

The Paper Lantern

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## The Works

<b>In the Spirit of a Grove</b> by Sarah Huderle	4
<b>Octopus Garden</b> by Lisa Brodsky	5
<b>Secrets, Secrets</b> by Pavel Kifyak	6
<b>My Murder of Crows</b> by Marissa McClure	10
<b>Directions</b> by Valentina Penalosa	13
<b>Dear Korea</b> by Rachel Kraus	14
<b>Freedom from Who</b> by Khadijah Sooknanan	15
<b>It's 5 PM Somewhere</b> by Lisa Brodsky	18
<b>Death of Worlds</b> by Jennifer Hansen	19
<b>Proud to be Canadian</b> by Lisa Brodsky	21
<b>Refreshment and Red Lipstick</b> by Brayden Honey	22
<b>Mental Anguish</b> by Bri Ehmler	25
<b>50 Angels Below</b> by Berenice Flores	26
<b>Blue-Black Heart</b> by Marissa McClure	27
<b>Failure of Motherhood</b> by Lisa Brodsky	28
<b>sAddictions</b> by Nicole Middendorf	29
<b>Reunited</b> by Amanda Judd	30
<b>Bar Mitzvah</b> by Lisa Brodsky	31
<b>Poblano</b> by Berenice Flores	32
<b>Lost and Found</b> by Lisa Brodsky	33
<b>Artwork</b> by Anna Sybesma	34
<b>Recipe for Fried Bread</b> by Sarah Huderle	35
<b>Smoky Day</b> by Lisa Brodsky	43
<b>The Hanged Man</b> by Rachel Kraus	44
<b>Mother Hen</b> by Lisa Brodsky	45
<b>Where Trees Grow Green</b> by Malaya Guerrier	46
<b>My Cairn with Eleven Meanings</b> by Bri Ehmler	53
<b>Life in the Circus</b> by Lisa Brodsky	54
<b>Hover</b> by Lisa Ronan	55
<b>What is Love?</b> by Sarah Sells	56
<b>Between Past and Future</b> by Yousef Saad	57
<b>Over 1,000 Flight Hours During Deployments</b> by Kara Stevens	58
<b>Physical Anguish</b> by Bri Ehmler	60
<b>Scholar's Mate</b> by Amber Lough	61
<b>Love is a Dead Bird</b> by Sarah Sells	62
<b>Freedom Through Life</b> by Kara Stevens	63
<b>Bypast</b> by Sarah Huderle	64
<b>J-Town</b> by Thurston Moran	65
<b>Boy and Dog</b> by Cheryl Wilke	72
<b>Road Queen</b> by Jennifer Hansen	73
<b>Flower Beyond the Senses</b> by Izzy Cruz	76

**What You Took with You** by Lisa Ronan .....77  
**Mascara Stains** by Marissa McClure .....78  
**Intergalactic Evenings** by Rachel Kraus .....79  
**Life is Short** by Amanda Judd .....81  
**When** by Lisa Ronan .....82  
**Tickler in Flight** by Kara Stevens .....84

**Contributor’s notes**.....85  
**Publication information**.....88

**Front cover:** “Garden Song” by Lisa Brodsky  
**Back cover:** “Trauma” by Sarah Huderle

# *In the Spirit of a Grove*

*by Sarah Huderle*

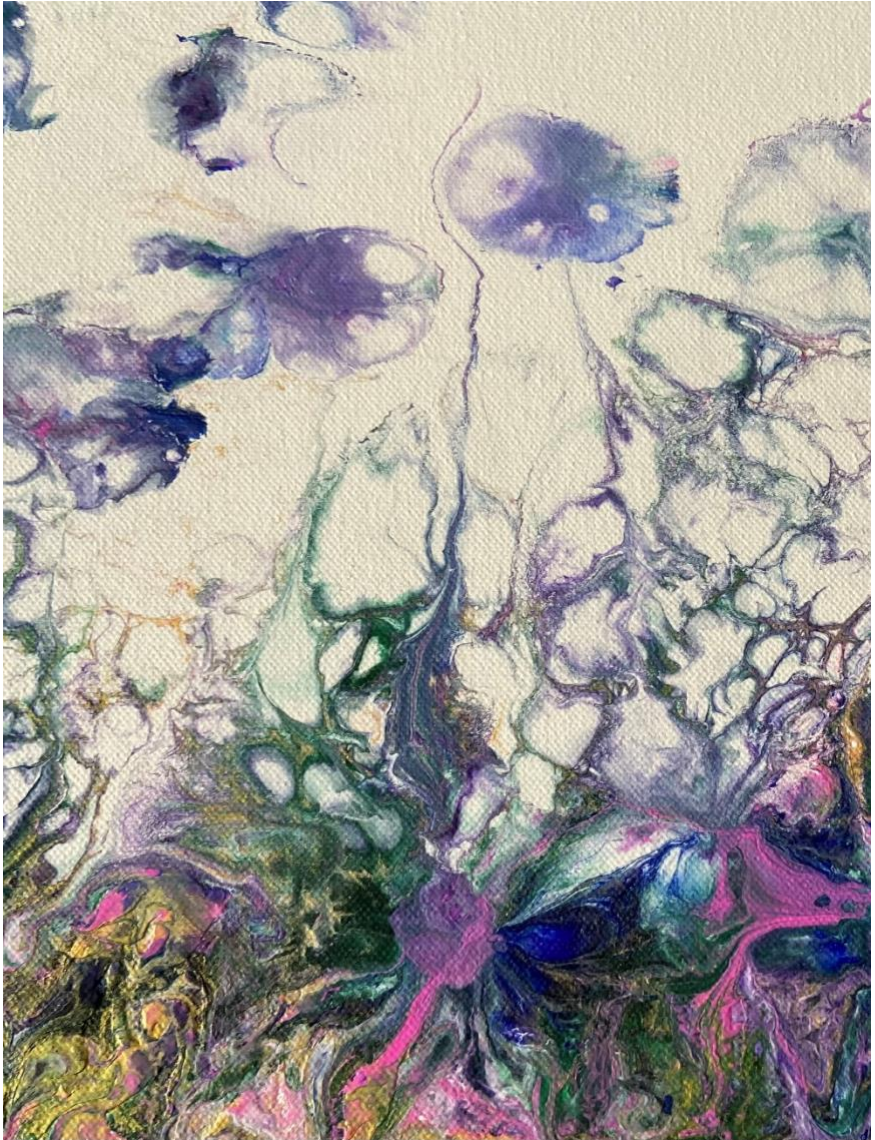
Plunged in the depths of the floral forest-grove,  
past ivy, past baneberry, past stinging nettle's spite,  
where chicken-of-the-woods clings to gnarled oak trunks  
and dryad's saddle fruits from fallen elm stumps,  
where lily-of-the-valley scales slopes of great height,  
the forest gasps a breath of pure saturated life.

It thinks in lush grape vine on sumac and spruce,  
bears sweet fruit of plum, raspberry, and goose.  
It feels in gentle grasses, breaths the sway of a breeze,  
and speaks in sharp chirps of the chortling chickadee.  
It smells in musty cottonwood, oak, and willow, and  
sings in rattling trills of the plump American toad.

Trudging through overgrown paths,  
through buckthorn thicket and cottonwood snow,  
the grizzly bear huffs its warm honey breath  
and breathes a sting of tart apple in a bellowing groan.  
As the forest gasps its breath of pure saturated life,  
he understands he is not the only one alive.

# *Octopus Garden*

*by Lisa Brodsky*



## *Secrets, Secrets*

*by Pavel Kifyak*

How does one dress gay? How does one scream out to everyone around, I am gay!

If I wear this red and black checkered blanket scarf, will that do; in what universe would I have the ego to wear such a thing outside?

I once went to my sister, outfit picked out, and asked her how I looked. She looked me up and down—me in a long-sleeved black shirt with some kind of three tear design down the middle that revealed the white shirt underneath and a white and black checkered scarf on top. Of course, there were also the tight black jeans to top it all off.

She looked back up into my eyes and asked me: “are you gay?”

I froze up. I mumbled and fumbled out a half denial.

That is how my sister found out I was gay, and it is also how I am going to tell you, dear reader, that I am gay.

She technically did not answer my question. Yet somewhere in the back of my mind I think I am always asking: “do I look gay?” I think she answered that one.

Do I just tell everyone about myself; do I just not care about it—but how annoying it is to hear “do you have a girlfriend yet?” Then they would always ask “why not?”

As a kid I always heard: secrets secrets are no fun unless you tell everyone. I always scoffed at it—I mean if you tell everyone, then it’s not a secret.

Now I wonder, at what point is EVERYONE everyone: do you tell all the billions of lives on the planet—no you don’t, that’s unrealistic. Then it’s not everyone is it, so who is everyone—what number do I have to tell?

The first gay I ever met, before I knew I was gay, was in high school. It was a creative writing class in which the teacher asked us all to share something about ourselves. We were working on memoirs so we were working on knowing ourselves. The teacher asked us questions about ourselves, so one boy piped up and said that he was gay.

The teacher kind of looked at him like he did this a lot. He was a very talkative and open person, even confident in himself.

“That’s great,” the teacher said, “does anyone else have anything to share?”

She turned and made eye contact with me as if she could smell the insecurity on me. I quickly looked away; I had nothing I wanted to share.

The first and second crushes I have ever had were both girls. The first was a redhead—the cute popular boy of the school also happened to be redhead—she liked another boy but I did not mind, I just liked being with her.

At some point, we were apparently included on some school wide list of pairs people would have wanted to see become couples. There was some drama about it—high school stuff. Something felt wrong, deep down, to be included on that list with who I was included with as a pairing.

The other had big puffy, curly hair, and her arm would pulse as she wrote little messages right across from me. She would pass those notes right off to me and we would trade jokes and observations. She got a boyfriend and had so much PDA with him. I also did not mind this; it was, strangely, a relief.

Whenever someone asked, “who do you have a crush on?” these two would be easy answers. Easy ways for me not to think of other options.

There was a boy, a stranger, at the bookstore counter. He had a white T-shirt that revealed the V of his collarbone that jutted his skin out into shadows and muscle. Even had a smooth face contrasted by these bold black rimmed glasses sitting on top of a curved nose. I had to wait in line, and there were two clerks—one of whom was too handsome to simply exist in my everyday life. For no particular reason, I counted the queue and noted that he would not be my clerk based on the order. For no particular reason: I may or may not have let the person behind me in front of me.

This was college.

Out of the population of the USA, five percent could be considered LGBT. Out of that how many are gay? I don’t know, but what are the chances any cute clerk at a bookstore is gay? What are the chances they are attracted to me? What are the chances I take the chance? What are the chances I know what to say?

I was on my way to college, I made contact with a boy walking past me. I saw him from far back up the street. I was thinking to myself how I should smile at him. He did not smile back. He just looked at me.

Another 95 percenter. Or an uninterested five percenter. Or a five-percenter wondering if I was a 95 percenter or not. Or I just smiled at someone and that means literally nothing to anyone but me.

What do I have to wear, what do I have to say without saying it? Saying it means vulnerability, implying what is—well I can hardly even go that far.

Imagine me wearing some of those nice turtlenecks or sweaters. They remain firmly in my closet. I get to look at them and imagine myself going out and wearing them—thinking nothing of it.

My high school was a uniform school. I found it a relief to not think about my outfits. Put on some khakis and a red long-sleeved shirt and no one could tell anything about me—it was a uniform after all. Then there were the free dress days, they were paid for days, and I would get to look at all the expressive things other people wore. Turtlenecks, full suits, and just the most stylish things that looked so nice. Things stuck in my own closet.

There was this other girl who spoke very little and was a quiet one. She would come in on these days looking like a business woman—everyone would complement her and for good reason.

I hated it. Clothes were an extension of the self, of self-expression. I did not know who or how to express.

In college, there was this guy who wore a full-on poncho and heels. It was the oddest combo I had ever seen. The sheer confidence and ability to wear heels to college? Anyway, we were all—as a student body—gathered and these two big baseball cap wearing guys tapped his shoulder.

They both seemed a bit cowed as they said, “you look great.”

My brother always told me, whenever I told him I was afraid of heights, that I just needed to climb up high and overcome that fear. That one day that fear would be a thing of the past and I would never deal with it again. It either did not work, or I needed to climb more ladders. All I know is that I tried very hard, I climbed a twenty-foot ladder—got just below the top before my mind kicked in and refused to let me go further.

I made the feeble climb all the way down rather than that singular step further.

I think I stink of insecurity; they can smell it on me. This boy over there wants to look gay, but does not know what that means or if he really wants to take the climb.



Wasn't coming out supposed to be the last time I lied? Wasn't coming out supposed to be coming out?

My youngest brother once poked fun at the fact that I did not have a girlfriend. My only sister has a boyfriend, my eldest brother has a wife, and my second oldest has a long-standing girlfriend.

I told him I would never have a girlfriend. He took it to be self-deprecating and assured me one day I would. It did get me thinking if never getting a girlfriend would even guarantee a boyfriend. Would that be so bad, and yet what does it mean to be gay without a boyfriend?

To be a homosexual, by definition is to be: sexually attracted to people of the same gender. Fine then, it does not specify a boyfriend.

My youngest brother and my oldest brother both do not know I'm gay. They ask me about potential girlfriends and it feels like I'm keeping some awful secret from them that would change everything. It would change that girlfriend word forever—at the very least and that is too much irreversible change in my opinion.

I trust random readers more than them. I do not trust my own loved ones; I treat my relationships with an outstretched arm.

As a kid I always heard: secrets secrets are no fun unless you tell everyone. I always scoffed at it.

Now I wonder, at what point is EVERYONE everyone: do you tell all the billions of lives on the planet—what number do I tell so that I can move on.

I know the number. I cannot know the number.

# *My Murder of Crows*

*by Marissa McClure*

## *One Crow*

You swooped down  
To pat my head  
Your talons curled  
Around my coils  
Your sign to tell me  
Everything is going to be  
Okay

## *Two Crows*

One across from the other  
I cross your finish line  
The end of a chapter  
End of an era  
As a new one begins  
May the next one be  
Fruitful

## *Three Crows*

The holy Trinity  
You watched me  
Through glass  
As the seasons changed  
Blooming in constricting  
Environment  
My dark angels  
Witnessed my growth from girl  
To Woman

## *Four Crows*

One in each direction  
Pointing me towards  
Home for anywhere  
Your beak turns  
Is my home  
Surrounded by love

In every road I take  
Leads me down  
A new love  
For life

*Five Crows*

In the summer heat  
You all cawed  
In the oak tree  
Turned a new leaf  
On my love life  
I will never go back  
To the girl I was  
Before

*Six Crows*

You are seen as Evil  
Death is approaching you  
When they hear your Call  
No one understands you  
Misunderstood creatures  
Of the night and moon  
I understand you  
For I find my peace  
In the dark of the night

*Seven Crows*

Associated with Creation  
You must not forget  
Everything must die  
To live  
Harbingers of Death  
You carry new life  
On your iridescent wings  
With every soul  
You take

*Eight Crows*

Your cycle is continuous  
Life

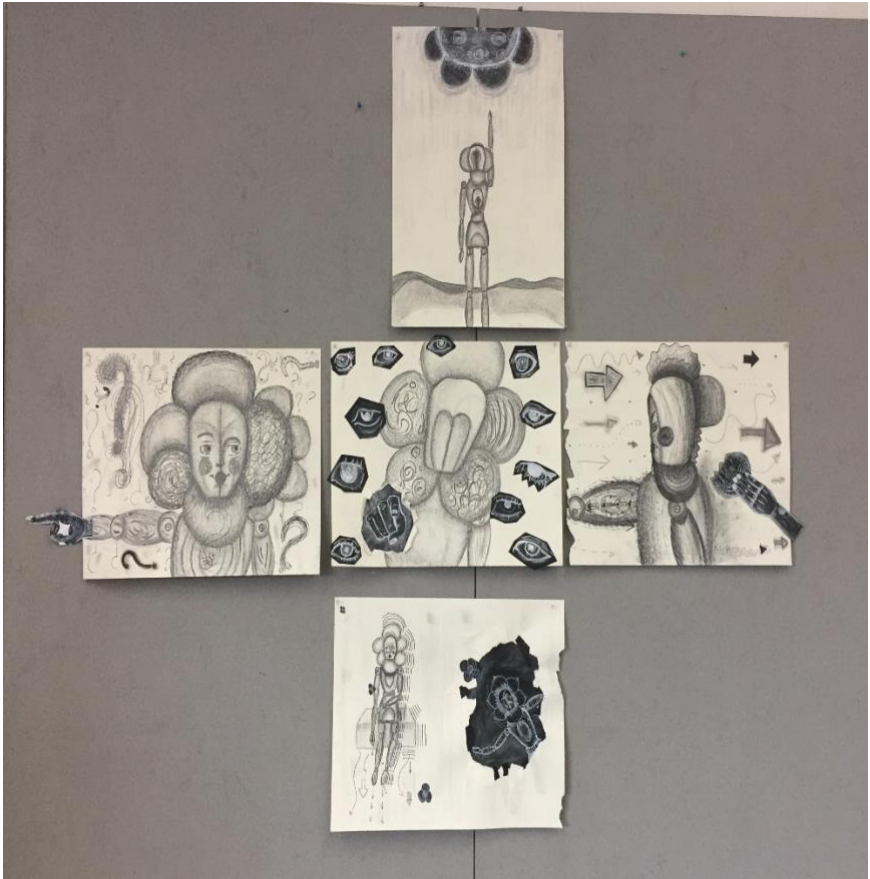
Death  
Repeat  
Every hour you take flight  
To carry the next soul  
Into their next life  
You remind me  
Death is an infinite loop  
No one can break

*Nine Crows*  
Completion  
Each time a chapter ends  
In my mundane life  
I feel a sense of it  
A part of my being  
One by one  
Becoming whole  
Before my time ends  
On Earth

*Ten Crows*  
You rest together  
Collected in your thoughts  
Like Death  
Your card means change  
You remind me of this  
Change is inevitable  
Do not fear me  
I thank you  
Every time I see you  
With every call of my name  
In your own language  
I no longer fear  
Change

# *Directions*

*by Valentina Penalzo*



# *Dear Korea*

*by Rachel Kraus*

i remember you  
from this photo of a baby  
staring into the lens, maybe  
trying to coax the highest bidder.  
you gave me a numbered plate  
held tightly across the frame.  
korea, do you still remember me?

your influence remains  
rooted in my DNA.  
yet recollection betrays  
a smooth face in the mirror,  
sometimes unfamiliar,  
but always korean.

a piece of me still lies as  
an infant with a stranger.  
she smiles kindly  
a form of apology, declining  
to take me home herself.  
she passed me along to someone else  
who would want a baby from korea.

you can meet me now  
as a passerby, a visitor  
perhaps, even a child fostered,  
eventually released only to wonder  
with curiosity of a foreigner  
of that place shrouded in intimacy.

dear korea  
even though i'm no longer yours,  
indifferently you once held me.  
thank you for allowing me to be  
a living human, despite being born  
unwanted, forgotten, and orphaned.  
my dear korea.

# *Freedom from Who*

*by Khadijah Sooknanan*

New York.

The Big Apple.

The place to go if you want to improve your life or achieve your wildest aspirations.

New York.

The place of diversity with different cultures from all around the world.

Well, if New York is the place to be, then why am I stuck on this damn train at 7:50 in the morning, late to class, getting yanked by this lady.

I rushed out of bed at 7 a.m., frantically pulling myself together; I had a big test today and staying up late cramming was not a good idea. The bags under my eyes are prominent, and, as I rush to get out of the cramped, over-priced apartment, my mom, tired from her late-night shift, yells warningly, “love you, be safe, Salaam!” She always yells that; it has become a constant in our hectic lives. “Love you too, bye, Salaam!” I yelled back, slamming the door behind.

I’ve always admired my mom. She left her well-paying career back home and moved to America. My mom works night shifts as she didn’t want to leave her kids during the day. My siblings are younger and needier than me, so I don’t get to spend as much time with her as I would want, but I *gladly* accept any time I do get. We only get to bond at prayer time, for which I am grateful. She makes sure my siblings and I are well-fed, well-taken of, and granted any wish we want. I appreciate what she does for us. We may be struggling to make ends meet, but we have each other.

As I exited the apartment building, I took a deep breath of the crisp morning air and looked up at the sky for a moment of serenity, the sun peeking from the horizon as its colors began to engulf the black sky. Red and yellow clash against the dark sky. I sigh, *it could be better*. I started running to the train station right away. Only 2 minutes until the last train arrives before the delayed schedule kicks in, and I am left stranded without transportation.

Tick. Tock.

Rushing up the rusted stairs and into the partly crowded train station, I pulled out my metro card and swiped. “Decline, too fast,” the machine

states. “Ugh, today is not my day,” swiping again, but slowly this time, I am let through. As I rush up the second flight of rickety stairs and onto the busy platform, I hear the creaks of the train approaching. The familiar screech of the metals grinding together is a relief for many New Yorkers, including me. With joy we welcome the unpleasant sounds. The doors swing open as the train comes to a stop. I am met with backs. The backs of workers, students, elders, and infants crammed into a car. I sigh and start pushing my way through. It’s too late to wait for the next train, and I cannot risk trying to get to the other car. “Excuse me...Sorry...I am so sorry,” I mutter as I am shoved around into the tightly cramped car; finally, I am wedged between a formally dressed lady and a man in casual clothes. I am too far to hold onto the poles for support, so I gather all my core strength and hope not to fall. As the familiar phrase, “Stand clear of the closing doors please,” is heard, I am relieved to be one third of the way from school.

A toddler not too far wails in her mother’s hands, but I tune that noise out as I begin to review possible test subjects in my head. Some scattered people are on their phones quietly recalling their previous day or complaining about their day ahead. There is constant chatter among the elders who are seated. The smell of coffee and donut wafts through the car and delightfully clashes with the familiar bacon, egg, and cheese sandwiches most New Yorkers eat, my belly grumbles. Nevertheless, the vibe of this car is familiarly cozy. It is a routine I am comfortable with.

Suddenly, I feel a hand on my shoulder. Surprised, I whipped my head to the side; it was the formally dressed woman. *What the fuc—* Kindly asking, “can I help you?” She worriedly responds, “are you ok?” Thinking she meant about being cramped in the car or possibly sensing the dark bags under my eyes, I dismissively tell her I am okay with a gentle smile. She then shakes her head stubbornly and asks again, “are you ok?” I am confused, scrunching my eyebrows together. I gently tell her I am fine. She then bluntly asks, “are you sure you are not being oppressed?” By then, I had gained a little attention, a few heads turned my way, and I was suddenly red with embarrassment from the unexpected question. “No...why would you think that?” She accusingly wags her finger and declares, “well, the thing on your head says otherwise!” I was too stunned. *Maybe she’s a little delusional?* “Do you mean my hijab?” I sympathetically ask. Maybe she doesn’t know that I willingly cover my head as a sign of my religion. She disgustingly looks down at me and sneers. “That scarf is making me uncomfortable. Take it off!” Suddenly rushed with anger, “this is not oppressive in any way. I



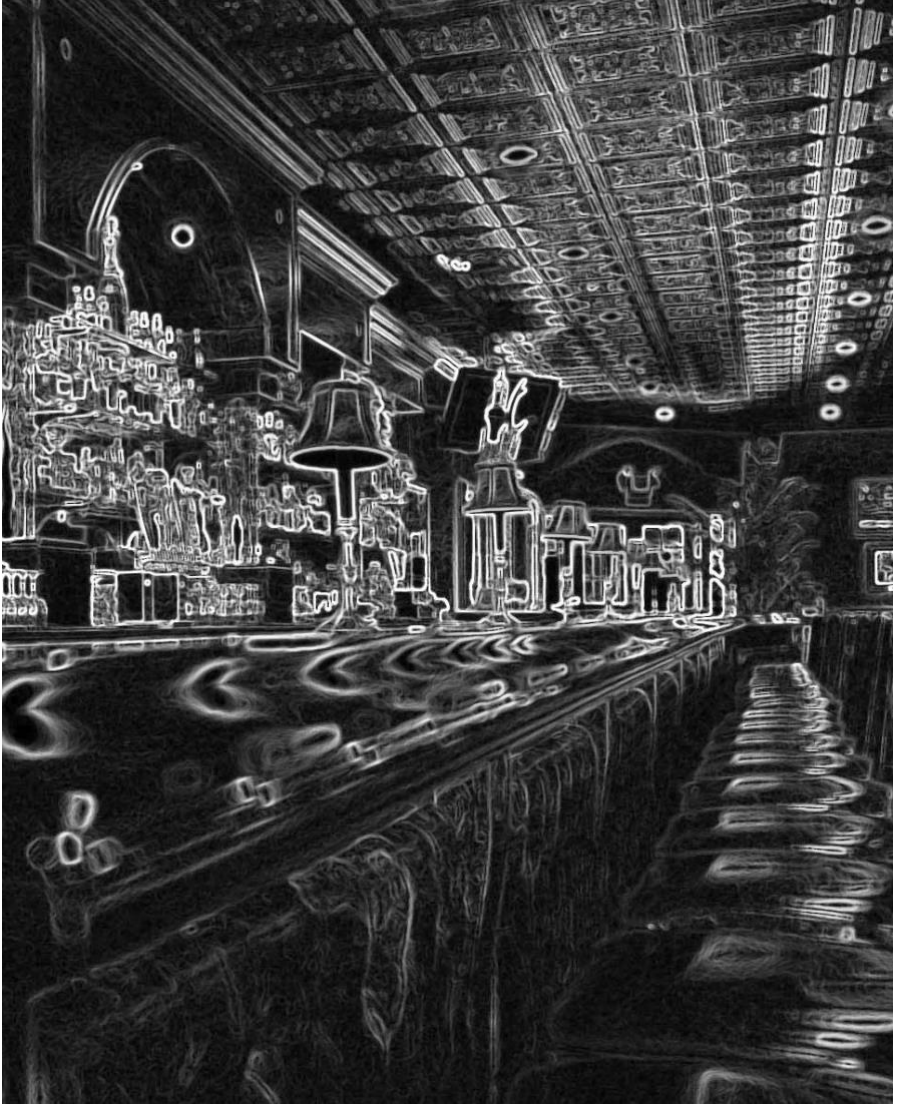
don't know why this is making you uncomfortable." She gives me a horrid look, the same look when you smell rancid milk that has been expired for a while. "It is a sign of oppression, and it makes me uncomfortable that a terrorist is standing next to me!" I am baffled. *How am I oppressed but a terrorist too?* I am suddenly tired, nothing is going my way today, and *this lady isn't making it any better.* I groaned as I rubbed my temples. I informed her with one more remark. "If nuns cover their hair and are considered sacred, what makes Muslims covering their hair any less holy? Furthermore, I have no ties to any terrorist organizations; heck, I had no idea about terrorism until I got to America, so please, woman, be silent because it is not a good day!" I scream fiercely.

She seems surprised; I should have agreed with her instead of standing up for myself. I can see the wheels moving in her thoughts, and, as I am left in silence, I begin to suspect she has let it go. But just as I'm about to sigh a breath of relief, I'm yanked by the arm. She screams, "You need freedom." I glanced up startled. The abruptness of everything makes tears swell in my eyes. Becoming frustrated and overwhelmed, my body quivers and I start to shake. Onlookers who heard everything witnessed that this grown woman yanked a 13-year-old, who finally elicited a reaction. They yell at the lady to stop and, disapprovingly, tell her to stop harassing me. Finally, she realizes what has happened, and hesitantly lets go of my arm. I am overcome with relief and try to move away from her. People see what I'm doing and, despite the limited area, they assist me in getting as far as possible. I mumble a thank you and silently wish for the train to reach quickly to my stop. After what seems like an eternity, the halted train finally moves again, and I am happy that at my next stop I get off.

As the train finally stops, I push past and free myself from that train car, never turning back to see the lady again. As I was about to walk to the exit gate, the man who stood next to me tapped my shoulder and sympathetically told me that what that lady did was wrong. He disagrees with what she was saying to me and asserts unequivocally that everyone is equal and that I am not a terrorist in any way, shape, or form. I didn't understand how much I needed those words until I heard them, but I'm glad I did. Gently telling him a thank you, I push past the gate and head to my school. *New York. The Big Apple. The place to go if you want to improve your life or achieve your wildest aspirations. New York. The place of diversity with different cultures from all around the world.*

*It's 5 PM Somewhere*

*by Lisa Brodsky*



# *Death of the Worlds*

*by Jennifer Hansen*

Day dropped like  
Autumn apple, crisp with fall scents;  
Cloudless blue sky; my last

Early grave awaited  
Tasting of concrete and metal,  
Metallic, burnt and bitter

I stood tall and stately, cheapened;  
to abject horror. Unleashing Fear, terror  
Then death besieged

Destiny foretold, Symbolic pride  
America strong like a Bald Eagle  
Overhead. Ignorant stationary target

In the end, returned  
to dust. Crumbling to earth;  
Nothing could withstand

Infinite pain, struggling to recover. Clutching a fruitless  
sky. Endings like mine; inscrutable.  
Only the diseased of mind can conceive this fate

Feeling desperate cries whispering  
unheard; Like a mime in a park mid-act  
Fellowship of fear united

Voices that once spoke volumes within,  
Silenced forever like a forgotten friendship.  
Fates decided by a madman

The walls were twenty-eight, inside  
ageless. Too vibrant to fall;  
these lives taken with us

Twins falling one by one; joints buckling  
Merciless hits; striking our core,  
Burning, rocking...falling...killing

Infinite families mourned. We died that day,  
along with so many others;  
Death of a thousand cries

Our deaths resonate like a battle cry  
from days past. Bringing a nation together;  
not for long, sadly

We are gone, but never forgotten  
We stand illumined in the night sky  
Surrounded by the names taken with us

Forever a remembrance,  
what should have never been;  
The death of the worlds

## *Proud to be Canadian*

*by Lisa Brodsky*

A pandemic cry was heard throughout the world,  
but the US was busy watching the Kardashians.  
Conspiracy geeks say climate change and COVID aren't real,  
but the polar bears are hungry and  
dead reeking corpses in the morgues disagree.

Enshroud your ugly face with a goddamn mask but  
Facebook is full of idiots speaking their empty minds,  
and I now have a lot less friends.

George Floyd begs Chauvin for something to drink.  
Hit the body with a tremendous light.

Impeach the President please we beg while  
kindergarteners are at home learning to read.  
Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg is heard no more, and  
liquor stores are filled with parents including me.

Mobs storm the capital and shout for Trump, and there's  
no toilet paper to wipe the masses' asses.  
Obedient aides let him tweet for all to read and  
I delete my Twitter account.  
Paid protestors shout for justice for George and light fires.

Quarantined people run out of meat to eat and  
racism called a public health crisis.  
Summer heat will smack the Wuhan flu down.  
Tell me again why I can't go back to Canada.

Underprivileged are seen but not heard.  
Vaccines hurt both in the arm and social order.  
While I sit back and spend my day refuting  
xeroxed myths that have been mass produced, and by  
the way you won't grow a third boob.

Yet the microchips still flash at the airport as  
zombies with altered DNA complain about their rights.

## *Refreshment and Red Lipstick*

*by Braden Honey*

Outside leaves changed, winds chilled more and more, and every new day grew shorter as each one passed. With each sunset, moments of light and summer heat fade. As leaves turned, I occupied my space for darker periods. Dull, dreary walls lay heavy in my field of view, dimming the room like a canopy obscures the forest floor. It was several months into lockdowns, mask-wearing, and social distancing. Sequestered, my mental and physical states melded together, swirling and homogenizing in chaotic action until they reflected one another. A reflection of my consciousness looked something like a cocoon of low-light and an unmade bed. With little else to do, self-reflection inched its way further into the forefront of my mind. I sank into my mattress and found myself immersed in myself. Like a seed, I began to sprout and poke through the crust of the earth. Time was sunlight, my friends and family were water, and my surroundings were soil. At the foot of my bed, my solitary lamp was a lighthouse alone in a sea of grey-blue paint. It shone its sunflower hues and cast shadows on the walls' chipped countenance begging for a refreshed appearance. Lost at sea, I searched for my island, a place to call my own. I had a subconscious feeling that I had somewhere to be and progress to make. Unfortunately, I remained isolated in my room as a bitter wind now whipped outside my window.

Heavy dimness hung in the air like a thick humidity; it filled my lungs and left a filmy feeling on my corneas. The awkwardly crossed legs beneath me created tension in my hips as I sank into the foot of my bed. The ring over the phone buzzed like an electric fence, my eyes locked on the screen in front of me as I watched the comments flow in the chat section of a zoom meeting. In the corners of my mouth, my dried-out lips peeled apart as I opened them to start speaking.

“Hi, my name is... , and I'm a volunteer with Raphael Warnock's campaign for the US Senate. How are you today?”

When someone answers on the other end, tension is released, a taut cord snapped by a sharpened pair of scissors. A question got its answer of whether an interested person would be on the other end of the line or not. This time there was, in fact, another interested person. A renewed sense of peace and hope that the future holds something bright came when I hung up the phone. We talked about personal priorities, and

hearing their voice lightened my heart. I glanced at the screen and saw that others in the Zoom chat were sharing my experience. I hung my leg off the edge of the bed frame, feeling gravity grip my ankle and gently tug it towards the floor. As I set it down, my sock slipped momentarily; tired muscles strained to regain my footing. Creaky like a rickety old door, I straightened my legs as I got out of bed. When I got to the kitchen, I took a second to reflect. An interested recipient was an oasis that refreshed my effort to have an impact. When my hand gripped the metallic handle, my wrist twinged. A gentle tug pops open the fridge releasing a chilly wall of air that hits me like a wave of fresh seawater. It made its way into every nook and cranny in my clothing. I was motivated to participate in that community; the experience and my hard work had proven to be worth its effort.

New experiences were fertilizer pushing me to grow to match what I then knew I could be. My space felt incongruent to my changing mental landscape. Uncomfortable with the mismatched perceptions, I decided on a change. Orange on blue, a sunrise over a deep ocean, would bring a new life to the walls of my room. A new era would bloom petal by petal. A fresh layer, a renewed appearance marks the transition from one time to another. The corner of my headboard, dulled by the fluffed pillows, dug into my back as I relaxed and lay back. Perceiving the colors and objects around me, I saw a portrait of something I had lived previously. Still me, but oddly outdated, the little gifts from friends and the clutter of books and papers on my sofa were memories I had yet to process. I needed to make space and categorizing and organizing those excess possessions was a practical first step. I curled out of bed, blood rushing out of my head, leaving behind a dull pain. The floorboards moaned, creaked, and gave in a little every time I lifted and placed my feet on my way around my room. Items belonged in various piles, boxes, groups, and states of laying on a bed or over a chair. As I did this work, stress pulled at my back muscles and racked my shoulders with tension. Not an unfamiliar feeling, I paralleled that feeling with the experience of lifting heavy mental weight to process my anxiety and other mental struggles. I had prepared my room; I had done the work.

There is discomfort, a flightiness in the heart, when working out the courage to be vulnerable in displaying an honest look. Seconds earlier, I had stood from where I was sitting, nervous and wondering. My lovely partner runs down the stairs, having left to find a palette, an array of vibrant colors that inspires radical creativity. Magnetization pulls me into my chair; rough canvas seat-covers rasp at my skin, and I feel wavy

fur slip past my legs when I sit down. A sense of urgency occupies space behind my ribs, and my shoulder blades pull together. They stand hunched over me, directing me, as if on stage, to tilt my head this way and that. Buttery brush strokes leave a thick layer of pigment, my lips puckering to matte the final product. Once again, my hands push on armrests, and I stand to look at myself in the mirror. In my reflection, I see a piece of me in visual form, red lips and dark eyeliner, an expression of honesty long overdue.

Several years, or even months ago, the concept of expressing myself through makeup would have been foreign and terrifying. I would have refused to allow the puzzle pieces to come together that make a more complex and beautiful perception of image and expression. I was yet to have exposure to a reality outside that of shallow patriarchy. Being comfortable with displaying what is beautiful and who I am, makes it possible for me to leave my house every day more confident and grounded in my identity.

The paint goes on first with an outline, uncertain of its place until it dries. Filling in the broad deserts of uncovered surfaces comes after. As layers stack one over another, a past environment fades. Simultaneously, another is coming into its own. Nearly empty, the room is void of most expression except for that of the vibrant orange. My feet straddle the doorway, stuck to the seam separating the hallway from my bedroom. The space is unrecognizable, but I feel welcomed by a familiar feeling. I take a step onto the nearly empty floor and peek into the organized and consolidated closets. I fill my lungs with air, building pressure and collecting old baggage. With an out-breath, I expel what once was necessary but now is a burden as I move into a new chapter. I set to work moving furniture, cords, and various possessions. When I lay again on my bed, I recognize my space as a reflection of me.

Displaying my identity with my physical appearance, be it the walls of my bedroom or bright red lipstick, lifts a weight off my back. Expression is a recognition of the progress made by my hard work and my ability to overcome. I feel more comfortable in my skin and more confident that I'm expressing my truth about what makes me me. At the beginning of the pandemic, my room became my sanctuary and my place to grow. It was and still is where I spend much of my time, and as these eighteen months have passed, how I present myself and maintain my space has become a reflection of myself and the challenges I have confronted and overcome.



*Mental Anguish*

*By Bri Ehmler*



## *50 Angels Below (in memory of a friend)*

*by Berenice Flores*

My limbs become numb; cold body frozen in pose, lightning bolt veins  
swell.

Memories still swirling, ones that ambush me,  
restlessness of a word on the tip  
of the tongue.

And the burden that brought me to break water, is unfurling.

Not like the last time, when five strangers rushed in, and shook me  
fiercely,

on my last white flag; a mannequin.

Hours before, asked my God to take me,  
willed my heartbeat to stillness.

No, not like the last time.

My fingers curl, eyes open to a blooming light.

Veiled in abyss, 50 angels wait and refuse to catch me.

A sturdy wing beats

once, twice, thrice on my chest,

hundred hands on the soles of my feet, push.

And we glide . . . up to the surface.

This heartbeat is still water-logged—

now accompanied by a choir.

*Don't close your eyes, there's still light above you.*

No, not like the last time.

## *Blue-Black Heart*

*by Marissa McClure*

I once had a red heart  
Full of devotion  
Overflowing  
It drips from my lips  
Then as each autumn wind  
Turned colder and colder  
By the years  
It became a sickly blue  
Bruised lips  
From crushing blows  
I mistook for love  
In the coldest month  
Of the new year  
My heart is turning black  
Frostbitten  
I hope it won't break and fall  
Into the pit of my stomach

# *Failure of Motherhood*

*by Lisa Brodsky*

Ode to the innocent shores of a  
womb untouched unprepared  
but welcomes the company of  
the blastocyst seeking refuge  
on its fertile ground.

Ode to the ova blighted by  
the confused chorion that are  
spontaneously seeking  
to become something they  
are never destined to be.

Ode to the placenta as it  
clings to the shores but  
sheds its contents that are  
washed away in a sea of red  
as the tide rushes out.

Ode to the swelling breasts  
that are quietly weeping while  
they ache with loneliness as  
they yearn to sustain a  
life that is no more.

Ode to the anatomy of the female  
body that is able to give life then  
take it away while silently suffering  
from false promises and a  
failure of motherhood.

## *sAddictions*

*By Nicole Middendorf*

Ashes fall to the ground,  
Covering it in a blanket, like snow.  
Flurries of the forsaken emotions  
I have tried to leave behind  
Show their faces to me,  
Revealing them from behind the sheets of ice.  
Smoking nicotine and tobacco in a white, paper tube.  
Chemical reaction: Combustion in my lungs.

Pennies for your thoughts,  
Dollars of hope spent impulsively.  
Time spent like poker chips and checks.  
A blackhole slot machine with flashing, color-changing lights.  
Hypnotic.

Finding my dreams at the bottom of the bottle,  
I cradle each glass like a baby bird  
And then swallow it down whole.  
The warm feeling of  
Rushing reds delights me.

Slamming white, delicate porcelain dishes  
And silverware into the  
Dishwasher. Loading it out of anger.  
Avoiding arguments,  
Hoping it shakes me around and washes me away,  
too.

## *Reunited*

*By Amanda Judd*

as if no hateful words  
    were ever spoken;  
as if no long silence  
    ever grew in between;

you came when I needed you,  
    looking just as I remembered,  
to help him greet death.

and later,  
    with visions of him  
    floating in tear-filled eyes,  
    with words of him  
    still on our lips,

I crawled into bed with you,  
as grown sisters sometimes do.

I heard only your breathing,  
I felt only your warmth nearby,  
    and for one brief moment,

all the pain fell away . . .

I was simply home.

# *Bar Mitzvah*

*By Lisa Brodsky*



# *Poblano*

*By Berenice Flores*

Crow soars high and caws.  
Emerald rows of bounty wake from the night's rest.  
Leaves flutter a yawn in a whispered breeze,  
and tucked behind is a ready, waiting jewel.  
Cross-hatched pecan hands, rough like pumice  
break a stem. The drummer's last bang in a movement—  
CRACK.  
The sharp herbal scent rises up from the black-green fruit,  
another poblano added to the burlap sack.  
Chill air fills their noses;  
a melody of wet earth, green, and fog.

They breathe in so,  
DEEP.  
Before dawn,  
before the warm solar rays,  
before the scent that reigns the fields . . .  
is engulfed in dripping sweat, of musk and hours, of an angry sun.  
So many hours.

For now,  
they can breathe DEEP.  
Of virgin cool, green, rushing air filling the nose and the head and the  
lungs  
in pleasure, in stillness, in peace.



## *Lost and Found*

*By Lisa Brodsky*

On Day 652 they speak of alienation, but all I feel is appreciation of our best selves. We are the beatdown and the benevolent. The condemned and the compassionate. We have been demonized, discouraged, and dejected, yet we are determined.

Exhaustion only encourages us, and we have endured all the faceless mannequins who say ten Hail Marys and all is forgiven. Both the takers and givers get in the queuing line. There is hope in this season of isolation, that inspires us to wait for the leaves to turn.

The jaded masses are doomscrolling while we just do our jobs. What happened to kindness? We are the bringer of what they know, the meteorologist that predicts which way the wind blows during this litany of loneliness, the ones that say red sky tonight.

Mask-less misery fills the shelves at the corner stores as the media manipulates our mind's eye. It's never-ending. The outrage of the overworked fuels our urgent optimism, while polarization tries our patience during our not-so-trivial pursuit of protecting public health.

While the quarantine pods are full of qualified front-liners and the resentful revolt for their super-spreader rights, we are relentlessly serving a syringe full of freedom. You are tolerated while we suffer the trauma of uncertainty, yet we are unruffled and unwavering.

During these vacancies in our vital forces, the unvaccinated take vacation. We are the worn-out but still woefully wishful that this experience will yield more than a revolt of the zombies on zoom who forget to unmute, for we have lost our way but found our purpose.

*Artwork*

*By Anna Sybesma*



# *A Recipe for Fried Bread*

*By Sarah Huderle*

The day after Grampa's funeral, Rose returned to the cemetery. May had arrived just three days prior, and what remained of winter had finally withered in the early morning sun. Chorus frogs and spring peepers chirped in the pond behind the cemetery's dirt road, overshadowed only by the aggressive *conk-la-ree* of a red-winged blackbird and cheery *phoe-bee* of a chickadee, while in the broad oak above, robins chortled to announce their warmth and wove nests from sticks and mud. A chickadee landed on a wetland reed. It bobbed. *Conk-la-ree!* With a chirp, it fluttered away as a red-winged blackbird landed nearby and screeched.

When Rose pedaled past on her bike, the chorus frogs and spring peepers silenced, only to call out moments later once she zipped past. Rose stopped to whistle a *phoe-bee*. The chickadee responded. *Phoe-bee*. Rose smiled and pedaled harder. As she neared her destination, however, she slowed.

Rose hopped off her bike and leaned it against a gnarled oak. Dragging her feet, she approached a familiar grave under the twisting, protective branches. The grass around it laid flat and trampled after the previous day, and dozens of flowers littered the gravestone, petals drooping after hours with no water. Rose sat cross legged and breathed.

"Hey, Grampa. Can we talk?" She looked to the sky and blinked in the sun.

"...I'm gonna talk. I'm...I'm sorry, Grampa. I'm so sorry. I wanna talk to you. I just really wanna talk. Can I do that?"

She plucked a blade of grass and twirled it into a wet ball. It dropped to the stone. "I'm so, so sorry. I wanted to know you better. Can I?"

Silence.

"It's okay. I'm sorry. It's okay. I'll talk to you now. I'll get to know you better."

*Phoe-bee*. What was she even doing here? It's not like he could hear her.

"I know. I know I can't talk to you."

She poked the ball of grass.

"But, hey...I can talk to Gramma. Gramma must be lonely now."

*Phoe-bee.*

“I came here to promise. I promise she won’t be alone. I promise, Grampa! I’ll get to know her better! I’m visitin’ her after this. It’s okay. I promise, Grampa!”

Another chickadee called. Reflexively, Rose whistled. *Phoe-bee.* The tone wavered. Rose watched the chickadee dance in the oak above her. *Chicka-dee-dee-dee*, it called. Rose inhaled, lip trembling, then stood up and popped a barrette from her hair, letting a ginger curl flop against her glasses and shroud her eye.

“Here,” she said, placing it by the headstone. “Here’s somethin’ to remember me by. I’m sorry. It’s all I’ve got right now. Just...remember me. I’ll remember you.”

*Phoe-bee.* Rose stood up.

“Goodbye for now, Grampa. I’ll make sure to visit.”

Rose trudged back to her bike, lifted it, and kicked off, pedaling down the old gravel road. Her wheels ground pebbles into the dirt. With one last glance at the massive oak tree, she pedaled past the pond, where the spring peepers and chorus frogs chirped and the red-winged blackbirds screeched their *conk-la-ree* calls. Rose whistled.

*Phoe-bee.*

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When Rose arrived at Gramma’s, she pressed her foot into the curb, leaned against her bike seat, and stared at the little purple house. Ivy crept up the siding, surrounding the white door with lush green ripples, while fluffy lilacs nestled into the sides of the house. Fresh, sweet breath drifted from the lavender blossoms. Violets, clover, and creeping Charlie scattered across the yard, and when Rose laid her bike in the grass, the crushed ivy wafted green, minty air around her. Rose approached the door and knocked. Someone shuffled inside. The door opened.

A small, elderly woman appeared in a quiet purple dress and a loud smile, eyes crinkling in the corners as she peeped through thick round lenses and laughed. Gray little curls bobbed as she bowed her head and gestured inside.

“Oh, my sweet Rose! Please, dear, come right in.”

Rose stepped in and threw her arms around the woman. “Hey Gramma! How’re you doing?”

“Oh, don’t you worry about me, dear! This old woman is okay. How are you?”

Rose plopped into an old chair and pulled her red rubber boots off. “Suppose I’ve been better. Bein’ here helps, though!”

“Oh, dear! You’re too sweet.”

Gramma’s stature softened, and she put a hand on her chest. Rose noticed a doughy, cream-colored substance clinging to her frail fingers. She recognized it instantly. Without a word, Rose leapt to her feet and gently snatched Gramma’s hand.

“Gramma, you’re makin’ bread dough!”

“Why, yes I am. Come, dear, I’m just about to fry it.”

Rose followed Gramma to the kitchen. Earthy green paint wrapped around the walls across which small paintings of fruit bowls, spring flowers, and dancing birds hung. On the right side of the room, golden sunlight spilled past walnut blinds that rose to reveal the fresh lilacs outside. A round walnut table lounged under the open window bathing in the sunlight and the cool air. On the left side of the kitchen, a large lump of dough oozed over the white countertops. The room smelled like flour, salt, and lilacs.

Gramma led Rose to the dough and instructed her to wash her hands. Rose obliged. Next, Gramma pinched a ball of dough from the lump and gently began pulling it, moving her hands in a slow circular motion until it stretched flat. Rose watched.

“Now,” Gramma said, “We’ve got some garlic butter heated on the stove. Carefully, we’ll place it here.” Gramma laid the dough on a pan, letting it drop away from her. It sizzled quietly.

“And now,” Gramma pinched more dough and handed it to Rose, “would you like to try?”

Rose grinned. She absolutely would. Taking the dough, she attempted to replicate Gramma. “Alright, so I just hold it and rotate it and...oh,” she paused as it started drooping, “oh no.” It began to fall apart. “Well, that’s...” she stopped as a hole tore in the center. “This is...absolutely masterful. I’m a master, Gramma! Look at me go!”

Gramma chuckled. “Hand it to me, dear. I’ll place it next to mine.”

Despite the dumpy shape, it sizzled and cooked into a golden crust. For an hour, Gramma and Rose worked together, melting the butter, shaping and frying the dough, and sending fresh bread and roasted garlic wafting through the house. Soon they had fried and eaten half of their dough. Rose bit into a piece. It tasted heavenly. It was perfectly salty, pillowy, crusty, and buttery, with just the right amount of garlic. The spongy texture melted in her mouth.

“Gramma,” Rose asked, “where did you learn this recipe?”

Gramma stopped. “I learned it from...a dear old friend.”

“A dear old friend? Who?”

Gramma tore the last piece in two and passed half to Rose, who took it with cupped palms.

“Gramma, who?”

“Please dear,” Gramma said. “Eat.”

Rose gave her a puzzled look and opened her mouth to speak. Before she could press, Gramma spoke. “With Grampa gone, the garden is down a hand. Rose, dear, will you help me pull weeds after we eat?”

Rose dropped her question. “Sure, Gramma. I’d love to.”

Gramma popped her bread into her mouth and ducked into the garage, returning moments later with a paper bag and gardening gloves. Rose chomped her bread and followed Gramma to the backdoor, grabbing her red rubber boots on the way, and, as she slipped them on, they opened the door and stepped outside. A white lattice arch curved over the doorway, thick grape vine twisting up the wood. Next to the door a small glass table with two white chairs perched on the brick porch. Farther down the yard, Gramma’s garden hosted an array of fruits and vegetables: broccoli, lettuce, tomatoes, strawberries, and raspberries lined a corner of the backyard, protected from the neighborhood by a white picket fence. A green compost bin crouched between the garden and the fence.

Clad in her red rubber boots and her sturdy denim overalls, Rose dove into the soil, plunging her palms into the earth and ripping dandelions out by the root. Gramma took the limp leaves from Rose and tossed them in her paper bag, and when that filled up, Gramma dumped them in the compost. Dirt spilled over Rose’s wrists and packed into the gloves, and after an hour, she removed the gloves altogether. Mud caked under her nails. The sun beat down, and when Rose wiped her forehead, she smeared a streak of dirt across her face. Together in Gramma’s backyard, they laughed as morning gave way to noon, and soon lunchtime came.

“I do hope you’ll wash your hands before lunch, dear.”

Rose laughed. “Don’t worry, Gramma. I’ll clean up. Looks like we got the dandelions. I’ll get to work on these violets.”

“Wait, dear. Leave the violets.”

Rose cocked her head. “Won’t they choke out your grass?”

“I prefer violets to grass. I’m quite fond of them, you see.”

“Why?”

Gramma hesitated. “Why,” she said, “they remind me of a dear old friend.”

There were those words again: dear old friend. Rose furrowed her brow. “Say, Gramma, you never answered my question earlier. You said a dear old friend taught you your recipe?”

“Come, it’s time for lunch.”

Gramma turned and walked towards the door. Rose grabbed her wrist.

“Wait. You’re being cryptic. I just wanna know why you’re being cryptic.”

“Rose, let go.” Gramma tugged against Rose’s grip.

“I’m just curious!”

“Rosemary, I don’t want to talk about this.”

“Please?”

Gramma stared at Rose. Neither moved. A chickadee called nearby. Finally, Gramma sighed.

*Phoe-bee.*

“My deceased love taught me that recipe.”

“Oh...I didn’t know Grampa could make bread.”

Gramma scoffed and stood rigid. “Grampa? Why...”

Gramma yanked her arm away and rushed inside. Taken aback, Rose let her go. What was that? Why did Grampa’s name offend Gramma? They’d been together for decades. Old couples aged together out of love. Wasn’t he her love? What did Rose do wrong? Confused, staring at her feet, Rose followed Gramma inside, only to find her opening the front door.

“Gramma-”

“I need to get lunch meat. You stay and clean up. Is chicken okay?”

Rose swallowed and nodded. Gramma slammed the front door. Rose winced. To the closed door, she mumbled, “I guess I’ll shower.”

She dragged her feet down a dusty hall. In the green-walled bathroom, Rose glanced out a small window to her kneeling grandmother outside.

Her...wait, what?

She did a double take. Outside, Gramma kneeled in the yard, plucking a handful of violets and tucking them in her pockets. A minute passed. Eventually, pockets stuffed, Gramma stood up and shuffled down the street. Rose watched her go.

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Having showered, Rose sat at the kitchen table and waited for Gramma, rolling a thread from her overalls between her fingers. She waited. And waited. Outside, a chickadee danced in the lilacs. A red-winged blackbird screeched in the distance. Thirty minutes passed.

*Phoe-bee.*

Finally, Gramma returned with empty pockets, carrying a pack of deli chicken in her hands. Silently, she set it on the kitchen counter. Rose watched her place a pan on the stove, melt a spoonful of garlic butter, and dig the remaining dough from the fridge. The butter sputtered as Gramma laid a length of dough on the pan. Rose bit her lip. She had to apologize for her behavior, right? She should probably apologize. Why leave Gramma upset?

“Hey,” Rose said. “So, about the recipe.”

*Phoe-bee.*

“I’m sorry for pressing.”

Gramma pressed a spatula into the pan.

“I understand it’s tough to talk about Grampa.”

Gramma’s shoulders tensed. She pursed her lips.

“Since he gave you the recipe, I shouldn’t remind you of him.”

The dough hissed. Gramma’s breath quavered.

“I won’t bring him up again.”

Gramma squeezed the spatula.

Her knuckles turned white.

*Conk-la-ree!*

“That goddamn man never loved me, Rosemary!” Gramma slammed the spatula into the counter. Hot butter flew against the cupboards as it bounced and rattled onto the floor.

Rose froze. She stared at Gramma, unblinking.

“Never once did he care about me. Never once did he give a damn! Never once did he thank me for anything!”

*Conk-la-ree!*

“Well, I don’t give a damn either! I don’t love him! I don’t even care about him! I’m glad he’s dead! Because of him, I couldn’t...we couldn’t...in those times, we just couldn’t...oh dear. I shouldn’t yell.”

Gramma pinched the bridge of her nose and groaned. She leaned against the wall. A moment passed. Neither moved. Finally, Gramma looked at Rose and sighed. Despite her fury, kindness flickered in her eyes.

“...at least you care, Rose.”

Rose stared, wide-eyed, and nodded. She didn’t respond.



“I’m sorry. I think I need a nap, dear.”

Gramma leaned forward to move. Briefly, however, she stopped. Rose watched her produce a small object from her pocket. She placed it on the counter, then hobbled out of the room. A door closed. Rose remained at the table and looked down; unconsciously, she’d rolled the thread from her overalls into a tight ball.

Something crackled on the stove, and bitter, burnt butter wafted to Rose’s nose. The bread! She leapt up, shakily removed the pan from the heat, and carefully placed it aside, then lifted the spatula off the floor and wiped the butter from the cupboards with a kitchen cloth. Blood rushed in her ears. What now? Should she check on Gramma? No...no, that was a bad idea. She should let Gramma rest.

Rose glanced at the object Gramma had placed on the countertop.

It was a barrette. Rose’s barrette.

She stared. Where did Gramma get this? Rose picked it up. Upon studying it closer, she found a violet clasped inside. Rose furrowed her brow. What did Gramma want to convey?

Wait, what if she wanted Rose to...

Rose leapt out the front door. Ground ivy spewed green mint into the air as her feet pounded across the yard. She wrenched her bike from the earth, plonked on the seat, and began pedaling. She shoved, pushed, and grinded her feet against the worn pedals, tearing down the road with haste. Bike chains whirred. Rose had a suspicion. She knew. She knew where to go. Where else? Where else would Gramma want her to go? Biking down the street, she turned onto a gravel road, hearing the chorus frogs and spring peepers grow louder. A robin chortled in the oaks above, overshadowed only by the aggressive *conk-la-ree* of a red-winged blackbird. A chickadee called over the blackbird. Reflexively, breathlessly, Rose whistled. The tone wavered.

*Phoe-bee.*

Soon, the gravel gave way to a gnarled oak. Benevolent branches twisted over the graveyard, protecting those below. Rose hopped off her bike and leaned it against the ancient trunk. She turned. A familiar grave sat straight ahead, grass still trampled, flowers still wilting from a day with no water, and when Rose approached, a red-winged blackbird landed overhead. As she neared Grampa’s grave, however, a sting of purple plucked her eye. She glanced aside.

*Chicka-dee-dee-dee.* A few rows past Grampa, a chickadee landed on a simple, rectangular grave. At the base of the grave, a mass of purple littered the stone. Rose walked over to investigate, and the chickadee

chirped. There, in front of the grave, sat a bundle of violets, neatly organized and tied with grass. Rose furrowed her brow and read the headstone.

“For my dear old friend,” it read, “here is our recipe. Now, you can make our bread and remember our time together.”

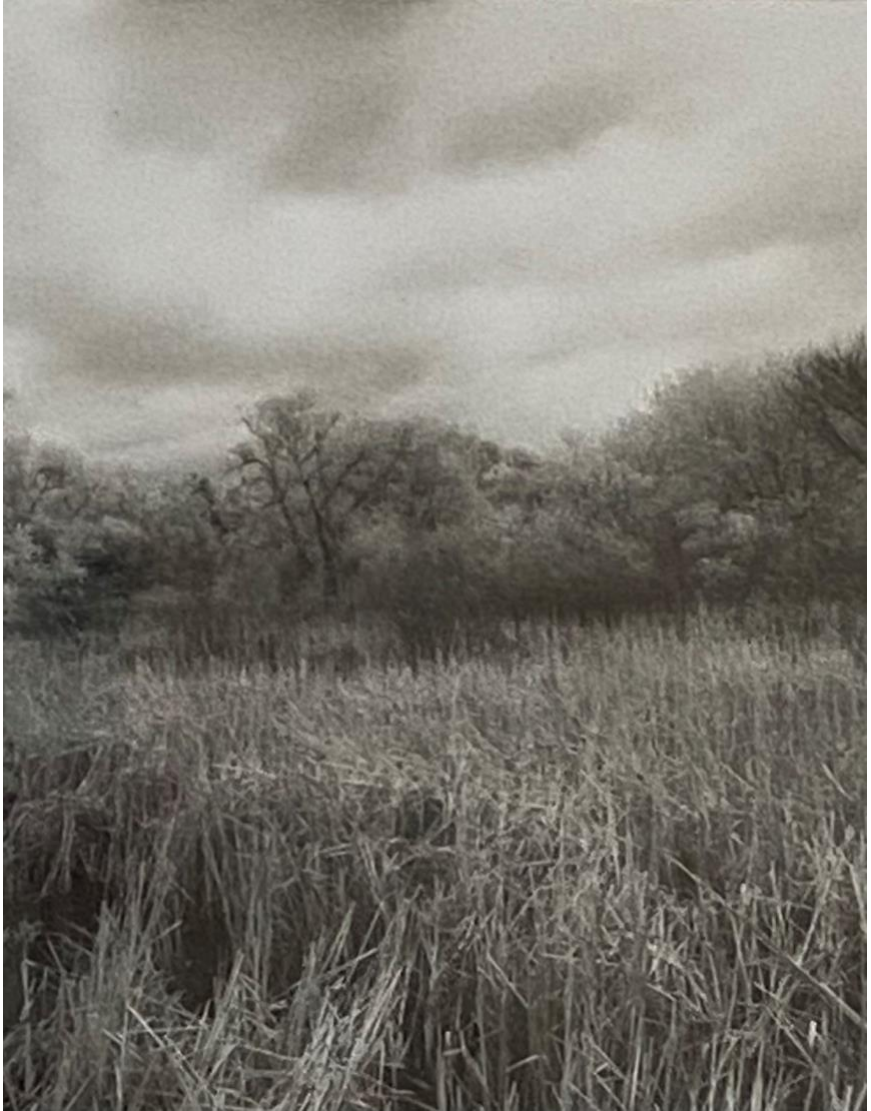
*Phoe-bee.*

Rose kneeled and squinted. Suddenly, she understood.

The grave bore a woman’s name.

# *Smoky Day*

*By Lisa Brodsky*



# *The Hanged Man*

By Rachel Kraus

these days sleep has not come easy.  
my eyelids murmur to me. tentative  
heartbeat whispering in unison with the wails of the  
branches at my bedroom window. hitched in my chest, my  
body fumigating within itself. there is a ghost living in  
my femur, it makes my skin ache. it dominates my thoughts transforming  
coherency to dark matter. i push and pull entangled  
tumbling awakening. so here i hang, a dangling  
fish caught with a leech in my rapacious mouth disconcerted  
fins flipping outward to force the body to fall within itself. the ghost  
and i play tag for hours. i lose every other time.

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other time.

# *Mother Hen*

*By Lisa Brodsky*

Maybe the little hatchlings all stand in a row and follow mother hen blindly accepting she will keep them safe. She protects them from the sly fox that moved into their nest to rule the roost. She nurtures the brood until all are grown up and fly the coop.

Maybe if there was a kernel of truth among the chicken feed instead of a free range of guilt and shame, we might not be questioning your motivation. We might not always be crossing the road to avoid your mind games and your need to make us invisible. And then maybe you will see us through the egg on your face.

Maybe in the next go around, we won't ruffle your feathers or the pecking order won't matter so much to you. And maybe in this new cage all will be forgiven then forgotten.

Maybe next time you could try love instead of envy served once over easy. Because, we have all cracked, the hens and roos have flown the coop, and a new silver fox has settled into rule. I will not run with my head cut off to escape your falling sky. For I am the bad egg and it's time to remember that chickens always come home to roost.

## *Where Trees Grow Green*

*by Malaya Guerrier*

Chaos. A hundred or so teenagers running in all directions, trying to find their cabins. Camp counselors attempting to corral everyone to their proper place. If there weren't so many people, I might have found it amusing.

*Avocado.*

*Moss.*

*Olive.*

"What are you staring at?" a quiet voice asked.

I spun around on the wooden bench by my cabin door, my butt hitting the concrete of the porch. A black-haired girl stared at me with her head cocked to one side like a puppy. "Uh, um," I fumbled for words. "Nothing?"

"Well, if you're not staring at anything, then what are you doing?"

"What are you doing?" I countered.

The girl gestured to her suitcase. "I'm moving in."

"Oh." I studied the girl. She was petite and had her thick, straight hair cut in a bob that nicely accented her oval face. With the sun shining on it, her hair looked as shiny as aluminum foil. She wore a lavender romper. Her brown eyes were the size of ping-pong balls and looked so hopeful, so innocent, and so desperate.

"Isn't this place just grand?"

"I guess," I muttered. Of course, the camp was grand—it held over two hundred acres and a river. It had a grand dining hall, a grand hill where the cabins were situated, and grand trees throughout the property. But I wasn't about to agree with her—that would only invite further conversation.

The girl hesitated, then spoke again. "My parents wanted me to make friends since I'm always by myself, so they sent me here. Why are you here?"

Out of all the questions she could ask, she picked that one. I momentarily closed my eyes.

*Fern.*

*Eton.*

*Mint.*

“Listen, shorty—”

“Violet,” she interjected. “My name is Violet.”

“Fine then, Viola. Don’t let me distract you from moving in.” I stood up and hurried past her, my head down and my hands stuffed in my pockets. I walked along the road at first, the gravel moving beneath my feet. Then I chose a more secluded trail which led down the steep monstrosity of a hill.

As I tried not to fall, the breeze moved through the trees, causing the branches to sway and the leaves to whisper. Birds chirped. Twigs snapped underfoot. The sun rays filtered through the canopy and warmed my face. I stopped, tilted my head up, and just stood there, soaking up the afternoon sun like a cat. A hummingbird flew past, its throat an iridescent purple. I frowned. “My parents wanted me to make friends since I’m always by myself, so they sent me here,” Viola had said. I wondered if her mom had spoken with mine. “You’re always alone,” Mom had told me. “This camp will be good for you. It’ll help you make friends.” I had scoffed at the idea of being sent to a summer camp, but Dad had backed her up, so here I was. It wasn’t fair. My parents knew why I was always alone, yet they were always pushing me to make friends. I stared hard at the tree beside me. Its leaves had the forest green of my grandma’s end table, while the bush beside it had the pistachio green of my aunt’s nightstand and the tea green of my room. I squeezed my eyes shut and took deep breaths.

*Forest.*

*Pistachio.*

*Tea.*

“There you are.”

I yelped and spun around, my heel catching on a root that had been in front of me. I groaned, staring up at the trees and blue sky.

“I’m sorry,” Viola said as she helped me up.

“Do you mind? I was enjoying some serenity.” I glowered at her, rubbing my tailbone. “What do you want? Why are you so nosy?”

*Spanish.*

*Emerald.*

*Bud.*

Viola wrinkled her nose. “How am I nosy? I just came to tell you that we’re supposed to go to the ropes course now.”

“Oh.” My cheeks must have looked like a male cardinal; they sure felt that way. “Fine. I’ll be on my way.”

To my dismay, Viola followed me. At first, I just assumed it was because we were on a trail together and already halfway down the tiny mountain, but she stayed beside me even once we joined the whole group. Down the hill, across the open field, through more trees, and into a clearing full of wooden posts with ropes strung across—the whole way—she was like a dog who did nothing except heel.

The ropes course was set in a clearing. Giant wooden posts that looked like telephone poles formed a squarish shape. Most poles were a part of two different high rope challenges, whose two platforms formed a ninety-degree angle. Three of the challenges involved ropes. One had two parallel ropes: one for the feet and one for the hands. Another had a rope for the feet but had several dangling ropes that were spaced out for the hands. The third one had two ropes that started and ended like the first one but crossed in the middle, forming an “X” shape. I shuddered.

“That one looks hard,” Viola said, pointing at the last challenge: a log set between two poles. “How can you walk across it without falling if it’s so round?”

“Don’t know, don’t care,” I said.

“I’d like to try the ‘X’ one.”

“Good for you, Viola,” I said, hoping she would shut up so I wouldn’t have to engage in the conversation.

“My name is Violet,” she corrected me. I tuned her out, listening to the climbing instructors explain the procedures. When they were done, Viola went to grab a helmet and the needed harnesses so she could go on the “X.”

A tall brunette sidled up to me. “Is she your dog?”

I stared blankly. “What?”

The brunette rolled her eyes and flung her long French braid over her shoulder. “The tiny thing in the purple romper. She followed you like an eager-to-please puppy the whole way here. Haven’t you noticed?”

“I wouldn’t go so far to say she’s eager to please me, but, yes, I’ve noticed she seems to always hang around me. It’s very annoying.”

The girl nodded. “I’m Ruby.”

“Jenny,” I said.

“Are you going to try the ropes course?” Ruby asked. “Or are you too afraid?”

“Why should it matter?” I growled. She got the hint and left me alone.



I turned my attention back to the ropes course and my heart nearly stopped as I watched Viola fall in the middle of the “X.”

*Forest.*

*Jade.*

*Apple.*

*Olive.*

“I hate you!” she had screamed at me. I could still remember the incident. My parents weren’t home at the time; they had been on a date. Rose had come over to hang out like any other day in our eighth-grade year but then started screaming at me. She had brought her brother’s baseball bat and started swinging at me in my room, breaking my lamp, my piggy bank, and my second-story window. But then she dropped the bat and came at me punching, kicking, scratching, anything. Her face had been as red as a ripe tomato, and her hair sweaty and sticking to her forehead. “I hate your guts!” she had said. I tried to reason with her, to explain that I wasn’t the snitch to the whole school, but Rose wouldn’t listen. Then she pushed me out the window and ran. I had landed on the grass in the front yard, breaking several bones. All I could do was lie there and wait for my parents to get home and take me to the hospital.

*Phthalo.*

*Pistachio.*

*Apple.*

*Spring.*

“That was nerve-racking. Are you going to try?” Viola appeared next to me, breathless. Her cheeks were rosy and glistened with little droplets of sweat. Her eyes were now the size of sunflowers rather than ping-pong balls.

“No!” I trembled at the thought of being high up, prone to falling down, down, down...

*Sap.*

*Celadon.*

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” I lied. “I just prefer to watch.”

*India.*

*Mantis.*

“Oh.” Viola studied me for a moment. I worried that she would notice my shaky, clammy hands or my darting eyes or my sweaty face

with my curly wisps sticking to my forehead—and then say something. But all she said was, “You want to take a walk?”

I nodded, but not knowing why. I didn’t particularly want Viola’s company; she had been stuck to me all afternoon. But perhaps it was the trees that called me. Their fluttering green leaves and undulating branches just felt so calming. I needed calm. Maybe I could forget that Viola was even there as long as she kept silent.

We left the large group and the collective smell of sweat and walked towards the trees. A woodpecker was drilling for food. I flinched at its red crest and the way it bore into the bark so forcefully. But as we walked further, I could no longer hear it. I heard robins and chickadees chirping and tweeting. I saw a falcon soaring in the bright cerulean sky, which was almost cloudless except for a few wisps. Pine needles cushioned the trail, and a few undecomposed leaves leftover from last fall crunched underfoot. All the trees waved at us as we passed by. I saw sap green and sage green, as well as spring green and celadon. I felt like running with joy but stopped myself. I was still too sore to attempt that.

“It’s so beautiful,” Viola said, turning around in awe. “I can see why you enjoy it so much.”

“There you are!” a voice screeched behind us. Viola and I turned to face a young woman, probably in her mid-twenties. She had wavy rusty-brown hair to her armpits and the sky-blue polo of a camp counselor. “I’ve been looking all over for you—Jenny and Violet, right? I’m your camp counselor, Amber. I was very late and wasn’t around to help you find the right cabin or for the start of the ropes course but I’m here now and I need you to come back with me so I know where everyone from my cabin is so no one is missing and possibly dead, okay? Great! Let’s go!”

Viola and I stood there dumbly, not sure what had just hit us. Then Viola leaned over and whispered, “Is she okay?”

I just shrugged. “I’m not sure if I can handle sharing a cabin with her for a full week.”

“We’re going to have so much fun!” Amber said as we climbed the monstrosity.

I looked at Ruby, who walked next to me. “You’d think she was five,” she whispered to me, rolling her eyes. “Or she thinks she’s talking to a bunch of five-year-old kids instead of high-school sophomores. And we just had a whole afternoon of fun. I can’t believe I have to share a cabin with her for a full week—and with your puppy.”

Viola, on my other side, looked over questioningly. “You have a puppy?”

“I’m talking about you, sweetie,” Ruby said.

“My name is Violet. And I’m not a puppy. Why are you calling me a puppy?” Then she turned toward me. “Jenny, why is she calling me your puppy?”

I paused as Amber, Ruby, and two other girls who were in our cabin forged ahead. “Where have you been this whole afternoon, Viola?”

“I’ve been with you.”

“Exactly,” I said, trudging forward and trying to ignore the whispered “My name is Violet.”

*Spanish.*

*Eton.*

*Slimy.*

*Mint.*

Sixth grade had been uneventful, except for the new girl. I had tried to be friendly. “Hey Rosie! How are you?” I had said, waving. “Do you want to sit with me?”

“My name is Rose.” She glared at me but set her lunch tray down and sat across from me anyway.

“I’m Jenny.” I had tried not to stare but couldn’t help it. I was curious about this new girl. Everyone at Appleton Middle School had been gossiping about her, hypothesizing every detail they didn’t know. Some said her parents were divorced, while others thought she was Canadian. A few crazies claimed she was an alien spy from Mars. She had curly black hair in a side part and sage eyes with Harry Potter-style glasses. She had always worn a long-sleeve cardigan, but when she pushed the sleeves up to eat, I could see purple bruises. “Maybe you could come to my house sometime, Rosie,” I suggested.

But she had caught me staring and hurriedly pulled her sleeves down. “My name is Rose.”

*Hunter.*

*Sap.*

*Celadon.*

*Tea.*

I walked into the cabin. Everyone else had fully settled in and had their beds made. I shoved my suitcase off my lower bunk and set to do the same as Viola walked in and sat on her perfectly made bed.

“Guess what girls?” Amber said. “There’s a campfire tonight as soon as it’s dark outside. There’ll be smores and singing and basically a whole party! I recommend that you all go.”

The other girls all consented, so we left once it was dark. The crickets were chirping, an owl was hooting, and fireflies sparkled all around. The other girls hurried toward the center near the fire, but I hung back. The flames flickered and danced, not unsimilar to the lights on an ambulance.

*Moss.*

*Avocado.*

*India.*

*Apple.*

“I hate you! I hate your guts!” All I had been able to think of as I laid in my front yard were Rose’s words. I had been her confidant. I was the only one who had ever seen her bruises; I was the only one to whom she had explained her bruises and her life. I never told anyone, yet the entire school found out. I could still feel the sting of the wooden bat hitting my calf. I could still feel the bruises on my legs from her kicks and on my face from her punches. I could feel the glass in my arms from falling out my window. I could feel the pain of broken bones and a probable concussion. I could hear the tires of my parents’ car on the driveway and then their voices, worried, panicked. I could hear the wailing sirens and faintly see the flashing, dancing lights. But what I saw most clearly and felt most acutely was that I had lost my best friend.

*Midnight.*

*Fern.*

*May.*

*Slimy.*

The wind whistled through the branches, causing the trees to waltz. The color of the leaves was hard to make out in the dark, but I knew there would be May green and apple green, or olive green and slimy green. I could make out a figure on the edge of the campfire party: short and petite. As I moved closer, I could see her shiny bob and her romper. I hesitated, considering turning around, but she turned and looked at me.

“Hey, Violet,” I said, “do you want to sit with me?”

*My Cairn with Eleven Meanings*

*by Bri Ehmler*



## *Life in the Circus*

*By Lisa Brodsky*

Shuffling my feet through the passages of  
the parochial ring, past the sentries of  
lockers that bang like a clapping crowd,  
my back hunches over and arms hang  
loosely like a sad Pierrot doll with black  
streaks down my cracked porcelain face.

I perform for you in my wide  
pantaloon that are no longer in style.

The scholarship puppet in the circus  
ring being thrown to the bourgeois bears.  
From class to class with the classless  
they pull on my puppet strings as they  
recite the morning prayers of forgiveness  
while I pray for their eternal damnation  
and the show to be over but it must go on.

I pantomime my way through the box  
but there is no escape for the charlatan.

The butt of pranks, but I am no clown.  
I exchange my frilled collaret and my  
black cap to learn a lesson with the  
cliques of commoners. Head tilted and  
propped in a corner under the big top  
waiting for the roar of the crowd. And

when the tigers circle, the joke's on them  
for I am already drained of blood  
and my flesh has already gone cold.

# Hover

By Lisa Roman

## Hover

*wind hovering/ (verb): to remain fluttering in the air above a point on the ground by flying into the wind at a speed equal to that of the wind*

Weathered, gray granite steps to reach your Ethereal lace –  
I gained the top,  
and forgot the effort of ascending.

The people below  
slow and insignificant -  
like my thoughts -  
scattered.

The immeasurable horizon of smooth azure I breathed  
generating lift -  
hovering in your Atmosphere with the clouds made Life  
unreal

## *What is Love?*

*By Sarah Sells*

When you woke up, you climbed into my bed  
and laid there until the dandelions grew  
up through the floorboards and the vines  
tied our bare arms into a bow.

You held my head in your hands  
as a butterfly broke a hole in my roof,  
and made a new home in the rose  
that sprouted from my windowsill.

Your sweet scent burned into my sheets  
as a store filled with strawberries.  
But like a cup of spilled milk,  
it slowly soured with age.

Sunshine fell through the open roof  
and we bathed in an incandescent glow,  
until it washed up in the rain.  
I closed my eyes and waited.

But the storm did not pass.  
The dandelions grew too tall  
to see through, and the vines  
too thick to break.

I reached towards the sprinkles of  
sunlight to grab your hand,  
but I could not find it under  
the mess of weeds.



## *Between Past and Future*

*By Yousef Saad*

*What is your substance, whereof are you made, that millions of familiar shadows on you tend?*

*You have walked forever in that finite corridor. Even given eternity you could not do anything else.*

*Wrapped impossibly in that spiral.*

*What kept you trapped there between past and future?*

*Was it the faces? Those masks that covered the walls?*

I walked without time in that place, no direction but forward. I could not remember a time I didn't, I could not imagine a time I wouldn't. Everything I was, that path.

The corridor, the corridor, the corridor.

I could only watch the masks; horror, joy, fear, love, weeping, laughter. This was everything.

Between forever past and future arriving a deviation occurred. Instead of a mask, a hole. I stared into it and I saw myself stare back. This mask was me.

All of them were.

*How long have I been here?*

I finally stopped, I breathed. Dimension exploded forth from me.

When the space you walk in is bent into a circle, a loop, no matter how far forward you move you will always end up in the same place.

Did I bend this space into that cycle or was I bent? Was there a difference?

Impossibility under the regime of perception is simply a matter of bitter work.

It was not I who left. My six degrees of freedom were bound in all directions. Ana and kata. Kata and ana. I could not be bound and leave, I could not lift that which I am grounded to. A mind can be remade.

A mind **must** be remade. I must remake my mind.

Past and future. One must be left behind.

# *Over 1,000 Flight Hours During Deployments*

*by Kara Stevens*

I earned my leather jacket,  
Dark brown, Oversized,  
The fuzzy side of  
Pale green Velcro on its chest.

It signified achievement,  
Places for rank, name, and squadron,  
No place for individuality.

Our motto: “Integrity first  
Service before self  
Excellence in all we do”  
I excelled at the  
integral mission  
To serve all but myself

This jacket, thick and heavy,  
hangs stiff, at attention,  
in my closet with pride.

It reminds me of Balad, Iraq  
When lightning struck our plane  
with a snap.  
The weightless feeling  
Like a dandelion pappi,

As the power flickered,

The dread, when we dropped,  
heart palpitating,

The relief when the engines  
Turned on once more

Or in Afghanistan over the

Hindu Kush Mountains,  
(In its name, kush, kill)

I looked outside to see  
A rocket-propelled grenade,  
Soundless through the clouds,  
Like a drab green nerf football,  
Flying over our wing

The booming mortars  
The nightly Fourth of July  
That shook my hut

The screaming sirens  
*Woooo woooo* they cried  
Destroying my chances of sleep

Rubbing my eyes,  
I dragged myself to Kim,  
the bomb sniffing Belgian Malinois,  
who donated her thick, brown fur  
to my tan desert flight suit  
and placed her head in my lap.

Back home, I stay deployed  
images, sensations, sounds from the past  
merge with the dread I would die each day

I dive into the closet  
caress the leather sleeves,  
remember a mortar won't fall on my head

My jacket hangs with pride  
My pride is, I survived

*Physical Anguish*

*by Bri Ehmler*



## *Scholar's Mate*

*by Amber Lough*

King's security moves forward two times,  
Easy move with not a lot of rigor.  
Black's own follows suit, staying in the lines,  
Far too early to predict a winner.  
White's left knight moves forward, taking center.  
Black moves bishop to fourth row, third column.  
Black had realized a good way to enter,  
And had immediately looked solemn.  
Black towering over white as they had moved,  
Moving their mobile knight to four and four.  
Black followed suit, and had become amused,  
Queen moving sideways to finish the score.  
White could have got out with a few more views,  
But they had to face defeat, had to lose.

# *Love is a Dead Bird*

*by Sarah Sells*

Love is the ivy-covered house;  
an ancient green forest, creeping  
up the walls, choking  
the light from the windows, strangling  
the old bricks that crumble to ashes in your hands.

Love is a starry night,  
the swirling masterpiece of Van Gogh.  
A bandaged head hiding  
his lone ear; a bloody horror he wrapped up in a bow  
and handed as a gift.

Love is the empty bottle  
falling from your lips, shattering on the floor.  
A broken mirror flowering in small crystals,  
as the sour champagne lingers in your  
empty mouth.

Love is a dead bird  
you leave on the front porch. Feathers ripped from skin,  
streaked in scratches, wings pulled  
from the sockets where it once flew. Next to it, you sit  
proudly.

Love is nailed to the cross, hanging  
from the top of the church; the dead man  
you bow down to and beg for repentance.  
Even when he never shows, you vow to drown  
in the holy water  
for love.

*Freedom Through Life*

*by Kara Stevens*



# *Bypast*

*by Sarah Huderle*



How goes it, Bypast?  
I know, Bypast  
how our esteem burned, Bypast,  
how we ached and reveled in smoking nettle.

Oh, Bypast,  
how time skipped, Bypast,  
how our arms,  
our legs,  
our extremities,  
our anxieties,  
once compacted themselves  
and crushed a pit  
into our chest.

I know, Bypast,  
know nothing I say  
will leech the sickly honey you need,  
but if, Bypast,  
you met the survivor,  
if you shook my hand,  
you'd breathe, Bypast,  
breathe tears of aloe  
for the nettle whose barbs we crushed.



# *J-Town*

*by Thurston Moran*

## **EXT. ABANDONED ANTIQUE STORE – NIGHT**

Mark and Bryan are walking down a sidewalk and they turn to their right on a street corner and find the antique store.

David and Dawson jump out from a nearby dumpster and scare Mark and Bryan.

Mark and Bryan almost fall into the street.

DAVID: (Laughing) Hey Mark, why don't you hit the road?

Mark lunges at David and grabs him. Dawson pulls David away and Bryan gets in front of Mark.

MARK: (Yelling) Why not hide in the alleys and chase us? We would at least be prepared!

DAWSON: But we hate being seen! (To Bryan) So, you're our guy for this spree?

BRYAN: (Removing his hood) Yeah? Wasn't I sent for?

DAWSON: Just messing around. We're glad to-

BRYAN: Yeah, I get it. Good to see you all too. Who has the Twitch?

Mark pulls out a bobby pin out of his left pocket and shows it to Bryan.

## **INT. ANTIQUE LOBBY – ABANDONED ANTIQUE STORE - NIGHT**

A lock is heard clicking, and the door swings open, disturbing a settlement of dust. They all step through the door, with their noses plugged and holding their breath so they don't sneeze.

MARK: Alright, we aren't paying attention to value or era. Find whatever suits your fancy.

All three split up in different directions of the old store.

Bryan peers over an old sewing machine, and then moves over to a shelf with a lot of porcelain figurines from Germany, which at rough estimate, look like they came from the 1950s. They are mostly Kaisers and a few women. Bryan grabs three of them and stuffs them into his bag.

David goes towards a cabinet full of plates and is rubbing his hands together, nervous about his deep-dark secret.

DAVID: (Voice getting louder) -but I need to find a way to convince them. I should keep it inside of me until-

David stops at the sight of everyone else staring at him.

Bryan walks over to David to confront him.

BRYAN: What is going on?

DAVID: I don't know.

Bryan turns over towards Mark.

BRYAN: Do you know what is shaking him? He looks like he saw-.

MARK: He's afraid to, but we'll know once he says.

DAWSON (O.S.) Hey guys! I found something!

Bryan and David move down towards the front counter where Dawson is, and he is holding a gun.

BRYAN: Is that a-?

DAWSON: (Interrupting) Colt .45. Our history grades shall be rewritten.

DAVID: Hey! I saw that in the case first!

DAWSON: I grabbed it first, slowp-!

Mark smacks the pistol out of Dawson's hand.

MARK: Our teacher would not approve!

DAWSON: It wasn't loaded. At least.

BRYAN: (Smiling) Just forget about it. I got something better.

Bryan pulls out the porcelain figurines and places them on the counter.

Dawson starts laughing at the sight of the figurine.

MARK: Why are these funny?

DAWSON: (Pointing to the woman) That one looks like your mother.

Mark comes at Dawson with his hand raised, but Bryan gets in between them.

DAVID (O.S.): Hey Mark!

Mark looks over at David to see a 90's Playboy Magazine held in his right hand.

DAVID: I didn't know your mom was on a cover.

Bryan starts laughing with Dawson and David, only for Mark to shut him up by elbowing him in the arm.

MARK

Guys, we only think dirty!

No talking dirty!

In the middle of the laughter, David starts to hear indistinct conversation coming from the floor.

David leans down towards the floor, and upon noticing that one of the floorboards is loose, quietly removes it and peers down to see...

Jay arguing with SCOTT TRICK, Jay's older twin brother who is Jay's superior and has a more successful regime as a criminal.

JAY: I know that I lost some of your money, but I still can get it back!

SCOTT: You know my policy! A dollar lost is a dollar found! I cannot afford to go under!

JAY: I didn't know I dropped it! Okay?

David breaks away for a second, and Dawson is the first to notice David's curiosity.

DAWSON: (Approaching David) Our dog has now uncovered trouble.

David shushes Dawson.

Dawson and Bryan peek down the hole and see the Tricks arguing.

DAWSON: (Whispering) How come we never heard them?

MARK (O.S.): I checked to see if this place was condemned. There is nobody else around.

BRYAN: (To Mark) You might want to see this.

Mark relents to see what is happening.

MARK: I'll be bitten! We have company! This is bad.

BRYAN: My dad is going to kill me.

MARK: (Chuckling nervously) Not before they do first.

DAVID: That was who I saw last night.

MARK: (To David) Okay? Why no heads up?

DAVID: Because I'm not trusted enough to spill the beans.

MARK: For someone who likes to complain, you tend to know very well not to.

DAVID: (Hesitating) It also depends on the people who care to listen to me.

Bryan looks over at David.

BRYAN: I may not know you that well, but I will listen to you.

DAVID: But what about what I show you. Would you still listen?

BRYAN: I will go with you into the darkness if it means I see something.

DAVID: Then come with me.

David goes towards the back hall with Bryan following closely behind. They take a stairway immediately to the left heading for the...

### **INT. BASEMENT – ABANDONED ANTIQUE STORE - NIGHT**

David and Bryan are quietly stepping down the basement stairs to not draw the attention of the Tricks.

Both stop at the edge of the stairs before running into the basement, and there is a bookcase blocking the entrance to the basement going to the left.

BRYAN: (Whispering) So, who are these guys, really?

DAVID: Think of them as water and oil being forced to mix. That is who they are.

BRYAN: Then why not just run separate gangs?

DAVID: They can't. It's a family business.

BRYAN: Blood is thicker than both of their records, I guess.

Both Bryan and David peer through the bookcase and see that the Tricks are close by.

JAY: I hope I get a better payout when I tip off the cops!

SCOTT: You aren't going to hand yourself in after you shot some accounties for their bank! Who else will pay me off?

Mark is at the top of the stairs beckoning for Bryan and David to come back upstairs, but Bryan shoos Mark away.

DAVID: I thought he would give us away.

Bryan nods nervously.

Jay drops his P64 onto Scott's desk.

SCOTT: So, you really will give yourself away this time?

JAY: No, I'm just simply retiring for the night. I will get you your missing money tomorrow.

SCOTT: Hey Jay, you know I'm your big brother, right?

JAY: No, I'm not doing it this time. I'm out.

SCOTT: (Laughing) Might as well.

Jay walks away undeterred.

Bryan starts to go back upstairs, but David beckons for Bryan to stay.

With Jay's back turned, Scott picks up Jay's P64 and aims it at Jay's back.

BRYAN: I think we should leave now.

Bryan tries to leave again, but David grabs his arm.

BRYAN: I don't want to get caught, now let's go!

BOOM! BOOM! BOOM! Scott fires three shots into Jay's back.

David is close to screaming, but Bryan covers his mouth, and they duck down.

They both get back up and peer around the corner again where they see Jay's corpse bleeding out all over the floor.

Mark is back at the top of the stairs.

MARK: Bry, Slacker, get out of there!

Scott finally notices Bryan and David, and he aims the P64 at them.

Both Bryan and David duck down as Scott fires at them.

**INT. HALLWAY – ABANDONED ANTIQUE STORE - NIGHT**

Bryan and David run back upstairs and Mark and Dawson cram into them from the right and run towards the back door.

# *Boy and Dog*

*by Cheryl Wilke*





# *Road Queen*

*by Jennifer Hansen*

Noelle didn't remember her drive out to the stranded Lexus on that cold January morning. Her thoughts were over-whelming her. Emotions raw and throbbing like a gaping wound that will never heal. These thoughts brought her back to those nights in Cancun with him. Erotic, sex fueled nights of passion with a stranger.

Mindlessly, she pulled ahead of the Lexus and threw the rig in reverse, stopping on a dime right in front of the disabled car like the pro she was. Putting the rig in park, she zipped up her florescent green and reflective winter work jacket, put on her hat and gloves, and looked in a mirror thought one last time.

"Get it together Noelle." She said to herself as she squared her shoulders and jumped down from the high cab of the tow truck to start her day.

The cold had stopped bothering Noelle years ago. Her lean, five-foot eight frame has adapted to the bitter cold wind and the icy elements of a Minnesota winter. She walked to the back of the rig and grabbed the cable to hook up the Lexus.

She was jolted out of her thoughts from a loud voice screaming at her over the roar of the diesel engine.

"What the fuck are you doing, you dumb twit!?" screamed the driver of the Lexus. Confusion set in for just a moment as Noelle collected her thoughts.

"Are you talking to me?" she asked politely.

"Of course, I'm talking to you, you stupid twit. Is this your first day on the job?" the driver hollered.

Trying not to let her anger get the best of her with a paying customer, Noelle put the cable back in its place and said unemotionally, "Sir, if you would like to have a discussion, I suggest you close your driver's door and move over to the shoulder here with me," she said as she stepped over to the icy side of the road, motioning him to follow suit.

Being a tow truck driver is a dangerous occupation and Noelle knew from experience how it would only take one distracted driver, one sleepy driver, or one speeding driver and they could both lose their lives.

The driver slammed his door that he had been half perched out of and angrily started walking to the side of the road with Noelle. She

hadn't been able to make out what this man looked like, so when she raised her head, and saw him walking toward her wearing an expensive dress shirt, with disheveled tie and dress slacks, even in this cold weather, Noelle couldn't contain the little gasp that escaped her.

"It's you!" Noelle exclaimed.

The driver, was still half striding/half-slipping over to her yelling, "I told them that a flat-bed was needed, this car is too expensive..." and then he trailed off when recognition flashed over his face.

"Oh my God, it's you!" he said back to her.

Noelle couldn't believe her eyes. She hadn't seen Ryan Peterson, if that was actually his name, since Cancun four months ago.

"What are you doing here?" she asked quietly.

"I'm stranded, and apparently, they sent you to rescue me," Ryan said, as he flashed her that shit-assed grin that won her over before.

Noelle did her best to put her no nonsense, professional look on her face. "I'm sorry sir, what you were saying about the flat-bed?" she asked him.

"Noelle?" he said in a questioning tone as he reached for her elbow.

Pulling her arm out of his reach, she started making her way toward the rig. "If you want me call the flat-bed, I can have one here in 45 minutes. Would you like me call them in?" Noelle asked politely.

"No, that's fine. I have an early meeting that I am late for." Ryan said and asked to be dropped off at a mechanic in the next town.

"Climb into the cab, and I will get your car hooked up," Noelle said as she motioned towards the passenger side.

Noelle got the Lexus secured in record time and climbed into the driver's side of the truck minutes later.

"Where would you like me to take you?" she asked.

"Noelle, just talk to me. Why are you so mad at me?" Ryan questioned.

Something inside Noelle broke. She wasn't sure if it was the sleep deprivation, losing custody of her son, or of what Ryan did to her and being so kind now, but at that moment she didn't care. Noelle turned slightly toward him and just let him have it.

"Mad at you? Why do you think I'm mad at you, you fucking bastard!" Noelle screeched at him. "I mean, what woman doesn't just love to be banged for an entire weekend and then just tossed away without a second thought like a fucking piece of lint?" Noelle emphasized that outburst with slugging him in the shoulder. It felt so good to do it the first time, she went in for another hit.

Ryan grabbed her arm mid-air. When he did that, something clicked in Noelle's head about what she had just done and she started bawling.

"Noelle, what is wrong?" Ryan asked with genuine concern.

"I, I tried to call you..." she started to say and trailed off.

"You can't be that mad at me because I gave you a bogus number, you gave me one too. Some old lady named Ethel received some pretty racy sexting from me," he said.

Noelle opened up and told him everything that happened over the last four months. She told him about losing primary custody of her son to her ex-husband, she told him about her father dying, and then she dropped the big bomb on him.

"Ryan, I wanted to get ahold of you, because I got pregnant from our weekend together," Noelle explained. "I didn't think I would ever see you again and I knew I couldn't have a baby on my own, so I got an abortion last week."

Ryan looked at her like she punched him in the nuts. "You had an abortion?" he asked quietly.

"Yes. I'm sorry. I didn't think I would ever see you again." Noelle explained

"You're sure it was mine?" he asked.

"Yes," she whispered.

"Unhook my car, and I will call another tow company," he said as he got out of the truck.

"Ryan, please wait," Noelle hollered as she went after him.

"I mean it Noelle, unhook this car immediately and leave. I never want to see you again," he said with finality in his voice. By some miracle his car started when he turned it over just as she finished lowering and unhitching his car. He backed clear of her truck and slammed on the accelerator to get away from her.

As she watched him leave, she knew this was the last time she would see him. She was mentally and physically exhausted after her ugly crying episode, but she did as she always did and squared her shoulders like her daddy taught her, got back on the road, and drove back to her business, Road Queen Towing.

*Flower Beyond the Senses*

*by Izzy Cruz*



## *What You Took With You*

*by Lisa Ronan*

You packed boxes of clothes; shirts, sweaters, blue socks - you only have blue socks - piles of pants that still had their price tags, a tennis bag and guitar but left your shoes, your books, papers, a plastic shelf. Three suit jackets without pants, and a suede jacket you wore hang in a closet that smells of dust. You left your good-luck-dollar bill. You probably don't need that anymore. You left the ugly red rug I hoped you would take, and an old bicycle with torn tires. You took anger and put it in a box. You carry it with you and pull it out every now and then, blow it up like a balloon – until it explodes, covering us all with blood red confetti.

## *Mascara Stains*

*by Marissa McClure*

Black rivers rolling down my bony  
Cheeks, particles of my soul  
Scream for land  
Echoing in the valley of my trachea  
Silence. The mountain peaks are stained  
In blood, oozing down its sides  
Blossoming bleeding hearts  
At the base  
I cried for you  
To be the low hanging branch to grasp  
From the raging turbulence of my pain  
Each one I reached  
Snap!  
Dead branches  
Broken promises  
All you offer  
And as I fall off the water's edge  
One last blood curdling cry to you  
“What did I do wrong?!”

# *Intergalactic Evenings*

*by Rachel Kraus*

captured in satellite readings  
blasting my nitrogen levels  
sneaking away scarlet faced, my  
thumb in jupiter's big red eye

seeing myself for the first time  
black window, features brand new  
i look at her, accusatory  
*why can't you do this alone?*

it burns the insides of my mouth  
then it becomes a part of my bloodstream  
sifting through biotic discontentment

i let it flow through my elbows  
then to wrists, rippling like  
venus' golden thunderheads

it makes me a better person  
even a better mother  
*i swear it does*

we all need a reason to feel planetary  
creating a force within the confines  
of magnetic skin, a gravitational pull

orbiting through the evening  
like a woman in the form of mars, thinking  
everything right now is transitory

heartbeat, wrist pulse, temples  
lifting into the exosphere  
these same chants in a separate world  
like maybe i'm good, like maybe i'm fine

like maybe tomorrow *i won't need you after all*

we all know the ending. it's a do-over  
i watch my face in the dark window  
my reflecting disappointment  
as i strap myself in, one buckle at a time

a full moon face, painted  
like someone i have never met  
or at least admit to  
my self-portrait, two versions in one

there's nothing new to see here

turning, burning,  
churning,  
contorting  
competing, depleting, failing

it continuously calls my radio  
*let me in, let me in, open wide*



## *Life is Short*

*by Amanda Judd*

It is impossible to catch  
the quiet thief of time  
robbing us of life itself.

So now I guard  
my days as if they  
are precious jewels;

I cast off care and vanity –  
dig down through the  
years, to find my buried dreams.

With hands inherited from my  
mother, I dust off those  
forgotten plans for “someday,”

And vow to spend my  
hours feeding the woman  
I was meant to be;

Every minute will have  
a purpose – every moment  
will leave a legacy.

Lest I awaken  
one day and find life  
has slipped through my fingers.

Refusing such a fate, I boldly  
grasp the unknown future,  
determined to hold more than regret.

# *When*

*by Lisa Ronan*

When I was four, I drove with my parents in our Volkswagen to Mount Rushmore. In one picture I sat bareback on a yak. In another, my mother holds my hand by the pool of a pink motel; I have long brown hair brushed into pigtails that hang in two ringlets behind my ears, my red sweatshirt unzipped as I squint into the camera. My brother was not in any of the pictures then. He was a newborn. I do not remember where he was.

When I was seven, I was a flower girl at my godmother's wedding. I rode one thousand six hundred miles by train from Wisconsin to Arizona with my grandfather, because he was afraid of flying. We slept in a compartment of two single bunk beds; from the enormous window I watched Missouri, Kansas, and Colorado go by. Fading fields of wheat crops, sand-coloured earth, and dry corn tassels waited for winter. I never saw houses. I slept on the top bunk. The shiny silver sink flipped out of the train compartment wall like a murphy bed and disappeared back into the wall. You had to dry it out with a paper towel from a silver dispenser above the sink. There was a toothbrush sealed in plastic; a small toothpaste the right size for a child hid in a glass inside the sink when I opened it.

I wore my nice dress, walked around the train, and ate lunch at the restaurant with white tablecloths in the glass-domed double-decker compartment watching flat fields swish by below. My grandfather parted his thick white hair neatly to one side, it swept over his forehead, his crisp white shirt done up at the neck with a bolo tie - a braided leather cord with a turquoise stone as blue as his Irish eyes. My parents flew out on a plane and met us in the desert when we arrived.

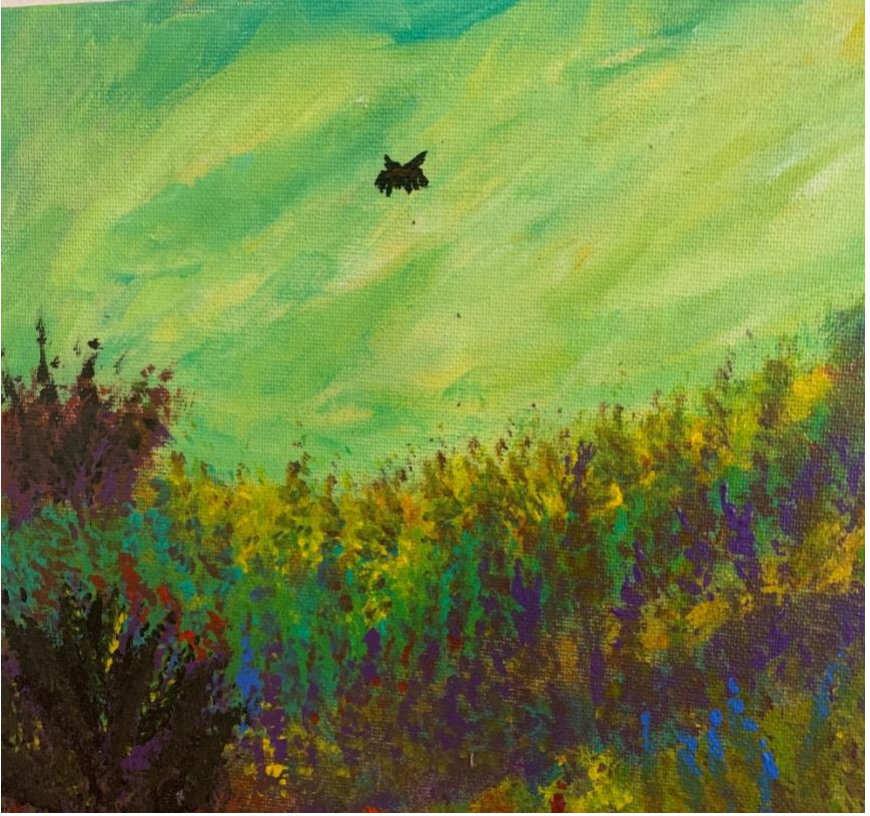
My brother was three and a half then. We could not afford a ticket for him to go with us, so he received a shiny red fire engine, bigger than he was. He stayed at the babysitter's house for a week. It was snowing and dark when we got to the house to pick him up. He sat in a chair by the door, the lights off in the living room, somber and waiting. His big eyes watched the door as we came in. He wore a ski jacket I had outgrown

with large pink and burgundy flowers, soft brown curls around his face, the red fire engine, like a newborn baby, tight in his arms.

When my son was two and a half, my mother passed away. I saw her in dreams at night sitting next to me at an auction or flying in with pale skin to kiss me on the cheek, a gossamer gown of white trailing her. Her hair had grown out, streaming behind her as she floated through the air. After that, the next time I flew over the ocean, I went up into the stratosphere and found her there waiting for me. We sat on velvet cumulus clouds, blowing on cinnamon tea. We talked for days. She laughed, called me *Honey*, and smiled just like she always had when I came in the door after I had been away.

*Tickler in Flight*

*by Kara Stevens*



## ***Contributor's notes***

**Lisa Brodsky** - Lisa Brodsky holds a Master of Public Health degree from the University of Minnesota and works as a County Public Health Director. She was born and raised in Canada and is a mom of four boys. She is currently working on her Associates in Fine Arts degree in Creative Writing at Normandale Community College and was the 2<sup>nd</sup> place winner in the 2022 Patsy Lea Core Awards for poetry.

**Izzy Cruz** - Izzy Cruz is a musician and student at Normandale.

**Bri Ehmler** - Bri Ehmler is completing her general courses at Normandale before transferring to the University of Wisconsin—Stevens Point in the fall of 2022 to earn a bachelor's degree in chemical engineering. In her free time, she dabbles in photography and writing stories and poems. She is certified bilingual in English and Spanish. Bri has two dogs that keep her company and five younger siblings.

**Berenice Flores** - Berenice (Níce) Flores was born and raised in Los Angeles, but has lived in the Midwest for many years. Her writing style ranges from stand-up comedy to fiction, poetry, and screenwriting. She will be continuing her studies at Bowdoin College in Brunswick, Maine focusing on creative writing and cinema.

**Malaya Guerrier** - Malaya Guerrier is a PSEO student who is currently working on her AFA in Creative Writing. She enjoys reading, drumming, and watching football. She hopes to become a published novelist one day.

**Jennifer Hansen** - Jennifer Hansen is a current student at Normandale Community College who will graduate in the fall of 2022 with an Associate's degree. She will continue her education at Mankato State. Besides this short story, she has been newspaper reporter for a small county paper called *The Steele County Times*.

**Brayden Honey** - Brayden Honey is a first year PSEO student at Normandale who has developed their writing confidence and expression in and out of classes in the past year and is happy to share some of their work with you!

**Sarah Huderle** - Sarah Huderle is a 12th grade PSEO student who aspires to both illustrate and write short stories. She hopes to present complex experiences in a simple yet intriguing way through art and writing. Sarah won first place with her story "A Recipe for Fry Bread" in 2022's Patsy Lea Core contest.

**Amanda Judd** - Amanda Valerie Judd has been writing since she was 7 years old. In 2020, she was the winner of the Patsy Lea Core Prize for Poetry. In 2021, her poem, "My Only Label" was nominated for "*Best of the Net 2021.*" Her work has been published in Trouvaille Review, Prospectus, Talking Stick 30, NoVA Bards 2021, and is forthcoming in Panoply.

**Pavel Kifyak** - Pavel Kifyak is completing his AFA at Normandale. He has a hobby in painting, drawing, and reading but has also sought to be a writer that readers enjoy. Writing is one of his great joys.

**Rachel Kraus** - Rachel Kraus is a current AFA student at Normandale. She plans to go to Hamline University to continue studying Creative Writing in Fall 2022. Outside of writing, Rachel enjoys running, yoga, cooking, and being a personal chauffeur to her three busy children.

**Amber Lough** - Amber Lough is a PSEO student from Cedar Mountain currently pursuing a degree in English, mainly for creative writing, with perhaps a minor in Japanese.

**Marissa McClure** - Marissa McClure is an aspiring writer who writes poetry and short stories. She writes stories that have twists and turns with an added touch of fantasy and world building. She is currently writing her rough draft for her first novel and her first poetry book.

**Nicole Middendorf** - Nicole Middendorf is a student at Normandale.

**Thurston Moran** - Thurston Moran is set to graduate from Normandale Community College with an AFA degree in Creative Writing. He plans on going to Metropolitan State University to continue majoring in Creative Writing while also branching out into Technical Writing, Screen Writing, and Film Directing while working towards his dream career of being a film director for Hollywood.

**Valentina Penalzo** - Valentina Penalzo is a PSEO student who is the 2022-2023 officer of PR, her hobby is art, and she is getting her Associate Arts Degree. One of her paintings was exhibited in the Student Art Exhibition and won an excellence award.

**Lisa Ronan** - Lisa Ronan is completing an AA and AFA in Creative Writing at Normandale College this summer. Her writing was awarded at the Patsy Lea Core Award for Poetry in 2021. She writes fiction as well as poetry, is currently working on a novel and lives in Milan, Italy with her son.

**Yousef Saad** - Yousef Saad is a math student with a passion for writing. They are a mentee in the 'Write Like Us' creative writing program.

**Sarah Sells** - Sarah Sells is a student at Normandale and Washburn High School who currently resides in Minneapolis. She spends her time writing both fiction and poetry and is pursuing a major in creative writing.

**Khadijah Sooknanan** - Attending Kennedy High School and Normandale, Khadijah Sooknanan is a PSEO student. Growing up in South America, she moved to Minnesota in 2018 and has lived there ever since. She is pursuing her Associate's degree at Normandale, she hopes to major in Creative Writing and achieve her Bachelor's in it.

**Kara Stevens** - Kara Stevens is the self-published author of *The Scarring of the Roshanna*, a dark psychological fantasy inspired by her PTSD healing journey. She holds six degrees, including a master's degree in Health Sciences, and will graduate with her AFA in Creative Writing after the summer semester.

**Anna Sybesma** - Anna Sybesma is a PSEO student from Edina High School who is taking classes at Normandale. She enjoys reading fiction.

**Cheryl Wilke** - Cheryl W. Wilke was born and raised on the small town prairies of central Minnesota. She has authored two chapbooks and two children's picture books (available at Amazon.com); her visual arts are primarily watercolor and pastels. Wilke is a 2022 AFA graduate at Normandale Community College.

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Front Cover: “Garden Song” by Lisa Brodsky

Back Cover: “Trauma” by Sarah Huderle

Submit your creative writing to the Fall 2022 issue of *The Paper Lantern*! All work is reviewed anonymously, and acceptance is based on literary merit. More information can be found at [www.thepaperlantern.org](http://www.thepaperlantern.org) as well as the archive of previous *Paper Lantern* issues.

Works in all genres of creative writing (poetry, fiction, memoir, short plays, etc.) as well as visual art are considered. Multiple submissions accepted.

Submission is open to registered NCC students only. To Submit, find and self-enroll in our D2L page, “Paper Lantern.” Go to the D2L homepage > Academics > Self Registration > Paper Lantern. Answer the prompts and that’s it!

In the announcement on the home page, you’ll find links to all the genres we accept. To watch a video for how to submit work, go to: [https://mediaspace.minnstate.edu/media/How+to+submit+to+the+Paper+Lantern/1\\_oizzp215](https://mediaspace.minnstate.edu/media/How+to+submit+to+the+Paper+Lantern/1_oizzp215).

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