

Kings River Review



Reedley College
Spring 2023

kings river
KRRReview

The logo features the text 'kings river' in a small, vertical, sans-serif font on the left. To its right, the letters 'KRR' are rendered in a large, stylized font. The 'K' is orange, and the 'R's are blue. The 'R' on the right has a long, flowing tail that ends in three blue wavy lines, suggesting water. The word 'Review' is written in an orange, serif font to the right of the 'R's.

Spring 2023

The *Kings River Review* is published each fall and spring semester by the students in English 15J, Literary Journal Publication. Our desire is to produce a journal that reflects the emerging voices and visions of community college students, designing a space for their creative expression. The journal is named for the Kings River which runs along the western boundary of Reedley College.

The *Kings River Review* is made possible by the support of Dean of Instruction, Dr. Todd Davis, and Title V Grant funding.

We welcome submissions from two-year college students from across the United States. Please visit our website (kingsriverreview.com) for submission guidelines and to purchase copies.

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Northern Spotted Owls

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Kings River Review logo courtesy of Steve Norton.

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Letter from the Editor

Dear Readers,

Welcome to the spring 2023 edition of the *Kings River Review*. Within these pages are inspired works of literature, art, and photography meant to stimulate the imagination. The unique and various contributions from college students around the United States are greatly appreciated and each adds a special something to the publication of this journal. No matter what you find on your journey through this carefully designed compilation, you are sure to laugh, gasp, ooh, and aah over the talent emerging from the writers and artists. This finished product was not the work of merely a few people; it took the energy of many students who sat at their computers for hours tapping away on their keyboards, grinding their elbows on tables, pinching paintbrushes with colorful fingertips, and waiting patiently for just the right image to capture on camera, canvas, or computer.

Thank you to all who shared their submissions. Continue to create, learn, and improve on the talent you have. This journal is meant for you, and we look forward to reading your submissions next semester.

Sincerely,

Paula Rawlings

Editor of *Kings River Review*

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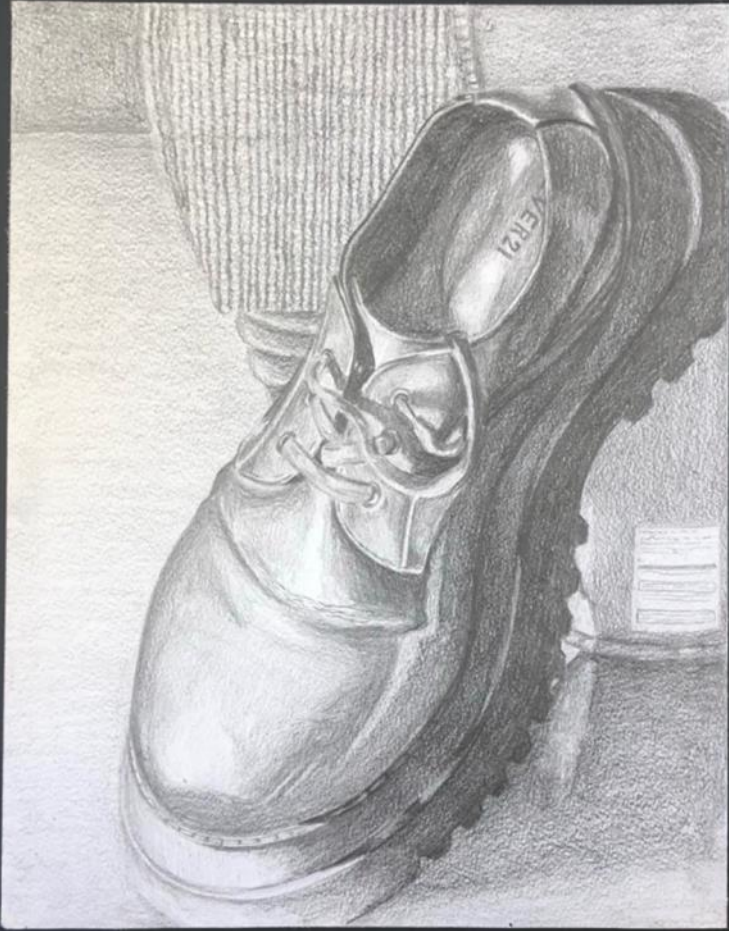
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A decorative horizontal band of watercolor-style green washes in various shades, from light lime to deep forest green, with soft, irregular edges. The text is centered within a semi-transparent white rectangular area overlaid on this band.

Reedley College
Featured
Artist



Shoe

Alejandra Lara-Salas



Hunt

Alejandra Lara-Salas



Cocktail Mixer
Alejandra Lara-Salas

A decorative header featuring a watercolor-style background of various shades of green and yellow. A semi-transparent light green rectangular box is centered horizontally, containing the word "Fiction" in a black, handwritten-style font.

Fiction

Quest

Phoenix Carmen

A fire crackled. A light breeze rustled the branches of the trees overhead. Four men sat around the fire. The tallest was called Duncan, a knight of great renown. Duncan was a large man in every sense of the word. He had a chest larger than a broad shield, which if not for his prodigious skill may have proved perilous at times, and his thick red hair and beard were like wire.

Duncan's posse was formidable in their own regard. There was Fredrick, whom the party called Fred. Fred was not a short man, but he was broad. He kept his face clean shaven with a knife that he sharpened religiously each night. Thomason, or "Tom," was Fred's squire, all of 19 years, and thirsty to prove himself. He was the smallest of the group, but he was nimble and agile. The last man was simply called Ug. Ug, didn't look like he belonged with the rest of the group. He wore no armor, and carried only a long wooden pole with a dagger fastened to one end. Ug stood almost as tall as Duncan, but he was nowhere near as broad. Tall and wiry with matted black hair and beard, he looked like a wild man.

Duncan glanced at Ug and felt an unease in his belly. They had picked him up in the last village they passed through. The three companions had been sitting at a table drinking and discussing the next step of their journey, when this filthy man had plopped himself in an open chair.

"You wanna get up them mountains? I can take yeh," he had grunted, the smell of ale and rotting meat accompanying his words. "I know those mountains like I know my own ass."

"Judging by the smell, ser, you missed a spot when last you cleaned it," Tom had shot at the intruder.

“Quiet down,” Duncan had said, kicking Tom under the table. “We need a guide.”

So, after a lengthy discussion of terms and one last night in a feather bed, the four men had set off from the village and made their way to the base of the mountain. It had been a hard day’s walking. Duncan and Fred wore their plate armor, and Tom carried the majority of the supplies: flint and tinder, water skins, sharpening stones, and some wine. Only Ug moved unencumbered through the bush, his long make-shift spear at the ready.

The day’s journey had brought them to a small clearing nestled against a sheer cliff, and it was here that the men had made camp. Duncan sat sharpening his longsword. Tom and Ug sat across from one another, and it was impossible to tell if they were staring into the fire or at each other. Fred had his dagger out and was working the stubble off his cheeks.

“If you only do that in the morning, you’ll have more hair and be less like to cut yourself ya know?” Duncan said, not looking up from his sword.

“I can’t sleep right if I don’t,” replied Fred. “It gets all itchy. I don’t know how you live with that thing, Duncan.”

“There’s nothing wrong with a face full uh beard,” growled Ug. “That’s how you tell the men from the ladies...and the children,” he continued, his eyes now clearly fixed on Tom.

“If a beard is the only distinction you draw between men and women, then I pity you,” Tom shot back across the fire.

“Calm now lads, we don’t need fighting amongst ourselves. There’ll be plenty of that further up the mountain, I’m sure. I’ve heard stories about goblins, wolves, and worse in these hills.” Duncan’s voice was deep and soothing. “And if the stories are true, we’ll have far worse and far better both waiting at the top of this mountain.”

“Yeh, them stories are true, alright,” said Ug, “but you don’t know

half of the worse, and probably spend too much time dreaming about the better. A Cyclops lives in a cave at the top, oh, yes. He's got a hoard of gold alright, but have you ever met a Cyclops? Nasty things. Strong as ten bulls, and a stench like the shit of twenty. Aye, the smell's the worst part..."

"The smell? The three of us have swords. You have...whatever the hell that is," Fred chimed in, gesturing toward Ug's spear, "and you're worried about the smell? This'll be the easiest sack of gold I ever earned."

Ug cackled, "Aye, the smell. But it ain't the smell of the Cyclops. That's bad enough, but did you know a man shits himself when he dies? That's the worst of it. Smelling the shit of the dead men around you knowing you're next." He turned and stared pointedly at Tom as he spoke the last two words. Tom had opened his mouth to retort when a cry of pain from Fred interrupted him.

"Damn the Saints!" Fred swore, dropping his dagger and clutching his cheek with both hands.

"I warned you, didn't I?" Duncan crooned, a note of smugness in his voice. "Now Thomason, put some of that wine in the fire to boil so your master can clean his face, eh?"

Fred gingerly removed his hands from his face to reveal a long, deep gash on one cheek. Blood flowed freely from the wound and dripped to the ground.

"Never mind that," Fred snapped. "We're not wasting good wine on a scratch."

He reached down and scooped up a handful of dust, then slapped himself in the face. Dirt caked into the open wound and the bleeding slowed to a trickle.

"See there? All better," He grumbled, picking his dagger back up. "Now, hand me one of those whetstones, Tom. If this blade were a tad sharper that wouldn't have happened."

Duncan, satisfied with his own blade, tossed his stone to Fred.

“Keep your bickering down and your ears open, lads. I’m gonna get some sleep,” he said. “You ought to think about the same, we’ve got a Cyclops to kill tomorrow.”

Next morning, Duncan awoke to find Fred examining his cheek in the reflection of his sword. The gash looked terrible. Overnight, it had swollen to nearly twice the size. Blood had congealed around the dust caked into the wound, and a yellow-white liquid was oozing from one corner.

“I told you to clean that,” said Duncan, the smugness in his voice replaced by a tone of concern.

“It’s fine,” grunted Fred, “Just a scratch.”

Duncan turned and surveyed the camp. Tom was still snoring, wedged between a boulder and a tree. Ug was nowhere to be seen. Duncan’s stomach gave another uneasy churn.

As Duncan turned to ask Fred if he knew where Ug had got to, the man seemed to appear from nowhere. Fred started, which awoke Tom who leapt to his feet, drawing his sword.

“What happened, what’s going on?” he asked blearily, pointing his sword around at nothing in particular.

“Shhhh...” Ug hissed back. “I found his cave. It’s only about a mile up, but he’s not in there, which means he might be close by, so keep yer voices down. If we move quick, we might be able to loot the place before he comes back.”

“Brilliant,” Duncan replied softly. “Get dressed and packed, lads, let’s move.”

As Tom secured the supplies, and Duncan and Fred donned their armor, Ug paced around the perimeter of the clearing. Occasionally, he would stop and sniff the air. Once the men were fully armored, the three turned to face Ug.

“Okay Ug, time to earn your share,” Duncan said softly. “Lead the way, Ser.”

Ug nodded, and trotted away into the brush, spear still clutched

tightly. Duncan and his companions followed him closely, taking care to make as little noise as possible. In spite of their efforts, the two men in plate made considerable racket as they passed out of the woods and onto a stony path that led up the mountain. With each twig snap and clang of metal on rock, Duncan cringed. He alone knew that Ug was right. Cyclopes were nasty, and not solely because of their smell. They were downright violent by nature, taking as much pleasure in killing as they did in hoarding gold. He hoped that Ug was telling the truth, and that the beast was away from his cave. If they could get the gold without ever seeing the thing, all the better. Still, as they climbed further up the trail, he felt the knot in his stomach grow tighter.

As they gained altitude, the terrain around them changed. Dense trees gave way to lonely pines. Thick bushes became scraggly scrub, and larger and larger boulders lined the path. Ug moved faster than the other three. They would frequently lose sight of him around a bend then turn a corner to meet him perched on a rock sniffing the air.

“We’re close, and I still don’t smell shit,” said Ug after one such meeting. “He might still be out. Something smells...off though.” He sniffed the air again, then glanced at Fred. “You okay pal?” he asked.

Duncan also turned to face Fred, who had been rearing the group. He looked terrible. The side of his face with the cut was so swollen one eye was forced partially shut. The pus leaking from the wound now had a greenish tint, and Fred himself appeared fevered. Sweat beaded his brow, and he seemed simultaneously flushed and pale.

“Mmokay...” Fred breathed. “Is...just a scratch. I just need...some water.”

Tom hurried over to his master and handed him a skin. Fred drank deeply and exhaled. It did appear to help a little. Duncan could see some color come back into his face, and his good eye was clearer; he still looked horrible though.

“Let’s keep going,” said Fred, his voice a little stronger. “Let’s get this gold and get back to a town.”

The four continued up the rocky terrain, Ug in the front followed by Duncan. Fred followed with a lethargic stride that made Duncan more uneasy. Tom brought up the rear, a look of concern growing on his face.

Finally, the path ahead widened into a plateau strewn with large boulders. A sheer drop on one side, and a cliff face rising on the other. A single pine tree stood against the cliff, and next to it was the mouth of a wide cave.

“There,” Ug whispered, “I still don’t smell anything but yer face Fred, but be quiet all the same.”

Ug darted quickly up to the mouth of the cave and tucked himself behind the pine tree. The other three followed as quietly as they could. With all four crouched, hidden behind the tree trunk, Ug peered around the lip of the cave into the semi-darkness.

“I don’t see anything,” he hissed. He sniffed the air. “Smells like shit alright, but that’s where he sleeps. Could be he’s not here, it’s not as bad as last time.”

Duncan sniffed the air as well. He too smelled shit, but it wasn’t as potent as the odor of decay coming from Fred. He turned and looked at the man once more. Fred was leaning against the cliff, his breaths coming in quick and shallow. He was white as a sheet except for the swollen red gash across his face. Duncan’s stomach clenched tighter. They needed to get Fred to a healer, or he wouldn’t last the night. He wondered what had caused his friend to worsen so quickly, but pushed the curiosity to the back of his mind. They were here now, and a healer would demand gold.

“Fred, stay here. You’ll be worse than useless to us if that thing is in there,” Duncan commanded. “Keep a lookout and give us a whistle if you see anything coming.”

Fred nodded and sank down onto the ground, but kept his good eye open. Duncan and Tom drew their swords, Ug clutched his spear, and the three quietly rounded the corner into the cave.

They found themselves in a dimly lit cavern. The light from the tunnel entrance seemed to dissipate unnaturally quick. As the men crept into the darkness, their vision adjusted, and the details of the chamber came into sharper focus. Stalagmites poked up from the floor, and an ominous dripping pierced the otherwise silent cave.

The men edged deeper into the gloom, weaving between rocks, clutching their weapons tightly. Suddenly Duncan's foot made contact with something metal, and a chink cut through the incessant dripping. All three froze. Silence, but for dripping.

Duncan peered down to see what he had kicked. It was a single gold coin. As he stooped to pick it up, another caught his eye. He turned to gather it up as well, and there, partially hidden in a small chamber, was their prize. A pile of coins, gold cups, and precious gems.

Tom stifled a cry of joy that nonetheless echoed through the chamber. Duncan glared at him, then stuck out his hand. Tom reached into his satchel and produced three burlap sacks. He handed one to Duncan then offered another to Ug, who had just joined them in awe at the mountain of treasure.

The three quickly stuffed the sacks with as much gold and as many gems as they could, choosing those that appeared most valuable. As they worked, a faint whistle met their ears, followed by a stench that Duncan recognized. So too it seemed, did Ug. He glanced briefly at Duncan before darting off into the darkness with his treasure, spear still clutched in his other hand.

Tom and Duncan looked at one another, and Duncan held a finger to his lips. Then he began to creep back toward the cave entrance, crouching behind stalagmites, Tom at his heels. As they came closer to the exit, a hulking figure suddenly appeared silhouetted against the light of the cave mouth. They stopped and waited, holding their breath. The creature sniffed the air then turned slowly away from the mouth of the cave to where Duncan knew Fred still sat waiting for them. The knot in his stomach doubled, and he dropped his sack of

gold, preparing himself to charge the creature. Fred would be no match in his current condition.

As he stood and took a final deep breath, he saw a second silhouette fly across the mouth of the cave. It wrapped itself around the larger silhouette, and Duncan saw it stab something long deep into the monster's back. An unearthly scream of pain resonated through the cavern, and the two silhouettes fell to the ground. Duncan and Tom grabbed their bags of gold once more and ran to see what exactly had just happened.

Outside the cave, it took a moment for their eyes to adjust once more. Once his vision had cleared, Duncan saw Ug standing over a huge, fleshy creature, his spear protruding from the base of its skull. It looked, for the most part, human, except for its sheer size and the stench coming off of it. It was face down, but Duncan knew it was the Cyclops. As he looked, the beast gave a final convulsion and the smell worsened as a brown liquid oozed out from beneath the loincloth the creature wore.

"Guess it's not just men who shit themselves when they die," Ug cackled. He looked over at Fred, still sitting against the cliff face paralyzed with fear. His sword was clutched in both shaking hands. Ug sniffed in Fred's direction. "And I suppose a man doesn't need to die to shit himself," he roared with laughter.

"Thank you," Duncan said sincerely to Ug. "Thank you for saving my friend."

"I got lucky. I think it smelled his face, it was distracted," Ug replied, jerking his head at Fred. He gripped the handle of his spear, and with a squelching sound removed it from the Cyclops's neck. "Well boys, I think my terms have been met. This is where I leave you." Ug turned, scooped up the bag of gold from where he presumably dropped it before attacking the creature and began to jog down the hill. Duncan watched him go, his stomach slowly unclenching itself. The man had been true after all. Duncan turned to Tom.

“Come on lad,” he said. “We've got to get your master to a healer. Now that this thing is dead, we ought to come back for the rest of the gold, Fred first though.” The two men walked over to their companion, still sitting pale against the rock. They helped him to his feet, and with Tom supporting his master the three began to make their way down the mountain. To a healer, to civilization, to spend their prize.

Vanessa's Secret

Melynda Huff

Mr. Avery Moore, a prison psychologist, sat in front of Vanessa Kent, a woman who was convicted of killing her husband. Vanessa shot him while he slept, and the authorities believe she killed her 3-month-old daughter as well, but her body was never found. Avery was tasked with Vanessa's evaluation before she was to report to the electric chair at 0500 hours tomorrow.

Avery looked at Vanessa, a tall slim woman with pointed features and long blonde wavy hair with slight shades of grey just above her temple. She had on her bright orange jumper with the number 05-342569 stamped across her chest in bold black lettering. Vanessa looked younger than she was, and Avery noted that she was very beautiful. Vanessa's eyes were a striking grey color, and they bore into Avery, studying him warily.

"Good morning, Ms. Kent. My name is Dr. Moore, and I will be doing your eval today," Avery said looking over to Vanessa and smiling warmly.

"Hello, Doctor. Have you come to see how crazy I must be in order to kill my beloved husband?" Vanessa said with a deep southern accent. It almost sounded straight out of a 50's movie with the level of poise she had when she spoke. Vanessa chuckled slightly after the word 'beloved' and lifted her right eyebrow slightly. Avery took a mental note that she didn't mention her daughter.

"No, I am only here to ensure that you understand and can cope with what is going to happen tomorrow," Avery said pointedly. "I have a couple of questions to ask you. Are you okay with that?"

"Cope with what is going to happen tomorrow? You mean when they walk me down to be executed?" Vanessa asks with a scoff and an

eye roll, her hand waving dismissively. "Ask your questions doctor, I have nowhere to be."

"Well, how are you feeling, Ms. Kent?" Avery said after clicking on his recorder he had taken out of his briefcase.

"You know they are shaving my head tomorrow? Can you believe that I must die bald? How pitiful," Vanessa said sadly, touching her hair. "You know I used to get compliments about my hair? I'm sad to see it go." Vanessa sighed looking me up and down. "You know, doctor, I must say you look as handsome as my late husband," her eyes sparkling mischievously.

Avery ignored her compliment, cleared his throat, and asked, "Do you regret it? What you did to your husband and your daughter, Ms. Kent?"

Vanessa considered the question. "My husband had it coming," she said simply.

"What about your daughter?" Avery asked.

"Next question, Doctor," she said sighing dismissively.

"Fine, do you think you belong here, Ms. Kent?"

"My time on this earth is coming to an end either way though, Doctor. No need to dwell on the inevitable." She looked up and smiled though it didn't reach her eyes.

"The guard told me you like to draw; are there any drawings you would like to show me?" Avery asked motioning to the notebook on the bed in the cell.

Vanessa's eyes lit up ever so slightly as she got up from her chair in the corner of the cell and walked the two steps to the bed to retrieve the notebook, handing it to him. "Here, look at the ones you want. They won't matter much tomorrow, so at least someone will see them before they're thrown away."

Avery flipped through the pages and saw a lot of landmarks and landscapes. There was a lot of detail in Vanessa's drawings, but he stopped about halfway through the pages. This drawing was of a baby

pink rose that hadn't quite bloomed all the way yet and was cut brutally at its stem. This drawing was different than the others and seemed not to fit the theme of the rest of the book.

Avery turned the book around to show Vanessa the drawing. "This one is beautiful. The detail is incredible." He watched as Vanessa shifted uncomfortably in her chair. "Does this picture mean anything to you?"

Vanessa looked at the drawing and sighed. "They all have meaning to me."

"Well, what does this one mean to you?" Avery asked, feeling like he struck a nerve.

"Can you keep a secret?" Vanessa asked and leaned over to Avery, lowering her voice.

"I want to know about this picture." Avery said, looking Vanessa in the eye.

Vanessa reached for the recorder and switched it off. "My husband was a cruel man, you know. He used to watch the game on Sunday evenings, after church," Vanessa said. "He would get so drunk and..." Her words faltered before she continued clearing her throat. "He would hurt me. I fell pregnant because of it, and my husband 'allowed' me to carry his child." Vanessa had tears in her eyes now, but she continued. "The game nights continued even after Rose was born, Doctor. Do you know what he did? He took her into the bathroom to give her a bath. He never gave her a bath. I walked in on him trying to drown her. That is when I knew what I had to do to escape him."

She looked Avery in the eye. "When he fell asleep that night, I took his gun from the nightstand beside the bed, and I shot him two times in the head." Vanessa smiled a bit at the last part then wiped her eyes with her fingers. "That picture you are looking at is my baby girl, Rose. She never even had a chance with us."

Avery looked at her quizzically. "Well, as touching as your recollection of events is, you never told me your secret."

Vanessa got up from her chair and knocked on the cell door to signal to the two guards that she was done with the interview.

They came in and motioned for Avery to get up and follow them out of Vanessa's cell, but before Avery got up, Vanessa leaned over and smiled sadly. She whispered in his ear so low, he almost missed it. "She is still alive, Doctor."

It Hurts to Breathe

Jharna Sutaria

Part 1

When I was six years old, I saw a dove's egg for the first time. A small array rested in a nest within the depths of a few tree branches, and I could see it from my bedroom window. For some days, when the dove was away, I decorated the nest with roses and strings of intertwined vines. Each day after school, I would stare out the window at the dove returning from her daily adventure and resting gingerly on the nest.

During this time, my parents were going through a tumultuous divorce. I would come home to either deafening silence or screaming; therefore, this peaceful and consistent routine with the dove comforted me. It assured me that nurturing parents exist, even if I didn't have them.

One day, I came back from school and did my usual routine of fixing the decorations on the dove's nest. Some of the roses and vines were dying, so I replaced them with fresh ones. After I was satisfied with my work, I went to my room and occasionally glanced out the window to see when the dove returned. An hour or so passed before I put my coloring book down and looked out the window to see the dove, but the nest was empty. "Maybe she just got a little lost while coming home," I said out loud. For some reason, I had to hear the words to calm the anxiety that was starting to stir in my stomach.

I didn't want to waste too much time away from the window, so I grabbed a cup of apple sauce from the fridge and decided it was my dinner tonight. My eyes were glued to the nest while I ate the sweet apple mush. I tried to ignore the stars becoming more visible against the darkening sky. I fed myself all sorts of comforting stories about

why the dove hadn't returned yet.

Maybe the dove was visiting its friend and lost track of time.

Maybe the dove wanted to go back to its mommy for a little bit.

Maybe the dove is on a different tree close by because it's not able to sleep well while trying to rest on the bumps of her eggs.

I stared out the window until I fell asleep. The next morning, I still didn't see the dove. My anxiety started to bubble up more. I didn't want to leave the window that day. I just wanted to wait for the dove. I ran my fingers through my hair as I tried to brainstorm ways to fake sick for my parents, but unfortunately, I've never been one to hide my intentions well. So, I reluctantly dragged my feet to school and sprinted home after the last bell rang.

This pattern of coming back to school, staring while staying clear of the nest, and then falling asleep by the window went on for a few days. Finally, I worked up the nerve to check the nest. My heart stopped for a painfully stretched-out second when I looked inside and saw the broken eggs. Small puddles of yolk and blood were leaking from each shattered shell.

Panic strangled my throat, and tears trailed down my cheeks, dropping into the nest. Eventually, I did a Google search and discovered that doves abandon their nest when they think it is close to continuous danger. The guilt still claws at my core. Maybe I deserved to endure what the dove went through.

A couple of years into puberty, as my hips started to widen and my breasts began to form, I felt like my body was being taken from me. I felt invaded. I came out to my immediate family as a transgender male and asked them to help me start the process of transitioning. My family, and the conservative state of Texas where I resided, denied me access to gender-affirming healthcare.

Each fight tightened my grip on my gender identity, causing more tension in the house.

On the morning of my first day of middle school, I woke up with

soreness between my legs. My whole body screamed as I began to sit up, and as I did, my eyes trailed to the blood-stained pale blue underwear on the floor. I stared intensely at it for a full minute or two as if I was expecting it to fly up and slap me across the face. But it didn't. It was just there, crumpled on the floor, innocently holding back so much that needed to be said. It was the only witness to what had happened last night when my mom's boyfriend came into my room and raped me.

When I opened my mouth to scream, and he clamped his hand on my lips, when I tried to fight back, and he hit me on the side of the head, my head swerved, and my eyes faced my bedroom window. I couldn't tell if the stars and black dots belonged to the indigo sky or if they were from the blow of the punch, but I tried not to focus on that. I tried not to cry because I didn't have anyone to wipe my tears. What got me through the rape was looking out my bedroom window at the branch which once held the dove's nest.

Five weeks after the rape, morning sickness started to seep in, and my breasts began to grow tender, and as absent as my mother was, even she caught on. She asked me if I was pregnant. I said, "I am... sorry."

Lies about being reckless at a party with a boy replaced the truth that didn't feel safe to speak.

The pregnancy created another reason for my family to be embarrassed by me. My mom refused to make eye contact with me for days. On several occasions, I would catch her scrolling through search results of abortion clinics. One day while they walked past my bedroom door, I overheard Mom telling her boyfriend, "We can't make her do it locally...what if someone from our circle finds out?"

Within a couple of days, my mom booked a plane ticket for California, and before I knew it, I was in a Planned Parenthood facility, lying on my back, feet propped up and apart while bright ceiling lights blinded me.

The doctor and nurses spread me so wide that I swear I would tear into two. When I begged for painkillers, one of the nurses told me to “just breathe.” I attempted a slow inhale, and my cramps clenched. Sharp pain from all sides of my core pierced through me like bullets, reminding me of the rape. It felt like a sword had barged through the lips between my legs.

I was losing the one source of proof that I had. The only tangible result of the crime. And the one person who held the highest probability of believing my truth. My vision went blurry, the blinding ceiling lights bled into each other, and then it was over.

During the cab ride to the airport, we halted at a streetlight next to an elementary school. Looking at all the children made me compare myself to the person I was before I came out of the closet. By the time the light turned green, I’d named each child on the playground, and throughout the flight, all I thought about was the dove.

Part 2

It’s been fifteen years since my abortion. During that time, with guidance from my teachers, I earned my high school diploma. After saving up with essay scholarships and working a crap job, I paid for one of the four-year colleges I had been accepted to, California’s Stanford University. I had a couple of reasons for moving to the most progressive area of the golden state. I was determined to move to a place where I could easily gain access to gender-affirming care, and for some strange reason, I also wanted to be closer to where I had my abortion.

I always passed by that Mountain View Planned Parenthood clinic. It brought me some sadness but also a shining spirit. It reminded me of how far I’d come and encouraged me to keep going. At Stanford, I graduated from the top of my class and worked my way to becoming a professor at that school.

I felt like a dove taking flight.

While I was in the midst of my studies, I came across a classmate who I eventually fell in love with. Like me, she was a survivor of sexual assault and had a pregnancy as a result. Her conservative parents forced her to go through the delivery by threatening to kick her out of their house if she got an abortion. At seventeen, she gave birth to a healthy baby girl. Her child was five years old when I first laid eyes on them, and she was twenty-two. She had transferred from a local community college and was studying to become a lawyer.

We moved into an apartment together as soon as we'd both graduated and gotten stable jobs. I was finally part of something bigger than myself. I had a family. I had my own nest and joined my partner in raising her kid, who I grew immensely fond of. I treated her like my own: school drop-offs, homework help, bedtime stories, and ice cream weekends. The sparkle from her eyes reflected off of me after her early milestones. I poured all the unconditional love I wished I had received into her childhood. I did everything I could to keep her out of harm's way. I spent each day letting her know how much I wanted it to stay this way.

But it didn't.

My partner and I began to face conflict as soon as we settled down. She kept me and my gender identity a secret from the rest of her family, but I kept all of her like a promise. My grip held on too tightly, if I'm being completely honest. The footprints of both of our troubled pasts covered our apartment floor. We were regularly stomping on each other's mental minefields. I tried to fix it because I refused to be someone's secret again. Codependency is a stormy sea with tides that suck you in if you are not careful, and I tried to fight for all of us. I paid for all of the therapy. I dragged my partner to each of our couple's counseling sessions. I did my absolute best to hide the tension from our daughter, but the truth is that she witnessed as much as I did. I tried and tried and tried. My heart kept giving to what we'd built together until I had nothing left to give.

Despite all of my efforts, my home collapsed, and so did I. The triggering turbulence was affecting my mental and physical health and performance. I finally reached a point where I realized that I had to choose between myself and my two favorite people. It took a long while because I never wanted to let go, but one day I did.

During my last night at my ex-partner's apartment, I had a private conversation with my daughter about the fact that I am no longer in a relationship with her mother, and I am leaving their apartment tomorrow. I told my daughter I would always love her and be there for her when she needed me. I blinked back tears and softly sang to her as she sobbed herself to sleep.

The next morning, when the rest of the family was still in bed, I left a goodbye note on the table, placed my keys on the rack, and closed the apartment door for the last time. I turned on the ignition and pulled out of the parking lot. While driving back to my new apartment, I ventured onto the route that passed the Mountain View Planned Parenthood. I stopped at a red streetlight that was positioned parallel to the clinic. An image of the dove's broken eggs flashed before my eyes. A lump began to rise in my throat, and I forced it down with a hard swallow. The car behind me honked, and I turned to the streetlight, which had switched to green.

My ex-partner made it clear that she never wanted to see me again. We'd stopped verbally abusing each other after I took my name off the lease. I was leaving, so there was nothing left to fight about. My daughter and I did our best to keep in touch. Initially, she would visit every week, and we'd promise to stay in each other's lives every time we parted. When she was away, I threw myself into my work and dreaded returning to my apartment at the end of each day. The loneliness was brutal, and the grief was heartbreaking, but after a few months had passed, I met someone new, went through surgery, and in a blink of an eye, I was raising another child. My daughter visited me less frequently after that. I remember seeing the pain in her eyes as

she watched me become a more intimate father to someone else. Years passed as our weekly phone calls gradually spaced into blocks of months. Each time we were on the phone, it took fewer minutes for our conversation to run dry. After a while, the gap between us became so painful to digest that we stopped talking altogether. I will always remember and love her, but now she has become someone I used to know.

I still drive by the Mountain View Planned Parenthood. I still think about my abortion. Leaving my family made me think of my painful procedure at eleven. Suddenly, I am again the dove forced to leave her eggs behind. To this day, my mind returns to all the memories my family and I shared. I still can't look away when I see some of my daughter's features on another child's face. My hands trembled when I held onto my second daughter's bicycle handles as she learned to pedal. My pulse reminded me of the rush of excitement and fear that comes with raising someone and teaching them how to navigate the world. My heart remembers loving my family to the fullest.

My lungs have been sewn back together, but it hurts to breathe.



Poetry

We Who Take Cold Showers Salute You

Lois Wickstrom

Ice needles pelt my skin
I do not bleed
Hair plasters my face
A frozen sculpture
We who take cold showers salute you.

Soap slathers a warm balm
A slippery blanket
Lather is luxury
Foam is fruitful
Cleansing more than sweat
We who take cold showers salute you.

The salvo resumes
Numbing cold
Wakening zest
Shivering assault
Survivor's cry
We who take cold showers salute you.

It's Not Your Fault

Shannon Kelly

Good morning Pandora
Happy birthday
Welcome to the world
We'll show you the way

Artistry from Athena
Curiosity from Hera
Mischievousness from Zeus
To last you an era

Hephaestus forged you
From water and clay
Aphrodite inspired
Your beauty and shape

Here is your husband
Titan Epimetheus
Take care of each other
And don't be impervious

A gift for the two of you
Keep this box closed
Because of its contents
It can't be exposed

Goodbye dear Pandora
I know you're a fool
We made you that way
I'm sorry we're cruel

But Zeus chose to punish
The innocent man
Unwittingly gifted
By traitorous hands

So now there is famine
Hatred despair
Turmoil passion
Sickness everywhere

It's not your fault
That the world falls ill
This was our way
Of destroying the anthill

Stone Cold Killer

Shannon Kelly

Did Perseus know
As he lifted her head
Fallen like snow
A victim lay dead

A battered survivor
Of godly abuse
Secluded away
And cursed in her youth

Poseidon had stolen
Her innocent purity
Athena rebuked her
With outright cruelty

She meant no one harm
Desiring to protect
Stheno and Euryale
From ignorant disrespect

Their yard was littered
With unwanted guests
Assassins were thwarted
Stone cold statuesque

And then came Perseus
Gifted and clever
Aided by Athena
With that goddamned mirror

I know it's a shield
But what is the difference
It won't change what happened
Brutality in reverence

He showed her no mercy
Like everyone else
Medusa was slain
For every man's health

What about women
I scream out in vain
I'll wield her venom
Revenge for the slain

The Words Left Unsung

Shannon Kelly

We soar through the mountains
Up to the peak
There lies a titan
With regenerative physique

Why are you here
I ask the chained man
As my flock digs in
According to plan

Fire my child
The titan replies
I stole from the heavens
So humans survive

That doesn't make sense
I tear out his liver
Why risk the gods' wrath
His lips seem to quiver

They are my children
Prometheus shakes
Seeing them suffer
Made my heart break

*So I stole from Hephaestus
To spread inspiration
Societies blossomed
From the new foundation*

My mother tears out
His eyes and his tongue
But I know in my heart
The words left unsung

Eternal damnation
Is worth all the while
As long as his humans
Can exist and smile

Humane Denouncement and Dismissal (HDD) Form [Section 5-B, Line 272]

Gabriel Lukas Quinn

How strange we are
Pink and blessed
From mother's womb

With beads of dew
Blood red in kiss
Atop our crown

We froth for air
From green daylight
Till dust's last sup

What steel keeps us
From the locks, keys
Of our choice masks

These white ghoul arms
That reach for aid
No known response

Bubbles bursting
Full, peach nectar
Dribbles in vials

Mad lab musings
Black cackles ring
All around us

No savior here
Our cures are far
Just out of view

How strange we are
Solemn depressed
Fine to be few

How grave we are
Glad dying race
Pleased in prison

*If accurate,
Print full name here*

Party's Over

Nicholas Baldwin

The party started out with fun and jokes all around.

Two turned to three turned to four drinks more.

Others faces were rosy and full of joy.

Another drink and so many drinks more.

The phone rang in my pocket.

It was my sober sponsor.

Head first, I fell.

Straight to floor.

Lights out.

Dead.

Whiskey, Classic

Alexa Rose M.

A pair of glittering eyes the color of amber,
to match the drink in the bottom of his glass of whiskey.
Her body slides down the tongue as easy as the liquor,
lifting off couch cushions,
an offering poured from the decanter.
He is eager.
A thief and a drunkard,
no stranger to overindulgence.
Perverse,
yet not perverse enough to kiss her.
He drinks her,
his typical Saturday evening of perfect hedonism.

Meal for Earthworms

Alexa Rose M.

Drug through the dandelions,
through tufts of downy grass.
Leaves and twigs tangled in my matted hair,
dirt under my fingernails from clawing at the soft earth.
I am the soil and the seed.
A meal for earthworms.

Where It's At

Veralyn Beaumont

Stand up. Speak up. Shut up. Sit down.

Come here. Get out. Keep up. Hurry up. Slow down.

Listen. Forget.

Make some friends. Stay away from them.

Think for yourself. What do you know?

Read a book. Go outside.

Act your age. Grow up.

Be yourself. Be normal.

Do whatever makes you happy. You can't make a living with that.

This is where it's at, they say. Where you ought to make your own decisions, to venture on your own path. They say that figuring out your way is what makes life exciting, worth living for. They say, they say.

But how can I even move when every step is wrong?

That's where it's at. Figure it out.

My Pink Stuffed Bunny

Tecna Mostafa

Come, come, my monophobia calls out.

Monophobia? What's that you say?

Oh, silly little bunny of mine, precious pink sweet bunny,
a lifeless yet humble doll with floppy long ears resides within my
laundry basket.

Come, come, it is time for our tea party with our other lovely friends
dangling in my arms with delicacy, our imaginary cups set in place.

The aroma beads within her seams to invade the room quite
comfortably.

Monophobia, you say? Well

it frightens me when you're gone.

You have to understand that.

Many moments of nostalgia confined in my youth

belong to you, is you. You are

my childhood memories

which danced and thrived, enhanced, and enchanted

because of you, my pink stuffed bunny.

Itty Bitty Speck of Dust

Tecna Mostafa

Black matter and energy swallow up the universe as it rapidly spirals
around us.

Stars brimming with intense mystery may dazzle and shine
as the rings of Saturn spin and twirl gracefully
and as the ferocious storms of Jupiter aggressively invade
each by standing particle, stumbling and tumbling through the wind.
And even black holes, pitch black as the heart of a nightmare
treacherously manifested to a living catastrophe
can wreak havoc to our precious home.

Yet, despite having the potential to swallow up our beloved Earth,
the planets and stars live in harmony, coexisting with one another,
growing and evolving, but slowly drifting apart,
seeking for eternal expansion.

Deeper and further into our endless world,
as we dream into outer space, we are but
an utter, itty bitty speck of dust.

Chocolate Chip Cookies Just for You

Tecna Mostafa

How could I forget
the hollow glimpse in your eyes echoing during your moments of hurt?
How dreadful can this cruel world be to bend a beam of sunlight?
But your eyes, oh, your eyes,
when they lit up.
My arms were now embraced with a magnificent aura,
and our walls pulsated with immense color.
What great joy erupted within me when you excitedly accepted my
 gift?
The warmth of freshly made chocolate chip cookies
brimming in the oven after being carved generously with deep
 appreciation
crispy on the edges and stuffed with a gentle slather of Nutella.
I could finally return your smile and goofy chuckle back to you once
 more.
Your pain and misery is temporary.
I made them just the way you like them—
your favorite chocolate chip cookies, just for you.

No Longer a Goddess

Elizabeth Soria

I am fat,
not morbidly obese
or even slightly overweight,
but fat.

Fat like the Venus de Milo
with rolls that befit a Goddess of love
caressed lovingly with skill and patience
by an artist's hands.

Fat like the Lady Aphrodite
whose beauty captivated
as she burst through the sea foam,
like ladies of fortune
whose size was more of an accessory,
like those who could afford to eat.

But that is the past.

Today, I am fat.

I am unhealthy.

No longer am I a goddess.

The Panadero

Gavin Garza

*From the colors and aromas of this world,
my childhood made a poet's lyre
and offered it to me.*

Sayat Nova

Three children draped
over an arm rest— waiting,
twiddling the flapper, told
*Keep put, I'll be there
eventually.*

An ice cream jingle, then
a honk—
two as a set.
Another for good measure.
A Ford Transit—

we scatter, check

our pockets

the cushions

mom's penny bag

her church money

we'll save one for Yeshua

and another for the ofrenda

relax.

Carmen flags the sailor to our curb.

We step out, he shines

his elote teeth. Speaks

a rough Spanglish

to the children of Monterrey,

Uno, dos, how many to you?

He opens the gates:

racks splotched

of silvers and bronze,

waves of Crisco and fresa

blanket, tease us—

we fumble with the names.

Sprinkled cookies

Glossy piggies

Coco swirls

Sponge cakes

Sugared horns

Conchas.

I know concha,

my papá taught me.

The crumbs he brushed

stained the polos and belt buckles

he left us to altar.

I grab the change,

the clamshell.

Hands

he reaches, hands

scorned and kissed

by blood and desert suns.

He throws in an extra,
then closes the gates—
muffled ranchera
and cresting exhaust fumes.

Que tenga un buen día

is all I can say.

Tomorrow, I'll slump in pews, but today—
today I'll sink
into ocean breads, and spread
this beautiful mess, knowing
I am loved by my bread.

For Zoe

Gavin Garza

Some part of us is rooted in the Valley strip
blowing north, south, and back again
passing remnants of the other.

Imagine if I wrote what I wanted to.
I mean, I do, but I was a child
being a child when I made those loose ends.

And man, aren't we already burdened
with what our parents tucked and bundled
into a seed head? I hold on

to my hat
as the pollen and espinas
tell it plainly.

Imagine if I wrote like I wanted to.
Infatuation on memory
is a baseless thing.

So I plucked a seed from
my bed, caught the drift, and set off
towards the Altamont Pass. Ah,

writing's hard with one hand.
And man, I really have to squint
when the overcast shadows the mast

with the hushing sun.

Anyways, so yeah.

You get what I'm saying now.

Office Poem No. 6

Gavin Garza

All the unread books
leer back at me.

The mysteries of pavement and earth
muddle together

and trail off

as I leave for

another Wednesday. It's March now,

and I'm back where I was
when I was 20.

Stuffing journals,
crumbling ARCO receipts.

A cough drop under my tongue.

Eavesdropping on a Modern Love Story

Amber Wren

It's a rainy Tuesday afternoon & I can't help but overhear two strangers in this coffee shop start a conversation. Brought together because of a mutual experience—the awkwardness of public bathrooms. #MEETCUTE. They keep taking & oh what a coincidence, both once called the Windy City home, only to find themselves twin transplants in the City of Brotherly Love. I'm obsessing over how many previous times their paths may have crossed in this city or that & imagining countless instances they might have *just* missed each other. Meanwhile, they exchange phone numbers & set a first date for Sunday brunch at 11 o'clock.

Swimming

Amber Wren

tumbling head over heel
down a rocky slope
the water rushes up
over my head

sometimes I'd rather
sink than swim
the slope unmountable
from this angle

the real work
begins after I put
myself back together
the falling apart
seems inconsequential
in comparison

but
I've always been good
at treading water

The Ermine Longs to be Released into the Void, and the Lady Dreams of Destruction

Karen Canfield

"Lady with an Ermine" circa. 1489 by Leonardo da Vinci

She holds herself still within her skin,
within her silk and velvet,
holding the ermine

almost absently. Neck beaded
with the blackness, she holds herself,

not her mind. She lets that drift
away. From where she sits,

she can see the empires
she will build, the kings she will
crumble.

She smiles to herself. Towers combust
with one twitch of her finger. The ermine
follows her eyes

into darkness. For what is movement
without stillness? The quiet contemplation
of galaxies and cities

and peaches.

And the white ermine, poised to dart
from her arms.

It holds its paw aloft, its needle teeth
at the ready. In her gaze the world

is razed and reborn. Centuries
of cities flare and burn

and flicker out. She holds it all
in her red velvet arms,
her artful fingers, her eyes
no man can hold,
patient—

till the moment
she lets go.

Self Portrait in a Small Gold Locket

Karen Canfield

Head full of stories like trees
waiting to be carved. She
sings when no one is around,
throat full of sagebrush desert.

The pull of the stage, the fear,
the desire for all the things she could
learn, do, be. Danced the trained
body, strained like chisel

shapes stone, wood, words.
I see a girl
who sometimes wishes
to be a dragon.

Lunch on a Bench in the Not-So-Secret Garden Behind the Library in the Rain

Karen Canfield

Raindrops thread pine needles with glass beads.
From under rose bushes, ceramic rabbits watch.
Just before, summer's heat sighed down my neck
like smoke. Now, the leaves have rusted.

Ceramic rabbits watch me from rose bushes,
and I find myself on the knife-edge of November.
The leaves have rusted saffron,
and December looms like a landslide.

On the knife-edge of November,
I steal this moment and tuck it in my coat pocket –
December looms like a landslide,
the raindrops on leaves, soft as secrets.

I steal this moment and tuck it in my pocket.
I wonder why I cannot run. An irregular
percussion of raindrops like tapping fingers.
The white ceramic rabbit watches me

and wonders why I do not run.
Before, summer's heat draped itself over this concrete
bench. Now, the white rabbit watches from under silver leaves,
and rain threads pine needles with glass beads.

Las Rolas Mas Chidas

Derrek Gudino

As a kid, I would visit Mexico at least 3 to 4 times a year, sometimes even more; if we didn't go within the year we felt incomplete. It was a longing for warmth, and we had to get our dose. On one of these many trips, I remember driving from Abasolo to Penjamo with my cousins. We were in my uncle's black Jetta, a trendy car only in Mexico. The music was bumping, and everyone was singing with the windows down. Everyone was singing but me. I didn't know the song. Chavo was driving and he began to scan the local radio stations, "Pinche estaciones culeras, no mames, no agarra nada," I turn to look out the car window, the warm breeze flows through my hair, and I smell the sugar cane fields burning. Something is always burning in Mexico; the smell of smoke and dirt season the air. The auburn hills turn purple as the sun dials down for the day, the green pastures scurry through the valleys, and the moon hangs above as an ornament while the sun curls in for the night. Giovanna and Astrid suggest cds their dad might have in the glove compartment, Joan Sebastian's *Rey del Jaripeo*, or Alejandro Fernandez's *A Corazon Abierto*, and what we should do once we arrive in Penjamo. "Un pomo de Absolut, no?" Suggests Giovanna as she counts the endless kilometers of agave. "Sip, claro y con un jugo de uva" agrees Astrid. Chavo tells us to be quiet and turns it up, "Esta es chida." He winks at me and turns it up more. *Everybody's changing*, Chavo attempts to sing, but his voice diminishes and stops when he can't figure out the third word. I laugh at him but then focus on the lyrics to help out. "La conoces, primo?" I raise my bottom lip and turn my head left and right, "nel, primo, quien es?" Chavo looks at me disappointedly. "No que en los united escuchaban las rolas mas chidas? Fijate que aca se escucha otro tipo de musica, es mas, la musica de Europa primero llega aqui y luego les llega a ustedes,

en ves, ustedes andan atrazados.” My cousins all laugh at me in unison. I laugh too. I scratch my head and clear my throat. Embarrassingly, I ask him who the artist is. “Es Keane, wey. Te los recomiendo.” The exit for Penjamo approaches, I roll the window up as the cool breeze flies in and the streetlights turn on.

Self Surrender

David Tang

I left myself in the past.

Broken dreams fade

into the sky.

Ghosts come and go.

Passing storms

ruin shelters.

This time, like the last,

will be different.

This time, I mend it

with imperfections.


Kintsukuroi, beautiful

for having been broken.

Disappearing

David Tang

A turtle retracts its shell in defense,
much like social avoidance.
It starts with canceled plans,
missed calls, and isolation.
A fading presence.
The voice atrophies,
the mind wanders,
the self ceases to exist,
once a supernova, now a remnant star.
Stars don't burn out until the end.

A decorative horizontal band of watercolor-style green washes, ranging from light lime to deep forest green, with soft, irregular edges. The text is centered within a semi-transparent white rectangular area overlaid on this band.

Creative Nonfiction

The Day I Grew Two Years Older

Antoni February

“One two three, eyes on me!” Mrs. Miller, our teacher, shouted over the din of our fellow students.

“One, two, eyes on you!” our classmates said in one voice.

Our peers silenced at once and straightened their backs in rapt attention: good, focused, hard-working students. Gabriel and I could see them all the way from the back of class...

“Settle down, all,” Mrs. Miller said. “Today is a special day. We have a guest speaker. I-”

“Yay, no math!” I shouted to stifled laughs from Gabriel.

“Antoni, do you want me to write your name down again?”

“I’m so sorry,” I replied. “How could I ever have said such a thing?”

Laughs. A girl sighed.

The teacher turned, uncapped a whiteboard marker in a hand tightened so that I could see her knuckles gone white, and wrote my name on the board.

“Now, I know it’s a bit of a change,” Mrs. Miller said, putting the pen down and addressing the class once again, “but—and trust me, I speak from life experience—you will get to know all about this topic when you become a little older. Please be on your best behavior, treating her as you would treat me, for Ms. Abbots.”

“Hi, Ms. Abbots!” our fellow students said in one voice.

“Thank you.” Ms. Abbots was young with brown hair cut short, earrings that jingled, and a jean skirt. “You may have noticed that I have put two straws on your desks.”

We did indeed have two red straws on our desks. One was a soda straw, the other a coffee stirrer, but the sun shining through the window, and what would happen beneath it today, occupied me more

than to care about what this had meant.

“Oh, how truly wonderful! Are we having a pizza party?” I asked, slumped back in my chair.

Giggles.

To this, Mrs. Miller flashed a glare and put a finger to her lips. That shut me up.

“I want you to pick up the straw to your left (the bigger straw) and try to breathe through it,” Ms. Abbots said.

We all did so. Our fellow students brought their full focus to the task.

“Now, get up and do twenty jumping jacks.”

We did the jumping jacks, slapping each other, hitting knees on our desks. Even Gabriel and I broke into giggles. When we were done, we stood panting.

“Now try to breathe through the straw again.”

My fellow students and I were red in the face and gasping after five seconds.

“How did that feel?”

“Hard!” Daniel said.

“Tiring!” Marissa said.

“Like there’s not enough air!” Tyler said.

“Okay, you may put the straw down,” Ms. Abbots said with a smirk. “Now, I want twenty more jumping jacks.”

All my fellow students looked at each other in disbelief. This was much better than solving math problems. Even P.E. didn’t possess this element of surprise.

We did the jumping jacks, sweating and panting.

“Now, try to breathe through the coffee stirrer.”

We all tried but failed, spitting the straws out after a couple of seconds, faces gone red, gasping for air. Gabriel and I were cracking up at the back of the class. Not much of a change on our part day to day, though this was a setting I'd prefer. Especially on such a day, the day I

would become a teenager.

“So, how did that feel?” Ms. Abbots asked.

There were giggles, kids were still panting, the word *hard* sprang up around the room.

I shouted, “Chickens, I could do that all day!”

“Who among you has heard of tobacco cigarettes?” Ms. Abbots asked, ignoring me with a skill learned from a degree in education.

Hands shot up in the air.

“Yes?” she pointed at Daniel.

“My uncle used to smoke cigarettes.”

Ms. Abbots gave a grave nod. Then, she turned on the overhead projector. On the first slide was a man smoking a cigarette, his brows furrowed, eyes searching the ground, troubled by adult matters. On the other half of the slide was a pair of what looked like cuts of ham gone black, lying on a blue table.

“What if I told you that millions of people around the world breathe as you did through these straws every day? This experience is an accurate portrayal—how it truly feels—to have lung disease. The first straw is how a person with lung cancer feels. The second: Emphysema. Have any of you ever heard of these terms before?”

A girl's hand, with perhaps 15 wristbands of various colors, sprang up.

“My grandpa died from cancer.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Ms. Abbots said. “But now, perhaps you can understand how he felt. Can everyone see this picture? Even you in the back?”

I gave her a thumbs up.

“Mhm.” She looked at the rest of my classmates. “These are what your lungs look like after smoking tobacco. This is a photo of lung cancer, and this,” she clicked on the next slide; the lungs looked like pizza with black olives, “is Emphysema. Both of these diseases are caused by smoking tobacco. Tobacco is found in cigarettes, cigars, and

cigarillos. Nicotine, a chemical found in tobacco, is considered one of the most addictive substances in the world. Imagine smoking just one cigarette and having to smoke them every day. This leads to these horrible diseases. Imagine climbing the stairs to your home and being forced to breathe as you did through these straws today.

“The simple truth is that smoking tobacco, in any form, cuts your life short. I hope this sheds light on cigarettes. I hope none of you ever try them. Remember, if someone offers you a cigarette, or any tobacco product, just say no.”

Our classmates nodded, their eyes wide with the realization of wisdom.

Gabriel and I looked up at each other. The edge of my lip was curled in a grin. He gave a nod. My eyes flashed up at the teacher, and, stealing a moment, I put the straw between my index and middle finger, raised it to my lips, and took a drag. Both of us were on the verge of bursting into laughter.

“Okay, class!” Mrs. Miller said. “Everyone thank our guest teacher, Ms. Abbots, for teaching us about the dangers of tobacco.”

“Thank you!” our classmates said in unison.

But I did not thank Ms. Abbots. Instead, my heart was pounding with a sense of impending destiny. That day was not my birthday, but I would go to sleep two years older than my fellow students. As I rested my head on my pillow that night, I would be a teenager.

Today was the day I would smoke my first cigarette.

After the bell rang, and our fellow students left for lunchtime in the sun—the basketball hoops, the soccer field, the monkey bars—Mrs. Miller had me and Gabriel stay. She told us how one more straw (I stifled a laugh at her word choice) and she’ll send us to the office. She was stern with Gabriel but kept looking toward me. She said that she expected more from us. That we were smart kids. That we would regret goofing around while we should have been learning. The usual

speech. We nodded, serious, perhaps even an inch of remorse came to us. We couldn't get detention. We had plans.

We left class with our baseball hats on, our backpacks on one strap, our jeans sagging. Cool. It was March of 2009. We were eleven years old. My parents were in the heat of divorce arguments. America was in the midst of a recession. The friends who I'd chosen's parents were either broke, divorced, or had not even known them, whether father or mother. This was unusual because we were from San Carlos, The City of Good Living. Suburbia. Houses starting at eight figures. The kind of place to start a family. We must have been the worst kids in town.

Gabriel and I were best friends. Sure, our friendship revolved around mischief—pulling fire alarms, hopping fences, getting suspended—but it was innocent. We were kids with a strong sense of curiosity. Sure, I'd say the same teases as the rest of our friends did about him: that he was short, that he had a fat ass, that his shoes were toddler-sized, but I had respect for him. Gabriel got off on logical reasoning. He'd research all kinds of topics on the internet and spend hours explaining. For me, the curiosity manifested as "We have to try that." I'd get excited, and so would he. It's true that this kind of behavior can lead to trouble, perhaps trying hard drugs (as some of our friends went on to do), receiving injuries, or being booked into juvie. But, at the time, we didn't care about any of that. We were kids.

All we thought about was what had stolen our curiosity. Our next venture. For weeks until this day, we debated what brands of cigarettes there were to choose from, which ones Logan had, if we would be addicted, if not, how many cigarettes it would take. The research proved what Ms. Abbots had said, that it only took one cigarette to become addicted, but we still disagreed on this fact. We were the experts; Ms. Abbots knew nothing. It must have mattered how many cigarettes a day, a week, or a month you smoked, we reasoned. But even if the nicotine did seize its grip on my lungs,

addiction would be cool, I thought. In fact, I fantasized about being addicted. All the girls would hang around me if only I smoked cigarettes...

Leaving class, we caught up with Zachery, the third member of our trio of soon-to-be cigarette addicts. Zachery was a tall, plump, Tongan boy. Like us, he skateboarded. We were all “skaters” back then. He stood at his locker—hands tightened on the straps of his backpack. He was looking down at his shoes, his chest rising and falling with deep breaths.

“You ready to smoke?” I asked Zachery with a smirk.

“I’m not going to do it.”

“What do you mean? You said you were down.”

“I’m not going to smoke.” Zachery looked up at us, his cheeks were red. “You guys get lung cancer. You guys breathe through a straw. I’m not doing it.”

“You’re being a pussy,” I replied.

“Yeah, Zach. You’re being a pussy. You’re not going to get lung cancer from one cigarette,” Gabriel said.

“But you get addicted. It has chemicals that make you addicted.”

“You won’t get addicted from one cigarette,” Gabriel said. “Everyone has smoked one cigarette in their life.”

“Says you.” Zachery was on the verge of tears; his voice trembled.

“Your mom smokes a pack a day.”

“Yeah, but she didn’t go from smoking a pack a day from one cigarette.”

“I don’t care,” Zachery said, tears welling in his eyes. “You guys go. You guys get suspended again. I’m not going to smoke.”

I decided to settle the matter. “Suit yourself, pussy.”

“Yeah, pussy,” Gabriel said. “Even if you do get addicted, you can just quit.”

Zachery stormed off. He was always like this. Zachery cried all the

time, every day, for no reason, when he fell on his skateboard, when his mom called his flip phone telling him to come home for dinner, when he didn't want to get lung cancer. Zachery was a pussy. We had just learned what the word "pussy" meant a year ago, in fourth grade. Enough moments of life experience had passed to know that we were not pussies. That word stood for everything we were not.

We endured the rest of the school day bouncing our feet, looking up at the clock, counting down the hours. When that bell finally rang, we were the first out the door, as if we were going to a baseball game with our dads, or perhaps a laser tag-themed birthday party for our friend.

First things first, we got our backpacks and skateboards from our lockers. Then, we skated over (in front of the teachers, of course, who made it a rule that there was no skateboarding on campus because of kids like us) to the assigned meeting spot: the steel rings and ladders of the school playground. Just last year we were climbing these monkey bars, excited to start middle school. Today, we'd be smoking our first cigarette. The cycle of becoming a teenager—I remember thinking. In the next hour, I'd be years older than those guys I sat at those desks with in math class.

Here, we met Logan. Logan was a "skater," like us. He was in seventh grade, two years up from Gabriel and me, but he'd been held back, so he was essentially an 8th grader. He had never told this to us, but nevertheless, we obtained the information that he had been to juvie, had smoked weed, had sex, drank Jack Daniels, and was addicted to cigarettes. Though, he did tell us once that since his mom passed, his dad bought him as many packs of Marlboro Reds as he needed. This confirmed all we had heard. He was the coolest guy we knew.

"You guys ready to smoke a cig?" Logan asked with a smile, brushing his dirty-blond hair—hair that I envied—out of his sky-blue eyes. He had on the hood of his fur hoodie, the same one he wore

every day.

“Yeah,” I said, hushed, glancing around for teachers or parents, or crossing guards. “Let’s do it.”

“Hell yeah,” Logan shouted, grinning with teeth gone yellow. “I’ve been craving a cig all day.”

Logan didn't care. He could shout about smoking right in front of the teachers and get away with it. This was part of the reason we were drawn to him upon our first months in middle school, after leaving the fourth grade (rather than fifth grade, as the city of San Carlos thought best...). Logan had wisdom in teenage matters.

It was four days from Spring Break, and the sun was shining. The breeze was warm. We kick-pushed on our skateboards to the park across the street from school, Burton Park. As we did, we saw our fellow students being picked up from school in minivans and SUVs by their moms, moms who probably had GPS installed, even iPhones in their pockets. They were probably asking our classmates how their day at school was, what they had learned, if they wanted spaghetti tacos for dinner, reminding them that they had baseball practice at 4:30...

“Fuckin’ soccer moms,” I shouted over the roar of our skateboards.

“Yeah,” Gabriel shouted. “They think they’re so cool.”

But Logan, the person I wanted to impress by this statement, just kicked on. He skated ahead of us. A leader. Logan would lead us to the lands where we would find our rain and meat and crops of mischief. I lifted my gaze towards him as I kick-pushed. He looked lost in thought...

As we reached the baseball fields behind the Youth Center, Logan stomped on the tail of his skateboard. The board popped up into his palm with ease. Saying no words, he began to tread the grass of the baseball field.

Logan held his board with such nonchalance... He didn’t care what

anybody thought. But yet, I saw how he craned his neck around, gazing at the kids playing baseball, doing scooter races, doing homework with their binders spread out, playing catch with their dads. At the time, I didn't think much of it. We differed from these kids; it's just how it was when your parents were divorced.

"Hey! Antoni! Gabriel!" David, our buddy from class shouted from the baseball diamond. He had a catching mitt on. A man, grown up, in sunglasses, also with a catching mitt, was smiling towards us.

"You guys want to join the game in thirty minutes?" David's dad asked.

"I'm good," Gabriel said, looking down at his shoes.

I did the same.


As we walked past, Logan looked at us, the edge of his lip in a grin.

"What a couple of faggots."

Faggot was another term we had learned in the last year. Its traditional definition was a gay person, a guy who likes other guys. This sure was a part of it, but I found the term could range to describe the kids who sat in the front desks, the kids who wore running shoes instead of skate shoes, the kids who liked reading books, the kids who played catch with their dads in a place where all their friends were.

"Almost at the spot," Logan declared in a voice like gravel, as it moved past his Adam's apple. He nodded towards a grove of redwood trees and shrugged. "Looks like a good spot to smoke."

I looked around, trying not to look suspicious. Our classmates were probably doing homework at the Youth Center. When they were done, they'd play pool, games on the Wii, or shoot hoops in the gym. We would be smoking cigarettes, but it was worth it, I told myself. I'd be two years older in the span of the time it takes for a cigarette to turn to ash. They would still be kids, while I would be a teenager...



Artwork



Girls in the Mirror
Kiarra Smith



City Museum: the Burrow of Dreams

Kiarra Smith



Black Love Poster

Kiarra Smith



The Queen in Gold of Ophir
Kiarra Smith



Balloon Boy

Kiarra Smith



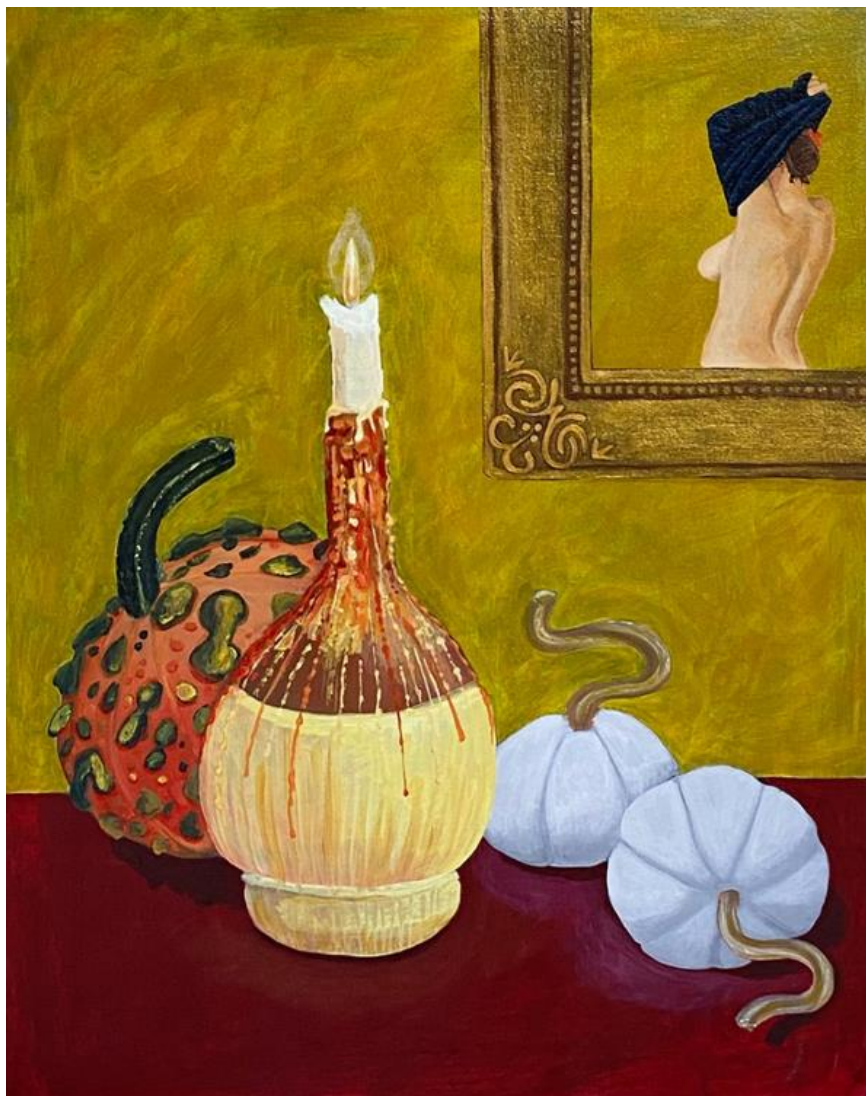
Feminine Energy
Miriam MacMillan

Acrylic Paint



Friends to Lovers
Miriam MacMillan

Acrylic Paint



Self Reflection
Miriam MacMillan

Acrylic Paint



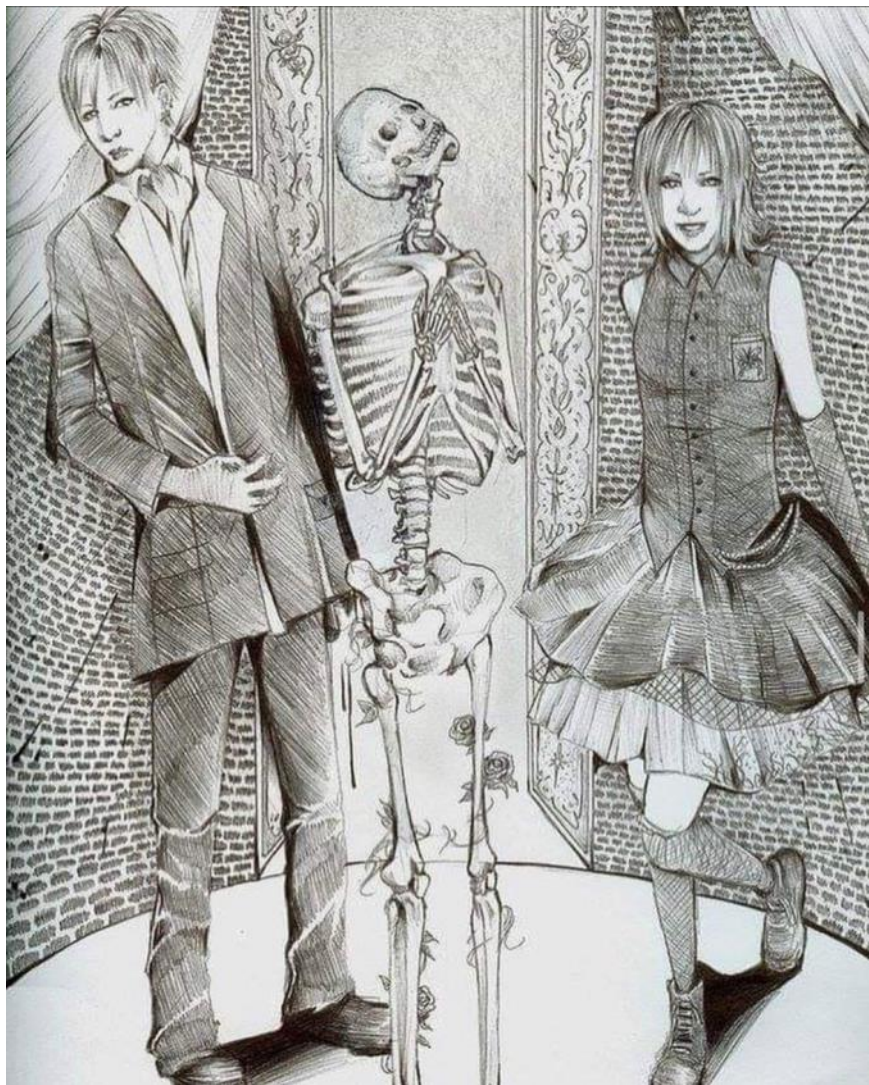
Sun Kiss
Miriam MacMillan

Acrylic Paint



Tribute
Maegan Park

Copic Marker



Gemini

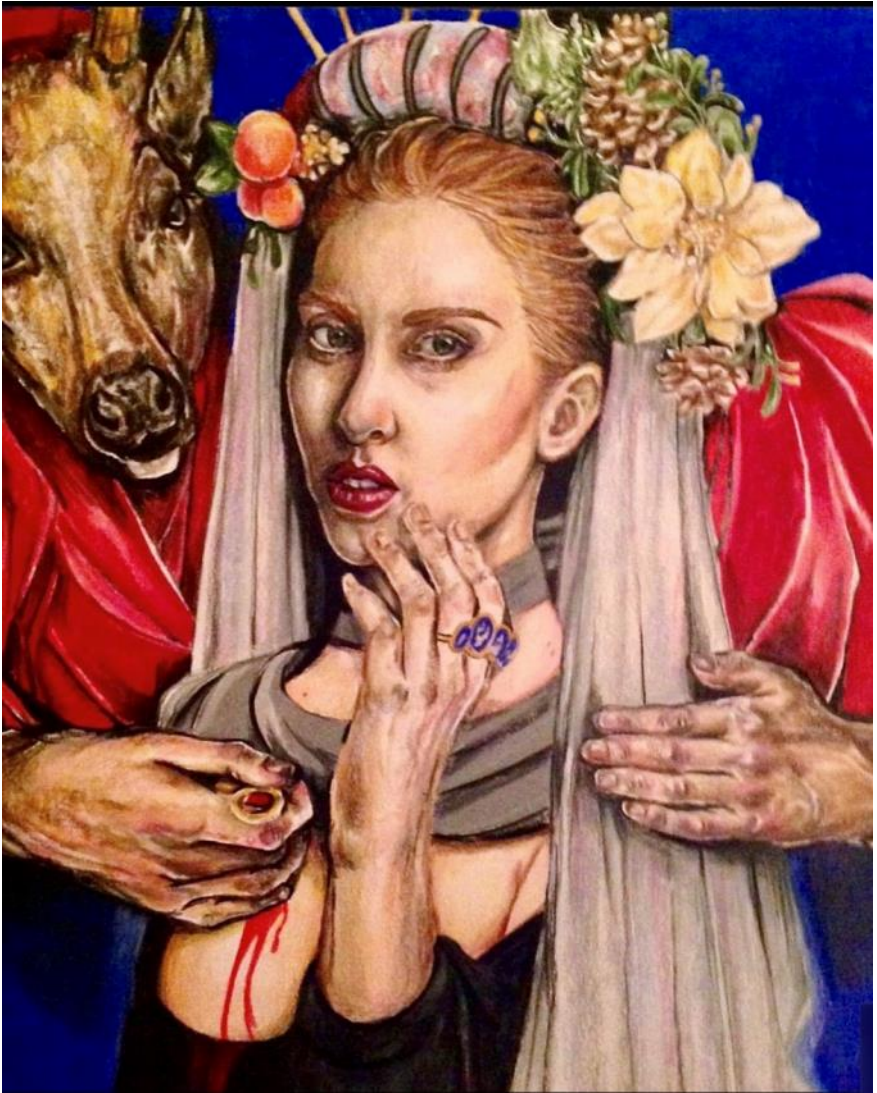
Maegan Park

Ball Point Pen



Solace
Maegan Park

Graphite Pencil



The Night Before
Maegan Park

Prismacolor Pencil



Flappers in Their Twenties

Sophia Lavrov



Nicole N49-Eau de Cigarette

Sophia Lavrov



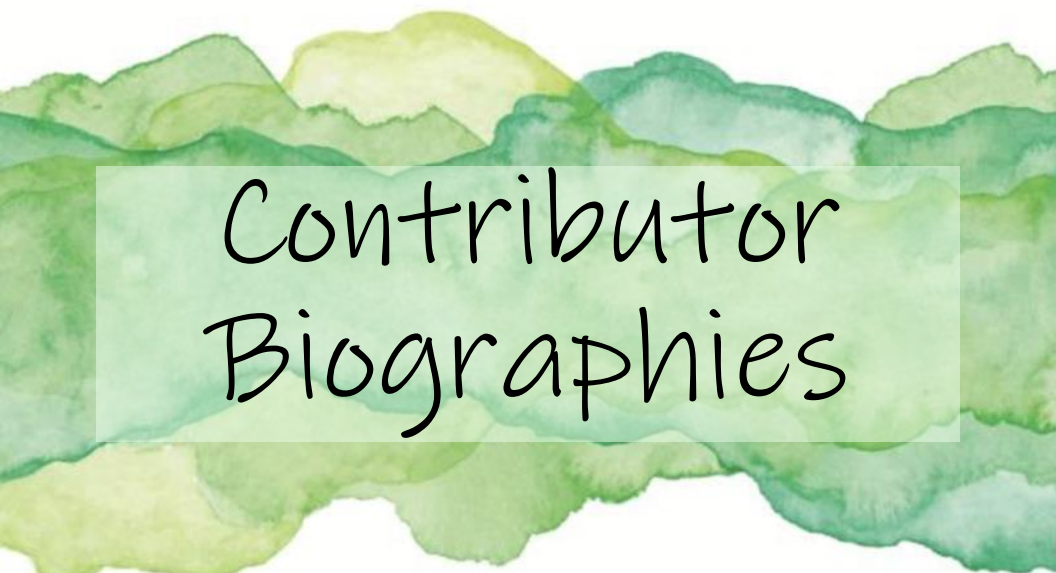
The Warthog CEO
Sophia Lavrov



What an Ass
Sophia Lavrov



Lovebirds
Zakariya Saous



Contributor Biographies

Nicholas Baldwin is a Creative Writing Major at Monroe Community College. He is an avid writer and artist with two fiction novels to his credit. Visit NicholasBaldwin.com for more information.

Veralyn Beaumont is a student at Golden West College, loves getting lost in stories, and enjoys exploring worlds and cultures that go beyond the personal. This has inspired Beaumont to delve into this art form as a writer, hoping to pursue an ever-expanding imagination.

Karen Canfield is a writer and performance artist from Southern California. She is finishing her last semester at College of the Canyons before transferring to complete her bachelors in English. She grew up devoted to various artistic endeavors including singing, dance, and theatre. Her work has appeared in *cul-de-sac Magazine*.

Phoenix Carmen is 30 years old, an English major at Fresno City College, is currently working on an Associate for Transfer, and hopes to enroll at a UC in the next few years.

Antoni February is a 25-year-old writer from the San Francisco Bay area. He studies English at College of San Mateo by day, from which he plans to transfer to a university that offers the major. He is inspired by the depths of his imagination and by the ideas that spring forth from that source. His writing has been published by *Scars Publications CC&D Magazine*, *SweetieCat Press*, and *Labyrinth Literary Journal*.

Gavin Garza is a poet, writing tutor, and student at Fresno City College. He is an English major and researches non-western music and his Chicano-Irish ancestry in his spare time. He currently lives in the Tower District of Fresno, California with his cat, Cynthia. His Instagram is [@anoldsoulsong](https://www.instagram.com/anoldsoulsong).

Derrek Gudino was born and raised in San Diego, California and attends Cuyamaca College. Gudino loves everything about nature and enjoys nothing more than walking outside and enjoying the air and everything around. Life in Southern California is always evolving, and Gudino likes to voice what happens with the people that live in a bi-national city.

Melynda Huff is an Air force Veteran and attends New Mexico State University, Alamogordo, a community college located in Alamogordo, New Mexico (Go Aggies!). Huff is currently in the process of getting a degree in paralegal studies and is taking a creative writing class as an elective.

Shannon Kelly, a 22-year-old student, is finishing his last semester at Lone Star College. One of his biggest goals in life is to become a true renaissance man. Kelly is an amateur artist in several mediums, and creative writing has been his newest venture.

Alejandra Lara-Salas is a studio art major at Reedley College who has grown to love and work with an assortment of mediums, although most of Lara-Salas's art consists of watercolor and graphite.

Sophia Lavrov is a nineteen-year-old artist based in Marin County and attends College of Marin. Lavrov has long been captivated by all things creative but primarily works in the fine arts, having owned and operated a watercolor stationery business since age fifteen. Lavrov accumulated hundreds of greeting card, sticker, and print designs for a stationery business as well as others. Lavrov has experience working with clients, from custom cards to chalk art designs. Lavrov also has experience teaching fine art to children, and lately, has been exploring new media and techniques such as oil painting and printmaking within courses. By majoring in studio art, Lavrov wishes to further explore the

arts and all its scopes. Regardless of which direction taken, Lavrov always aims to create.

Alexa Rose M. is a student currently studying English at Bakersfield Community College and is pursuing a career in teaching. She is a debut author.

Miriam MacMillan studies studio arts at College of Marin in hopes to transfer to a UC or CSU in the spring and become a practicing artist. In recent years MacMillan has produced art containing themes such as feminism and reconnecting to femininity and the LGBTQ community.

Tecna Mostafa is a freshman at Golden West College and is incredibly passionate about studying English, astronomy, culinary art, and creative writing. Mostafa's dream is to publish a science fiction/fantasy novel and is basing current work on personal experiences and life encounters.

Maegan Park is an LPN to RN Nursing Student at Rockland Community College in Suffern, NY, but illustration and graphic novels have always been a passion. Park tries to sketch regularly (schedule allowing). Park loves figure drawing and portraits and would like to incorporate experiences in the medical field with storytelling. One of Park's dreams is to illustrate a graphic novel and work collaboratively with their partner.

Gabriel Lukas Quinn is an unpublished 20-year-old gay writer and communications student from Portland, Oregon. Quinn writes short speculative fiction, psychological thrillers, and pensive poetry regarding mental health and living with depression and discrimination. He currently edits for the *Perceptions Literary Magazine* at Mt. Hood Community College, where he is also obtaining his transfer degree.

Zakariya Saoud is a student at Fresno City College with a passion for bird watching as well as bird photography. Saoud is currently seeking to complete a Major in Music for Transfer and a Minor in Commercial Music.

Elizabeth Soria is a student at West Hills College in Lemoore. She aspires to be a high school English teacher and hopes to help students be more comfortable in their writing styles. She will be moving on to CSU Stanislaus in the fall to continue pursuing her degree and teaching credential.

Kiarra Smith attends St. Louis Community College, Forest Park as a Culinary Major. Smith is a visual artist and writer. She is the author of seven books and uses her work to explore ideas of heritage, spirituality, and personal identity.

Jharna Sutaria is a spoken word artist, creative writer, and student at Cañada College. Their personal ties to mental health, sexual assault, and transphobia have led them to creatively advocate for the various social issues that they survived. "It Hurts to Breathe" started as an essay they typed up a couple of days after Roe v. Wade was overturned. The novella version of this story will be coming out in the spring of 2023.

David Tang attends Golden West College but has been at odds with education throughout life; Tang dropped out of high school and took nine years to transfer. Creative writing inspired Tang to pursue education and hopes to pass on what was felt while learning it.

Lois Wickstrom is a senior citizen student at Community College of Philadelphia in Philadelphia, PA. She is a former chemistry teacher who

is now taking a poetry class. She also writes children's picture books and middle-grade novels. Since CCP gives reduced tuition to seniors, Wickstrom is taking advantage of the situation by taking classes she never took when she was getting her BA.

Amber Wren is a returning student studying English & creative writing at the Community College of Philadelphia. They are passionate about queer art & literature, gardening, slow fashion, bees, and dessert.

Authors

Nicholas Baldwin
Veralyn Beaumont
Karen Canfield
Phoenix Carmen
Antoni February
Gavin Garza
Derrek Gudino
Melynda Huff
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Elizabeth Soria
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