken. The pure vulgarity of the mind that brings one unsettlement is her sole claim to selfdom. *A stain on my veil sewn of beauty and grace is a rarity. The girl in the sand and I could not be one, she too damaged and I too desirable*. She floats on her amour propre while choking on her own vanity.

39,225

Mike Flory

When will we stop denying our pain?

107 a day.

When will we lift others instead of drowning them?

3,271 a month.

When will it be enough?

39,255 a year.

Real courage is letting yourself cry.

Real courage is opening up to those around you.

Real courage is facing your demons.

We are agonized by our ambitions,

107 a day.

We give in to desire,

3,721 a month.

We let go of hope,

39,255 a year.

Real courage is admitting you need help.

Real courage is loving others.

Real courage is letting yourself rest.

107 men commit suicide a day,

3,721 men commit suicide a month,

39,255 men commit suicide a year.

We have a problem but are too stubborn to recognize it,

While we drown, we don't try to grasp the air but leave with a stern look,

As we float down, we never show fear.

Based on this Demographic: https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/vsrr/vsrr034.pdf

The numbers in this poem are averages based on the number of total suicides for men in 2022.

Names Have Power

Miles Torres

My name is Miles, but that is not the name given to me at birth. My birth name is Luz Cristina, Cristina being my middle name and what I went by the most growing up. My name came from two women that mean a lot to my mother; Luz is the name of my grandmother–my mother's mom–and Cristina came from one of my mother's aunts. I never met either of them, but I hear a lot about my grandmother and how she would have loved me. My birth name is pretty, it means Light in Spanish, but I have never liked being called by my birth name, especially my first name. My first name got a series of nicknames I dislike, making me grow more and more to hate it. Growing up I didn't have many friends and suffered from bullying every single year until I came to the States. Nicknames like "Lulu" and "Lucecita" still haunt me to this day, mainly the Lucecita one because of my dad. I don't have the heart to tell him how I feel about the nickname.

Once I came to the states, I took advantage of teachers not being able to pronounce my first name and told them that I go by Cris; Cris being the shortened version of my middle name Cristina. I finished high school with the name Cris, free from any name teasing because of my first name. While I was in high school, I was slowly discovering my gender. Growing up I knew there had to be a reason why I felt differently than other girls and boys, so I started exploring the use of different pronouns and names to identify myself. I chose the name Miles while educating myself and finding ways to feel more comfortable about my gender. One of my favorite YouTubers at the time came out as trans and he had chosen the name Miles for himself. I chose Miles because he helped me educate myself and helped me feel comfortable. To me, the name Miles means that I am who I am because it's who I chose to be. I am not Luz; that's who my parents chose I should be. I feel more comfortable with my name and my parents are aware of the change and my preference, but I also understand how much my name means to them, especially my mother who lost her mom very young. They still call me Luz, Cris, or Cristina but it doesn't bother me much coming from them. They still respect my chosen name when talking about me to one of my coworkers or friends and that's all I ask for.

At first the name Miles caused trouble at home. My mom couldn't understand why I was changing so drastically and thought that I was being influenced by the wrong crowd. As time passed, she realized that maybe it wasn't a phase. She realized that I was sure of who I was, how I felt, and that I didn't seem to be changing back to who I once was. She realized that I seemed more comfortable being me. We live together, she respects me for who I am, and she respects my name. But I expect that she will call me Cristina until the day she passes, and I will not be forcing her to change that. To my mother I'm Cristina, but to everyone and myself, I am Miles.

As Eye See It

Aletris Schnakenberg

During my second semester, I felt a massive headache and my eyes began to blur. A few weeks later, without any indication, the right side of my face drooped like melted candle wax. Poking and prodding my cheeks, I realized I couldn't close my right eye. With dread, I bought an over-the-counter eye patch to sleep.

The doctors were befuddled. "A pinched nerve or Bell's Palsy, perhaps", they surmised.

Arriving at the hospital, the hallucinations became more vivid and often. I started losing track of reality and time.

I'm now trapped in a dark place. Torches with small flickering flames light a chasm gave off a reddish glow as if I was on planet Mars. Suddenly, a long sharp sword, light as a feather, popped into my hand. Glancing down at my torso, armor was attached from head to toe. Taking a shaky step forward, ahead a great, taloned foot crashes into the chasm. The blood rushes from my face and my stomach muscles are tense. Lifting its massive head into view was an ancient dragon. Terrified, I look the beast in the eye.

"You must fight your dragon before moving on".

"I am that dragon" he states matter of fact.

He rumbles forward, and I take a cautious step back. A large crack-like apparition sounds somewhere to my right. A woman with flowing black hair clutching two swords and wearing glasses approaches through a cloud of red dust. With one shake of her head in greeting,

We approached the dragon. With resolve, I swung my sword in a vertical upward motion towards the scaly belly of the beast.

"Are you quite done?" the nurse with the glasses and black hair says, "I am trying to take your blood pressure."

In the crook of my arm are three plastic tubes and a line leading up my leg. The continuous beeping next to me reveals my unsteady heartbeat. My fist is clenched next to the nurse's face. I place my hand on the bed. I wasn't with a dragon. I had a stroke and almost died.

The doctors believed it was a miracle I survived. However, as time went by, more and more health issues arose forcing me, like a lab rat, to be curiously examined by more doctors, each more perplexed to what was happening to my deteriorating sight.

Sitting in the waiting room of the latest specialist, I could not stop fidgeting and my eyes were getting blurrier. Was my illness getting worse, or was this just the effect of the eye drops they gave me?

The doctors said my vision loss was "temporary", but I think they lied. I think people tell you lies to be kind, but it feels like I'm becoming less significant as if I were an animal needing to be coddled.

The leather chair under my fingernails provides a steady grip as comfort. I breathe harder and feel the sweat pouring down my back. Finally, a nurse calls me, taking a deep breath to calm myself as I follow.

In the frigid and dim exam room, an impish, bespeckled doctor slowly enters smelling like oranges, he inspects my eyeballs with precision.

"Move forward" he orders and leans my forehead awkwardly against the leather headrest. The shadows of the machines were moving around my eyes at such a rapid pace, feeling like a product being examined on a conveyor belt.

"This can't be right", I heard him say shoving a microscope into my dilated pupil.

The doctor sat back and with a great sigh bluntly stated, "There is no chance that your vision will return".

I felt I hadn't heard him clearly, so I stared at him. My mind went blank. I couldn't move my body. The doctor and my husband were talking, but they sounded like the "Wah Wahs" of the adults from Charlie Brown.

"Do you have any follow up questions?" the doctor asked.

I shook my head like a puppet, as if somebody else was in control. I just wanted to leave immediately.

Arriving home, I felt hollow as I dragged myself to the couch staring into space where my brain went into overdrive. Will I ever be able to live independently again? How will I be able to survive like this?

I take a sharp breath as a solitary tear falls down my cheek. My lip begins to quiver. Then, my chest tightens, and I gasp for air. In seconds, my one tear becomes uncontrollable sobs. Falling to the floor, I began hyperventilating. From the other side of the house, my husband comes running in.

"Why didn't you let me die!?" I wail. "I can't do this!". I look at my husband, "What are we going to do?"

When you lose sense, it's like having a part of you missing forever. I didn't want to lose myself. I wanted to achieve my goals, and I knew I must find a way.

Soon thereafter, I contacted *The Light House Guild* which the doctor insisted I call.

“Do you need a ‘White Cane’?” The lady asked.

I had a visceral reaction to that question. I was eighteen years old. Of course not. But realistically, I could not get around without one. I cried again.

“Yes”, I told the lady tearfully, and she connected me to New York State’s *Commission for the Blind*.

One year later, I am out deep-sea fishing off the coast of Maine, and the crisp Atlantic Sea water splashing my face. There wasn’t any bait necessary, so I just dropped my solitary line in and waited.

I finally felt connected again.

I felt a tug. Turning the reel slowly, I felt a tug again and reeled in the line faster upon revealing my catch, three separate cod fish. Slipping through my fingers like a bar of soap, the cod was as confused as I was with the catch. While handling these tiny fish, I couldn’t stop smiling.

A Scoop of Happiness

Pickering Curran

A gentle breeze, that smelled vaguely of freshly cut grass and petrol, rustled the trees as a choir of chirps whispered in our ears. It was an almost perfect June day, with the taste of summer soon approaching. Milo and I had just left work, another excruciating day filled with stubborn customers and overbearing managers. We decided to enjoy what was left of the nice weather that day, treating ourselves to a walk through the park, which was settled in the center of my built-up hometown.

"Lemon Basil?" I had asked, already knowing this would be his favorite flavor at the local gelato shoppe.

Milo responded in agreement, "Oh! That sounds delicious." He smiled, already imagining the delicate taste of sensory tango we were about to partake in.

After paying the young cashier an overpriced cost for a measly single scoop of gelato, he handed us two spoons with a forced pleasantry. The park entrance greeted us with an iron gate entangled with overgrown vines with vague remnants of once flowering bushes.

We found ourselves sat on a rickety old park bench, overlooking the once well-kept creek dividing the park. Just past us sat a beautiful old willow tree, its branches dangling over the creek so that its leaves danced upon the surface.

I scooped a decently sized bite of the decedent gelato and motioned to Milo, offering the first taste. He willingly accepted, taking the bite so gently. I couldn't help but notice how he gently licked away the leftover gelato from his soft lips. Milo noticed me staring a bit too long.

"Everything all right?" he asked, giving me a puzzled stare.

"Oh, uh, yeah. Just gauging the taste," I answered, stumbling over my words, attempting to give some sort of excuse for my longing stare.

"Well, why don't you try for yourself!" Milo exclaimed, digging into the scoop to offer me a taste.

I don't have a moment to protest as I find the burst of sunshine reaching my tongue, the initial tartness of the lemon awakened my senses. My eyes were elated as the sophisticated and earthy taste of the basil melted in my mouth. Next to me, I heard soft giggles.

"What?" I asked awkwardly, giving a half-smile, meeting Milo's eyes. The way he starred felt different.

“Nothing, just...you.” He answered, looking away from me quickly.
“Thank you for the treat.” Milo leaned over and kissed the side of my cheek, which was nothing out of the norm.

As usual, I returned the gesture with a kiss on his forehead. To my surprise, he went to give me another kiss on the cheek. Except, I happened to have moved at just the right moment.

As Milo’s lips gently separated from my own, my heart began to pound, like a frantic bird trapped in a cage. Did that really just happen? Obviously, it wasn’t intentional, right? Questions were whirling through my head. Before I even knew what I was doing, I had found myself mere centimeters from my best friend’s face again.

“Is this… okay?” Milo asked hesitantly, barely making the distance between our faces, not that I wanted him to. I quickly responded by taking his face in my hands and bridging the gap between us.

Milo and I looked at each other and laughter erupted between us, remembering all the time the people around us had already assumed we were some sort of item. The two of us were always quick to deny any rumor between us, yet here we were.

We sat entangled on that rickety old park bench, watching the branches of the willow tree float along the creek surface, and listening to the birds sing the last songs of spring. Kaleidoscopic fragments of uncertain outcomes danced through our minds. But one certainty lingered, I have my best friend beside me, and nothing would compare to that moment.

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