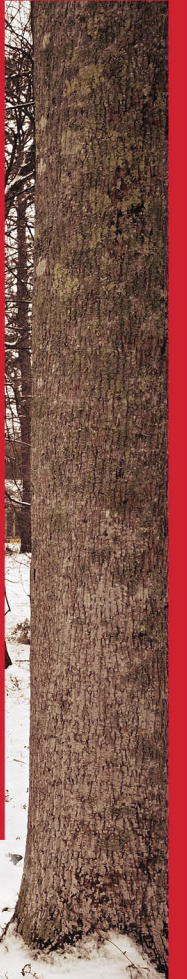


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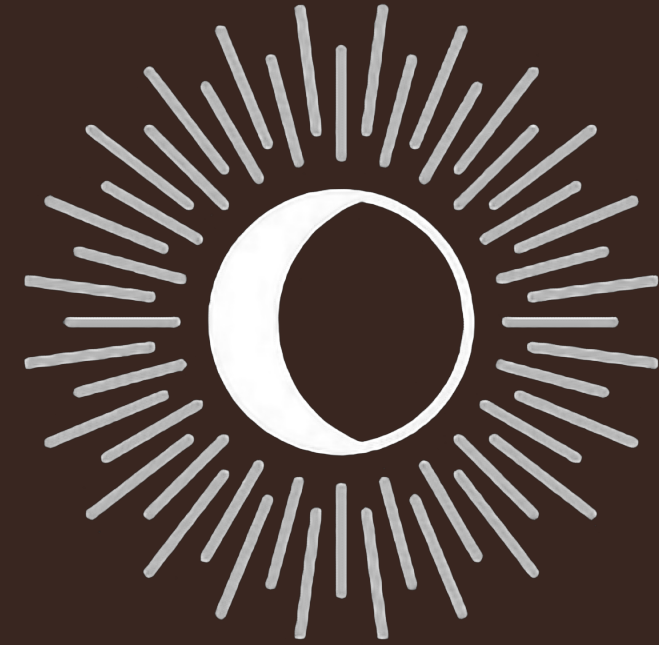
CHIAROSCURO



CHIAROSCURO

2026 Edition

2026



CHIAROSCURO
BREVARD COLLEGE

Literary and Arts Journal
Spring 2026



Chiaroscuro

(ki-ar'-e-skyoor'-o)

n. [pl. -ROS], [lt. <L. clarus, clear + obscurus, dark]

The treatment of light and shade in art to produce the illusion of depth.

Chiaroscuro is published annually by students enrolled in COM 107: Literary Journal Staff and COM 307: Literary Journal Production at Brevard College. We accept submissions of poetry, fiction, nonfiction, theatre, photography, and art from Brevard College students, faculty, staff, and alumni during the fall semester.

For more information, visit our website:

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Editor's Note

Dear Readers,

On behalf of the editors of *Chiaroscuro*, we would like to express our deepest gratitude for your continued support of our publications. This issue showcases the extraordinary creativity of our artists, writers, students, and faculty members—each contributing their own unique voices and visions to our community.

Your dedication to the journal and to Brevard College's rich tradition of artistic and literary expression helps to nurture and celebrate the talents of those who are part of this vibrant institution. We are honored to share these works with you and deeply appreciate your engagement with and encouragement of the creative endeavors of our college family.

We want to give a special thanks to the humanities department and the Friends of the Fine Arts (FoFA) for their contribution to the printing of the journal. Without their help, this journal would not be possible.

Thank you for being a vital part of this journey. Your support truly makes this publication possible, and we look forward to sharing more of the incredible work that arises from our collective commitment to the arts.

Warm regards,

The Editors

Chiaroscuro



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Brian

This photograph shows my father's red recliner placed alone in a snow-covered forest. He passed away during my first semester of college. After that, the chair stayed in the corner of our home. It looked the same, but it did not feel the same.

For years, that chair had been a place of rest and recovery in my family. It held people through hard moments. When I moved it into the snow to photograph it, I wanted to remove it from its normal surroundings and let it stand on its own. Outside of the house, it becomes less about furniture and more about what it carries.

The deep red against the white snow creates a strong contrast. The space around it feels quiet and distant, which mirrors how grief can feel isolating. The chair is still physically present, but the person connected to it is not.

This piece reflects how loss lives in everyday objects and how memory can slowly fade while something tangible remains.

— Brian Seon



Seon



The Piece of “Fading Presence”

DHT

Billie Moser

and when the soft bars
reflect the shrouded
 moonlight
 upon dusk

I think, oh

what it is to be anything at all

for I grip my hallow
and I realize,

I hold the key to
the chamber

Clarity

Elisa J. Amundrud



A Night of Shooting

I still remember walking out of my last exam, the summer heat heavy in the air, my school shirt sticking to my sweaty body, and thinking, Is this it? Was I really going to turn eighteen, finish fourteen years of education, stay in my home country, and not do anything memorable with this sudden freedom? The thought lingered for a while until one impulsive afternoon, I rang my best friend Michael, and within days, we had decided on a spontaneous trip around Europe. That summer I truly realized I was an adult. On the 28th of July 2024, after months of talking about it and erratic last-minute planning, with nothing but a backpack and an unlimited train pass to explore Europe for two months, we set off from Budapest, not knowing what to expect ahead. We were two freshly turned eighteen-year-olds, free for the first time and ready to see the world.

Over twenty days, we travelled through Bratislava, Prague, and finally Berlin, living in bleak hostels and off plain baguettes and butter. We met strangers, got lost, and learned how to take care of ourselves. Nevertheless, out of all those days, the night I remember most vividly, now a year later, came near the end of our trip, when I found myself utterly alone in a park at three in the morning, staring up at the polluted skies of Berlin.

That night, I couldn't sleep. The hostel was overwhelming; the room was hot, and my bed was uncomfortable. The room was alive with quiet motion, as people came in and out, turning in their beds. Restless, I grabbed my newest novelty, a lime scooter, and rode out into the deafening silence of the streets. I didn't have a destination in mind, just waiting on a feeling that would bring me to stop. Earlier that day, some people I'd met told me there might be shooting stars that night, so I decided to see if I could find them. Somehow, I ended up in a pitch-black park, not far from the center of Berlin, surrounded by trees and the humming of the streets that surrounded me. I lay down on a park bench, stretched out fully, and looked up at the sky.

The city lights slowly faded as my sensitive blue eyes adjusted to the intimidating night sky. The night felt enormous. I watched and waited, in my own thoughts for hours, half-wondering what I was doing there, alone in a foreign city in the middle of the night. I started to think it was a stupid idea.

Then, suddenly, a streak of light shot across the sky. A shooting star. I could not believe it, it felt so surreal, a phenomenon that happens only a few times a year. It was the first time I had ever seen one in my life. It lasted less than a tenth of a second, it was faster than a blink of an eye, faster than your brain could compute what you just saw, but you knew, because in that

Stars in Berlin

Jeremy Springs

moment, it felt like time stopped. Then another appeared, and another. Three in total.

I smiled to myself, almost laughing, because no one else was there. It was just me, the stars, and the quiet city around me. It was a night that would stay with me, a significant moment in my journey of self-discovery. I didn't want anything else, it was perfect, another perfect bucket list item to tick off along with the extensive list that I gathered throughout the trip.

However, looking back at it, that moment changed me more than I realized. Lying there, I felt something I hadn't felt before, a sense of peace and self-awareness that comes from being truly alone and okay with the feeling. For the first time, I wasn't relying on anyone else for comfort or company. I wasn't thinking about Ireland, as crazy as it sounds, my safety, or even Michael asleep at the hostel. I was just entirely in the moment. The world felt both incomprehensibly vast and oddly small at the same time, a sensation I struggle to describe on a piece of paper. It gave me clarity, realizing that growing up isn't one big event. It is a collection of small, quiet moments where you begin to understand who you are.

Before that trip, I thought of learning as something that happened in classrooms or through other people, teachers, assignments, and lessons.

But that night, I knew what it meant to be independent, not just in the practical sense of traveling on my own, but emotionally and mentally. I realized that solitude doesn't have to be lonely, it can be freeing. I learned that education could come from silence, from stillness, and from the courage to sit with your own thoughts.

When I think back to that night now, I realize it was an educational milestone in the truest sense. It was the night I began to understand my place in the world, not as a kid trying to figure everything out, but as someone capable of navigating life's uncertainties. The shooting stars became a metaphor for me.

The Tenebrosity of Boston
Danniell Huestis



Anthos
Kember Philips

Lyrical

Elli Clark

It is his giggle with the lights off, frosted in sweet chocolate. It is his teasing of smirking smiles and pointed pokes. It is his sigh of irritation, bitter but leaded in patience. It is his cry, though stifled, still somber and burdened.

Violins bowing in Italian piazzas, guitar strings aux parcs du paris. Morning chorus of the red robin, nighttime chorus of the blackbird.

He whispers “Je t’aime,”
he declares “I love you,”
in earnest, in resignation, in glory, in longing.

Humming melodies in an apron, knife chopping on wood. Voice cracking in the car, windows rolled down in the wind.

His “wake ups” and “sleep tights;”
Friday’s late nights and Monday’s early mornings,
his “you look beautiful” and “you look beautiful.”

Glory keep his voice, however quiet and however
loud.

Just as it is her squeal of excitement that has him beaming. And her huff of feigned annoyance, a simple trick to win him over.

It is her sniffling snore when the lights are turned low. It is her shuffling slippers during sunrise on hardwood floors. It is her cry of alarm when the detector blares and the oven smokes. It is her laugh, oh her laugh, every kind she has.

Little voice notes in a text chain.
Tiny hummings in the passenger seat.



His name when just she says it,
with the tag “I love you,”
or “my boyfriend.”
He loves the ring to it.

But there is a cloudy mist that veils their gaze. She likes him wholly,
unconditionally. As does he, she.



Muse

Vinnie Munson-Jackson

Love is a playwright
during night hours not used for sleeping.
She calls me on a corded phone,
and I feel her breath down my neck.
“I don’t know if I’ve ever
written a play worth acting out.”
I hum. She sounds beautiful.

When we fall asleep,
cords dangling,
I dream she finds me inspiring
while we brunch with politicians,
sit in endless waiting rooms,
model for artists we do not care for,
get shuffled around in handbags,
and wait for friends of ours.

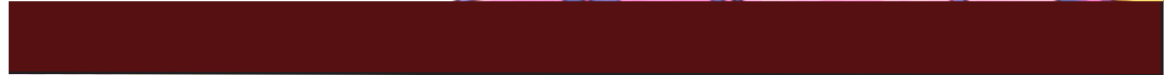
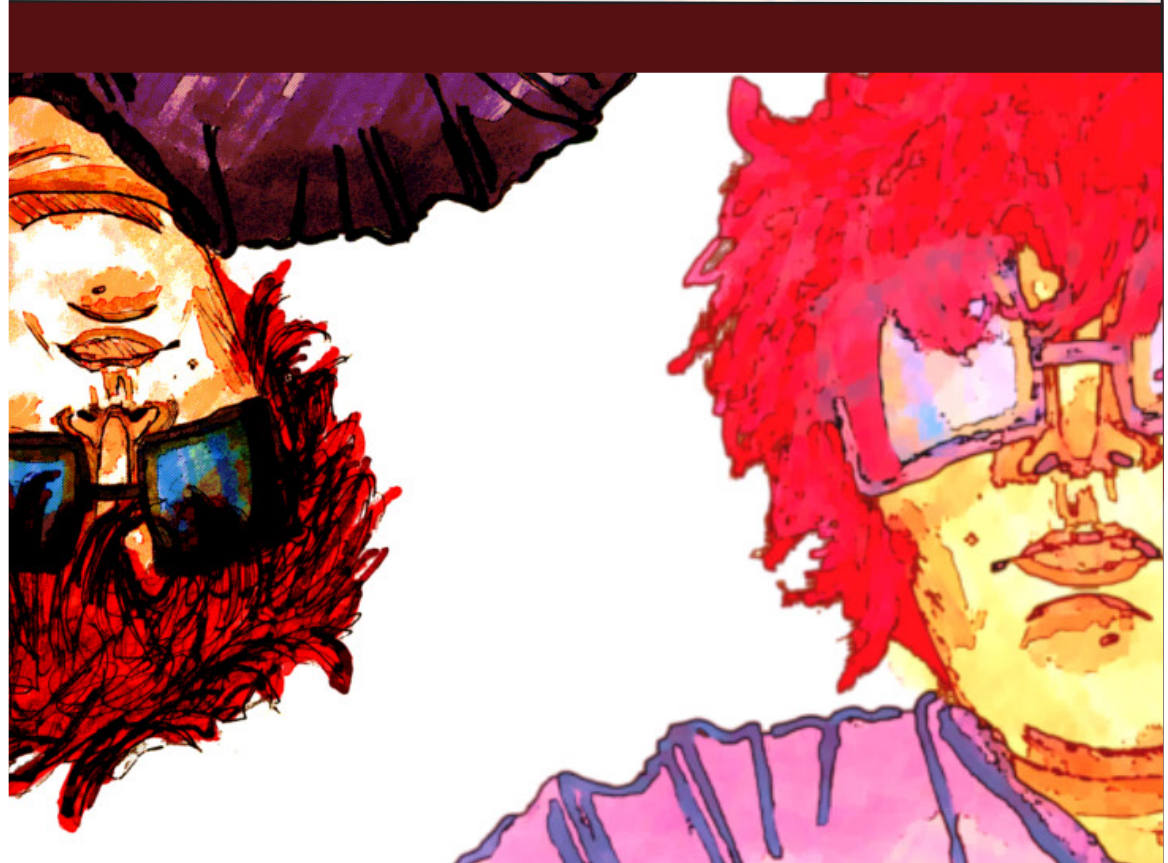
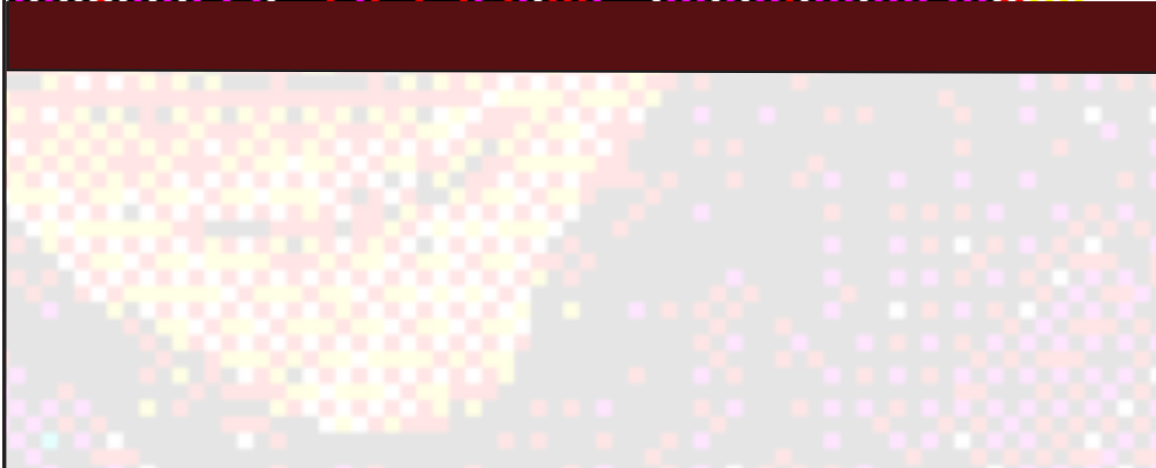
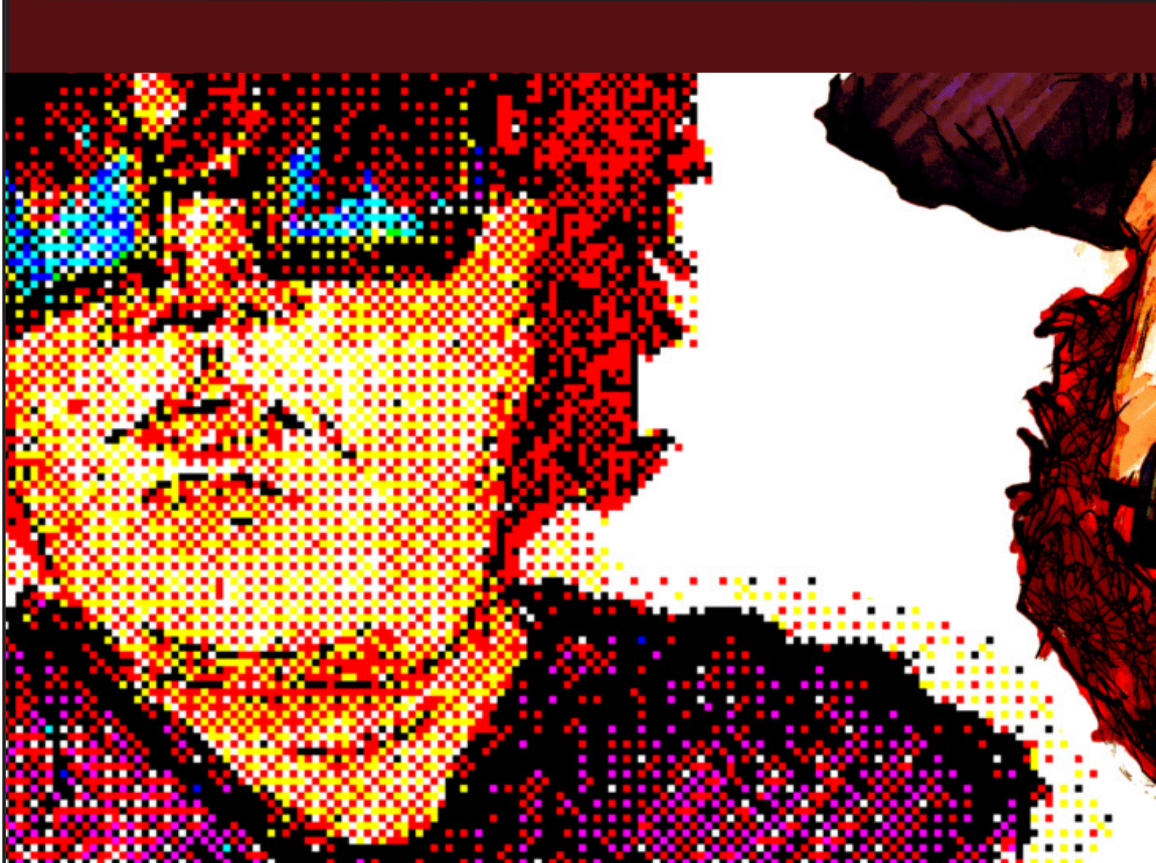
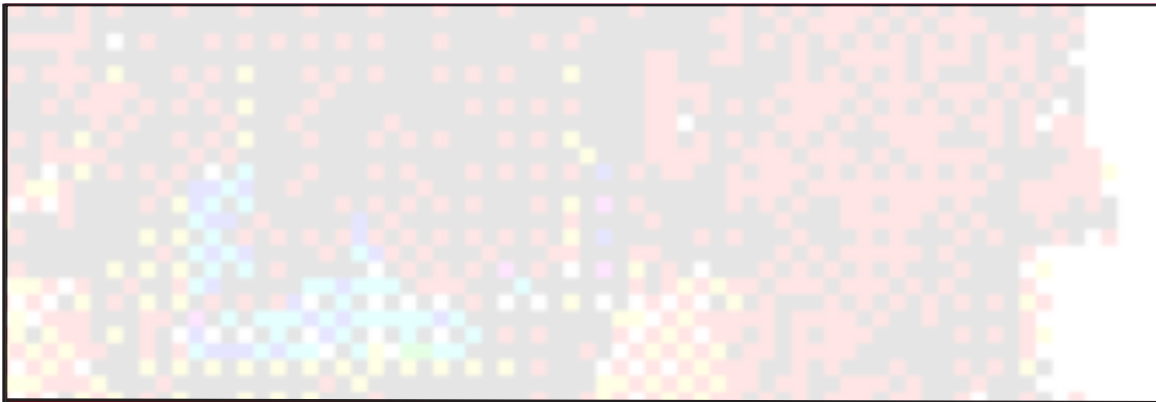
Sometimes,
there are mornings.
Love is about our town,
and I am about two blocks away from
her telephone.
I had leftovers for breakfast.
I work. I try to work.

It is after suppertime when
we breathe each other’s air.
“A loaded pistol must go off.
I think you got a haircut.”
Love declared nuance.
Love also declared a chop of
three inches and no more.

During the night hours not used for sleeping,
she edits her stage directions
and laughs upon a down pillow
I bought her for Christmas last year.

I tell her my dreams.
The ones so plain,
they could be performed
by amateur actors in love.

She hums. She thinks I am beautiful.



Poster Boy
Billie Moser

My Great Perhaps

Kiara Lylyk

Perhaps I should follow my gut feeling, but I feel the societal pressure of undefined expectations. While I could say my dream is to win the *Tour de France* or become a successful sports doctor, my actual dream is to feel in control of my own wishes. This year I recognized a recurring sadness that came crashing down on me whenever I got sick, injured, poorly performed, faced with uncertainty or anything that was an inconvenience to my focus. Now after finishing my season in Europe and moving back to school, I realized my unhappiness was stemming from an assumed pressure and expectation.

My entire life I have lived for the next thing.

In elementary school I wanted to be the fastest runner and a part of every sports team. In high school I wanted to take grade 12 courses when I was in grade 10 then university courses when I was in grade 11. I always felt a rush to get through everything I have done. When I started cycling, it all came so fast. I had just started racing locally when I suddenly had a coach and on my way to my first junior worlds the next year. From there it was all about how to get on the next team or move to Europe, because that's what I assumed was expected of me. The same went for school. I was always taking online courses over the summer to get ahead and now I will be done with my degree in three years.

This fall was the first time in my life I saw my unhappiness was coming from ticking off stepping stones that have been set in stone by other people but are not rules to live by. It made me realize I don't know what my own personal life goals are. I'm not sure many people actually do, but for me if I continue on beating myself up for not continually making progress for the next thing then I will take the joy from everything in my life. My dream is to discover what truly makes me happy.

I love riding and racing my bike. I also think I have talent. Yet, this year it felt like a chore because of that expectation and pressure I put on myself. In August I raced the *Tour de l'Avenir*, which is the under 23 women's version of the *Tour de France*. By the last stage I couldn't ride my bike because of the anxiety that took over my body. I felt empty, sad and wanted to never ride my bike again.



The first step is to take a break, which I am actively doing at this moment until I feel the motivation and love rush back in. My coach also has told me over and over again I need to step back but I would never listen. Now I understand that sometimes you need to take a step back to realize that is something you really are passionate about.

The second step is to set goals for my cycling career and my life off the bike. I lost touch with nearly all of my friends this year because of my level of focus. This fed into that overarching desolation when things would go wrong in cycling because I had nothing else in my life, even though I thought a book was all I needed for company.

Step three is using my time off right now to say yes to all the things in the past I would skip because I thought my performance or progress would suffer. Two weeks ago I went to a concert that started at the time I usually like to go to bed. Last night I stayed up late with my friends watching a movie. Today I had ice cream because everyone was getting ice cream even though I had a treat every other day of this week. Athletes are told that you need to be strict with your diet and rest when you are not training, but these are the things that cause me to lose who I am. This will be a challenge that I know will take time to balance, but I am determined to figure out how I can ensure my life is full while being focused.

Step four is making plans based on my goals and knowing why I do what I do. I was just invited to a race in Switzerland in November. But my goals would say this is going against my off season goal of getting my period back and taking a break from any racing. While I feel this obligatory pull to race, it goes against my off season goal to make my body function normally again. My choices in life need to fill my cup rather than feel like an obligation.

My Great Perhaps is defining what I truly want to do in my lifetime. If I continue to be a cyclist in Europe then how can I make it more balanceable. If I pursue a masters after my bachelors I need to know exactly how I can use it. Everything I do that could be stressful to my body needs to have a purpose so I know deep down it is useful stress. I want to go to bike races with the feeling that I get to do this rather than I have to do this. Actually, for everything in my life I want the feeling that "I get to do this" because in the grand scheme of things if we are not fulfilled by what we do, what is the point?



Eyes of the Tornado

Isabella Zambuto



An Evening Hangout

Rachel Cooke

Nexus

Elli Clark

It is the strangest of strangers who balance in an equipoise: a state of absolute unknowing, in the time when they have yet to meet, yet without doubt can say they neither hate nor love the other. He is numb, consumed with empty thoughts of her, but she is absolute, counting down until their time comes. From youth she acted dearly, in the form she thought right, and he was unruly, in his only way to defy. She endured the repercussions of his every decision, and each time, by her tenacity to live, he was saved. She was the soulmate he risked through his lifeline.

It was anyone's inherent right—a soulmate, a half of a whole person they were destined to be with. Someone to be linked, in both body and mind, in far more than the spiritual fashion. With the prick of a pin, two would bleed. With a single thought, two could hear. For some this was bliss; for others, a gamble.

To be his soulmate meant the inescapable risk to her mental and physical form, as he resisted so fiercely he could take the knives to his wrists without a second thought. But as he lay surrendered to an approaching demise, she would not. Bleeding and weak, without warning, she would hobble and drag herself to be mended, where she would be patched, where she would be healed; thus he would too. She collected these scars, willing or not, as he tested how far he could push her and how much he could hurt her.

More often than not, in the intimately late evenings, snuggled beneath warm blankets over steaming mugs of hot cocoa, she ask her mother why, in all the fated deck, she had been dealt these cards. But her mother's eyes would well as she sobbed in ignorance. Her father was kind, a man who lived by the pledge of security: he protected his body, as he knew it meant protecting her mother's. So why, for what reason, did her mate not do the same?

She would consider him too—whether it was hate or sadness that peckered at him. The struggle that weighed upon his shoulders and shoved him further and further down the line. *What had he lost? What had he suffered?* More than anything, she wished to be a hand to pull him out of the pit or to wave away the rumbling storm that clouded his sky. So, she did so the only way she understood how: do not come to harm, so she could keep him from harm.

At times, he forgot about the bond and thought himself a sole victim. He could name the scars that littered his body and mind, and he knew them all as his own. Not yet had he experienced the fear of an obscured wound. The first bone they broke was not his fault, but his foster brother's. As

onlookers turned a blind eye, the boy beat him with a baseball bat, spitting heinous words. Deadweight. Worthless. Alien. The second bone they broke was from the kids at school. Under concealment of the locker room doors, they slammed his head into a toilet bowl and broke his nose. Loser. Pathetic. Weak.

When neighbors and friends caught sight of her injuries, they pitied her with calm and heartfelt terms of endearment and hopes for an easier future to come; others had confused thoughts of why she didn't hate him for it. Hate, she thought, was deserved for those who deserved it. She grasped at the belief that wherever or whatever these cuts, bruises, and broken bones came from, he did not intend it. She would be the thorn in his rose. She would not break from her image of him.

One day, she would find him.

In a crowded street, on a dewy spring morning, where the ground is damp and the air is clean, she would spot him across the way.

In a fade to quiet in the midst of the passer's sound, he was trapped. Against his chest, his heart was pounding in thuds of synchronization to the stranger's. The whisper of a *hello* in the recesses of his mind, and a *Where have you been?* There was the sudden urge to respond, *Why have you come?* The stranger's mouth was unmoving as she watched him in return, but the words began to flood his senses. Even as he wondered who she was, he felt he already knew. She was familiar for someone he had yet to lay his eyes upon, and she was common for someone he was unused to. There was an innocent and pure beauty in the delicate features of her profile: flushed cheekbones, small lips, and round eyes. In that moment, he felt guilty and saddened.

She knew an apology was written clearly in his eyes, but she watched as it shifted from one second to the next, regret to obduracy. She could not begin to guess at his stubborn expression.

Through the daily rush of flocking people, she weaved in and out and around. Too caught up in her head, she was a near miss to the overloaded truck that sped by. And as it rolled past, she lost sight of him. With a small pause that cleared again, he had vanished, and his previous position sat empty, dull. She stared at the spot where he had once stood, trying to draw him back, but he did not return.

He was sweating, though not from exertion, and he left clammy streaks along his freshly cleaned jeans from the uncontrollable need to wipe his palms. There was no scenario in which he could picture that involved her forgiveness. Not that he desired such a thing, but he could imagine the

pain and the hassle of her accusatory remarks at his negligence. He believed she would blame him, dumping what hurt she had from the past into his hands. For seventeen years he had lived without her—that did not need to change now. He would quench whatever emotions of longing, guilt, and sorrow he felt with the anger of being tied down to a burden such as a soulmate. *Why should he care for her? Why should he be linked to her?* The responsibility was unjust.

Yet, she longed for him still. One glimpse and she couldn't let go. There were thousands of stories of him, gathered in the mere seconds he had stood before her. She wanted his life to be her responsibility. She yearned for it.

At dinner with her family, she picked and shifted the food in patterns on her plate. She had no appetite. Her mind was adrift with curious thoughts of his whereabouts. It was funny, she thought, that since they'd locked eyes, she could just about hear him. However quiet, his murmuring was a hum that soothed her soul, and she could assume he too heard her.

And he could not make it stop. It drove him up the wall, agitating him beyond compare. After creeping past his foster family in the living room and turning to lock the door to his bedroom, he wished for a silent night, but the sweet-sounding chatter was vivid and transparent. As if he sat on his floor with earphones in his ears, her voice spoke to him—called for him. Stop it, he would plead.

There was one way he could silence it all; this he knew. More times than he cared to count, he had tried this before, but if he succeeded this time around, then it would be over. He would be free of it all: of the cruel people downstairs, of the bullies in the classroom, and of her.

So, he crawled out his window and down the thick maple tree, went all the way along Main Street, and to the arched bridge by the valley.

Her parents did not scold her on her way out—they were left too stunned at her sudden, speeding exit to form the words. Her plate still sat full on the table, and her parents remained mid-meal. But she was distracted by the intent that rang clear in her head.

As a child, he avoided anything in relation to elevation: airplanes, bridges, steep hills, and tall buildings. His greatest fear was the height at which they stood. There were times when he would shake from fright and scream until someone smacked him soundless. Back then, he feared high places more than he feared people. In this moment, though, he found himself capable of swinging his legs over the rail and glancing off the

edge, far, far down to the swift rapid base. So easy, he thought; if he let his grip slip and he tumbled forwards, it would be so easy. His eyes fluttered closed, and he breathed in the crisp night air, counting from eleven to one. He released.

He *swore* he did. But his clothes didn't ripple in a gust of wind, and there was no drop in the pit of his stomach. Instead, he felt his sweater tug tight against his front. His weight angled forwards as if so near to tipping off.

She didn't know how long she could hold him. His sweater was slipping through her fingers, and her arms shook from fatigue. Leaning forwards, his weight dragged her in small increments, bit by bit. She grunted and, in one swift motion, used gravity to yank her body backwards, pulling him with her. As they fell to the paved ground—he haphazardly on her—she started to cry.

Cursed, he thought, she was sweetly perfumed. And her tears were making him uncomfortable—awkward at best, though he could not resist putting out a hand to pull her to her feet. Their hips ached from the impact against the pavement, and she rubbed at the area with her fingers, knowing a blackened bruise would soon form. He watched her do so, feeling the soreness in his own and winced at the telltale. They did not speak and only stood braced against the stillness. Wonders of things to say, yet she couldn't force herself to say them. Instead, as clearly as she could, she summoned two words to their consciousness: *Please stop.*

He flinched as her voice rang clean in his head. He couldn't just stop—it wasn't that easy. Despite what it had done and would do to her, he was tired. Tired of living. *I cannot.*

You can. We can.

No.

Turning his back in her direction, he tried to walk off, but she reached out to grasp his arm. Unnoticed, her nails dug into his skin, and she wished she could hold him here forever, confined here, safe and infinite. *Let me keep you.*

It was him crying now. Against his will he felt the cold wetness streaming past sealed lashes. Her plea was tortuous, and he desperately picked apart the letters, deciphering the spaces and the sounds—how she had voiced it and what it had meant. Did she really wish this? Keeping him meant more than staying alive: if his life was hers, she would need to take all of him, and he didn't know if he trusted her to do so. Lending trust over his body to anyone was not something he did easily anymore, for it had been beaten

and broken far too many times. She kept her grace as she rounded to stand before him, lifting his chin to meet her eyes. He was magnificent: darkened and disheveled hair, hardened and deep eyes, and the mouth of a wavering stubbornness to stay whole. Vulnerable and falling.

He couldn't fight it any longer—he didn't want to. She betrayed nothing of deceit, and there was no denying the instinct to hand over his heart, though he doubted there was anything left to gift that was not already hers. Was that not who she was? His heart. His soul.

Her smile was small but knowing, and he understood that she had heard him.

He would allow this.

She could keep him.

The wristwatch on his hand ticked from point to point, second to second, as, in anticipating anxiety, he waited. He felt foolish for the nerves that ruffled his calm, a swarm of butterflies unlike anything he'd experienced, but the longer she took, the more it grew. Was this normal, he thought, to feel so excited and yet so terrified all at once for a simple date? Though he supposed his nerves stemmed more from the question he hoped to ask—in the intimacy of the rooftop, under the twinkling canvas of a starlit sky, and her hand in his, *Would you be my girlfriend?* It seemed stupid to ask your soulmate, but he was scared nonetheless that she would deny him.

She would argue her feelings were more profound than the simplicity of happiness or joy. It was something that couldn't be captured in any poetic picture.

She was late, and she was sorry for it, but there was a trinket in the shop near her home that had called to be bought. A silly present for the boy. She hurried. Feet flying under the flow of streetlamps. She was elated, in a frenzy of bliss and innocence.

Happier than ever as she dashed across the way—when the headlights flashed and the horn blared—she knew she would not have the chance to be any happier. Once upon a time, her grandmother had whispered in her ear, “Your happiest moments are often your last.” She had judged the pessimistic woman harshly, but there was no denying that she may have been right.

He hated himself. This obscured pain was beyond him, and he suddenly knew that each time he had tried to kill himself, this was what she must have felt. There was no singular part of himself that hurt the most—the ravaging sensation echoed over the inches of his bones and muscles. He collapsed to the ground, unable to crawl or scream for help.

It was fading.

The stars dimmer, and

the city street quieter.

Rather muted and somber.

He missed her.

To Live. To Die.

Vinnie Munson-Jackson

The worst in memoriam
I ever felt with these two hands
was like each day was a crumb
on the plate—not yet
tasted by the mouth of God.
It sits. And it begs. And it sits.

Glass jars of honey line
the back of your mother's pantry.
She excuses their being forgotten
as a reason to praise immortality.
If anything lived forever,
it'd still dissolve in tea.

Four brochures and foreign coupons
rendezvous in your messenger bag.
The irony is like drool upon your chin:
viscous and obvious.

As if this dullness was any sort of safety!
The beast still thumps in your chest.
Wipe your mouth and listen.
It could still rear its ugly head
and make a mess
of this long-lingered doorframe.

A cool stone sits in the yard.
The worst In Memoriam I ever read
sat. And begged. And sat.



Pumping Iron

Karis King

The Reckoning

Mickey Lasco

After LaTanya McQueen

I was silent
when your progress left
shoe-sized footprints on my back.

Obedient,
when you pierced my skin
for your rotted jewels.

Still,
when you raped me of my fruits,
leaving me naked and cold.

Patient,
when you cursed and
threatened to destroy me.

I fed the lakes iron to make them rich for you.
I covered your ruthless, poisonous children.
I quieted the cries of your sufferers
and I bathed in their tears to remain beautiful
for you.

But you never called me beautiful
and you never thanked me for my labor.

I birthed your success from death
and let my womb remain
the hiding place for your failures.

I let myself be weak for you.
Seeking you approval of my fine keeping,
straightening my roots to look like yours,
opening myself for your simple pleasures.

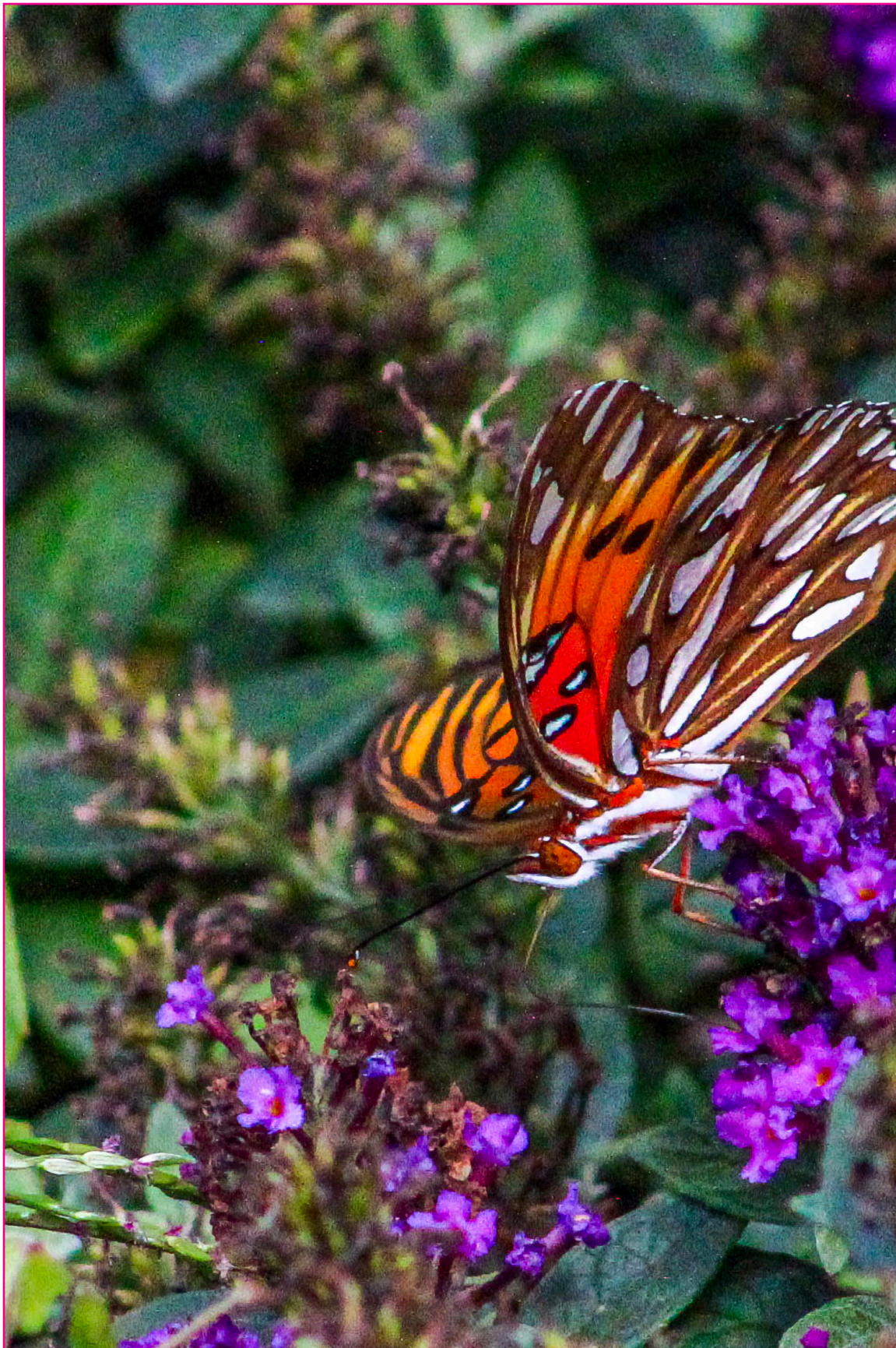


I let my silence equate to permissive
and you basked in it with enjoyment and pride.

But I am no longer silent.
I am unruly and wild.
I feed now only on your children
and breed your failures just as they are.
I watch as they haunt you and I laugh.
I see my beauty in their reflection.

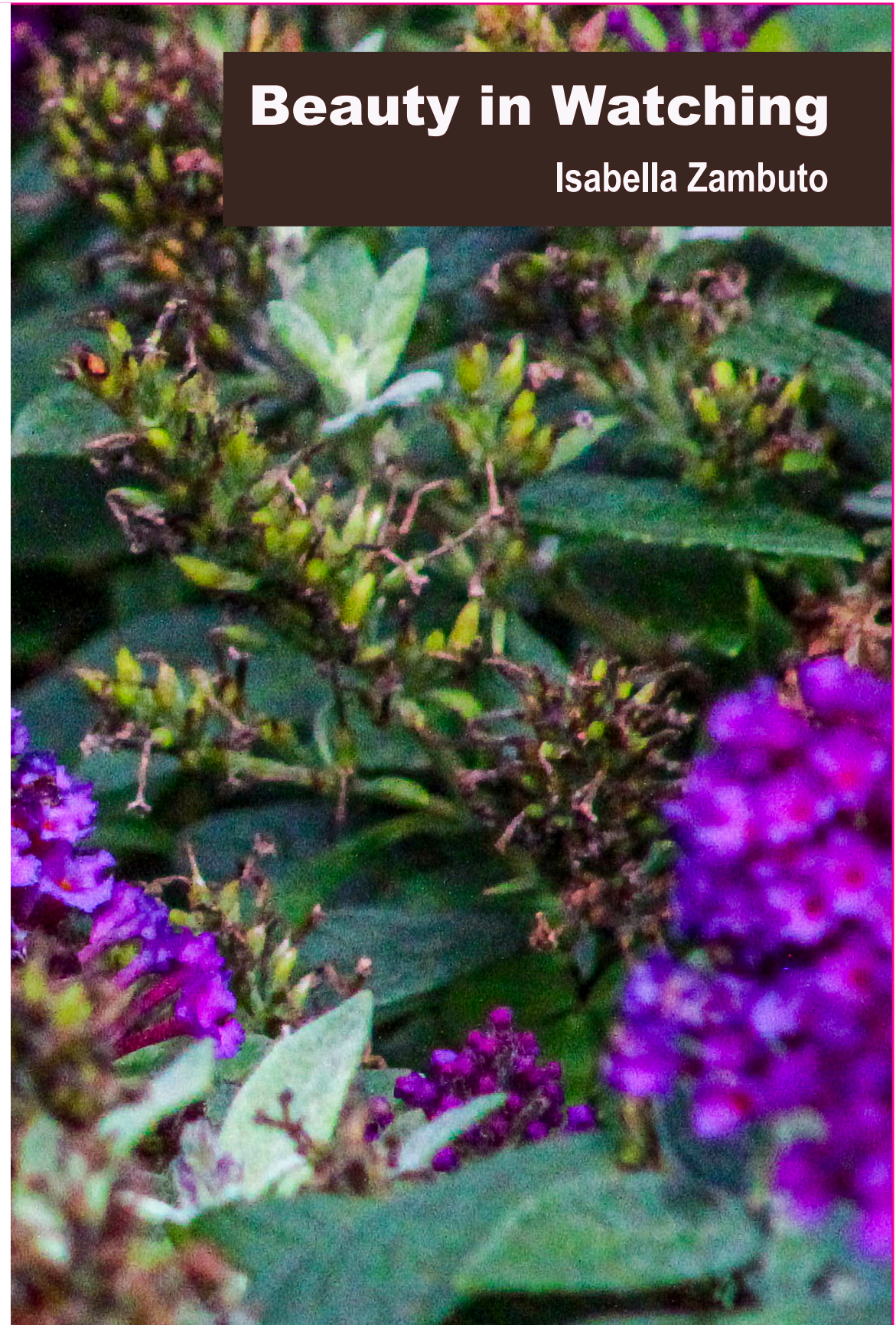
I curl my roots around your home
and just like your children,
I swallow,
and then I smile.





Beauty in Watching

Isabella Zambuto





Spotted Critter
Mia Diaz

Why I Lived, and What I Lived For **Hailey Bistricky**

After Henry David Thoreau

I went into the woods because I wished to live freely, to get to run when I want, to get to rest at my leisure. I did not want to live to meet expectations that aren't real and aren't mine. I wanted to live deeply, to live a life full of struggles of my own choosing, not the ones that are chosen for me. I wanted to live just like a butterfly, floating from place to place; being able to decide where I go and if I stay. I did not wish to worry my life away, but to fill it with moments that are truly as beautiful as the first sunrise over black balsam after many weeks of rain.

I wanted to dive into the deepest parts of the ocean and to turn up the rocks that lay on the bottom, to immerse myself deep into waters that the internet says are only there to drown you. I wished to do more than simply existing and following rules, more than just figuring out how to navigate my way through a Macbook. I wished to escape the ideas that consumed the word and to form my own opinions. I didn't like the idea that we were built to spend our days in a technology based routine, that we're supposed to get up each morning and look at a magic box to check and see what fresh hell awaits for the day. I wanted to get up with the sunrise and to smell the dew; to slowly become aware of the cool, moist air as I awake; to hear the songs of the birds and to sing with them. I wanted to run wild with the elk during the day and to watch the bats playing tag in the night. As many around me brush off birdsong as background noise while they look at "the world" that appears at their fingertips, I chose to engulf myself in the world beyond that. I chose to let my body become one with the Earth and to not separate it by means of societal standards. I chose to roll in the mud, to disguise myself as a part of the Earth, to become one with it. I chose to view the phone ringing as the background noise and the birds singing as the main event. I chose to explore the world beyond our fingertips. Instead of chasing designer brands, I chase the tip of the tallest mountains. Instead of running to get the newest iPhone, I prance through a field of flowers with the deer.

I went into the woods because I wished to live freely, to get to live a life without predetermined expectations. I did not want to live to meet the expectations that are created by a person who shows up on a magic box. I wanted to immerse myself fully into the wonders that fill the giant orb we rotate around the sun on, and today presents a chance for me to do that; so today I will begin.

Great Egret

Judith Davis

Great Egret, you stood sentinel along the shore of the harbor at low
tide—
beautiful silhouette with the sun shining on the water at
your feet.

You listened and watched for the quick movement of the fish, your
breakfast.

I sat perfectly still watching you fish.

The beautiful morning, with the sun dancing on the still water of
the
harbor called to both of us in a moment of spiritual union
and peace.

How I will miss our quiet times of communion, our times to be
still and
know God's creation, peace and quiet, as I sail from this
harbor with
other birds than you over lakes and mountains to a new
home.

I will look for you as you and I migrate south, and I will always
give thanks
for you and your cousin the Snowy Egret with yellow feet.

We have loved this harbor of peace, our anchorage, our spiritual
home.



Great Egret Sentinel

Judith Davis

The Day I Stopped Apologizing

There are moments you don't talk about.
Moments when the hurt sits so heavily on your chest that even breathing feels like a betrayal of its weight.
The night everything was too loud—the memories, the silence, the empty spaces someone else left in you—I almost slipped into a place I'm afraid to describe—a place where pain felt easier than feeling anything at all.
I didn't call for help.
I didn't know how.
But someone heard me anyway.
He wasn't supposed to be there that late, the boy with the soft voice and those pale blue eyes, the one who always seemed to notice the cracks I tried to plaster over. He knocked only once, like he already knew the answer twice.
When I opened the door, he didn't ask what happened.
He didn't ask who hurt me.
He just looked at me—really looked—and it was like he could see the ache I'd been carrying in the shadows of my ribs.
"I'm not letting you go through this alone," he said.
Simple words.
But they cut through the darkness like someone had thrown open a window in a room I thought was sealed shut.
He sat with me on the floor, in silence. No fixing, no judging. Just presence. Just warmth. Just this quiet insistence that my existence mattered. At one point, when I trembled, he reached out and took my hand, gently, as if it was something sacred.
And for the first time in a long time, I believed I wasn't a burden.
I wasn't a disappointment.
I wasn't the villain someone else had made me out to be.
He didn't save me with grand gestures.
He saved me by staying.
By being the light when my world felt like a hallway with every bulb burned out. By seeing something in me worth fighting for, even when I couldn't feel it myself.
He is the reason I stopped apologizing for walking away from the place that was poisoning me.
He reminded me that leaving isn't betrayal—sometimes it's survival. Sometimes it's the first step toward healing.



for Walking Away

Ivelysse Leighton

And now, when I look back on that night, I don't see the darkness that tried to swallow me whole.
I see a pair of blue eyes, full of worry and warmth.

I see the moment the world shifted, not because everything got easier, but because someone cared enough to refuse to let me fall.

I'm learning to be my own light now.
But I will never forget the boy who held the candle when all I had left was smoke.





Grandma's



Kitchen

Karis King

Home

Quintin Overocker

With apologies to Bon Iver

The November sky is the color of cold as the full moon sets over the county forest where I will soon be comfortably lost, following a dog following the scent of grouse.

I was born in the breadbasket wasteland of the midwest, but I feel home here in the northern forests among the tamaracks and marshes and tea-brown streams.

But doubts, those wide-ranging tenacious little bastards, have found my tracks in the snow and their dark eyes peer at me from the pine shadows.

On the truck's radio a man sings the moon to sleep. "I move in water shore to shore/Nothing's more," words that can only be meant for a person like me on a morning like this. This song was born in a cabin not thirty miles down the road, and I know my search will be over if I can decode the message.

I can't.
"Sky is womb and she's the moon" eludes me.

Years and states later, in the poplars, rhodo, and rain of the Blue Ridge, feeling home for the first time since then, I realize his lyrics hold no secret message, no special power, no transformative release into freedom. Instead, Justin Vernon was probably just high as hell, grabbing words from the clouds, their distribution as orderly as the path of pine pollen caught and scattered by the wind.



Spiders
Dr. David Chastain



Mia Diaz
Heart and Ribs

It's All for Not

Rowyn Roberts

Like a fire raging in an inferno,
I feel hurt, I feel angry, I feel vexed.
This pain will never quell, never dissipate.
This wound will last forever.

Like a papercut that never heals,
there is a gash in my heart,
a cut in my soul,
and a bruise on my mind.

Like the heartache of a fresh breakup,
she is an ever-present thought,
an aching presence,
the loss of my life.

Silent Acknowledgement. Needed. Needed.

Vinnie Munson-Jackson

This wet calf, still glistening with
fresh life and a yolk still upon sweet hay,
is an animal. And you already know this.

I try to write a piece for
a friend of mine who I thought
I revered more than I did and I
sit and write about a placenta from
an animal I do not know the way
I know humans.

I cease to become complimentary
to people when we've known
each other long enough that
we've both become ugly.

I don't like your hair.
Not nearly as much as you like it.
I am fat. And in a way you don't prefer.
God, I hate us.

I dreamt last night that I delivered a calf.
And my fat legs were bruised from
the hooves that thrashed upon
the arrival to this fresh green
awful planet.
I named that naive infant after you.

It is horrific to think that
I think the fluid and mess of
first life and breath may be
more beautiful than this
stale air between us.
But it is genuine. It is genuine.
You and I are ugly. We know this.



Dracones

Camille Forth

Fiery furnace,
death on wings, kingdom's terror,
its venomous blood.

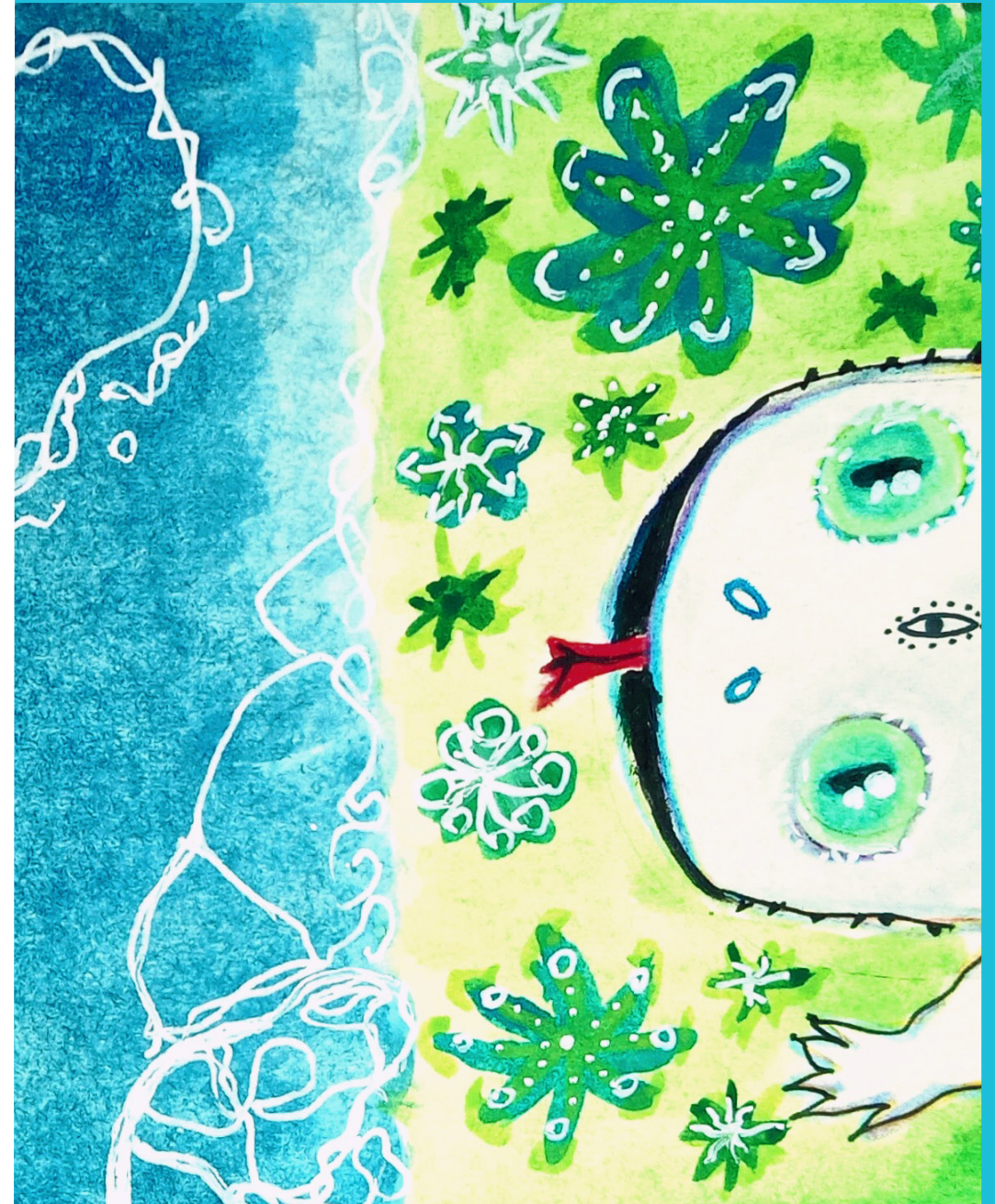
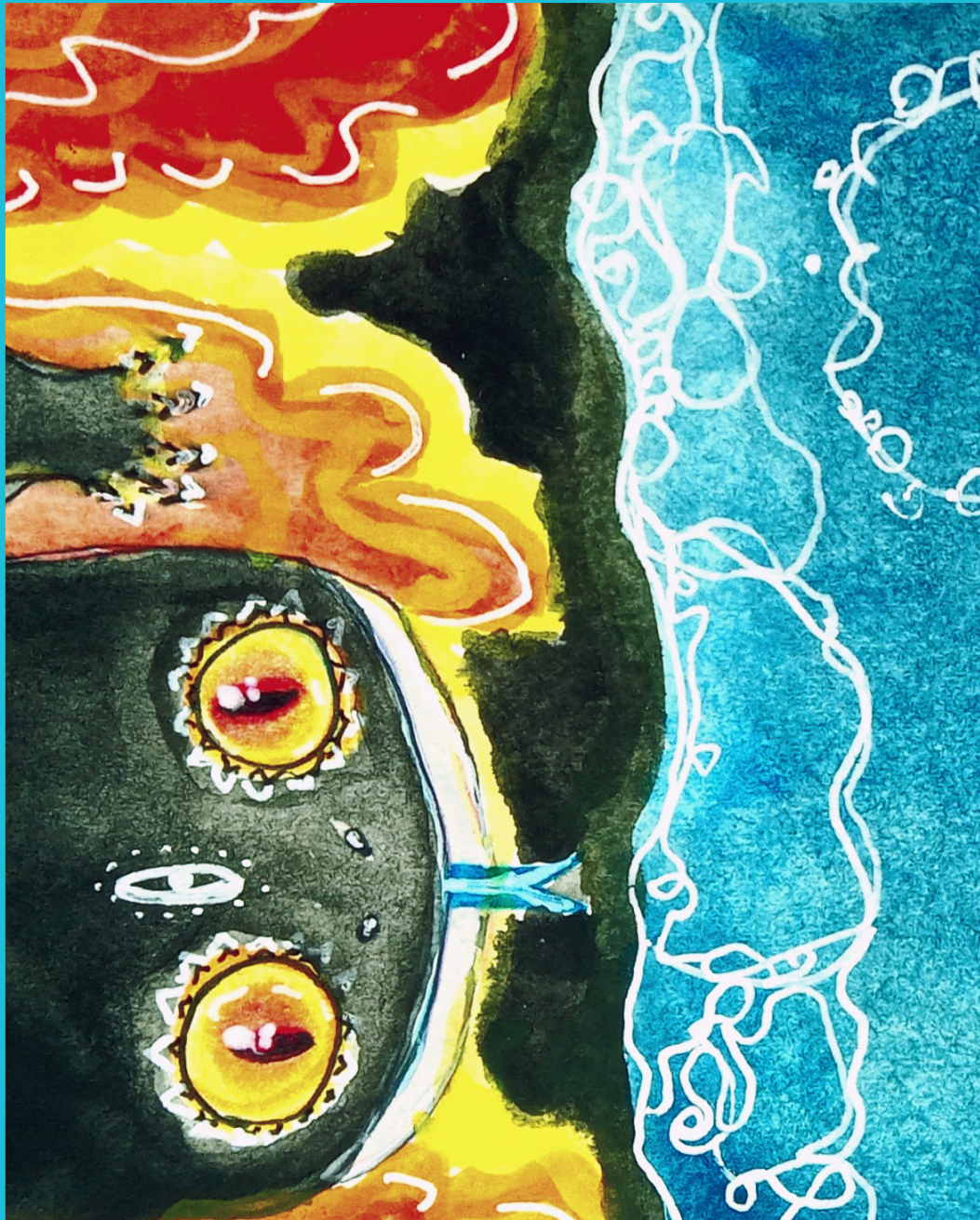
Large horns, maw of knives,
scaled body, wings of leather,
serpent's gaze and tail.

A clever hoarder,
power born flesh, yin and yang,
eyes of fantasy.



Sisters

Darcy McDowell



Excerpt from

Ivelysse Leighton

The night before the world broke, they found peace where the noise could not reach them.

Moonlight pooled like silver water over the empty field. Eliane lay on her back, fingers tracing constellations she'd once believed were God's footprints. Besides her, Kieran's frost gathered in the grass, tiny crystals climbing each blade until they shimmered pale blue.

"You're freezing everything," she murmured, half-asleep.

"Not everything," he said, watching her breath turn to mist. "Just what I can't keep."

Her laugh was soft. "You can't keep me either."

"I know."

The wind moved through the trees like a sigh. Neither spoke again for a while. She turned on her side, firelight blooming faintly in her palm—small, controlled, almost tender. He reached for it, letting his cold meet her warmth until steam rose between their hands.

"Promise me," she whispered. "If war takes me—if he takes me—don't look for the girl I was. She won't be there anymore."

Kieran's voice dropped to a breath. "Then I'll find the woman who took her place."

Her hand trembled once before she closed it into a fist, snuffing out the light. Somewhere far off, the wind howled like something waking. She didn't see it then—the way shadows crawled beneath the horizon, how Lucian's power was already threading through her magic like vines around a flame.

Thus ended the last peaceful night they had.

The battle was chaos given shape: screaming winds, shattered steel, and magic burned through the night like falling stars.

At its heart, two figures stood apart—locked in a rhythm older than words.

Kieran moved through frost and shadow, power radiating from his skin like breath in winter. Across the ruin, Eliane Crowe stood wreathed in flame. Not his enemy. Not entirely. The girl who once laughed at his clumsy jokes, the woman whose wildness once steadied his discipline. Now she was fire, and he the frost that might unmake her.

"Eliane," he said, voice breaking against the wind. "We don't have to do this."

Her laugh cut sharp as glass. "Haven't we said that before? Back when



The War for the Eternal Isle

it was only words? Now it's magic, blood, and consequence."

She raised her hands. The ground split open, and molten light spilled from the earth's wound. Her power moved like a living thing—beautiful, feral, free. But beneath the gold and crimson fire, a silver thread shimmered faintly, binding each flare of her magic to someone else's will.

His heart tightened. She had always been chaos incarnate, and he had always loved her for it. But love would not stop a war or save the innocents that Lucian meant to burn from the world.

"You think this is right?" he called, frost gathering at his feet, the air biting cold. "To tear the world apart for his cause?"

"Lucian doesn't make me do anything." Her voice cracked, but her stance did not. "He makes me strong. He makes me free."

"Free?" His voice rose, the cold thickening around every word. "He feeds on your fire and calls it power. He's not setting you free, Eliane—he's chaining you with your own magic."

For a heartbeat, she flinched. Frost caught the edges of her flames as if even the air around her recognized the lie. But the spell—a silver thread laced through her veins—tightened, and her flames flared brighter, drowning the tremor. The soldier replaced her, rebuilt by another man's will.

"We don't exist anymore," she said, almost gently.

Her flames answered louder than she ever could. The world ignited. He lifted a wall of ice, and when fire met frost, the air screamed.

Each clash shattered the ground between them—ice splintering, flame devouring. Their movements, through enemies, still mirrored the rhythm of long practice, two halves of a language they had once written together.

He froze the ground beneath her feet; she leapt, spun through a ribbon of flame, and met his counterspell midair. Sparkes hissed and died against his cold.

"You're holding back," she said.

"So are you."

Silence fell heavy, filled only by the sound of their breathing and the hiss of dying magic.

Then softer—her voice broke through it. "Why couldn't you have followed me, Kieran? We could've been unstoppable. We would've been together."

He swallowed against the weight in his chest. "Because I see you. The girl you were. The woman you're trying too hard to become. I won't let him



destroy you.”

Her eyes shimmered, a faint silver sheen beneath the gold of her flames. The spell pulsed like a heartbeat.

“He said I’d never have to be small again,” she whispered, almost to herself. “He said power means I’d finally belong.”

“He lied,” Kieran breathed. “He bound your strength to his, but if you can still fight him, he hasn’t won.”

Tears gathered at her lashes, catching the light like molten glass. “It’s too late for me.”

He stepped closer, and frost melted to mist. “No. Not while you still hesitate.”

Her next flame missed him by inches. He saw it—the pull still there, the love that lived beneath her rage.

The battle roared on, but he fought differently now—measured, careful, not to kill, but to reach. His magic softened, the cold turning to breath, to touch, to promise.

“It’s never too late,” he whispered. “Not for us.”

Above them, dragons screamed through the clouds—Lucian’s and Cassian’s locked in their own war—but the sound fell away as she reached for him. For a heartbeat, the world went still.

Eliane’s hand met his. Frost met flame. Steam enveloped them—burning, healing, fusing.

Love had not saved her once. But it had kept him trying.

The air around them shimmered, splitting the battlefield into two worlds—one drenched in ice, one in fire. The ground cracked beneath their feet, light bleeding through the fractures.

Kieran pulled her closer, shielding her as heat and frost collided again.

Her lips parted. “Kieran... he’s coming.”

A shadow moved through the steam—massive, winged, ancient. The sky pulsed with light as Lucian’s dragon descended, molten scales raining sparks across the earth. Soldiers scattered like frightened birds, their screams swallowed by the beating of colossal wings.

Eliane’s magic convulsed inside her, no longer hers to command. Her pupils dilated as the silver thread of Lucian’s binging blazed across her skin like lightning.

The power ripped through her veins like molten wire. She staggered back, gasping. Flames burst from her palms, unbidden and wild, searing the

air around her.

A choked cry tore from her throat. “I can’t stop it—” Her voice broke into a scream. “He’s inside my fire, Kieran. Every spell, every breath—it’s him.” He lunged forward, catching her as her knees nearly buckled beneath the weight of her power clawing through her. Her body trembled against his chest, heat radiating from her like a forge ready to shatter.

“Yes, you can.” His hands framed her face, frost spreading over her skin, anchoring her there. “Stay with me. Look at me. Not him.”

Her breath came in ragged bursts, each one a battle. Flame-carved fissures split open the earth as Lucian’s will pulled tighter. Pain streaked across her features—but somewhere beneath it, she still looked at him.

For an instant, she did.

A tremor ran through her body. Not fear—recognition.

Then, like oil poured through her mind, a voice slithered in, silk over steel:

Little flame... you are mine.

Eliane jerked, a strangled sound escaping her throat. Her eyes flickered—gold, silver, then something hollow, devoured. The flames wreathing her shifted, their hue deepening into a shade not born of her—colder than fire had any right to be, like heat stripped of warmth.

Kieran’s blood went cold. “Eliane—fight him.”

She tried. Gods, she tried. He saw it in the way her fingers curled into his coat, the way her mouth formed a word she could no longer voice. The battle raged around them, but the war inside her was worse—silent, suffocating, merciless.

A beat of dragon wings shook the air. Lucian’s presence pressed closer, thick enough to taste—smoke and ruin, promises steeped in poison.

Eliane’s head snapped toward the sky, as if yanked by invisible chains. “He... he wants—” Her voice broke on a gasp. “He wants to use me.”

Kieran pulled her back, holding her as if he could cage her soul with his arms alone. “He will not have you.”

Her laugh—if it could be called that—cracked like burnt glass. “He already does.”

For a moment, the world slowed. Frost wilted. Flame guttered.

Her hand slid from his chest to his cheek, a ghost of the tenderness she once offered freely. “If I break... don’t try to save what’s left of me.”

He pressed his forehead to hers, breath unsteady. “I’m not letting go.”

The sky tore open with a roar. Lucian’s dragon plunged through the

clouds, its fire a vortex of devouring light. The force of its landing fractured the battlefield, sending shockwaves through stone and magic alike.

Eliane screamed—not in fear, but in agony. Fire exploded from her core, uncontrolled, ravenous. Kieran wrapped his arms around her, anchoring her to the last piece of herself she could still touch.

“Eliane—come back,” he pleaded. “Come back to me.”

For one suspended heartbeat, she did.

Her voice was a whisper buried beneath a storm. “Kieran...”

Then the world ruptured.

She met his eyes, trembling.

A breath hovered between them—fragile.

Flame consumed frost. Frost smothered the flame. Light erupted, blinding, searing the earth in a ring around them. The shockwave hurled soldiers and dragons alike into the air. For a breath, there was only light—devouring, absolute.

Then—silence.

As the brilliance thinned, steam and ash curled over the scorched ground. No bodies. No sound. Only a crater of fused ice and charred stone at the center of the battlefield, still pulsing faintly with residual magic—cold, yet burning.

Where they had stood, frost and fire braided through the earth like a heartbeat refusing to die.

No one could say if it were the echo of an ending...

... or the first pulse of something that had survived.



Winter Visitor

Judith Davis

“A Snowy Owl is at the beach,” birders reported that cold winter on Cape Cod.

I grabbed my camera, binoculars, and heavy coat and drove to the beach.

Cars parked near the marsh and birders were poised with their cameras to see the rare sight.

Expecting the owl to be out on the marsh grass, I was surprised to see it only fifty feet away.

My heart leapt on seeing the graceful, white bundle with brilliant yellow eyes staring at me, and becoming a “life bird” as it posed on the snow-covered marsh grass.

My fingers froze on the camera’s shutter in the fifteen-degree, windy afternoon, but my soul was warmed with delight on seeing the incredibly beautiful bird.

What a memorable gift of joyful life on a very cold February afternoon!

My image won a juried photography exhibit and now graces my living room wall in the mountains.

I smile every time I see it and remember that remarkable day when I fell in love with the Snowy Owl at first sight.





Snowy Owl

Judith Davis



Excerpt from

Elias Murray

Larry Sills - Engineer

I could hear laughter bouncing through the metal halls, but it didn't sound joyful in the slightest. Scornful. It sounded hopeless and scornful. Following the sound, I found Mike Fraizer slumped against the door, my eyes straining to see the back of the Nautilus torn to shreds.

"WHAT did that!?! What happened?! Are you okay???" I couldn't help but ask with panic lacing my words. Was I imagining things? Surely not, right? I didn't think my brain could come up with something as cruel as that. And Mike...he was still laughing, which wasn't a comforting sign. I didn't know the guy well personally, but I don't think I've ever seen the guy crack a smile, let alone laugh like this.

He couldn't even get an answer out before my attention snapped to the door as it strained to keep the water back for much longer. That's when I saw it. A monstrous creature hiding in the dark, all-consuming waters. The only thing that gave its location away was its light illuminating its snaggleteeth.

I didn't have much more time to look as the metal door was forced off its hinges, falling to the floor with Mike underneath. In panic, I tried to get Mike out so that we might've had a chance, but he didn't help. He didn't budge. He laid there, accepting his fate as his lungs drank in the water. At this point, the water was flooding in, almost filling the room. Yet that thing was still out there, waiting with a cold, uncaring stare. Either I died to the water or I died to it. I wasn't sure which was worse.

In a last ditch effort or perhaps a stupid, unoxygenated thought, I swam for it. We were deep, too deep to realistically make it to the surface, assuming it wasn't covered in a thick sheet of ice. Then again, I guess I'll never know. I couldn't even turn around before something sharp pierced my body.

Were the sights really worth it...?

David Burgess - Food Service

It was quiet, really quiet. All of a sudden, too. Everyone had gone silent, as if the darkness had just consumed all sound in the Nautilus. I wanted to go check it out, to know what was going on, but Brian stopped me, his hand on my shoulder with a pleading gaze. I looked out to the rest of the crew, most of them too nerveracked to eat. They stared at the food, watching as the steam slowly faded away. Something deep in my mind was swirling. It was a whirlpool of dread, but for what reason, I was unsure.

Then a noise trickled through the Nautilus. First it was quiet, like an AC buzzing in the background. But it only grew from there, rushing in like a waterfall. Water. It was water. It started to pool on the floor, gradually rising.



The Frozen Abyss

I didn't have time to have a reaction before Brian grabbed my hand with an urgent squeeze. He dragged me along, going down through the hatch that led to the box-covered storage room.

Once I was down, I gained my bearings as Brian slammed the hatch closed. "What about the rest of the crew? They'll die up there!" I asked while my body shook.

"We can't save them all. Besides, if the hatch got covered with too much water, it would be impossible to pull up. Don't you see? Saving ourselves, saving what we can, that's the most important part," he replied with a selfishness I had never seen before. Maybe...maybe it was just the heat of the moment. Maybe he was scared and he just hadn't thought about it enough. Besides, wasn't he right? Wasn't it better to save ourselves rather than risk being able to save no one?

But even the metal hatch couldn't keep the ocean from seeping into the room, its salt-tipped claws threatening to pierce our lungs with its suffocating presence. We weren't safe, we knew that much. We weren't going to escape our fate. We were going to die just the same as how we lived. Together. And the Lord knew it was going to be a slow, painful death. I sighed, knowing this was it. Taking his hand in mine as the water crept in, I spoke. "It's ironic, really. We didn't even get to eat our last meal."

Brian Thomas - Food Service

We stood there for hours, but there was no escaping the dead end I had dragged us into. It seemed like a good option at the time, but looking back, I should've tried to go up, to go to the bridge and swim up. Were we even close enough to the surface to do that? Was the ice thin enough to break through? Was the water not cold enough to kill us off just in spite? Maybe. . . maybe those extra hours were enough for someone to find the Nautilus. Maybe. . . maybe me and my Davie wouldn't die here. Maybe. . . maybe this is my final breath.

I could feel the water finally push itself past my head, finally filling the room. David was beside me, letting out the air in his lungs, letting himself sink and choke as the water filled his airways. Deep down, we knew this could only end one way. Drowning. But, it was enough for me to know we died together. To know that regardless of what we had done, this would've been the outcome. So I breathed it in. My body wanted to fight, to survive, my brain screaming to stop, that it didn't want to die. But this...this was for the best, I think.

Yeah, this was for the best.





Cayenne

Lexxus English



Creation

Darcy McDowell

Beauty in Details

Isabella Zambuto



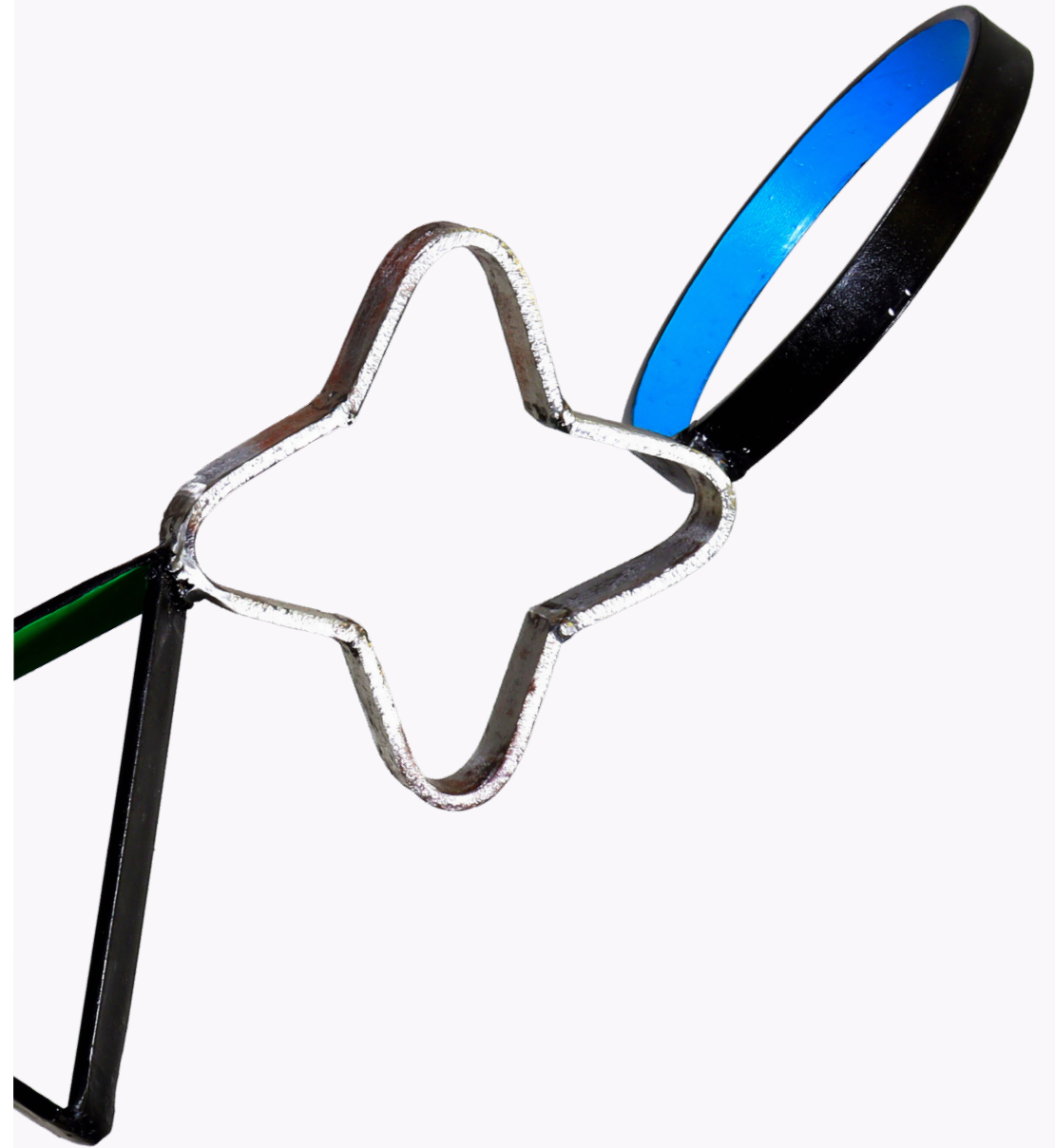
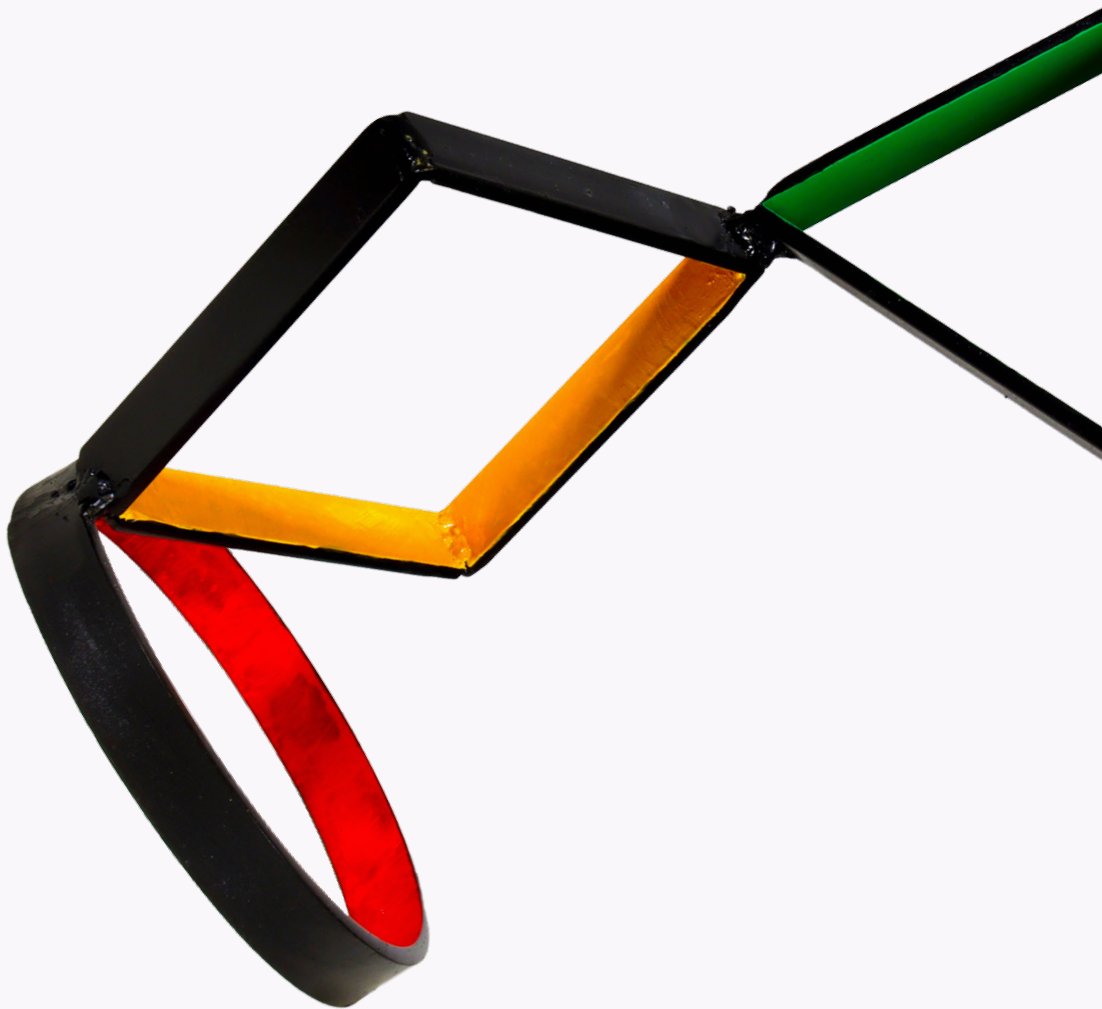
Distant Chimes

Valerie Ruppert

I do not bother to look, my mind is elsewhere.
Nowhere I've been
except in thought.
Generational dreams, thousands of years gone
arching like Apollo's arrows over the boundless sea and earth
so in thought
I am speared
atavistic—this cannot be now,
some parallel eternity!—
I am a humming brain
hearing distant chimes and SUDDENLY
I am there.

In Our Playful Nature

Autumn Short



Adulthood

Quintin Overocker

At ten I knew I'd own
a cattle ranch in Montana,
ride the range by day,
camp with the herd at night,
the Milky Way watching over
me and my horse as we dreamed.

In high school it was fisheries
biology, days in a boat
exploring far flung inlets of
far flung lakes, the smell of pine
and water forever on my skin.

College left me thinking of hiking
the mountain West, dropping into
inaccessible valleys, mapping
rocks cut by crystalline streams.

This morning, arriving to work
in an inherited nine-year old sedan,
I remember my schedule has a half day
of database training and—I swear to you—
I said to myself, “Oooh! Sweet.”

The young boy on horseback weeps.

Bridge Through Time

Kourtney Yelton



Here, Discover

Ian Waldrop

Here, sun rises
 awakening a new journey
geyser shoots possibilities
 to the stars
 hoping to remember
 grove's peace

Here, twins orbit
 consuming the other
ash holds mighty vigor
 ember dumps grit
 beckoning control of time
 crushing potential

Here, plasma dances
 in natural cycle
science compels
 explore, monitor, destroy
 a divide to use power
 threatening and rejuvenating

Here, gravity defies
 identities forged
twinkling crystals
 menacing moon
 new civilization
 never sees light

Here, storms roar
 the eye yours to find
tides surge
 shocking defense
 the lethargic explorer ponders
 and ponders again

Here, thorns sprawl
 unsettling capacity
twitch angers beast
 desperate for safety
 signal calls deeper
 vessel almost found

Here, all is seen
 one is chosen
Music drives
 the young Hearthian
 brave the storm
 find the travelers

Light screams
across new bark
strange peace
gathering warmth
watching beyond stars

Peek-a-Boo

Cheyenne Barr



Lessons By the River

Kaleia Hartman

The river does not rush.
It carries pebbles, sets them down
when it is ready.

I sit beside it and learn
not everything needs holding,
not every thought demands weight.

**The heron waits, the cattails bend,
and my heart slows their rhythm.**

The sky drifts open above me,
clouds passing without urgency.
Even time seems to loosen its grip,
reminding me there is no race.
Only the quiet patience of water,
teaching me how to let go.

Looking Deeper

Kylie Katcher

The poem “Soil Horizon” by Tiana Clark explains how the past continues to live in the present through racial trauma, especially in Southern spaces where history is often covered up. Clark uses the magnolia tree to show how beauty can be used as a distraction from the pain of history. The tree is described as blooming with “fragrant milky petals and waxy greens by the red brick house,” but it grows right above “the purpled stains of Confederate blood”. In this moment of the poem, she explains the difference between what is shown on the surface and what still lingers under the ground. Clark connects something that is usually seen as graceful with something violent and something unforgettable.

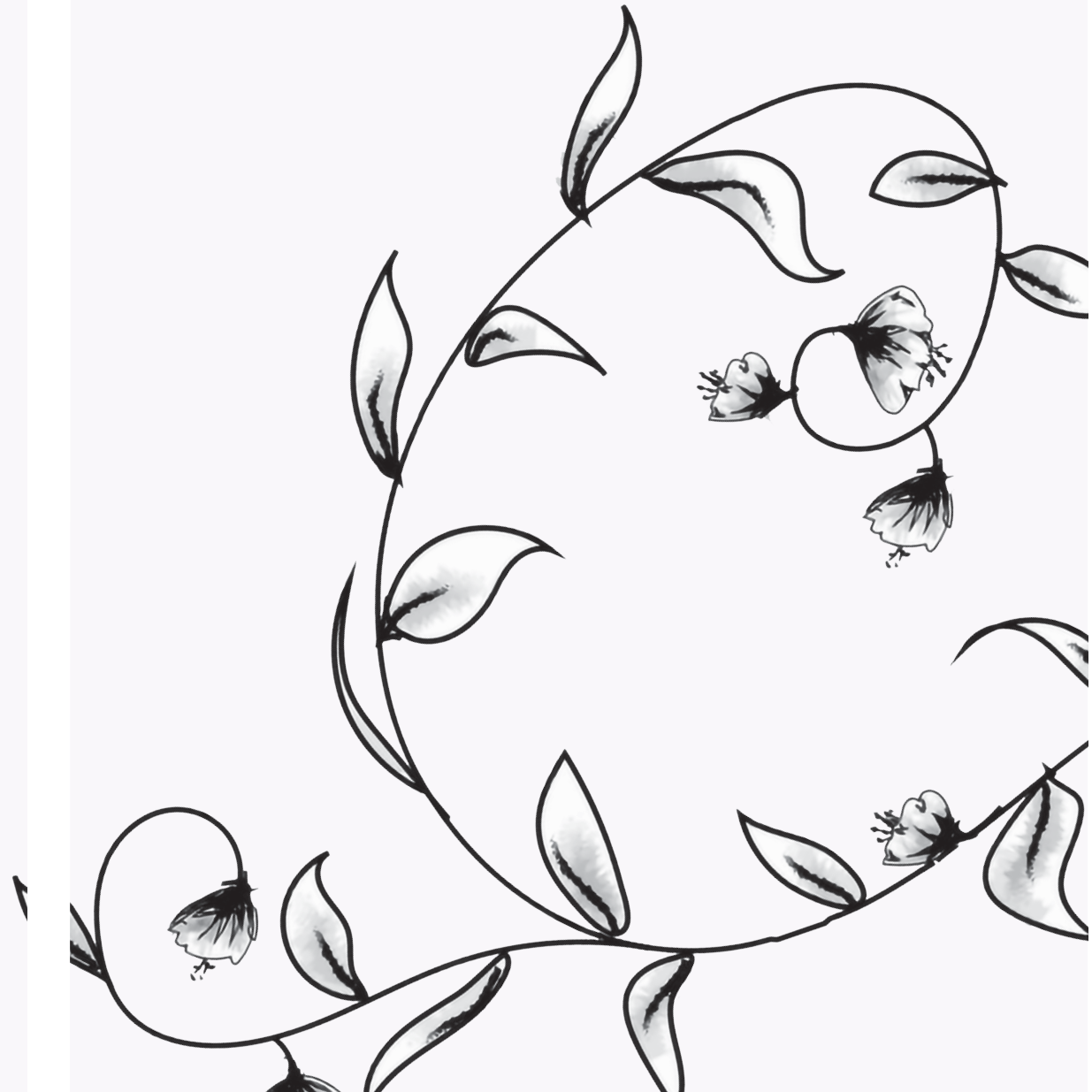
The magnolia is a common image in the South. It often symbolizes strength, endurance, and nobility, and in Southern culture, it has become a sign of tradition and elegance (“More Than a Flower”). At first, the magnolia tree in Clark’s poem seems to fit into these ideas, but when it is placed in the setting of a plantation soaked with violence, it becomes a symbol of contradiction or denial. The tree is beautiful and steady, but its roots grow into soil layered with history. Clark writes about the soil horizons themselves, the layers of topsoil, silt, and bedrock that hold the memory of the land. In the same way, the magnolia tree looks clean on the surface, yet it is deeply connected to the pain beneath it. The tree represents the tension between what people want to remember and what they try to forget.

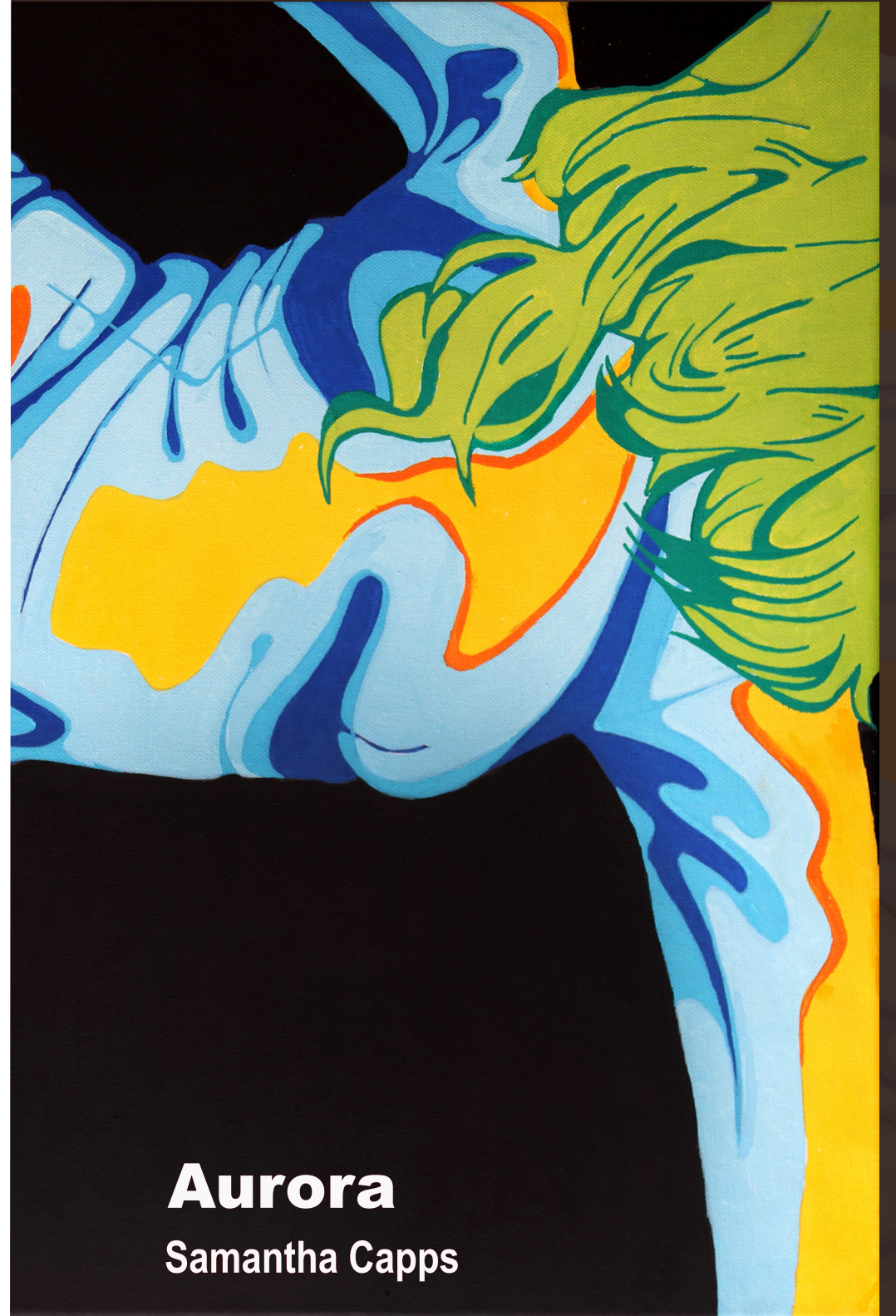
The poem shows the tension between forgetting and remembering through tone and imagery. Clark’s mother-in-law says the family can “redeem the land with our picture,” as if a photo could erase the slave cabins and the blood in the ground. The magnolia fits into this idea of redemption because it covers the hard truths with flowers. At the same time, Clark goes against this view. She asks, “How do we stand on the dead and smile?” reminding the reader that the land is always a witness to what happened, no matter how many pictures are taken in front of the blooming trees. The magnolia is a big representation of this struggle because, as it is admired for its beauty, it reminds us that the land holds stories of trauma and survival that cannot be forgotten.

The magnolia tree is important because it ties together the poem’s main themes of beauty and violence, past and present, and silence and memory. The magnolia acts as a quiet witness in the poem, linking the beauty people admire in the South to the painful histories they try to overlook. Its blossoms look delicate, but its roots reach into soil filled with buried trauma, reminding us that the past does not disappear just because it is

into “Soil Horizon”

ignored. By growing in a landscape shaped by both natural beauty and racial violence, the magnolia shows how memory stays alive in the land itself and how beauty and pain exist side by side, shaping the stories that define Southern identity. It stands as a reminder that history cannot simply be let go, because it continues to sit beneath the surface. The magnolia becomes a witness to both the past and present, while standing tall, carrying what lies beneath it.





Aurora
Samantha Capps

Reminiscent Maples

Matthew Leliveld

The maple leaves remind me of home
hanging delicately off the branches,
Stout trees lining the trails of Pisgah.
I can't help but remember the older days
maple leaves engulfed my young life,
my childhood home perched in the middle
of a thick and vibrant maple forest in Ontario.
I grew up under those canopies
walking roads freckled with leaves
the color of sun-warmed embers.

In spring, sap runs like rivers,
buckets hang on trunks like little tin hearts.
Friends and family gather
around the smoky, sweet boiler.
It's a ritual from my father,
homemade syrup straight from the source,
everyone waiting for that first taste
of something to bring some warmth to our hearts
on those cold spring days.

Quite beautiful how sugary sap
from trees in my backyard
can be turned into a golden brown treat.
It is not easy though, nothing worth doing is.
Days of collecting sap, and 18 hours of boiling
for a mere dozen jars of heaven.
It is worth it in the end, however, when the job is done.
We can make pancakes on the wood-stove boiler
right next to the vat of freshly made golden nectar
which has been tempting us for the past day.

Now I wander though Pisgah
reminiscing of the old times,
watching the leaves fall from the trees.
Maples are more sparse here
surrounded by many other species,
A small symbol of how my hometown
is now a smaller part of my life
than what it once was.
Take me home to that sweet smell of syrup.

Only in Destin, Florida*

Chloe Banner

Only in Destin, Florida*, can you go to a restaurant called "Fudpuckers" to celebrate receiving a full tuition scholarship to the college you applied to over the winter. Where they have a gift shop filled with trinkets and T-shirts plastered with their tag line, "You ain't been pucked till you've been Fudpucked." Where you can write and doodle on any free space on the walls or ceilings or floors or benches if you can find room. Where you can watch live alligators in front of the building and watch people feed them if you make it on time. Where you can order a mac and cheese burger with bacon jam that your dad still mentions to this day even though it's almost two years later.

Only in Destin, Florida*, can you get caught out in a downpour while shopping with your dad. Where you run between buildings trying to dodge the rain drops that keep coming faster and faster. Where you can decide that it's easier to run if you take off your sopping wet sandals. Where you can immediately regret that decision because now you are barefoot in an outdoor outlet mall and who knows what you could be stepping on. Where you wait for the rain to stop so that you can book it to the safety of your car. Where you and your dad sit down in the car and laugh about the whole experience while still soaking wet.

Only in Destin, Florida*, do you have to wear long sleeve shirts down on the beach because it's just March and mother nature hasn't yet caught up with the fact that we're ready for warmth. Where you can walk down the beach and see the transition between private and public sectors that are inexplicably separate. Where you see families getting into the ocean despite the fact that you think an ice bath might be warmer. Where you can walk down to a sea turtle nesting spot and talk to the park ranger who is keeping watch to make sure no one steps on it. Where you can listen to your grandfather regale you with stories of the last time he was in this location when you notice Air Force planes flying overhead. Where you can finally gain insight into a time that he seems to never open up about.

Only in Destin, Florida*, can you get a call that a close family friend from back home has passed away. Where you can see half of your family mourn while the other half seems indifferent. Where you can feel guilty for not feeling bad about her death because it was her time anyway. Where you can watch this news ruin the vacation for your grandmother. Where you go to Hooters that night for a depression meal™. Where you can still have one of the best vacations of your life despite this.

Only in Destin, Florida* can you find a store filled to the brim with toys and everything you find interesting. Where you can spend an hour perusing the store trying to convince yourself not to buy everything in sight. Where you can find a Squishmallow that you've been looking for for months. Where you can proudly show your dad your findings and tell him entirely too seriously, "No dad, you don't get it!" when you think he doesn't respond with enough excitement.

Only in Destin, Florida*, can you suggest that your whole family should go play mini golf as a fun bonding activity. Where you can brag entirely too much on the car ride over and completely bomb on the first hole. Where your aunt can keep laughing at you for missing and you take offense even though she swears it's all in good fun. Where you can watch your family have fun while you silently sulk because they just won't stop laughing at you. Where you can leave that experience thinking somehow that was the worst thing that happened on the trip.

Only in Destin, Florida*, can you go to a restaurant called McGuire's Irish pub whose entire decoration concept is yes. Where you can see dollar bills stapled to every free space that you can see, including the ceiling. Where you can decide after eating around \$300 dollars worth of food in total that you should leave a dollar, too. Where you go back and forth with your family about what the dollar should say because there is no way that you are leaving more than one. Where you finally decide on "The Banner Clan '22" and staple physical proof of this time in your life on a wall to stay there forever.

**Please note that all of the above events can happen in places other than Destin, Florida.*

Crab Legs
Rachel Cooke



significant

Madeleine Pollock

my back is breaking.
I see the salamanders
in their shimmering stream
how spineless they seem
despite
their small
significant bones
that make up
their small
significant bodies
how oblivious they are
to the weight I carry
they just carry on
digging in the mud
on and on and on
this life goes
until I break like
the rocks.
oh
how I long to slip
into their emerald pools
maybe next life
we will be
significant.
maybe next life
we will be
salamanders instead.

These Stones of Mine

Karis King

I wish I could take these stones on my finger
that symbolize promises and unity,
that make men so tempted
to disobey the bond of brotherhood.
These stones of mine
formed with care and purpose,
meant to dissuade man from their own temptation,
carved by the calmest of hands
calloused from years of dedication to their art,
imbued with the love of a maker
trusting that their purpose will be upheld,
their symbolism admired,
not looked upon with jealousy and lust.
I wish I could take these stones on my finger,
secured in my tightening fist
and cast them into the eyes of men who prey upon women,
their tears mixing with the refracted light,
rainbows created,
symbols of hope and promises,
because no longer can this man look upon women in lust,
but be forced to live in his own darkness,
a darkness that was cast upon these stones of mine.
These stones of mine
reaching into the depths of another
as the rage of women fuels me.
I hope these stones on my finger,
with their straight edges and pointed shapes,
pierce into the soul of man.
I have hope that they'll reach the part of man
that remembers a boy
long ago...
who didn't care what gender his neighbors were,
who would play on the playground,
teach them how to swing,
learn to dribble a basketball,
taught by a girl.
A boy who never wondered what was under that girl's clothes,
and only wondered if she'd like the stones in his collection.

Stones he found in the hardest of times.
Stones that were given to him by close friends and family.
Stones he wouldn't replace for the world.
Stones that reminded him of his fondest memories.
Stones he loved and admired
and imbued with his happiest emotions.
I wish that man could remember how it felt when someone
stole those stones from him,
jealous of the smile on his face.
I wish men could see
these stones of mine
and remember that little boy
who admired his stones,
his family, his friends, his memories,
and that little girl on the playground
who taught him how to love himself
and those stones of his.



Ghosts of a Digital Kind

Kara Gusner

Death was all I thought of this summer. Even in moments when it wasn't my mind's main focus, it was there looming in the background. A lingering existential spiral that all started when I visited my grandmother's grave for the first time in four years. As I sat there with her, I reflected on the memories I had of her and how incomplete they were. A few fuzzy mental stills was all I had, a few fleeing moments of the woman she was.

As I sat there mourning the woman I wished I knew, I thought about myself. I wondered if someone would ever mourn me this way, struggling to remember my face or my smile. The thought frightened me, so much so that I spent the summer stuck thinking about my inevitable fate and the ghost I might leave.

But there is one key difference between my grandmother and me, one that changes everything. I have the internet and she did not. I have found that the surface level memory of me lies in one-off mentions in school newspapers and in family member's Facebook posts. All that which holds my name shows a record of my existence, a record of my face and smile. Recorded in a way that was never possible before. Although these too are not a complete memory, just an image taken out of context. But while hollow memories may not show the person I was, they are still better than no memory at all. And I took comfort in knowing that some part of me would remain. Even if it was divorced from the person I was, it was still me.

Then in midsummer, the online landscape started to change, and the idea of an ID verified internet became reality. I watched as countries chose to entwine the lives of their citizens with their digital footprint, as they chose to make your digital persona part of who you are. While I feared what this would mean for the future of the free internet, I couldn't help but wonder about what it would mean for people's legacy. After all, once something has been recognized as part of you, it is intrinsically tied with the memory you leave behind.

When you die, what do you want to leave behind? What memory of you do you want people to form? Questions pertaining to death and legacy are not very popular when it comes to topics of conversation. Humans don't like thinking about their inevitable end. It's that third topic you shouldn't bring up at dinner, next to politics and religion. Though it is said that a person never truly dies until they are forgotten. But how do you ensure that, ensure that you will have a remembered legacy. Do you play the villain breaking laws and making sure people hate you? Do you find fame, getting yourself placed so high on a pedestal people will be forced to look up to you

for decades to come? Or do you make great discoveries so that maybe someday a person will pickup your works and cite you for a paper? Still, these examples are just fragments of a person, simplified down to their most outward components.

A specter made up of the memories and knowledge that managed to be saved when a person died.

However it's a specter people are obsessed with cultivating, trying to relay and record every part of their life no matter how impossible. You could write down your whole life into a memoir and there would still be parts that get lost. Small moments in between, things you forget about and contexts you don't realize are important enough to add. But that's just how human existence is, you remember only what you deem important and sift the rest out.

It is impossible to capture every waking moment, to record every facet of a lifetime. However, that's not to say that people cannot and are not trying to change that sentiment. In this digital age everyone seems to be scrambling to digitize their life, to make their digital footprint into their electronic legacy. Originally people made online content for fun and entertainment. But slowly now we're watching the changeover into content motivated by fame. After all, everyone has a camera so why not use it to make yourself known to the world, to gain the fame you covet. And what is the foundation of fame if not a wish someone makes to be remembered. The rise of phones and access to the internet, has led every person to be able to share themselves online. It has allowed people to be the masters of their own futures, curators of their own legends, and the deciders of their public memory. While it is true that some people choose to make their legacy stupid pranks or blogs that are nothing but overconsumption, there are many that don't. So many people nowadays share their whole life, whole identity with the internet. They digitized everything along their march from crib to coffin so that it can be electronically immortalized. Social media apps like Youtube, Instagram and TikTok are becoming platforms to build your own online headstone. Videos log an ever expanding eulogy you write for yourself, a branch of the genealogical tree digitized forever. Or at least for however long the data centers hold on to the data.

But with all this talk of digital memorials built by those still living, there is still no guarantee of the internet holding this up. We have no answer for what will happen in thirty, forty, even fifty years in the future when so many of the people posting now will be gone. What will happen to their Youtube, Instagram, TikTok? Will they be kept up as a scroll-through memorial to a person that once was? Or will they be taken down by the companies, for more server space or by the families out of respect? Perhaps the dead internet theory will catch up with us after all, leaving bots to scroll through hours of footage made by people long gone. Who knows? For all we know, the answers might be coming soon as we deal with the consequences of being the earliest generations to make content creation a full-time living.

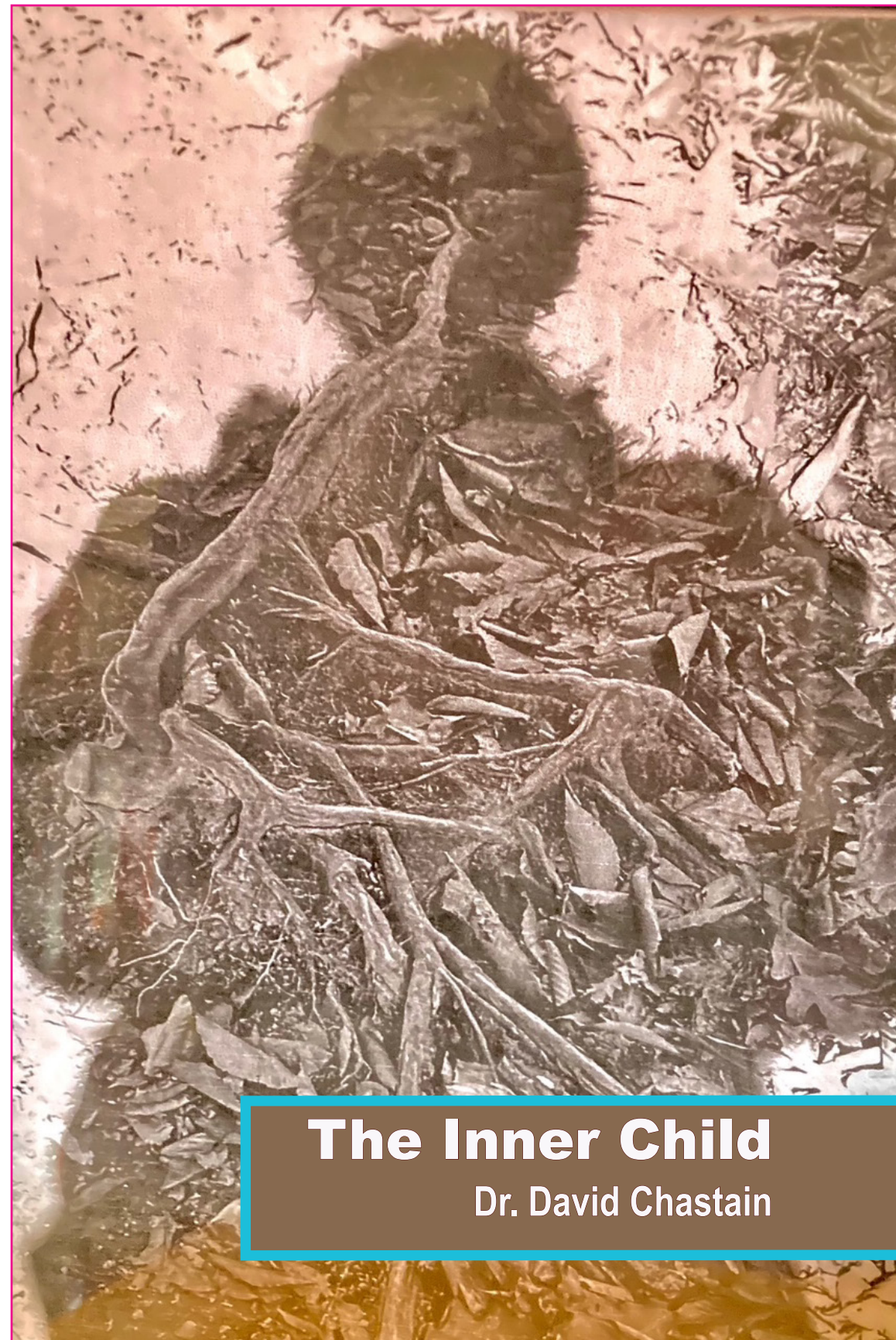
Which brings the discussion back to personal legacy, what you personally want to leave behind. It's a question I contemplate often, usually when I'm debating the nature of existence with myself. As someone who is prone to existential spirals, death and legacy are often heavy on my mind. It also does not help that I'm a history major as well, and so much of history is studying and examines the parts of people's lives that survived to the present day. So it's no real wonder to myself that I think about what parts of myself I leave behind, in words and moments. In truth I want a very human thing, I want people to remember my name, remember that I existed outside of the handful of friends and family I have. And I know how people are doing it nowadays, I see how people utilize social media. While I have fallen prey to the digital overlords we call social media I tend to use it from a point of anonymity. I grew up with tech savvy parents who lectured me on never giving out personal information, a rule I still follow to this day. I don't use my name anywhere online unless I absolutely have to. And I honestly hate it when people use my name in posts they make online or tag me directly. Though I recognize that those posts are cementing my existence, I still cannot help but dislike them. I know how counter intuitive it all seems, but life is about making choices for the living and I value my privacy more than what might bring attention to me.

Still to this day I use alternate names and anonymous accounts, even when talking to people online that I've known for years. I don't know their real name, they don't know mine and that's the way it will always be. While I love being anonymous, what can you do with an anonymous grave? For what flowers can be given to the ghost with no name? Or specifically in my case how can you understand the anonymous artist? I am fond of creating other

art besides writing and I have posted it online. Posting under usernames that have no way of tying back to me in places where I could never be recognized. And yet I am recognizable, within the communities of which I make art. There are people who know my username, know the things I like to draw.

For even when you detach yourself from who you are, people find ways to recognize the masks you put up instead. That fraction of myself I give to my art becomes something more than just the piece of me in my art; it becomes the window for which people can try and realize me, the artist. Even without a name I still exist as no one can think of art without first considering the artist. And maybe if there are fans one hundred years from now who are fans of the same things I'm a fan of now, they will see my art and wonder about me. Wonder and remember the person who made the work they are looking at now, as they scroll through whatever new internet hellscape we will inevitably create.

Which creates the question I now grapple with, "is that enough?" Is it enough for me to be remembered not for my name or any kind of recognition that comes with it, but for what I have created and only that? For someone to look at my art and enjoy it, enjoy the story I wanted to tell, or the emotions I wanted to convey. Is it enough to just be the art and not the artist? Yet, the thing about art is that it's impossible to fully separate it from the artist, every time a human being makes any kind of art they put a part of themselves in their work, always. Acts of creation are moments of memory strung together. A snapshot of the person, their talents and passions, taken from that moment in time. Art will always tell the story of the artist even if the artist themselves doesn't realize it. So personally, the idea that someone looks at my art years from now and thinks about the person who made it, tries to create their own image of the artist in their mind, is a kind of legacy. Even if it's not connected to my name or anything about me, even if all that remains of me is one person who likes my art, that's enough. Perhaps legacy isn't about recording everything you do, emblazoning your name on every moment of living, trying to prove who you are. Perhaps it is based on nothing more than you living at all, for the act of living is an act of memory and that which you create is more than legacy enough.



The Inner Child

Dr. David Chastain

The House That Used to be Home

Ivelysse Leighton

I used to think family was the safest place in the world.

Growing up, I believed our house was built on warmth—the kind that wrapped around you like a blanket fresh from the dryer. I trusted you with the kind of innocence only children have, the type that hands over secrets and dreams with open palms, sure they’ll be held gently.

For a long time, you did hold them. Or I thought you did.

It didn’t happen all at once. Betrayal rarely does. It starts with a small crack you convince yourself isn’t really there—a harsh comment dismissed as a joke, a promise abandoned but forgiven, a moment of carelessness you swallow because “family isn’t perfect.”

But cracks grow, even when we close our eyes.

The day everything fell apart wasn’t dramatic. No slammed doors, no shouted confessions. Just a quiet realization that you had taken something precious from me, something I didn’t know was fragile until I saw it broken in your hands. And when I looked to you for comfort, for apology, for anything... you stepped back.

You let me bleed alone.

The world tells me I’m supposed to forgive you because we share blood, as if DNA is an oath, as if genetics justify hurt. They remind me that “family is forever,” but they forget to mention that forever doesn’t always mean safe.

In the weeks that followed, I felt like I was grieving a living person. You were still there, laughing in the kitchen, talking like nothing had changed, but the version of you I loved had vanished. And I wasn’t mourning just you. I was mourning the home I thought we were.

Silence moved in where trust used to sleep.

Now, I hesitate at the front door. The walls look the same, the pictures still hang in their frames, but the house feels different—like the ghost of warmth lingers but won’t touch me anymore. It’s a strange kind of heartbreak, losing someone who still sits across the table from you.

But here is the quiet truth I am learning:

Family is not supposed to hurt like this. Love isn’t supposed to require armor. And sometimes, the bravest thing you can do is build a new version of “home” from scratch—even if you have to start alone.

I’m still grieving, but I’m also growing.

And lately, I find myself crossing that doorway without trembling—proof that something between us is mending.



November 6th, 2024

Rowyn Roberts

I wake up early that morning, a pit in my stomach.

I needn’t even check my phone,

I already know

in the back of my head

evil has won.

When I see the headline,

when I read the words,

I can’t breathe.

I feel tears welling up in my eyes

and my throat closing up.

I don’t go to work.

I don’t go to class.

I cry.

And cry.

And cry.





Mrs. Vi O. Lence

Ackcie Dent. Childe

Mrs. Vi O. Lence
You Never Made Sense
Such A Careful Smile that Cracked With a Wince
You Stayed In The House Where The Storm Never Slept
And Rain Poured Down From The Tears That You Wept
Mrs. Vi O. Lence
Did You Stay For Me?
A Mother, A Daughter, But Never Free
Mrs. Violence You Weathered The Storm
But I Can't Help But Wonder
Do You Wish I Was Born?



Six Portraits

Billie Moser

There she stood

Courtney Wall

There she stood, one hand in her hoodie pocket, curling the fabric as a distraction.

There she stood, her eyes staring down at her phone, small sniffles trying to fight the emotion.

There she stood, pouring her soul out to strangers, classmates.

There she stood, reliving memories she tried to drown.

There she stood, fighting back tears.

There she stood, fidgeting.

There she stood, eyes downturned, words spilling from her lips.

There she stood, ripping open old wounds, so that someone could understand her.

There she stood, admitting that she thought death was the only option.

There she stood, confirming that we saw her one day, and then almost didn't see her the next.

There she stood, shoulder slightly hunched, protecting herself, wanting to curl up and hide.

There she stood, and all I wanted to do was to whisper to her not to give up.

There she stood, her words streaming out, dripping, falling onto the floor, emotions escaping.

There she stood, with each passing moment, standing taller, straighter.

There she stood, letting go of whatever was holding her down.

There she stood, shoulders back, eyes lighter.

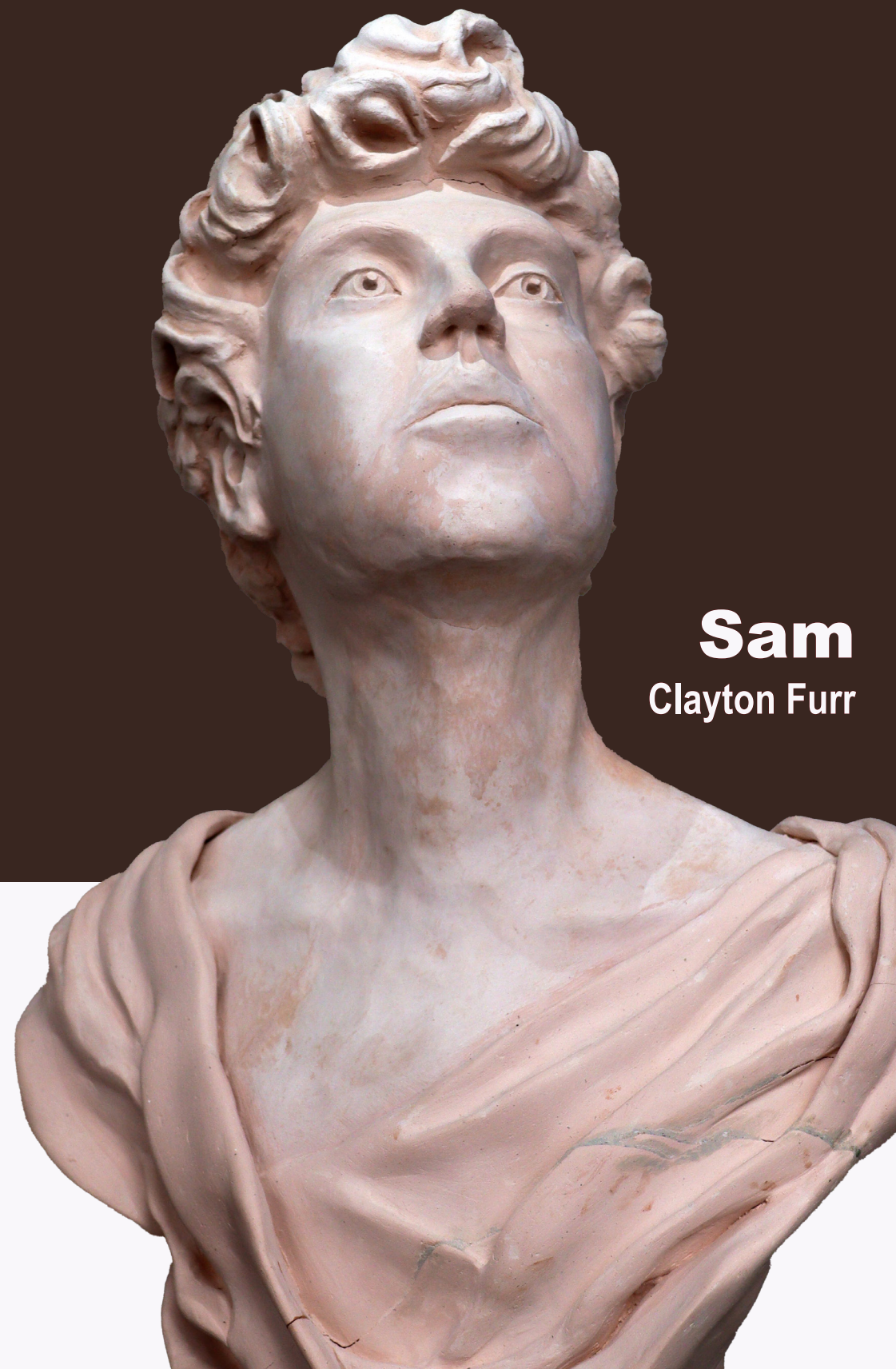
There she stood, reminding us that she didn't give up.

There she stood, her story being told, making her life her own.

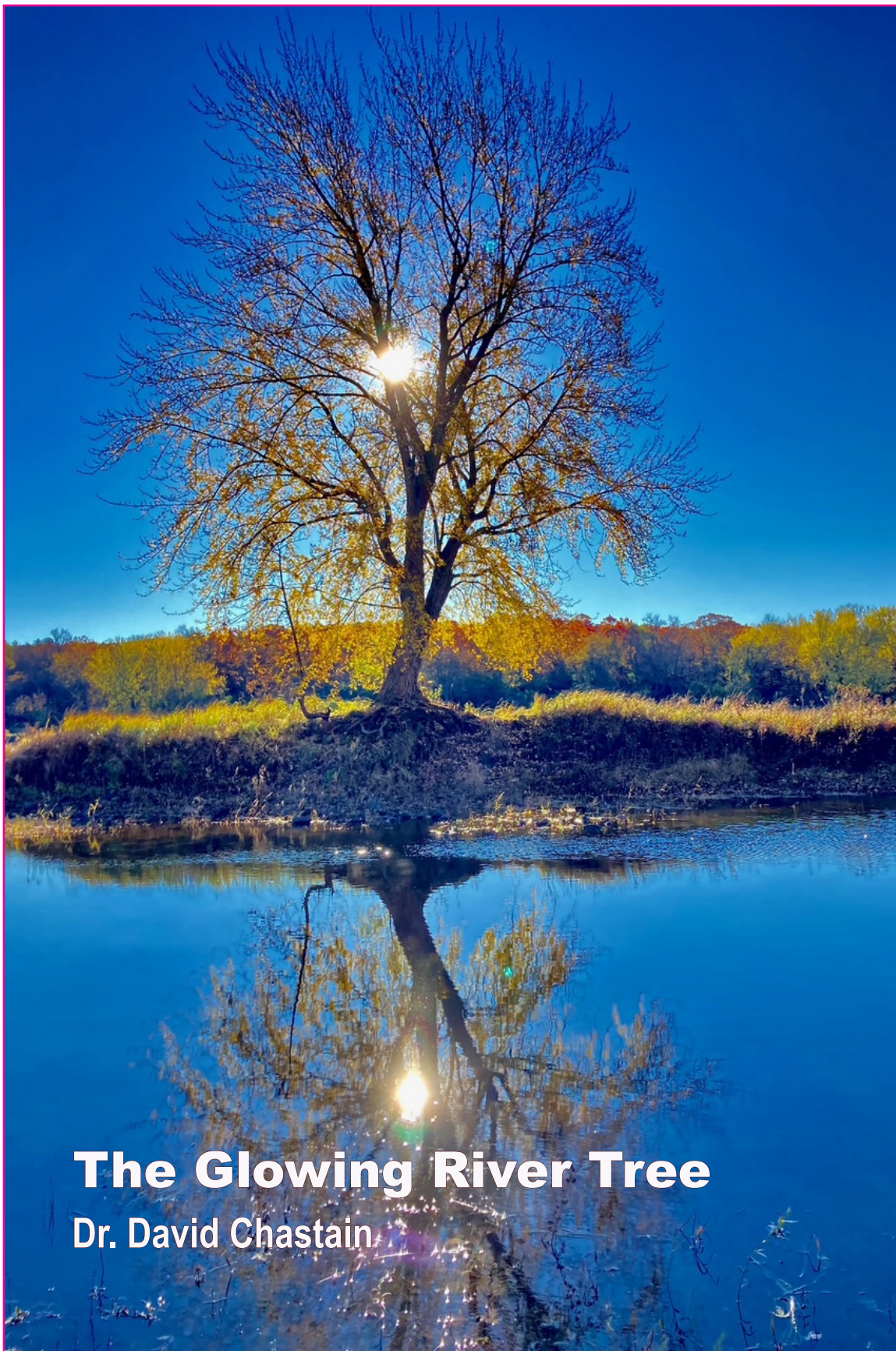
We Can't Change What's Done



Kember Philips



Sam
Clayton Furr



The Glowing River Tree

Dr. David Chastain

eudaimonia

Madeleine Pollock

what do you know
of the good life?
I think that virtue
is found where
the bears roam
& the trees
reach toward
the light
where the stars
swarm the night sky
the ways bees do
to spring flowers
because in this
good life
of plants
& purpose
& poetry
The honey is shared.
& it is
delightful.

Colophon

Chiaroscuro, Brevard College's literary and arts magazine, exists to showcase the creative voices of our campus community. Through poetry, prose, and visual art, this publication reflects the interplay of light and shadow, capturing what Brevard students and staff see, feel, and imagine. This 2025–2026 edition was produced by the student editorial staff using Adobe InDesign. Submissions were collected throughout the fall 2025 semester and thoughtfully curated to represent a wide range of artistic expression and perspective.

Designed with an emphasis on contrast, clarity, and visual flow, this issue pairs expressive student work with intentional typography and layout, reflecting the publication's focus on both form and feeling. The body text is set in Minion Pro, with the title in Arial Black and secondary titles in Arial Narrow. Floral design elements were created by Elias Murray, and the layout design was completed by Karis King.

This edition was celebrated at the *Chiaroscuro* Launch Party on April 21, 2026, bringing together contributors, editors, and the Brevard College community to recognize the creativity and work represented in these pages.

Chiaroscuro is made possible by the dedication of its editors, contributors, and the broader Brevard College community. We extend our gratitude to all students and staff who submitted their work, as well as the faculty and staff who continue to support creative expression on campus. Special thanks to the Brevard College Humanities Division and Friends of Fine Arts for their generous funding and support.

This edition stands as a record of a year's worth of imagination, vulnerability, and artistic exploration.

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