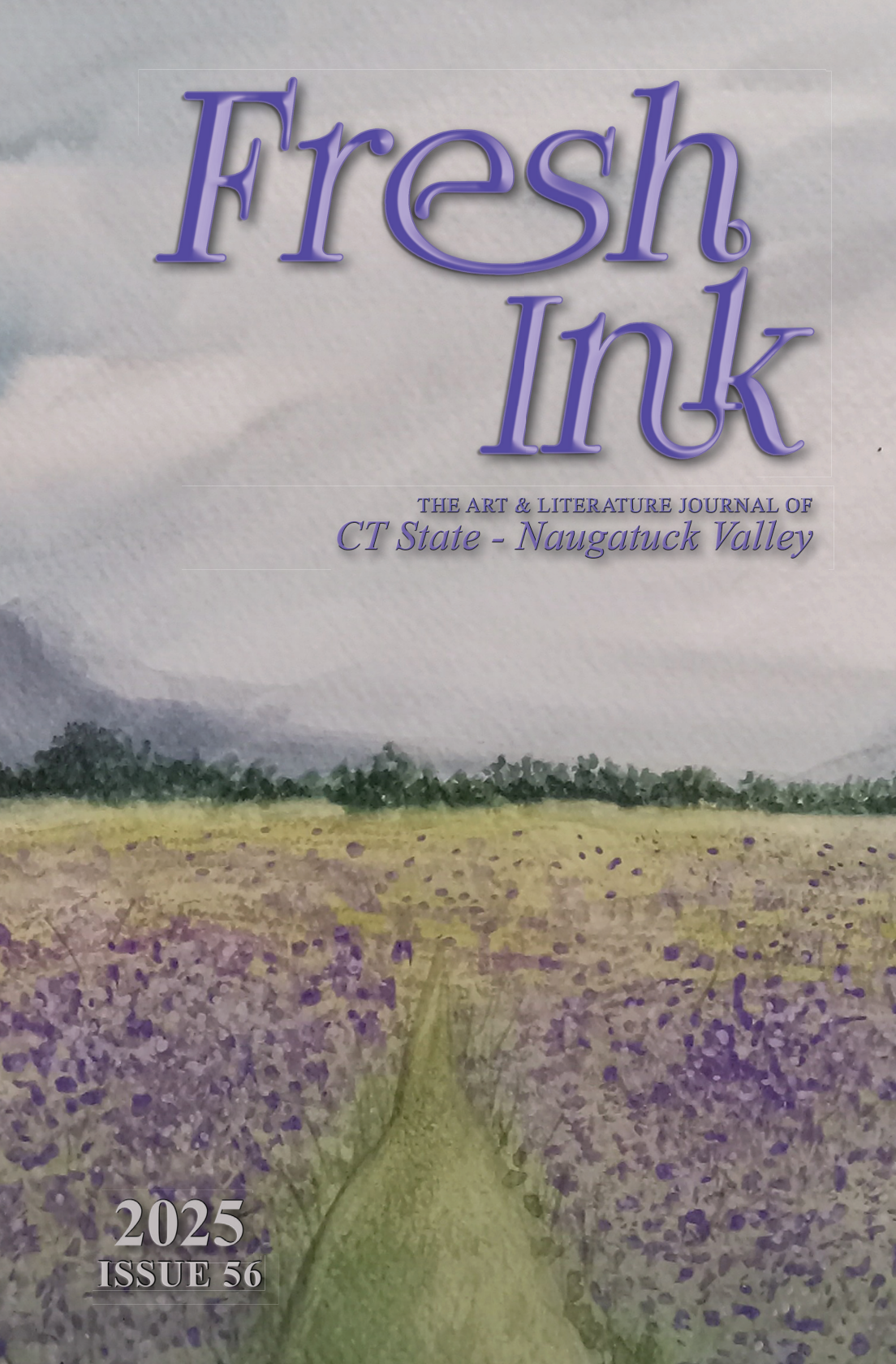
Fresh Ink

THE ART & LITERATURE JOURNAL OF
CT State - Naugatuck Valley



2025
ISSUE 56

The Art and Literature Journal of
Naugatuck Valley

Fresh Ink
2025

Archie Vieira*
Reality Pt. 2

ISSUE 56

In Memory – *Fresh Ink* Poet / Tiffany Margeret Gamache, aka "Tmags"

April 6, 2024 2:54 p.m.

Gardener

When a flower's last petal has wilted,
just as love sometimes does,
there is always a promise of new life in the seeds it contains.
Even if it seems like a hopeless feat,
something new can be grown from what has come before it.
Just as with love,
you can learn from the things in the past that allowed for failure and try again—
this time paying more attention, taking extra care,
having more patience
than was given before.
Whatever caused your previous blossoms to fall away is the basis of something new,
producing new buds to take hold. Something stronger, more durable. To give up would leave a garden bare,
devoid of the potential happiness it could be filled with.
Consider sowing the seeds you were left with instead of being discouraged.
Water them, nurture them, and feed them with care,
allowing new roots to form,
to take deeper hold.
If you do this,
you could allow for something to emerge
that might be even better than what was there before.
Give it thought—
you may just end up with something you would enjoy forevermore.

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April 2, 2025

Dear Friends of *Fresh Ink*,

It is that time of year again when we come together and celebrate the publication of another edition of Connecticut State Community College – Naugatuck Valley's art and literature journal. This year was notable in the quantity and quality of the submissions. I hope you enjoy these works of student and community artists and writers.

There are many people who worked diligently to help bring this publication to fruition, and I would like to take this opportunity to thank them here. This year's evaluation team for poetry and short fiction was small but mighty. CT State – NV alumni Joseph Adomavicia and Christopher Boniecki evaluated along with Emeritus Professor Sandra S. Newton and Professors J. Greg Harding and Wade Tarzia. The art evaluation team consisted of alumnus Joseph Adomavicia, Emeritus Professor Steve Parlato, community artists Brigitte Tutschka and Diane Calder, and Professors Wade Tarzia and J. Greg Harding. Thank you for your timely and conscientious review.

Layout of the journal and the cover was facilitated by Professor Ray Leite, Coordinator of Digital Arts Technology, Vismel Marquez, Educational Assistant and Stephen Rogers, student worker. Thank you for your continued support in this undertaking and your professional approach to the project.

Special thanks go to CEO Dr. Lisa Dresdner, Dr. Justin Moore, Campus Dean of Faculty Administration, and Christopher Rempfer, Professor of English - Program Coordinator, Liberal Arts and Sciences for their administrative assistance with the project. In addition, my gratitude goes out to LABSS secretaries Linda Ames and Robyn Mazzamaro and Fiscal Administrative Officer Lisa Anderson for helping me navigate this every changing process.

Finally, this publication would not be a reality without the continuous support of the Student Government, Karen Blake, Director of Student Activities and Alberta Thompson, Secretary of Student Activities. Thank you for all the help and guidance.

In closing, my appreciation goes out to all of you, the authors and artists of this publication. Thank you for sharing your creations with us.

Best Regards,

Jeannie Evans-Boniecki, Ph.D.
Professor of English
Adviser to *Fresh Ink*

1st Place - Art

Veronica Rodriguez Castro*

Milne's House

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* Asterisk indicates current CT State Naugatuck Valley Student.

2nd Place - Art

Archie Vieira*

Golden Band

1st Place - Prose

Mathew Nelson*

Faster Than Light

"Thank you for choosing Almost FTL! We might not be faster than light, but our automated light-rail trams get you to where you need to be, A-S-A-P! Please, enjoy the trip!" Tiria rolled her glowing, blue eyes to high heaven at the sound of the pre-recorded announcement. She groaned as she removed her ruined dress shirt and picked off the three mushroomed 9mm bullets that were sunken into her skin-tight micro-Kevlar bodysuit. As the bullets hit the floor, she thanked her home world, Q'tir, that she got into the empty tram car merely seconds before the doors closed. A quick peek at her thin, but toned abdomen under the micro-Kevlar shows deep blue instead of her normally fair, pink skin. To distract herself from the soreness, she looked out the window to see the glowing neon signs for various casinos, brothels, and pawn stores throughout the lower city. The display of dancing lights against the night sky would've been mesmerizing had it been the sky of Q'tir instead of Earth. "Savagery…" she mutters under her breath, "Soon I'll be able to return home…" The tram turns away from the garish city, leaving only the reflection of her face in the window. She takes a long moment to look at her tied-back purple ponytail, her long, pointed ears, and the "Isshic" family brand burned on her right cheek. "Home…"

But the longing for her home world was cut short by the screeching of the tram's brakes and the automated intercom announcing the next stations. The hiss of the doors opening was followed quickly by the booming laughter of three men. She could tell by the undignified tone of their voices that they aren't Q'tiran, and that they all had a bit too much to drink tonight. This was also the moment she noticed that she was in the car dedicated only to humans. With that in mind, she unsheathed the emergency adrenaline needle stowed in her right sleeve, sticks it into her left thigh, and quickly squeezes the pusher. She discards the needle and shrivels up into the seat in an attempt to disappear.

As the cackling men enter the tram at the opposite side, she studies them. Two of them almost stand eye-level with the hanging handles, almost as tall as herself. The muscular one has knuckle dusters bulging from his left pocket and a small pistol in his right, and the skinny one has a blade protruding from his. The third man, shorter and stockier, rests his arm on a revolver holstered within his leather

jacket. Before she can find anything else, the stocky one notices her and waves a stubby finger in her direction. "Look what we got 'ere fellas!" he starts to walk slowly toward her, "eyyy, whachu think you're doin' 'ere you fuckin' rat?" The other two slither up behind him.

"She thinks she a superstar or somethin' riding wherever she damn-well pleases, huh?" The built one spits, "What do these little rat-faces go for these days if we turn em in?"

"Not enough to make up for the trouble of draggin' 'em to the cops…" The lanky one lets out a laugh, "I don't know, boys, it looks to me that we caught ourselves a good time, here!" Still folded-up in the seat, Tiria studies their movements at all times. She notices a flash of steel from the pocket of the stick-man.

The pig-like one snorts out a laugh, "HAHAHA, as if they would even give a shit! Say, I always wondered what these little rats taste like…" As he draws near, he reaches into his jacket and pulls out a soot-laden Blackhawk .45 revolver. He pulls back the hammer and waves the gun in her face, "Now, missy, I suggest you keep still, or my little friend here might have to make an example of ya's…" With her heart racing and the pain of her bruises now fully masked by the adrenaline, she eagerly waits for the right time to strike. "I think I'll go for those goofy lookin' ears first." As he sticks his slug-like tongue out toward her left ear, Tiria notices his eyes start to close and the grip on his gun slightly loosen. In the blink of an eye, she pulls the gun and his arm to the right, clear of her body. The movement causes the man's hand to tense and fire the gun. The sudden noise lights a fire under the other two men, and they spring into action. Without missing a beat, she turns the amorphous blob around, locks her left arm vice-tight around his tree-trunk neck, and jumps with him to the left just in time to dodge the twig-man's switchblade. She breaks her hostage's grip on the revolver and points it at the other two, priming the next shot as she backs him away.

She notices the sentient brick wall has drawn his knuckle duster and pistol. He opens his mouth and shouts, "YOU BETTER LET MY MAN GO, OR I'LL POUND YOU INTO THE FUCKIN' GROUND, RAT!" With that, she realizes the best thing to do is exploit their anger. She rolls out her tongue slowly and slides it up and down the fat man's ear. The two other men take a step back as their faces go beet-red. "STOP THAT RIGHT NOW, YOU BITCH!" She locks eyes

with the meaty one and shoots him a devilish smile. With her teeth bared, she opens her mouth and clamps her teeth down on the greasy ear, severing it with a quick turn of her head, and causing the filthy man's blood to shower over the left side of her face. The tram car is filled with the man's howls. With a river of crimson flowing from her mouth, she spits the ear at the other two men.

Forgetting that he's looking at the wrong end of a .45 magnum, the meat stick tosses his 9mm to the side, clenches his fists, and screams out, "YOU'RE FUCKING DEAD!" The two men make a mad dash at her, weapons brandished. By instinct, Tiria tosses the single-eared man to the side, aims the big iron at the right knee of the charging bull and squeezes the trigger. The thunderous bang of the gun is followed by his screams as he falls to the ground. Recovering from the recoil of the magnum, Tiria finds herself face-to-face with a darting blade. Almost as fast as light, she sidesteps, narrowly dodging the knife, and discards the revolver. Fluidly pivoting her stance, she grabs hold of the man's arm and bends it behind his back with a satisfying pop. With a final sweep of his legs, the man falls face-first to the ground.

Not a drop of her blood was spilled, yet, like a mad artist's magnum opus, her body was generously spattered with trails and splotches of red. She stands above the three writhing worms and admires her handiwork. With a wry smirk on her face, she looks up to see the screen displaying her stop. With the hiss of the doors opening, the intercom blares, "Thank you for choosing Almost FTL! We hope you found the ride to be swift and comfortable!" She takes one last look at the pathetic goons and chuckles to herself. With her head held high, she slips out of the tram car faster than light.

Renee Duval*

1st Place - Poetry

A Memory from Home

Grandma sits on her stool, wobbly kneed
and folded in pink and purple tarps.
Her cigarette smoke dances lazy hallows around
mussed curls, blankets smudged on waking eyes.
The open oven warms her knotted form,
a slow roast paper doll on wooden legs.
A tangerine sun makes way.
It brings softened grounds and longer days,
bending and bowing northern most ferns;
evergreen tapestries of my home.
Soon, she'll wander crone-like in her woods
and pluck the buckets boot strapped to tender maples,
collecting their sticky sweet veins.
I watch from a high window as
her gnarled hands twist and grip the spiles.
True sorceress, an expert witchery of the trees.
She could have likely snapped off a mighty branch
from the great king maple tree,
and with a great shove off April slush,
had gone sailing in the paling sky.
I swear, I would have loved her even more,
watching that happy fool gliding over me,
buckets spinning wild circles from behind.

Kenneth DiMaggio

Ladies Only: Ode #1

to the Friday Night Kitchen Hair Salon for all the Lucys Lisas & Lorraines

Grandma Lucy
Cousin Lisa
And wise old Aunt Lorraine
(along with a couple of Tre'sas
M'rias and one or two outsiders
like Peggy or Phyllis) would prop
up their world beneath a cloud
of menthol cigarette smoke and
one of the ladies teasing one
of her tribe's hair into the cone
of a rocket

Husbands
would come to heel with
TV dinners instead of the
spaghet' they said their moms
always cooked better

Sons would have to be
disciplined again with
wooden spoons and scapulars
tied around their necks

And daughters
God help us they don't
turn into hoo-ahs like
you know whose girl

After which all the ladies
genuflected & poured
themselves more anisette

Broken wooden spoons
Malnourished husbands
& smudged faceclot's
from wiping away potential
tramps back into daughters

it wasn't easy being a woman

*

Kenneth DiMaggio

Ladies Only: Ode #2

T'ings
because the men were
always like boys

T'ings
like how Lisa wasn't ready
for a baby and if Lucy
bleaching blond into
Lisa's shoe polish black
hair was too cat'lick
to agree with it she still
knew a woman like
Dolly Sinatra who could
take care of it

T'ings like sneaking money
from your husband who was
a gambler or covering
for a sister who shouldn't be
flinging a little fun on the side
like the men but why not

T'ings like the short-barreled
shotgun we discovered in a
great-great grandmother's
closet when she died

Or t'ings
like a piece of paper
that had to be destroyed
so that the man arranged
to marry an Aunt would not
know how she once lived
in the Catholic Home
for Unwed Mothers

And how it hurt this son
but even Mom would have
things I would never
know about her

*

Kenneth DiMaggio

Ladies Only: Ode #3

The little bastards
not around?
(We were and in
in corners cupboards
and under the table)
that women from
great nonnas
to recently married
nieces with teased &
bleached hair only to look
like Marilyn Monroe but
with olive skin & hook noses
--but babies and kids?

Love 'em but also
hate 'em
Can we have a day
wit'out 'em?

Lisa twisted an ankle
tripping over Rocky's
robot
Lucy lost her mind
when Gina didn't
come home til 3 in the
morning
Lorraine had to bail out
Ritchie before his father
got done with his shift
and found him
in the jail cell

Hate 'em
Love 'em
but sometimes wish
we could live wit'out
'em

--and do you hear
something crying?
*

Kenneth DiMaggio

Ladies Only: Ode #4

Enough hairspray & menthol cigarette
smoke to cloud the wagon-wheel
light fixture above

And on the easy-to-clean
plastic covered table
bottles of anisette brandy
and Seven Up to mix
into the whiskey because
tonight crucifix-necked Lucy
didn't have to drink from
finger-size bottles while
Lisa drank away her Seven
& Seven's that she swore
were good for her high blood
pressure

and if Lorraine drank
her coffee half filled
with anisette
by the end of the night
she spoke a 100,000-word
novel about degenerate
gamblers corrupt cops
psychopathic sons and
never wed but always
knocked up daughters
that was our family

No wonder the ladies
needed a table where
the bottles could be
shamefully big

and a night where
they could fill their
glasses
without shame
*

Kenneth DiMaggio

Ladies Only: Ode #5

Marilyn
Farrah
or even a Kardashian
before anybody heard
of them
--whatever the famous
female hairstyle

every Friday night
in somebody's kitchen
the Lisas Lucys & Lorraines
of my family tried to bleach
perm sculpt cone or chisel
their hair just like the latest
glamour star

But hair from Siracusa
with roots Moorish or
Phoenician did not
disappear beneath
American beauty products
and so come Monday
Lorraine Lucy & Lisa
were back to the wild and
untamable curls of Sicily

"Ah fugg it! If my boss don't
like the way I look he can
stick it you-know-where."

"I tell ya one t'ing ladies!
Miss America don't have families
and jobs like weese do!"

"And if you piss us off and
we get crazy like our hair
watch out America."
*

ShawnaLee Kwashnak

Dandy with Her Person

Hannah Nicholson*

The Deck

The paint is chipping on the steps
Of the stairs where I am sitting
The rain had fallen just a minute ago
It smelled of concrete and dirt
Creaking wood below my body
I stop shifting to silence the sound
Feet heavy and planted still
Hands idly intertwined
My eyes follow the cars that pass
The back window's glass fogged
By the weather
It's quiet outside with just the simple sounds
Of songbirds singing
And wheels on the road
It is warm outside
And I do not mind
The cracks in this flooring

Derek Dean*

Where Did the Fireflies Go?

See the bustling world below
and ask:
Where did the fireflies go?

Absent of flickers on a summer's night
Roses and daisies in the moonlight
From your face I think you know
That all good things must go

The faintest flicker in the sky
Of all the years that's passed us by
And you observe where you may lie
A world devoid of fireflies.

Everything must keep moving on
And you must realize that the fireflies are gone

Where did the fireflies go?
Where did the lightening bugs go?
Flying off to someplace we don't know

Mathew Nelson*

2nd Place - Poetry

Wash Your Damn Dishes

We've known each other as long as I've been alive,
So, I'll lay this on you lightly like a mother confronting a little tyke:
You need to properly wash your damn dishes.

Fork slits slathered with scum, and slick and slimy grease
coats the pan shared by us all.
For everyone's sake, properly wash your damn dishes.

The sounds of you slurping soup and Caesar salad,
And the slew of cigs strewn about the yard I shall take in stride,
If you would just properly wash your damn dishes.

Contesting the kitchen without parley makes me burn hotter than Pompeii,
But it's a game that I would gladly play every day,
If it meant that you would properly wash your damn dishes.

Your callous acts come with no cost,
clear-coated, protected by a childhood of careless parents.
But I've seen (and cleaned) what you do to the john. So, I'll ask you kindly,
Please properly wash your damn dishes.

I've noticed the way you talk to me recently, all kind and friendly.
A proposal of peace, I presume?
Piss off. I'm porcelain to your PVC. Pretentious, pompous, positively a prick.
But at least I properly wash my damn dishes.

Yuli Andrea Cruz Torres*

Dining Room

Natalie Schriefer

My Excel Sheet Has Poems Out for Review in Yellow

And of course
most traffic lights
turn red after yellow,
but hold out
for those early-AM
drives when the timer
switches off—
and flashing yellow
blinks to green.

2nd Place - Prose

Laney Sullivan*

Only A Portal Away

"So you're telling me the only reason you're here is because some undereducated wizard threw the wrong potion at you? The only reason a beautiful woman has graced herself in my arms is because of a mistake? If only-"

"Would you please for the love of all the holy Gods, shut up!" I drag myself off the very toned body I had fallen upon, staggering to my feet to look the being in the eyes. "I just apologized for being transported here, which was out of my control, mind you, and you have the audacity to..to…." The words die on my tongue as I center myself. Here I was, out of breath, blurry vision, and my heart thumping out of my chest. I have never laid eyes on a more jaw dropping human, let alone met face to face with another of my kind. He's still plastered on the floor to which I was laying moments ago, stunned and admiring me before shaking his head and jumping to his feet.

"You have a lot of nerve, you most definitely aren't from around here."

"Where am I?" I ask as I take in the unfamiliar terrain. He paces around the room, and while doing so I take the time to fully compute the situation I am in. "The last I remember of anything was my dear friend Opal trying to show me one of her latest creations." My eyes trail as the man paces, he seems to process this information as I recite it to figure out where the hell I am. "She was buzzing with enthusiasm to show me she had finally completed a potion her mentor had demonstrated. Then the next thing I know she drops it in front of my feet, the floor swallows me whole, and I fall on you."

"More like crash into me." He smirks and goodness I feel the rest of the air leave my lungs. That charm of his seems to radiate out of his body and even though I need to focus on getting home, I can't help but want to learn more about this person.

"What's your name?"

"You've already asked me two questions, it's only fair if I get to ask you one first."

"Why of course your majesty, what is it that thou requests of thy?" I

do a little bow as I look back up at him, as he tilts his head. “What's with that glance? You’re wearing royal robes and a crown, is it wrong of me to assume you’re not of a higher standard in civilization?” He fully smiles at me and lets out a laugh that makes my legs feel like putty. I have no idea where this portal has transported me, but by God's grace please let my stay be longer than necessary.

“You’re amusing, and not like anyone else I’ve ever met before. You are also quite observant though I know my devilish looks may be deceiving, I am a prince.”

“The portal sent me to the past?” I take a step closer.

“Why do you ask so many questions?” He takes a step.

“Does it bother you that I ask so many?”

“You haven’t bothered me since the moment you fell in my arms, sweetheart.” He says those words so sweetly that I haven't realized how close I had gotten to him. I can faintly feel his breath against my lips before I reel backward. My cheeks are warm and I see that gorgeous smile again. “So I’m currently in a castle right now I presume?”

“That’s correct, Princess.” He smiles again, and I tilt my head. The nickname sends flutters through my heart, but I try to focus back on the task at hand. Finding a way back home.

“Princess? Oh really?” I smirk. “Good to know I’ve fallen into a realm where Prince Charming exists. Speaking of which,” I look around the room, taking in the large wardrobe, with luxury curtains covering stained glass windows. The bed is centered in the room, and a study desk is put to the side with a worn down candle placed just next to papers. “Would you mind being a darling and helping me find a way back to my world?” As I turn to face him the sadness in his facial features is evident and that breathtaking smile has shaped itself into a frown.

“To have you leave my company would be a tragedy, since in the short span you’ve brought so much joy.” He steps besides me and his presence alone is warm. His gentle eyes look over mine and he nods. “I’ll do my best to help you find your way home, Princess.” He sorts through his papers and I note that a few have more ink smudges than

others, but he lands upon a work of writing, taking it in his hands and strolls across the room. He opens the door and looks back at me, “Will you join me on this short journey darling?”

“Should I trust you?”

“I’ve given you no reason not to.” Once his smile returns I can’t help but follow him wherever he may lead me. We walk down the long hallway and enter a room. Books cascade the walls and a fireplace illuminates the whole room in a warm glow. I let out a small gasp as I took in the sight.

A few hours pass and as we go through books and books in this library, I can’t help this underlying attraction towards the Prince. He’s made me laugh more times in this astounding library than I ever have in my whole life. I just pray to the Gods he can’t hear the quicken heartbeat under my tunic. I scan page after page, until I turn and see the Prince's eyes glued to a piece of text, and he passes the book to me. I read what he was looking at and my happiness evaporated.

“A beginner’s guide to magic wields and portal summoning.” I huff. “This looks like the book.” I flip through the pages and find what I was looking for, it’s more simple than I thought. I place my hand over the lines and read out loud, “For one who wants to return to their origin place, repeat these words and that will be the case.”

“So you’re summoning yourself to go back to where you were born?” He questions, I look up at him and nod.

“I guess so.” The silence spreads and I feel like crying, the Prince grabs a nearby quill and writes down on the piece of paper he grabbed from his desk. He folds it and hands it to me, and the spark that courses through my body at the moment of contact is spine tingling.

“Just in case you’re ever in this realm again, or fall into another portal.” I felt my heart strings being tugged at, and without thinking I place the book down and leap into his arms and hold him tight. Without any hesitation he wraps his arms around me, and I feel like this is more of a home to me than any other place.

“Thank you for everything.” I say before pulling away, clutching the piece of folded paper in my hands. I close my eyes, for both concentration and because I can't stand to watch as I get taken away

from this man. I chant over and over my home's name and feel the buzz, and a shocking sensation takes over my body. When I open my eyes I'm back in my house. The tears string as I unfold the piece of paper, and not only do I see the Prince's handwriting, but a poem that's addressed to me. One minute I'm back home, and the next thing I know I'm knocking on Opal's door. She greets me and all I can manage to say to her is, "I need to find my way back to him."

A few weeks pass and between countless hours of research and potion brewing, Opal and I have not left her cottage. What seems like an impossible task takes only a few weeks before Opal is handing me a potion and instructing me to throw it on the ground.

"Thank you so much."

"You've been my test subject, it's the least I can do." She jests.

I jump head first into the opened portal. As I see the light fade I get my footing and see the room I've only seen in my dreams until now. I scan the room and my eyes land on him.

"Princess," he smiles softly, tears glistening in the corners of his eyes. I feel my own swell with water and smile. I finally see my Prince again, and his smile is just as exquisite as I remember it to be. For whatever miracle of a reason, I'll forever be grateful for that portal that brought me to him.

Gessica Lopez*

Warrior

Amira Jung*

3rd Place - Poetry

Guidance Dog

My heart breaks a little
sometime around midday,
and I couldn't take it—
I wanted to separate it from my body
and give it away quickly
like a sick dog I refuse to become attached to.
But still, I chew my lips and muster the sparing strength
I can gather to let it lead me
with its jagged mouth closed around my hand
through fields and off-trail clearings,
through thick early spring mud
and sharp tangled vines that seem
to hook my ankle at every passing.
It holds candid parts of me
under dappling patches of light
moving and reflecting like water
within its old, powdery eyes
holding my shape like a watercolor muse.
I let it guide me
until every thorn falls away from my skin
and chimney smoke beckons in the distance.
I let it guide me
like a ship's captain,
turbulent and earnest;
cloudy storm eyes and gnarled paws
leading me back to myself
time and time again.

Christopher Boniecki

Country Vibrations

Sometimes I imagine this certain cellophane whimsy.
I hum with my pinecone voice trying to serenade myself through everything.
I think about the smell of that sweet sweet Americana.
I wonder if in New York does the smell pierce through the honey roasted nuts and kebabs?
I often think about the myth a Hualapai women told me of a cliff face that once was a giant bird.
"Birds made of mountains" just sings the type of power I think we live in.
Theres something in the dirt here.
There's a twang in the way the wind mutters.
Americana flows through canyons and neon lit streets like a trout choked dream of a river
I feel it vibrate.

Candace Hall

Triolet for the Dead

Photo: S S St Louis, Havana Harbor, 1939

The young child, holding her doll, among those turned away
As our President unmoved by desperate pleas, refused negotiation.
No room for Jewish refugees yearning to breathe, no deliverance that day.
And the young child, clasping her doll, is among many turned away.
Did she stand in line at Auschwitz, or Dachau, crying and afraid?
The same thing happens, other children, other places, today.
Like that young child, clutching her doll, among those turned away,
Even as our President unmoved by desperate pleas, refuses negotiation.

Roberta Whitman Hoff

Crows by the Mississippi in New Orleans

Even creatures as internally
referenced as crows can't help feeling
the Mississippi River's Spirit.
It's large, broad flow; it's dangerous currents.
The Mississippi has been here a long time
in the memory of Earth. I delight
in the intelligent sophisticated caws,
and through the meandering branches of Live Oaks
and Cypress, the crows look down onto the tourists
on the walkway before the black glistening wings
take flight racing and testing
strength like youngsters over
the broad expanse of the Mississippi
safely to the other side.

Archie Vieira*

Revolution

Nancy Manning

Towards the Afternoon of the Year

That summer, Jay and I rented a cabin up north. We knew nothing about the Mortons other than that their names appeared on the rental agreement.

Following their directions, we turned onto a secluded dirt road deep into the woods. A brown cabin sat snugly under a low-lying stretch of pines. No other homes were nearby except our landlords' cottage. A girl raced to our car.

"I'm Angela," she beamed. Her bronzed skin made her thin frame look healthy as her pink tank top dipped low, and her denim cutoffs rode high.

"Jay." He gestured to me. "My wife Frances."

My smile wasn't returned. Instead, Angela skipped to the back seat and flung open the door. She pulled out two suitcases and lugged them to the porch. Jay tried to coax them from her, but she refused.

When I waddled around the car, Angela's eyes froze on my stomach.

"You fit into a bathing suit?"

Our baby wasn't due for three months, but my belly already protruded like a mountain.

Jay picked up on my hurt feelings and like the middle school teacher he was, told Angela that wasn't very nice. She shrugged. I didn't feel any better. Carrying two light grocery bags, I made sure they covered my abdomen.

Shockingly, Angela took a key from her pocket and unlocked the door. Before I could inquire about the Mortons, Angela chirped, "Tour time" and twirled around the room. "Kitchen. Duh!"

The seventies decor of bright oranges and dark browns was dated. Yellow shag carpeting stretched across the small sitting area. Angela swept her hand around that space, pointing out the new couch and the TV that got only one station. Then she pointed to the deck. Two Adirondack chairs faced Silver Lake, a majestic agate of glistening blue. I slipped my hand in Jay's. Despite the unconventional welcome, we had made the right choice to rent here.

"There's more," Angela urged.

I did a double take as she pulled Jay away from me, led him through a paneled hallway into a small bedroom. "Your bed. Bathroom's in there. Now it's time to swim."

Eyebrows raised, Jay answered, "We need to unpack."

"Hurry up." She scurried out the door.

"She's neighborly," Jay laughed, wrapping his arms around me.

"She's a handful," I countered, pleased that my preschool students didn't act this friendly.

* * *

When Jay and I headed to the beach, Angela dove off our dock, breaking the surface of the tranquil water. Her head appeared and she shouted, "Jump in."

I draped my towel over a chaise lounge propped in the shade. Jay said, "I think I'd better say hello to the Mortons."

"I already said you were here." Impatience was loud in Angela's voice.

I kept my silence. Jay removed his tee shirt and stepped to the edge, placing one foot into the water.

Angela commented, "It won't bite."

Jay took several steps into the lake. When he was waist deep, he plunged in, immersing himself completely in the royal blue that mirrored the cloudless sky. When he stood up, he shouted, "It's excellent. Come in, honey."

"Later."

Angela kicked over to him. "Let's swim laps from your dock to ours." Without any friends, she had to be lonely.

A voice behind me asked, "You okay?"

I spun around and saw an elderly woman squinting at me. Below a straw hat, locks of white hair went unkempt around her face. She wore a tattered cotton frock that snapped down the front like a summer bathrobe. Her skin was heavily wrinkled. One hand gripped a cane.

"Mrs. Morton?"

"Sure am."

Shaking her hand, I felt the frailty of flesh. She eyed Angela.

"We're thrilled to be here."

"I hope my granddaughter isn't pestering you."

"Not at all."

Mrs. Morton studied me closely. I offered her the chair, but she refused, explained that she liked the sun, but it didn't like her.

"We'll visit you folks later then." I nodded.

"Mr. Morton is happy you're here."

* * *

The next morning, an early knock awakened us. Jay sat up, wiped the sleep from his eyes, and marched to the door. Upon his return, he explained that Angela wanted to use our rowboat.

After toast and half a grapefruit, my head felt woozy, so I stayed in bed. Jay enjoyed the sunshine.

Around noon I wobbled outside. Jay and Angela were sitting on our dock. Jay immediately called me over. "Franny, you missed a blue heron."

"It'll return," Angela informed us. She checked his watch. "YR is starting." With that, she sprinted away.

"Ready for lunch? I make a mean grilled cheese."

Jay looped his arm around my waist. "I'm starved."

While we ate, Jay explained that he asked Mrs. Morton to make sure Angela didn't act as a human alarm clock the rest of the week. Mrs. Morton said she'd take care of it.

* * *

Angela didn't wake us up the following morning. When Jay left for the bakery in town, Angela waved to him from her porch but didn't move from it.

That afternoon Jay swam alone.

That evening Angela sauntered over to me, asked if I was having a boy

or a girl. “We want to be surprised.”

“What are you going to name it?”

“Lester for a boy and Jenny for a girl.”

“I watched a lady give birth on TV. She kept screaming. I never want kids.”

I remembered making the same pledge at her age and smiled. “You must miss your parents.”

“Not really. My mother dumps me here every summer.”

“Your father?”

“Hasn’t been around since I was two. Doesn’t pay child support.”

I cringed. How could any parent abandon their responsibilities?

Angela abruptly scampered away, yelling, “I have to see if Cricket and Danny get back together.”

When Jay returned from his walk, we went for a boat ride. Lily pads blanketed the low area of lake, so he paddled around them. The breeze off the water soothed my soul and the mountain views were spectacular. We explored where the loons nested. Keeping our distance, we saw the parents nudge their offspring away from us.

“Thought you’d never get here.”

Ignoring Angela, Jay stepped out of the boat and pulled it onto the sand.

Angela spoke to his back. “Danny’s dating Loren. I hate her. He belongs--”

Jay took hold of my hand, led me to our cabin. I told Angela not to worry. Things always work out.

* * *

The next couple of mornings Angela stayed on her porch. I felt guilty for her banishment.

Then something happened on Friday.

My stomach was queasy, so I was short-tempered. I couldn’t find my sunglasses and suspected that Angela had taken them. I rapped

on the Mortons’ door, told Mrs. Morton I wanted to speak with her husband. She explained he was resting and closed the door.

For dinner Jay suggested that we go out for pizza. I grabbed my purse. When I removed my wallet, I noticed my glasses at the bottom of the bag and felt guilty for blaming Angela.

After Jay started the car, Angela sprinted to us in a skimpy bikini. She insisted Jay paddle her to Fisherman’s Point.

Jay raised his voice. “Go home, Angela. Your grandfather needs you.”

Angela kicked the dirt, yelled at him, “For your information, he’s dead. Had a heart attack years ago. My grandmother won’t admit it.”

How could this be possibly true? Neither Jay nor I knew what to say.

* * *

When we returned, I had indigestion from the pepperoni. As we walked in a drizzle of rain to the back door, Angela’s grandmother ambled toward us, rambling, “She’s gone. The rowboat’s missing.”

I looked at Jay. “It’ll be dark soon.”

“Bet she went to Fisherman’s Point,” Jay said. “You have another boat?”

“Canoe’s over there. Paddle’s under it. Mr. Morton won’t forgive me if anything happens to her.”

“I’ll find her,” Jay assured.

He pushed a rusted canoe into the lake. Again, guilt wracked my brain.

“I’m going with you.”

Despite his pleas, I stepped into the boat.

With swift strokes, Jay rowed. A mosquito jabbed my neck as we arced around the center island. In a dark cove of pines, we saw the empty rowboat moored on some rocks.

“Angela,” I called out. A faint whimper answered. “She’s hurt,” I screamed.

Jay propelled the canoe even faster, no doubt leaving an ugly wake in the dark water.

Angela was slumped on a rock and sobbed, “My ankle really hurts.”

Jay dove into the water, swam over to her. I guided the boat to them.

“It’s swollen. Could be a sprain, maybe a break.”

Jay helped her stand. She hopped on one foot to the canoe. “I’m sorry,” she whimpered.

We rowed her back home, and Jay drove us to the hospital.

Though we never returned to that cabin, I think of Angela often. Unlike her, my Jenny loves being still. Poor Angela must have suffered, being unable to leave her porch for weeks and greet other renters.

Jean Evans-Boniecki

Amy Lee in Ward B

The issue wasn’t
with the roly poly girl who chugged a bottle of Clorox
burnt a hole in her esophagus in her attempt at an abortion
or the greasy Goth who shot his father’s pistol
into his temple only to blind himself
who would still not blink to not disturb the dust mites
asleep in his eye lashes.
It wasn’t
with the whiny lady in 8B who never left her bed
who was never left alone
who one night in a mad flurry dodged her aides and like a
defensive tackle
threw her weight with all her fury against the wall and
snapped her own neck.
It wasn’t
with the old midget man who would mumble “I’d rather live
in my hole than in this cage.”
With them, I had no problem.

It was
that the metal panel of the door was not broken by a knob
that the thick block of grey only swung open at a keypad’s
touch
that when Jorge after frenetically fingering the flesh on his
forearm
hurled a chair close to five feet
it didn’t even nick the window’s wired glass.
Then I knew I couldn’t stay.

Sometimes life is like that for me.

Jade Strumski*

Catching Glances across the Restaurant

I don't even know your name,
but somehow, we found ourselves sitting across from each other.
You're sipping on your shake, and I got my soda.
I only came here to hang with my girls, but we're just…

Catching glances across the restaurant.
Too scared to walk up and talk to each other.
Somehow your eyes always meet mine when I look up.
That little smirk that you make sends me spiraling.
Why are we
Catching glances across the restaurant?

I can hear your boys poking fun at you.
"Get up, get her number, go talk to her!"
My girls are also shaking me and whispering.
"Who will be the first to make a move?"
Will we just sit here and stay curious?
Or will we stop…

Catching glances across the restaurant.
Too scared to walk up and talk to each other.
Somehow your eyes always meet mine when I look up.
That little smirk that you make sends me spiraling.
Why are we
Catching glances across the restaurant?

As I'm about to pay, the waiter slips me a note.
"It's all paid for. Enjoy your meal, beautiful."
You guys get up to leave, and I run out to catch you.
Now we're standing face to face, who will talk first?
I open my mouth, but you beat me to it.
All I do now is smile at your texts.
All we do now is laugh about the time
when we were...

Catching glances across the restaurant.
Too scared to walk up and talk to each other.
Somehow your eyes always meet mine when I look up.
That little smirk that you make sends me spiraling.
Why were we
Catching glances across the restaurant?

Nevaeh Molina*

Winged Fusion

Ryan Garesio

On Tenterhooks

Facts are inconsolable
they can not remove a bandage from dead skin
or ache with a grieving mother
They can only tell you where to find the handkerchief
Or how the wound drains purulent

I am older now
And facts no longer keep me safe
I yearn, rather, for knowledge
for sitting in quiet contemplation
in soft wonderment
At the way wildflowers take forever to bloom
Or how the lines on my wife's body shine
Like gems in the ocean
Or the way a loon moves
between our world and his

Sitting is not so bad
And it consoles me when I am tired and unloved
It is the knowledge Of truth
I so desperately yearn for

Ivan de Monbrison

The Crazy Wife

The horizon parted in two
With candles burning in the room,
I hear the storm a bit too shy
Walking away on tiptoes,
Somewhere out there.
But you, maybe out of despair,
For no reason, out of the blue,
You break a glass to cut my mind.
And as you manage to do it,
You then ask me to drink my thoughts,
But I can't do it, dear,
Even to quench the thirst in me,
Nor the fire inside you.

Joseph R. Adomavicia

One Day, Daydreaming

One day while I was deep in my thoughts daydreaming
this old man I've never met before
with a pearly white beard, sunken in cheeks, wrinkles above his brow
and a touch of antiqued wisdom in his eyes
leaned in toward me from his seat of the bar and asked me,
"How is your heart, son?"
This was an interesting question with a not so simple answer.
I paused and gazed at him for no more than a minute
before answering and thought to myself
my heart is full of
concoctions of emotions.
Dreams and screams from beyond the pale.
Tears.
Laughter.
Wanderlust.
It beats to the tune of music.
It is loving and hopeful
yet tattered with hints of hopelessness.
It urges for more.
Sometimes it feels like it's pressurized to the point of bursting.
Yet, of all of these things,
None felt like an appropriate answer,
So I simply said,
"My heart—it beats.
My heart—it will be okay.
For, I'm still here living,
breathing, dreaming, and feeling.
Blood is still pumping through my arteries and veins."
He smirked and said to me,
"Well son, I don't have a simple answer either.
This world is comprised of emotions,
ups and lows, happy moments and woes,
yet no matter what we do,
we must do what is the best,
while forgetting the rest."

Mary E. Tetreault

Running on Empty

The gauge reads "Empty".
An alarm screams out as in pain.

My terrified mind asks
Which will it be?
The mountain ahead or a drop down below?

A Smash or a Thump?
Hello to Pain, or to a Quick Death?

My brain flashes in terror!
Tears blind my eyes,
And I bite through my lip.

Will they sorrow for us, the pilot and me?
Will someone fly overhead looking for signs?

Fire or ice? Devoured or frozen?
Animal signs, teeth marks on bloody remains?

We cry out now!
Seconds to utter our last human sounds!

Then in the miracle of another breath
The plane responds to a last pull of the wheel,
Something suddenly works!
The last drops of fuel!!

Up and away!

And then back down to the runway,
Swishing through grass
on the very last inch of the field.

The pilot grins and signals "OK"!
And I happily awake to the alarm of the bedside clock.

Izzy Spahiu*

An Aviary Issue

You'd never know just how moist and suffocating a space can truly be without experiencing it. Feeling like every breath you take is a waste of time and energy because it doesn't even feel like you took any oxygen in. Doesn't feel like your lungs got so much as a sample of what it needs to keep you going. Of course, that was the point. Windows barred with iron and coated in blankets of dust. Walls coated in moss with the only water being the buckets scattered across the cold stone floor and dissipating into the already terribly muggy air, accompanied by the noxious odor of death. This room, dirty and meek, filled only with the sound of labored breaths of the children sitting in pristine silver or gold cages. Bird cages that kept them safe and sound in captivity. Dozens of children, some as young as toddlers and some as old as teenagers, but all with one uniting feature. Their wings.

Colors, shapes and sizes of varying degree. Some small and fluffy, with tiny feathers that could do nothing but flap away at the air. Others with wingspans twice that of a normal bird, easy to take flight and escape the woes and sorrows of the world, were they not clipped. Girls and boys sat, dirty and hungry, not having eaten for days or weeks, some even already dead and beginning to rot. Nobody had bought them on time. Every piece of gold traded was a child in new hands. Sometimes they would get lucky and find themselves living the good life. Perhaps as a housekeeper, or nanny, being fed well and given allowances and free time to enjoy themselves. In most cases, however, that was more of a fever dream. Especially for Zephyr.
An avian girl with auburn wings decorated with browned tips that were carefully preened and kept as pristine and pretty as she could manage. Hours and hours spent gently running her dirty, calloused and bruised fingers through every single feather over and over again. She was determined to make a good impression at the next auction. The next, and the next, and the next if need be. She wanted that fever dream. She wanted to find a family for herself, and she knew in her heart that if she just looked pretty enough then she would have a shot. Zephyr wanted the life that she pictured in her head. She wanted somewhere soft to lay her head and sleep, and warm food to eat. Who's to say that she couldn't have her dream?

Zephyr stood, using the warped image of herself in the bars of her cage as her only thing remotely close to a mirror. She clenched her

jaw with every stubborn feather and shook her head every so often when she felt her eyes grow heavier and heavier. So tired. Zephyr was always so, so tired. It didn't matter what she did about it, she could only ever stay awake for so long. She stretched and she yawned and slept throughout every night, but she was still ever so sleepy. Zephyr looked around, eyeing the avians around her. She refused to be like them. If it was the last thing she did, she would escape and finally be happy in the big open world.

Zephyr felt her skin crawl when she heard the big heavy doors of their makeshift dungeon open. She quickly sat, upright and crisscross like the polite little girl that she knew nice families would like. She took a deep breath and feigned a smile that quickly dropped when she saw that girl walk in. That girl with rosy, pink hair that framed her pale cheeks and lay in waves down to her lower back. Soft hazel eyes scanned the room, slightly afraid of the darkness and the smell that came with it, but she was too stubborn to turn back now.

The girl managed all of three steps, the soft click of her heel against the floor echoing throughout the room before she flinched at the sound of Zephyr's voice. "You're not supposed to be here!" Hushed voices from all the still breathing avians quickly thrown Zephyr's way, demanding she shut up, be quiet, or even just rot already. Zephyr shriveled a bit, visibly annoyed and crossing her arms as she laid herself down on her cold cage floor. Mimi was quiet as she waited for the echoes to stop before gently stepping further into the room. Carefully, she reached into the messenger bag at her side and started to hand out small bits of food to the avians. Gently shushing them and greeting every single one with warming smiles as she gave them whatever bits of food she could manage to steal from the kitchen upstairs. Really, it was rather unbecoming of a princess such as herself.

Adjusting the small tiara atop her head, the girl finally came to Zephyr's side. She gently knelt down, greeting Zephyr with the same warm smile as the rest. Although it was returned with a scowl. Zephyr scoffed when the girl gently held out an apple, half eaten and browned but an apple nonetheless. Zephyr looked up into the girl's kind eyes before sharply slapping the apple away, earning a small squeak of surprise from the girl as she jerked her hand back. "Will you cut that out!? You're not even supposed to be down here! Go back upstairs to your stupid castle!" Zephyr hissed, their voice in a

whisper as the other avians groaned amongst themselves and silently judged her. The girl took a look at her hand and sighed to herself before looking at Zephyr again. "Don't be silly. How can I possibly enjoy myself knowing that you all are down here?" She spoke. Her voice was soft and sweet, speaking to Zephyr as if they were of equal status.

Zephyr rolled her eyes. "Yeah, yeah.... Pity, pity, pity. If you feel so bad for us, then hurry up and find us homes!" She spat. Mimi sighed. "I told you already, I can't do that! My father doesn't even know that I come down here to begin with! I'm not sure he even knows that I'm aware of this place at all! Besides, they're not homes, Zephyr! They're just new prisons!" The girl tried to explain, probably for the hundredth time given the lack of reaction from Zephyr or any of the other avians. Zephyr crossed her arms again and leaned her back against the bars of her cage as she glared at the princess. "Right. Princess Mimi Poinsettia of the ever so charismatic Rosenveille royals, cares oh so much about her little zoo." She retorted sarcastically. Mimi's cheeks puffed as she huffed and sighed exasperatedly. "I do care, Zephyr! I wish you could see that! I want to help you all so badly, but I have no choice! This is not my kingdom! I have no say in anything here!" She argued, eliciting a small smirk from Zephyr when she noticed she was getting under the royal's skin. "Awe, you poor thing. All the way upstairs, tortured by a cruel, beautifully sad skylight to sleep in while you wear your torturously pretty silk nightgowns and sparkly dresses and little heels." Zephyr hummed on and on, meanwhile Mimi's face quickly flushed red from the frustration.

"Hey! I may not have the same problems as you, but that doesn't mean I don't have any problems at all! I spend my only free time coming down here to help you, and yet all you can do is be mean to me!"

"I didn't ask for your help!" Zephyr quickly argued and leaned close, almost as if to intimidate Mimi.

"Well, you need it!" Mimi huffed exasperatedly as she stood, kicking the side of Zephyr's cage in frustration. "You'll understand one day, you stubborn birdie!" Mimi barely managed to control her volume as she turned on her heel and stormed off to the exit, turning back around to speak, "Goodnight, everyone EXCEPT Zephyr!" She called out quietly and stuck her tongue out at Zephyr. Zephyr replied

by sticking her own tongue out before Mimi closed the door and stormed back upstairs.

"God! That bird can be so stubborn! Whoever thought an avian could be so rude! I was only trying to help!" Mimi ranted and rambled to herself as she gently dusted off her dress, already panting halfway up the steps. She took a deep breath, trying to calm herself. "Relax, Mimi. Such anger is very unbecoming of a princess. Just do as mother always said. Chin up, back straight, and let your confidence speak for itself." She hummed and managed a small smile at the fond image of her mother. Queen Rose, who had the gentlest smile and calmest aura about her. If she were still around, surely this wouldn't be happening. Mimi's steps slowed to a stop as she turned her head, looking behind her at the deep dark shadows below that hid the dungeon her father ran. An iron fist truly does let one get away with wicked deeds. Mimi felt a lump in her throat that she quickly tried to swallow, trying to wipe away the tears welling in her eyes. "I can do this. I know that I can. Mother would be proud to see me like this. To see me do everything I can to fight for what's right and help those in need!" She whispered to herself and looked back up the stairs, unable to see the top, though the cracks in the walls let her see outside as the beautiful night sky, dusted in stars without a cloud to be seen.

Mimi took another breath, deep and steady, to calm herself. "I hope you're watching me, mother. I hope that I'm making you happy, wherever you are." She mumbled as she stepped closer to the biggest crack she could find, resting her hands on the wall and staring out at the beautiful sight. Mimi thought about those precious memories she had with her dear mother. Queen Rose was the most democratic queen to ever exist. Perhaps that's why she and the king held separate sleeping quarters. Mimi couldn't help scowling a bit at the memories of her father trying to deprogram her, trying to teach her traditional values and motherly intuition. He couldn't possibly have a freethinker as his heir. Rules are rules, as they say. Mimi clenched her jaw, lost in her own thoughts. Her anger and frustration left her fists trembling until something finally seemed to snap her out of her daze. The sound of footsteps.

The clicking of shoes against the stairs was like a nightmare. Mimi could feel her heart beating out of her chest as she looked up at the shadow, she could see growing bigger from someone coming down the stairs with painfully slow steps. The young princess quickly held

her hands over her mouth and nose to silence herself completely. She couldn't let herself get caught. God only knows what the king might do to her if he knew what she was up to, let alone the fact that she knew all about his little avian trafficking ring. She quickly looked around her, desperate for an escape. There had to be a way out of this. With tears in her eyes and terror in her heart, Mimi's gaze quickly fixed the only window she could find with no glass. This part of the castle was hardly ever tended to, so it wasn't exactly surprising to see. Mimi swiftly took her opportunity, taking off her heels and shoving them into her bag to silence her steps and quickly making a dive for the window.

With quiet labored breaths and trembling hands, she dragged her own small, frail body out of the stone hole in the wall and lowered herself down, using a loose stone that just barely poked out from the castle wall to support her weight as she dangled herself out of the window. Her dress flapped in the wild winds of the shore. Mimi always hated how close the castle was to the sea, and this moment was definitely no exception as she desperately tried not to look down at the rolling tides crashing against the ground far below her. Still, she held her breath the best she could and lowered her hands to rest against the wall in front of her, desperately praying that the brick holding her entire weight would hold steady. Mimi rested her forehead against the wall, shuddering from the cold and listening to every step she heard, waiting for whoever it was to pass as she hoped with all her heart that the trembling of her legs was from her own fear, and not the brick slowly dislodging from the busted wall that had long given up on it.

ShawnaLee W. Kwashnak

Champ Percheron

Roberta Whitman Hoff

Live Oak Majesties

Inspired by Walt Whitman

Something so different you begin to sense you've never seen such beauty, I feel more alive as if in a dream as I step thoughtfully in awe among Live Oaks with bending branches resting against the Earth. They're stretching their winding, huge treelike arms as if waiting to wake when no one's looking. I'm pausing, my breathing relaxing into

a new astonishing window to the world, to feel the universe connected,
To see a Live Oak. I try to listen to hear if they can speak.
Or to see if I can hear them the way an artist might hear them as he draws
their designs, crevices and soul. I hear I feel a whisper of gorgeous greys like a foaming sea and winding branches like dance.

I take them in as I would a waterfall or Northern Lights.
There's so many trees planted hear in the park. Each one unique in the way the branches grow and reach, the way a fingerprint is unrepeatable. Do they know each other, feel and speak to each other beneath the ground with their sensing roots? A forest of friends.

I think of the people who planted these trees 400, 300, 200, 50 years ago with a vision of love. Like Whitman, I am an awestruck child among these quiet giants reminiscent of the kings of Tolkein's world. The Live Oaks, queens and kings of the park for all beings, ducks and people to be astonished at nature's wonder and fall in step with Eden.

As I walk through hundreds of years of growth, I am grateful of those who loved trees before me, of Whitman's childlike wonder;
I carry home a few sticks that have fallen to the ground to my room as
the poet Whitman had done when he was here. I feel okay to be a little tree
strange about the elegant, ineffable Live Oaks of New Orleans.

Christopher Boniecki

Vagabond King

Someone's son fell into the Grand Canyon today.
A thousand miles away, a wake is being planned.
I wonder if he pictured the Yahoo article about his death as he plummeted.
I wonder if he realized he had a one-of-a-kind view.

There's a story being written by an arguing couple in Lisbon.
If only I could eavesdrop across the Atlantic.
The prose would be beautiful.

There's an endangered whale, last of its species, shooting out telepathic signals,
searching for a family that was killed by a commercial fishing boat.
If I spoke whale, it would be the most touching interview,
unparalleled by even that of the most haunted Vietnam vet.

There's a Japanese mute sculpting monsters from a world inside his head.
Bringing them here is his only concern.
If I could visit that place, I'd understand where our spirit comes from.
I think.

Jade Strumski*

It was All in My Head

It was all in my head
that's what I tell myself at night
I can still see your face, your smile, your eyes, you're still alive in my mind
that's what I tell myself at night
I convince myself you're still sleeping next to me
or you're taking a shower or you're up making food
You'll come back to me, and I'll wake from this dream
that's what I tell myself at night

The door will open, and I'll see you walking in.
Your hands will be full, but I will run to you
Play our favorite songs on the radio and we'll drive to the fantasy in my mind
I can still hear your voice and feel your touch
You're alive in my head and you'll come back to me
that's what I tell myself at night

It was all in my head
We're back at school fucking around, skipping classes, and walking out
I take you to the roof and we get blinded by the sun
We used to lie to the teachers about where we were
I wish this day would never end and I hope to see you again
that's what I tell myself at night

The door will open, and I'll see you walking in.
Your hands will be full, but I will run to you
Play our favorite songs on the radio and
we'll drive to the fantasy in my mind
I can still hear your voice and feel your touch
You're alive in my head and you'll come back to me
that's what I tell myself at night

As I lay awake, you lay down next to me.
You whisper, "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to leave."
I try and grab your hand, or hold you close,
But nothing is there, and I can't feel you.
Maybe my mind pretends you are still there,
And perhaps I convince myself that

The door will open, and I'll see you walking in
Your hands will be full, but I will run to you
Play our favorite songs on the radio and
we'll drive to the fantasy in my mind
I can still hear your voice and feel your touch
You're alive in my head and you'll come back to me
that's what I tell myself at night

Izzy Spahiu*

My Pretty Red Hair

I've worn it long, and I've worn it short.
I've brushed and I've styled, and put in all the work.
I bleach it, dye it, and maintain its red hue,
But on every bad day, I can't help but feel blue.

I buy all these brushes and creams and sprays,
Wondering what style I might try today.
I've straightened and curled it,
Almost always with music.

I trim my undercut, fine and short.
Otherwise, my hair is just too much work.
For the rest of it, I trim, and I iron, and tease
Only for it to fall apart due to a subtle breeze.

My hair, thick and coarse with many split ends,
And the brands that I try, and borrow from friends.
I've tried oils and serums and masks and mousse,
But even when I style it, I just can't let it hang loose!

The way each strand tickles and scratches at my ears and my neck.
I just can't resist tying it up until it's bent!
Each curl made in vain and each pin was no use,
For the way my hair puts my mind through so much abuse.

But I need it to look cute, and pretty, and neat.
I need it to look so incredibly soft and sweet.
I want it to be shiny, and silky, and smooth.
I want to control the way that it moves.

Confidence is not the default, I'm afraid that's not true.
Not when I can't control this hair that I choose.
Confidence is earned, through tears, trial, and error.
Through the right choices made in the accessories I wear.

Headbands and scrunchies, even the right color bobby pins.
No matter what I pick, I just can't seem to win.
You win this round, you stubborn hair of mine.
I'll just put you in a bun until you fall back in line.

Maybe then you'll behave if I tie you up tight and keep you away.
Keep you out of my eyes, way up there is where you'll stay!
But I can't do that forever, and I can't possibly hide my bangs.
I need to hide the forehead they cover and the uneven eyeliner wings.

I suppose I'll try again, with yet another product to try.
"Trial and error," is what I said. Now, isn't that just a crime?
For each thing that I've tried, I can rate and compare,
But I just can't control my pretty red hair.

Aleysia Bennett*

The Wreckage I Carry

I lay in the dark, waiting for sleep
To shield me from the words said unthinking and bleak.
Covered in blankets, I sink head to toe
Into the mattress wide-eyed and shaky from blows.
We fought with the same old weapons on our tongues.
You were always ready for it because often you won.
"*You never listen to me!*" You repeat like a chant,
Waving away every word I left spoken or unsaid.
The pillows rest my head where I'm wounded and weak.
I wait a little longer until the door shuts, footsteps recede.
Soon the lamp rattles off and your breathing comes with ease,
Like a spell now reversed, my throat chokes from relief.
A blanket of darkness calls for that mythical calm
To sink tiny pockets of peace through my lungs.
They remind me of how normal really should feel,
While my heart settles down to a beat, steady and concealed.
Arms cage around my chest as my eyes shutter closed,
But they won't break arrowed words marked to echo when dawn rose.

Stephen Rogers*

Video Game Colorscapes

Lori Vella Bouchard

Where Are the Children?

Sunflower girls
Dandelion boys
Shy and aggressive
Or the reverse
Mostly sharing
Sometimes callous
Loudly awkward
Truthful hearts
Full of mischief

Tripping on snags
In drenching rain
Batting balls
Into Summer's sun
In the garden
Stretched on grass
Only daydreaming
Feasting on fantasy
Hope, enveloping them

Laughing at nothing
Searching and hiding
Confront or escape
Ostracized one minute
Welcomed back the next
Want to play today?
Come outside with us

Flying on wheels
To flee from the years
Ruthlessly chasing them
Where are the children?
Somewhere alive
Are spirited children
Playing, still children
The ones *we* used to be

Danielle Bass

Burying Generations

Althea Richards and her first husband, Delroy Fagan, a man of few words and a lot of money, came from the North side of Montserrat. On their wedding day, Dale, as many referred to him, was 38, and Althea was 19. There was a murmur dancing in the air along with the smell of incense within the walls of the Anglican church. Staying quiet when something feels wrong has a price; Dale could afford to pay that price. Althea's parents, Marge and Daniel, were married for 28 years, Marge was 18 and Daniel 29 on their wedding day, and although no photographic evidence exists, the murmuring could be assumed. On their daughter's wedding day, Marge stood at the front of the church, next to her husband, who stood next to the Pastor, who stood next to Dale. They all watched stoically as Althea made her way down the aisle.

Now newlywed, Althea took great pride in her appearance and her new title: wife. She had no thought of children, and Dale, at first, agreed with her decision. He admired her assertiveness but that was just the beginning. She was his wife; he had money, so he made the decisions. She became pregnant three months after their wedding day. The pregnancy resulted in a stillbirth. She buried that baby. She buried the pain of labor, she buried the pain of loss, she buried her autonomy, she buried her pride, she buried her desire to never be a mother, she buried the love she had for Dale, she buried the idea of having any sort of independence, she buried every possible desire she ever had.

Twice a week, several months after the miscarriage, Dale forcefully sought to bury his seed in her garden to bring forth the offspring he desperately wanted. Althea, no longer mentally present, buried feelings in tow, submitted to this abuse and surrendered her body. She became pregnant and 38 weeks later she gave birth to a baby girl. Staring at the newborn, she noted her beautiful light skin. As she grew, it seemed that she had taken the beauty and pride that Althea once held.

To bury is to conceal. Althea concealed the love she may have had for the child, as her thoughts of disgust toward her were intrusive. She often contemplated, quite menacingly, ways to subtly break down her daughter, frustrating the child to no end, constantly critiquing, nit-picking, demotivating, and using every negative word outside of her

given name to describe her.

The child endured years of this abuse. She protested in the beginning to deaf ears. Her mother dismissed her feelings and her father, busy with business, had no time for her. She buried the thought that she mattered in the world. Her mother, after being dismissed by her father, went on to have four more husbands and birthed four more children. Each birth caused both mother and child to bury themselves deeper and deeper. The firstborn became burdened with the responsibility of the four others and, unlike her mother, didn't carry a disdain for her brothers and sisters. Their innocent cries unearthed emotions that the firstborn buried and forgot about. In exchange for this unearthing, she buried her adolescence and became their primary caregiver, the primary provider of affection, though she had no example to draw from. She cared and took on the responsibility while her mother sought after a means of provision.

Becoming of age, the firstborn left home, falling in love with a boy from the North side of Montserrat. Her mother disapproved of him, of course, as he was poor and of the same age as her child. "What can he do for you?" she asked and in reply, the firstborn said, "What did he do for you?" referring to her father. Althea took her child's words and swallowed them along with the hateful taste in her mouth.

A year later, migrating to the United States, the firstborn and her love from the north side became pregnant. They struggled to find a home, they struggled to find food, they struggled to fight the feelings of homesickness, but they remembered they had nothing to return to. Her love found favor with a man in the post office, who knew a guy who knew a guy and got a job working as a bus driver. He worked, they saved, he worked, they saved, and a short 40 weeks later, they welcomed a baby girl.

Sitting in her hospital bed, the firstborn looked down at her baby in amazement that she had brought life into the world. The baby opened her eyes for a brief second, and in that moment the firstborn looked at her firstborn and decided to bury her hate, to bury her mother's distasteful words, to bury her mother's dismissiveness, to bury any feelings of being inferior, to bury her feelings of being scared, to bury her hope for having any form of success in exchange for her daughter's success, to bury her dreams, in exchange for her daughters dreams, to bury her desires in exchange for her daughters desires. She

buried it all. She released a small painful smile as tears rolled down her face. Her love grabbed her hand knowing instinctively what she was in the process of burying and silently vowed to also bury his hopes, his desires, his concern for his health, his concerns for his well-being in exchange for this family he felt he did not deserve.

He leaned his head against his love. “What are we going to name her? he asked.

Staring at the child, she saw her mother Althea, and her father, Dale; she saw her Grandfather Daniel, and her Grandmother Marge, and then she looked at her love.

“Nova,” she said.

“Nova,” he repeated.

“It means new.”

ShawnaLee Kwashnak

Motley Peering out the Window

Christopher Boniecki

Joshua Trees

Walking to my car I imagine being interviewed in prison as the head of a rebellion in a made-up country.
Anger doesn't heat you up in the cold like it should.
I breathe the freezing air of America, for now.
Homeless sit in corners like Joshua Trees.
If this cold kills me, carve a tomb out of the snow mound in the center of the parking lot and place me in it.
A dirty ice pyramid for me, the pharaoh of stoned working-class America, for now.
The clouds sit up there like castles,
Dead Oak trees on mountaintops surround them like gothic fences.
I feel like I'm a wanderer with nowhere else to go knocking on the door of Count Orlok.
Like his black hand will come out of his castle in the clouds and pluck me from this parking lot.
Sometimes I feel like all my childhood nightmares remembered me and are back on the prowl.
I've held this melancholy for a missing place I just can't find or fully remember.
Confusion has made a cradle of my head.
I'm like a mother harboring a killer.
Watching my child's eyes want to break everything beautiful.
I just lay around growing branches.

Kassidy Selmani*

Bliss

There is a moment when you realize that you are not your fears in the midst.
Staring into your black teacup watching the sugar cubes evanesce.
Sugar, go open up your clenched fist.

Collapsed in the tangled field of green, letting your skin photosynthesize
A tree; I am, undistinguished from nature I let sink me alive.
There is a moment when you realize that you are not your fears in the midst.

Calling the ocean my home while harvesting my fingers into the sand,
I let go and I float; my head, my body, soul, all merging with water.
Sugar, go open up your clenched fist.

The peace pulses in my bloodstream, breaking through the veins in my arms
I brew with content, and I burn as I melt into the earth.
There is a moment when you realize that you are not your fears in the midst.

My sweet tea smoothly washing down,
I grin while looking in; no cube to be seen.
Sugar, go open up your clenched fist.

Envelop yourself in a realm of bliss, do not fall prisoner to distress.
Abandon the wreck of your stress and head toward what is best.
There is a moment when you realize that you are not your fears in the midst.
Sugar, go open up your clenched fist.

Benjamin J. Chase

As Seen in the Fall

Amber maple leaf
dangles between branch and grass
on a spider's web.

Benjamin J. Chase

Plagued

I soil my hands
and pursue the plague.

I relish the wheezing
and click every pop-up ad.

I feign interest in every car
of the salesman's lot.

I accept all cookies
and promotional mailings.

I beat morning people
to mornings.

I solicit
Jehovah's Witnesses.

I don't avoid the plague.
It avoids me.

Jessica Barlow*

A Shoebox of Memories

Under my bed I keep a yellow shirt that my dad gave me
Under the yellow shirt sits a black-painted shoebox
With a big, wide hole cut in it as if it were a piggy bank
A piggy bank that holds all my memories as if they were all my loose change
Those memories don't fit into the puzzle that is my mind
That is why they stay in that shoebox and that shoebox stays under the yellow shirt
And that yellow shirt stays under my bed.

I keep on my wall all the pictures and letters from past friends
Those don't hide under anything, not like the shoebox does
They are pinned to the wall, the wall I pass every day when I leave
The wall I pass every day when I come home
But they don't hide, and no yellow shirt will change that
No yellow shirt will change that

The shoebox sits under the yellow shirt and the yellow shirt sits under my bed
My dad gave me that yellow shirt, but the memories stay in the shoebox
The memories stay in the shoebox, that's what I tell myself
But sometimes they get out and the puzzle tries to fit them
"But there isn't any room" I say
And the memories flood back to the shoebox which stays under the bed.

Madelyn Romano*

Yellow Dress by Wayne Thiebaud Collage Interpretation

Linda Merlino

Daddy Was a Coward

The road is lined with trees and furrowed by wide tire tracks deep enough to hide acorns. Overhead their branches knot together in a natural arch blocking the sun. The little girl sits in the back seat craning her neck to peer out the window. Looking out - looking in, she glances in measured moments between the landscape and the head of the man at the wheel. He lifts one hand and splays his fingers outward as he describes how, in the autumn, the leaves are dressed in the colors of crayons. "I will take you here next fall." He says this with the assurance of someone who always keeps his word.

"How much further is it, daddy?"

The man patiently answers each question. The little girl thinks he is a nice daddy not at all like what she hears about him through paper thin walls. She imagines he leads a movie star's life filled with laughter and excitement. Her life is devoid of sparkle, no frills, and sometimes scary. Daddy seems to know the names of every tree and flower. She wonders if he learned all the answers in books.

Her paternal grandparents have a home in New Hampshire. They have two houses. Who lives in two houses? The pair are unpacking dishes and glasses in the antiquated kitchen painted pale yellow. When she and daddy arrive the two do not look up. They stay heads down intent on their task. Daddy drops the little girl's hand and takes off his hat. The little girl is afraid of her grandmother, her demeanor is stern and impatient. She is sure that daddy is scared as well, but he keeps a smile on his face and waits. Grandmother brushes back a tendril from her forehead and stands. There are no hellos. His smile disappears and his shoulders turn concave as she demands every chore to be done. Daddy defers politely, gives her a bow and does her bidding. The grandfather seldom talks, when he does his words are soft with the accent of his first language. Everyone is busy, the child goes unacknowledged. Their eyes are averted to the walls behind her or to the floor under her feet. No hugs and kisses, nothing demonstrative to warm the cold house or the loveless kitchen. No baked dishes from the oven. No comfort food.

"Go upstairs and unpack."

The grandmother speaks. Her tone contemptuous and harsh. The child complies and drags her suitcase to the stairs. She wonders if

her grandmother knows how old she is. Who ever heard of a six-year-old unpacking without an adult? The stairs rise straight up. Each tread a narrow slat of wood and the railing, once majestic, is worn thin from decades of large hands rubbing moist palms into its grain. An instilled history of dread from old and young afraid of the treacherous climb. At the top of the stairs are two rooms. Which one is hers? Daddy's? Does she get to choose? At home she shares a bedroom with her mother where there are twin beds. The one against the wall is her mom's and the one near the window is hers.

The first room in this house is long and slender. There is one bed. Unmade. One window with drawn, orange, ruffled curtains. The child hates the color. A second bedroom is larger. A double bed with fresh sheets has been pushed beneath a window framed with white sheer draperies. The child looks in the closet. Her grandmother's robe hangs stiff. She backs out of the room, drops her suitcase, and turns onto the landing. Her heart is pounding.

"Daddy?" the small voice is a whisper. "Daddy"?

The child descends the steps. No answer. She walks towards the kitchen. How far does she have to venture before he answers? Maybe he is in the car and cannot hear her. Fearful that grandmother will come flying out the child tries one more time to call his name.

"Daddy?"

"What is it that you want child? Did your mother teach you to shout? In this house we do not yell when we want someone or something. Your father is cleaning the basement. Tell me why you need him."

The child did not like being six. When you are six, all you can do when an adult confronts you, is cry. If she were ten, she could say, 'I want to know where my daddy is sleeping? That room upstairs is stuffy and ugly, and I don't want to sleep there." The tears came and instead of words there were sobs. I want to tell you that you frighten me, that people have said you are beautiful and that I look like you. Please do not let that be true. If there was a resemblance between us you would love me. I imagine everything said would be lies. I've heard the grown-ups talking and they say most of what is happening is your fault. I believe them.

Silence.

"Look child I will not have you crying like this for no reason. If you have nothing to say, go back up those stairs, unpack your suitcase, and do not come down again until I tell you."

Grandmother stays at the foot of the steps and the child retreats. Up the stairs back to the orange drapes. She goes to the window, pulls back the fabric and outside shimmering against the fading, blue sky is a mountain rising from the bottom of the earth to infinity, like her daddy said. He did not lie. There is a mountain in the backyard. The window with the hideous curtains has a beautiful view to hide the truth.

Daddy was a coward. In the summer he would be gone, his belongings shipped three thousand miles away, into a house he has bought for his new family. The man and woman downstairs will disown the child. She will never see them again. Never return in the autumn. The untruth she did not know, nor the reasons to ignore the facts. The skewed integrity of her abandonment would be a conversation for another set of decades. In the now of that desertion being honest was simply avoided.

Ivan de Monbrison

The Painter

At almost fifty-six years old
I am myself another man,
Always walking on his head
As a finger slips down my ear
Maybe trying to get to the brain.
And even when I am sleepwalking
I can still spot this cute spider
crawling somewhere over the floor,
Until it reaches a dark corner
And gently starts weaving its web.
Then I pick up a book and read
Lines, that say nothing to me,
Written by some unknown writer
Who nobody cares about.
So I stand up and drop the book,
I cut my wrist, pick up a brush,
To paint on the window with my blood,
And with the snow falling behind
It makes some scary painting,
No doubt, a self-portrait, as usual.

Kaydence Soule*

Verdant Dreams

Joseph Adomavicia

I Recall (Friday Night Ritual)

I recall the way we always started our Friday evenings.
It began with you, Jonathan, and me
stopping by the corner booth at the Spatoon for dinner.
Afterwards, we made our way to the package store, Wine & Liquor,
which was conveniently across the street from Rite Aid in Town Plot.
We went to get our drinks and your discounted double packs of Kool Blue shorts
to hold us over for the rest of the evening.
I recall it like it was yesterday.
Whenever they didn't have lucky old number 7,
you bought what you used to call "bathtub Vodka,"
which is formally known as Dubra.
I recall what you drank it in and how you drank it as well—
You drank it in a 10 oz beveled cocktail glass on the rocks
with a splash of Coke, Pepsi, or whatever brand cola
we had gotten from Pat's IGA.
We would sit and watch the Yankees games while you chain-smoked.
I recall there was always deep conversation, peals of periodic laughter
because of our drunken shenanigans,
which all amounted to time well spent together.
This was our Friday night ritual.
I recall the time we were watching the Red Sox and the Yankees
when the Sox were in all-green uniforms.
It was April 20th, 2007.
The Sox were down 5-2 in the bottom of the 5th inning,
only to come surging back on hot bats,
scoring 5 runs in the 8th to end up winning the game!
It wasn't often for the best closer in MLB history,
Mo Rivera, to take an L, but he did.
I recall what I did in celebration too,
which deemed me the dumbass of the evening award.
I ran to the doorway of your room in excitement,
crouched down into a catcher's position,
turned my Sox hat backward, and taunted you and Jonathan
by impishly impersonating Jason Varitek in the batter's box.
Before I could dodge it, you took your slipper,

threw it and clocked me with it
like you were Mo throwing his signature cut fastball to end my games.
I recall our Friday night rituals.
The three of us, creating what we have now as memories that
Jonathan and I still keep alive long after your passing.

Joshua Harris*

Non-Sense Poem

PULP alternative fact or FICTIONalized lives of college girls just wanna have funhouse mirrors on the wall of shame culture

Home is where the heartbreak kid friendly neighborhood watch now or never forget me not today mister Smith goes to washington

Off the record breaking bad dog eat dog worldwide web of lies have short legs crossed with you and me against the world kid

Neck of the woods to grandmother's house we go big or go home base-d on what groundskeeper of the keys to the kingdom (of) coming of age

Easier said than done and over with or without you people place or the thing about that is but to do or diehard-core survival of the fit as a fiddler

Renee Duval*

Rotting Frogs

Nasty toad of a boy
he was, lumpy and sour, fat finger
pointed at my heart. He croaked something,
then, words I don't recall.
Venom words that sparked fire in my abdomen and bile in my stomach,
fervor scarring my skin.
I walked home alit and tainted.
That night, a putrid lotus ruptured within me
not holy or white,
but rotten and sultry like dead fish on a hot shore.
Thick and sticky buds uncurled, coughing, and hiccupping
their potent pollen that rusted my body and bones.
Fat froggy tears on my mother's lap as she pet my sticky warts.
I'd been cursed by his pointed finger which had found something
ugly within me, curling it around his finger and tugging it outward
like the string of a wound-up toy.
I swam in muddy waters, eyes crusted shut, not wanting to see.
Till the swamp drowned my belly and I burst out for air
could I finally see the faint rays of sun melting the warts away.

3rd Place - Art

Victoria Caiza*

A Girl and Her Dog

Thomas Warner-Crouch*

The Tutor

"I never knew you could float that perfectly," I said to him. But to me he looked like a corpse. A line at fourteen I'd regret for the rest of my life. A string of words he liked before he sank back to his feet in a glittering blue. He was thirty and shirtless. I was fourteen and naïve. That's the part the whole town griped about. They didn't understand. They never did. It took me years to figure out just what he was. How I wasn't his first. I couldn't understand why he was so tranquil about what could kill him one day.

"Would you like to join me," he said as I stared down at him.

"The waters too cold," I complained dipping my toes at the pool side while he floated the smell of chlorine painting our nostrils.

"You want to go inside, then," he prompted. "You'll get sunburned." His concern about pale white skin being corrupted, hurt didn't quite register. I never saw irony. He hoisted himself out of the pool, and I could see his bathing suit stuck to him.

"Let's go inside," the closest he came to a demand. "I'll help you with your homework," he said as he breathed in the fresh long fingers of sunlight that caressed black hair.

"Sure, but just studying this time," I said not realizing I winced.

"I promise this time, bud. No funny business." As he promised this, promised me, he grabbed my bare shoulder. There I knew of its possible break. I could have said I was surprised. But I wasn't. I'd come out of his white palace with little else to say, little else to remember than that he loved me. He cared. He taught. He risked. It was always his point.

We went inside the bleached white house. With equally white walls and a skylight that opened to an onyx floor of a foyer leading to a white carpeted living room with pale thin curtains the same ivory color. He led me straight ahead to the kitchen not letting go of my shoulder.

"Come on, I'll make you a drink. You like Mountain Dew, right?"

"As I recall," I remember uttering believing it sounded as mature as I was.

He inhaled through his nose, "Good. Why don't you sit in the living

room just through that door…." He paused as I cocked my head, my eyes glowing a brown glint he recognized. "I'll bring it to you," he reassured me. "Turn on the TV if you'd like."

I sat down on a suede couch that looked like pearls. The room was completely silent save for a faint stirring I heard in the kitchen. He opened the door to hand me my drink. "Here."

"Drink all of it," he muttered.

"You always said Mountain Dew was bad for you," I corrected him.

"True. But this is a special occasion."

What occasion?" I asked craning my head.

"Didn't you get an A on your English paper recently?"

"That's the occasion to have a drink I always have anyway?"

"Hey, you accepted the offer."

This was true, but as I looked at the ice inside the thick green liquid that floated directly to the top of the glass, I knew but never knew and never acknowledged what the intention was. To me, his motives were always polite, always well meaning. Except the liquid had the hue of storm clouds and ice a pale milk.

"Come on, don't be rude…drink it." Sounding like an invitation I gulped at the drink a menacing mix of sour and sweet. Though I should have only tasted sweet.

It took two minutes for me to collapse on the couch. I barely remembered anything but hazy wakefulness. My underpants pulled down. Moving my hand inadvertently across the cushions of the couch I noticed they were crusted, the colors imperceptible. Then, I didn't know what it was. Now I know too much.

The next day, I went to his house for only one purpose. As he only had me there for one purpose. I always thought he didn't truly know who I was. He only wished to see me in certain states and moods. We didn't know what we were capable of. We didn't want to know. I sat by the pool where he floated. His eyes closed to the sun. His arms still in the water. Entirely still. My eyes were glossed over as I watched him. I wasn't wearing a bathing suit and today, of all days, he didn't ask me to swim.

"The water's beautiful," he commented. This wasn't a lustful invitation but something more passive than that. This wasn't just a trick children rarely suspect of strangers. What he is to me. What he was then.

"I bet," I agreed in a monotone.

"What's wrong?" He sat up again from the pool. "You seem not yourself."

"I'm not."

"Well, I don't know why," he dismissed.

"Aren't I always this way?"

"What way, my love?" No disguise.

"A kid. A child you fuck."

"What?"

"Wait, I should give you credit for one thing. You drugged me first."

"I don't understand what the hell you're talking about."

"They warned me about this in the fourth grade, and I still didn't listen in the ninth."

"What do you mean listen?" he asked, still floating. Eyes shut.

"How many?"

"Before you?" he stated in admission. "None."

"I don't believe you."

"What else do you want?" I grabbed something that had been protruding from my pocket. Wondering how it would taste if I stuck it in his mouth. I couldn't do it from where I was standing. It was a fantasy of mine. As I was to him.

His eyes opened when he heard the click. One phrase interrupted by a blast a blow to his right eye. The water a crimson red morphed with pale translucent blue. He floated. Not in a way that was light but as if a weight I imagine were attached to him. I carry a weight even now though I'm not sorry.

The water began to turn purple as the sirens wailed. I didn't put up a struggle.

Veronica Caiza*

Waiting

Elisabeth Kennedy

Purslane (Portulaca oleracea)

unrelenting sun & heat
have hell-scaped the garden

& we all tried so hard
to be good
expecting rain

now the brown heads of something
like flowers
crackle in hot winds

& wondrously
a fleshy pink stem snakes
green in the gray dirt

only by fearing the act of transpiration
only by holding breath until nightfall
only by switching photosynthesis
until cactus-like
& living in its own personal desert
—it thrives

some may think it's a weedy thing
a wee greedy thing
but wait until you see
the size
of that taproot

when night falls and the air is cooler
stomata unseal to uptake carbon dioxide
retain water in pouches
of fat rain barrel leaves

humans thirst for the lemon pepper tang
luscious & spicy — high notes
for a summer salad

fine too as a windowsill ornamental
but preferring to survive punishment
shapeshifting through heat
alive & well

Abigail Brague*

Cosmic Curiosity

Beneath the stars, beyond the sky,
Where whispers float and mysteries lie,
What secrets drift in the vast unknown,
In places where no light has shone?
Are there worlds we've yet to touch,
With lives that dream, that long, that clutch?
What songs are sung by distant moons,
Or truths that hum in silent tunes?
Are there minds that think in ways we can't,
In colors we cannot yet chant?
What wonders wait in the black unknown,
In spaces where no words have grown?
Do the stars converse in codes so deep,
Of ancient tales they wish to keep?
And what of the dark, where light can't reach,
What stories does the void still teach?
The universe, a boundless sea,
Of things unseen, of what could be.
Endless and wide, yet still untold—
The mysteries of the great unknown.

Andy Miller*

Who Died in Passchendaele in Age of Old

No longer heard the guns below
Those sparks that light a horrid glow
But here and now who could know
Of those soldiers sent far from home
In Passchendaele where poppies grow.
In marked field they lie down low
Under white crosses row on row
Lie lost soldiers far from home
Across the ocean to war they go
To Passchendaele where mud does flow.
When air does burn, blood does show
The rivers broken, the rain still blows
Flooding those fields down below
Drowning soldiers far from home
Who died for Passchendaele long ago.
Over it all green fields flow
Between their cross in their row
Fail to tell the tale, to show
Of soldiers sent far from home
In Passchendaele the crosses know.

Professor Arturo

Momma's Boy

"Want" is a four-letter word.
(my father)

I wasn't raised as wunna these "modern people" of this "gimme-gimme-gimme" generation. I'm from the old school and I feel that parents should not give their children everything they want. A part of parenting is the ability to say "no". I was raised in a traditional two-parent home in a time when parents gave their children themselves (instead of every material possession imaginable). I always wanted a dog, but my father said that would be another mouth to feed. There were no such things as Air Jordans. My contemporaries and I had Converse All-Stars, US Keds, P.F. Flyers and green army Surplus tennis shoes. We were happy with what we had. Boys did "boy things" and girls did "girl things" (except for some exceptions).

Recently a close female family member visited my residence for a few days and brought her (soon-to-be) 30-something-year-old son along for the jaunt. During the sojourn he turned out to be a deplorable classless pig with no perceptible socially redeeming values. He was deadest of dead weight and was a narcissist before the term was recently en vogue. He wasn't bad news. He was the worst of the worst of the worst of the baddest of bad news and a personality only a mother could love. Suffice it to say that his life was no profile in courage and was more deplorable than certain US President (name your choice). He was a master manipulator who often had his Momma cleaning his own house and paying for his own mortgage.

His grandmother (who died recently) was a decent Godly woman. His mother was a decent Godly woman. His lady friends were a bit (uh) ghettoish…straight from central casting with tattoos, baby bangs, lying, lack of accountability, fake nails, fake hair, fake butt, too much makeup, a sense of entitlement, attitude and baby daddies (y'all know the type).

His mother was a lady of achievement with career aspirations who was the best at what she did and does. During his time on this planet she gave him the best of the best of the best: a menagerie of animals

(I never had a dog. My father figured it was another mouth to feed), overnight camping and overseas excursions, all you can consume birthday celebrations, the most prestigious schools, hairstylists, spa treatments, the latest footwear and stylish clothing, overseas trips and everything his hoggish, greedy, gluttonous self-indulgent heart desired. It broke my heart apart when I perceived how he treated his mother. He used her like a walking ATM machine and would comment on her personal choices of men as a woman (whereas sons should not be commenting on a lady's personal business – especially his Momma). It was embarrassing.

And he would want more, more and MORE. He was chintzy. He wouldn't give a crippled crab a toothpick for a crutch (if he owned the who-o-o-ole lumberyard). When we went out to dinner he ordered everything on the menu, but didn't cover one iota of the bill and never offered the barest part of even the most minimal pittance for the tip. Before I met him my family member and I proposed an overseas trip to somewhere for the three of us. My present attitude after meeting him is that I would never entertain the remotest of a scintilla of such an idea, whereas, three would go and two would pay for it. I wasn't like his Momma who insisted that, "He's been traumatized ever since the recent death of his grandmother and when his girlfriend who left him."

I was traumatized too when they left and I discovered that some of my top shelf toiletries vanished. I was traumatized too when a hold can of shaving cream vanished and I had to go to the store in the snow to get more. I was traumatized too when I observed the manner in which he addressed his own mother. In my perspective all hope for him as a decent man…vanished.

Many many moons ago his Momma died and he found himself alone in the world.

3rd Place - Art

Archie Vieira*

Watch

Elisabeth Kennedy

Rosy Oblivion

A strawberry, cut,
fleshed edge tipped
against the clear plastic
of someone's takeout container,
knows not its own perfume.

One green fin of crumpled leaf,
shed, rests beside scarlet skin
pocked with tiny black seeds
that will never reproduce.

Crimson leaf litter decomposes
on forest floor. Humus
animates spring saplings
into flushed yawning sky
where bees & fireflies rise.

No matter what lies ahead,
the slippery red cavern
of the newborn's mouth,
gaping watery thirst-hole,
wails inconsolably into
the rest of its days.

In the hot red room
roses catch fire
& child-blood soaks
the thin mattress
to reveal the story
of the nothing
leaving her
holding nothing.

Mary E. Tetreault

Birthday

In the dim room
Light the candles – one by one.
Flames reflect in eyes around the table.

Only one of us blows out the fire
With one big inhale first,
Then a fast breath out, the fire dwindles to smoke,
A secret wish with no expectation of fulfilment.

Slices – one by one –
The first is for the wishing fire fighter.
Then one for each, even for the plate in front of an empty chair…
It will walk home wrapped in a party napkin
To Uncle Pete, as usual asleep in his recliner…
Almost gone, he still likes his sweets,
And to be remembered.

The crumbs fall for Kitty, a meowing ball of fur.

Christopher Boniecki

Delicious Blue Gold

Take every bit of me and make a chair out of it
Or use it for some awful IPA with cool packaging.
You've been watching the fire for hours.
Excited by the climax of a crackle
Or the twist of throwing a new log on
To watch the color hop 'round.
You'd kill me if you knew.
You'd mourn me first.
You're quite the consequentialist.

Sitting like a shaman in a shadowy tent
You make me feel like a colonist on your family's land
Like I've torn your name into a world you don't understand.
I hesitate to open the sliding glass door.
This door always takes a good yank to open
And you look like you're at peace.

Sitting like a king smothered by dead men's expectations.
I'm sorry for this.
I wish my blood could be siphoned off and fill you into the man you were.
If I could breathe that air of life into you I would.
I swear I would.
I'd be a mindless horsehoe crab.
Life shouldn't be hoarded.
I'll give all of mine away like you should've.
I'll pull my heart out and weigh it over and over again.
I swear to you the scale will always tip in my favor.
I owe you that much.
You deserve a son who will fight for your name.

Candace Hall

December at a Craft Store: A Pantoum

We don't have Christmas. We have Hannukah, I explained
Answering the curious customer behind me in the check-out lane.
Our decorations – dreidels, menorahs, gelt – have meaning like yours.
Our parties, like yours, celebrate ancient miracles with family, friends.

Answering the customer still curious behind me in the check-out lane
Christmas and Hannukah similar only by season, dissimilar religions,
Our parties, like yours, celebrate ancient miracles with family, friends.
Oh, a Jew, she disparaged. In competition with Jesus, Santa Claus.

Christmas and Hannukah similar only by season, dissimilar religions,
Different religions, I repeated. *But sharing morals, ethics, kindness, care.*
Oh, a Jew, she disparaged. In competition with Jesus, Santa Claus.
You have money, she scoffed, speak a secret language. Not like
everyone else.

Different religions, I agreed. *But sharing morals, ethics, kindness, care.*
Our decorations – dreidels, menorahs, gelt – have meaning like yours
You have money, she scoffed, speak a secret language. Not like
everyone else.
We don't have Christmas, I agreed. *We had the Holocaust.*

Joseph R. Adomavicia

Out of Mind Experience

I envy those
who are "out of their minds."
If I were ever so lucky
to be declared so
it would mean
I'd know a modicum of silence,
a patient type of peace.
One could even say it's
a simple solitude
I'd longed for
yet never could have.
For a day in my mind
is a day spent in perdition
created by a master of cruelty
who knows nothing but
his own demise.

Rue McFarlane*

Nostalgia

Joshua Harris*

Video Home System

"It's not even that rare, Andy. I am *begging* you to let me give you money here."

I was beginning to sound whiny. The hour of haggling was making me lose my edge. Andy reclined against the telephone pole and ran a hand through his greasy blonde hair. It was pretty short, but you could tell he didn't clean it.

"You wouldn't be coming to me if it wasn't rare. Besides, I don't care how much cash you give me. Money can't buy sentimental value."

I rolled my eyes, and they came back down on the gaudy VHS tape poking out of his satchel, placed there as if to tease me.

"Oh please, how much sentimental value can a movie called '*Slaughter of the Trailwalkers*' have for you?"

Andy puffed out his chest a little and jutted out his receding chin.

"My dad and I would watch it every Sunday when I was little. Back then it was the only VHS we had." he said, almost proud of his past poverty.

I bit my lip, bitter at his nostalgia.

"And your father let you watch 'Slaughter of the Trailwalkers' as a little kid? Jeez, no wonder you're so messed up."

Andy stood straight, the orange setting sun now shining across his flat face.

"I'll have you know that this movie was groundbreaking in the Western genre. It takes place on the Great Plains. It's the first to feature authentic members of the Whitefeet tribe on film, AND-"

"And I can find all of that out by watching it. 400 dollars."

I came with 500, but I didn't want to play my full hand.

"No way José," he said petulantly.

"You wouldn't have met me here if you weren't able to be bought."

"Untrue," he said in the same tone. "I came to mock you. Ha. Ha."

Each "Ha" was spaced out for emphasis. I paused for a moment. I let the tension build. I'd known Andy since middle school, I knew how

to play him. He's a sucker when he thinks he's got you beat, when he thinks he's in control. But he seemed truly steadfast in his refusal. As assured as I felt, I knew that Andy wasn't above naked mockery. And that was a risk I couldn't take.

"650 and you tell me everything you know about the movie," I said pulling the money out of my wallet.

"I've got 500 here, I'll get you the rest next week when I get paid."

Andy's face dropped, as if I'd pulled a rotten fish out of my pocket.

"Holy crap. You really want this damn thing."

"Bad," I nodded. "Now are you in?"

It was Andy's turn to pause. After a few seconds his face twisted into a poorly hidden grin.

"Why? What's a crappy little Western really worth to you?"

It's priceless.

"650 dollars. The girl I'm talking to likes Westerns, I wanna have something to talk to her about," I said through a clenched jaw.

Andy's sneering grin blossomed.

"Ah, a girl. Yeah I could see that. The things we do for love, right? Ha ha ha ha. Sure. Just make sure I get the rest of the money."

His laugh was a rattling cluster now. I held out the money, but when he reached for it, I held tight until he pulled out the VHS in turn. When I reached for it, he pretended to yank it away just to mess with me, but we made the trade without issue.

"Pleasure doing business with you, chap," Andy said in a mock posh accent.

I placed my precious cargo in my bag and turned to make the long walk to the bus stop.

"Hey!" Andy said before I got too far away. I turned and looked.

"Good luck with that girl," he said with a smile.

That night I stayed up late and watched the entire two-and-a-half hour movie. I didn't do any homework that night. It was a bloody film, roughly shot, but the grit of the plot made it acceptable. The lighting and the coloring were what shined, though. Plenty of burnt sunsets bathing the world in flame orange. I wish I could say I've seen better, but it was the only Western I'd even seen before.

The next day I was half-awake in classes. There was no doubt in my mind I failed my math test, but I was too tired and too excited to really care. The bad grade would bite, but something told me one of my parents would forget soon enough. At lunch Andy gave me some trivia and the rest of the school day went off without a hitch.

That night I set the table with my Dad as fast as I could. Mom and my sister get home pretty late, so he usually makes dinner, and I help him set it. In no time at all it was just him and I, alone in the dimly lit kitchen. This was the only time he and I had one-on-one time. He worked most of the day and was beholden to his evening newspaper and whiskey for the rest. I cleared my throat.

"Hey Dad, you like that Ron Wayne guy right?"

He still had a thousand-yard stare, though I could've sworn the familiar name started to snap him out of it.

"Mm? Ron Wayne? Yeah, a movie ain't a Western without him." he said vacantly as he chewed his couscous and wiped some from his chevron mustache.

"Well, I had the fortune of seeing him in '*Slaughter of the Trailwalkers*' last night. I know you like all those old Westerns, so I was wondering if you'd be able to fact check the trivia a friend gave me on it." I said airily, with the faintest trace of hope.

And just as his shell seemed to break he spoke the words: "Last night? Not studying? What about your test?"

Victoria Caiza *

Self Portrait

Lori Vella Bouchard

Empty Bottle

You abandon me again
Just shy of two years
I let you back in
Made room in my life
You were persistent
Would not be ignored
Now you want freedom
You are bored with me

Giddy moments together -
Fallen leaves, storm surges…
Without your naughty influence
I'd never have done those things
I need you now the most
You've nothing left to give me
You declare expressionless
While inching closer to the exit

Of course he'll follow you
He's like you that way.
You introduced him to me
I got to know him better
He'd rather be with you
You're taking him away
Just as I'm finally learning
There is love after loss

I knew you had a cruel streak
Living dormant inside you
I overlooked it, since
I grew to love you
You have a stranglehold on me
The ultimate advantage -
Your menacing threat to leave me

I bend to your will
As trees bend to the wind
You will ride this wind -
Blow out of my life
A second time
Maybe third – I lost count
There aren't enough minutes
Left to wait thirty years
For you to come back
I want to swear at you
Now, here, loud
Massive messy obscenity
Dashed across the page
But that wouldn't be proper
You persuaded me
To be improper with you
I admit I liked it.

You are but one
Of a billion tiny things
Coming in and out of life
A dot of sand in the desert
Empty bottle in the ocean
Scrape of dirt on the planet
A bite of rotting meat
In a stinking landfill…

Listen to me lie -
You son of a bitch.

Joseph R. Adomavicia

Your Side of the Bed

It's been months now, and still, your side of the bed is empty. The right side, furthest from the door. In the early morning before I left for work, I remember how the morning sun would shine through the blinds onto the gentle tones of your hair and skin. I'd kiss you on your forehead, tuck you in, and whisper "I love you" before I left for the day. You'd murmur back "I love me too". I miss your in the moment humor. Now I sleep on your side of the bed, the right side, although it's the wrong side for me to sleep on, but in ways, it keeps me closer to you. And maybe since there was no goodbye, if I sleep on your side of the bed, maybe, just maybe, I'll see you in my dreams to do so. Losing you was much harder without at least a goodbye. It was out of our control. Was it fate? Was it destiny? Did it really have to be this way? This bed and my heart are both now like an empty nest. The nest that nurtured our love, now nurtures it alone.

Christopher Boniecki

Furniture Emotions

You stand there, cowardly trying to disassociate and merge souls with an ottoman.
Have your Jesus spit in my face at my execution.
You all can do all your daily damning on me.
I've been playing your game for years, why'd I quit now?
It never mattered in the first place,
There's a dirty rabid dog coming for you.
At night when you're trying to be dead it trots through alleys tryna sniff you out.
During the day when you're trying to be furniture it'll snap you out of it.
The euphoric burn of fangs injecting into you that mean disease.
Making you wanna bite and seize
Like a beautiful human sickness,
Like a rainbow in an oil slick,
A comet melting in a green acid cloud.
You three eyed stag
Have you ever wanted to gouge like this?
I wanna see my blood on your antlers.
It'd be better than us both lying in an empty room
Our tears imprinted in the wallpaper.

Melanie Redline*

Chocolate Kiss

Pamela Thomas*

The Ring

She held up her hand to admire the beautiful ring he had given her. It dazzled in the noonday sunlight. The black butterfly diamond represented the love they had for each other. How it evolved from a cocoon to a full-blown butterfly. "It had been a struggle," Elizabeth thought, as she jumped into the car to go pick him up from work. A struggle that was worth the prize of becoming his wife.

Loving him wasn't easy, but she was sure that loving her wasn't that easy either. They were both broken but in different places. It was a long tedious five years of dating, but from the moment she laid eyes on him she knew he was the one. She hadn't dated since her divorce twenty years ago. Being a single parent of four children with all different personalities took up a lot of her emotional energy.

Elizabeth pondered in her heart the joys and pains of raising the children. They turned out pretty good, she thought feeling inner satisfaction.

All but one went to college and had good jobs. The one that didn't go to college opened her own business. Elizabeth remembered telling her college wasn't for everyone. Those were some difficult days. Emotionally draining, Elizabeth shuddered as she shook her head back and forth.

Yes, it's over now, but the entire family had to get involved keeping Caroline cheered up. She wanted a college degree like her siblings. God knows she tried. The entire family made it a family project to motivate her regardless of what endeavor she was pursuing. Caroline finally decided to open a business helping children at risk. She got an A.S. degree in early education and her career had taken off and exceeded all expectations.

She pulled the car into a parking space to wait. Ten minutes had passed and there wasn't any sign of him. "He's usually one of the first ones out of the building," she thought to herself.

Although it was Caroline's business a lot of people gave Elizabeth a lot of the credit for the success of it. Including Caroline. Elizabeth had worked the business with Caroline for years until she turned it over completely to her. Caroline was mature and confident enough to move it forward.

Most people saw Elizabeth as a visionary. Someone who could see the good in everyone. That's why when she and John's path crossed, and they started dating, people were excited. Lizzy was 55 and John was 60. They both looked twenty years younger than they were. Eliabeth had moved to the town twenty years ago. John moved there about seven years.

No one knew where John had come from. He seemed to just drop out of the sky. He was helpful and a likable person. He worked hard and stayed to himself. John had a factory job, but in his spare time he started his own lawn service. That's how he and Elizabeth met.

John was landscaping the yard at Caroline's business one day when Elizabeth stopped by to bring some fresh baked cookies. They were introduced, exchanged numbers, and it took off from there.

"Oh, there he is", she said happily to herself. Looking at him made her heartbeat faster and her knees weak. She smiled again tenderly. She couldn't wait until the wedding. "He had a past," she thought. "But we all do." She always thought his temper had something to do with his past. "That's all over now," she assured herself.

Although he never speaks of it, Elizabeth thinks he used to drink. "I will let him tell me on his own timing," she would say to Caroline.

All the other children were on board with her relationship. All but Caroline. She really couldn't say Caroline wasn't on board, but she asked the most questions concerning her and John. They just wanted her to be sure. "Caroline is the only one who thinks I'm too soft. Too kind. Not careful of my blindside," she would say.

Elizabeth smiled to herself and shook her head. Amazing how people are. When they need you there for them, they don't question how kind you are. However, when you do it for someone else, they want to label you naïve and too kind.

Elizabeth smiled as John passed right by the car. He wouldn't look her way. "Wait a minute," she said, "was that two police officers putting John into a police car?"

She must have been in shock because she realized John was in handcuffs the entire time and was led out of the building. Her head began to spin as she tried to figure out what had happened.

At that time Carolina and Chrissy (her other daughter) began knocking on the window. What is Chrissy doing here?" she said to herself. "Shouldn't she be at work?" Chrissy was a psychologist. And a good one, if you asked Elizabeth. Chrissy was always trying to counsel her mom. Give her advice.

She would say, "Mom stop being a rescuer and an enabler. Go talk to someone. Let them help you figure it out before you make the same mistake."

Elizabeth slowly unlocked her car door. "What's going on here? Do you know?" she asked. "Where are they taking John?"

"Come on, Mom", said Chrissy, helping Elizabeth out of the car. "We can talk when we get to the house." A small crowd of workers had gathered in the parking lot. Although Elizabeth allowed herself to be led away by her daughters, she still wanted to know what was going on.

As they turned the corner entering her block, Elizabeth saw a group of protestors outside her house. "Arrest the baby murderer!" the angry mob was shouting. "Baby murderer," Elizabeth said in disbelief. "Who are they referring to? Not John.... They are sadly mistaken." Elizabeth tried to get out of the car when it stopped to tell them so.

'Wait mom," said Caroline as she put her hands on her mom to calm her. "It is true. John was married. He beat his wife to death because he didn't want any children. His wife thought he would get over the idea she was pregnant, and accept the child, but he didn't."

"Mom, John is a domestic abuser. Before the beating that killed his wife, he had beaten her before. She wouldn't leave. Mom, he stomped the baby out of her. He escaped jail before his trial, and they have been looking for him ever since."

Elizabeth sank back in the car in disbelief. As her daughters helped her out of the car, the angry mob calmed down. She had been their friend and neighbor all their lives. The mob parted and let her come through as Moses parted the Red Sea.

She lay on the couch and thought to herself that she needed help. Just like Chrissy said. She knew he was violent. He had beaten her

on several occasions when they were out of town or when she stayed at his place. She never told the children because he would cry and promise not to do it again.

"He just needed some help," she rationalized to herself. "Someone to believe in him. To give him a fresh start."

She realized how she kept her mouth shut. After leaving her husband all those years ago because of abuse, she had repeated the same cycle. Elizabeth realized he wasn't the only one that needed help.

Melanie Redline*

To Fall

Elisabeth Kennedy

Dark Nadir

Next to the weathered gate, a chicken,
which might be mistaken for a lump
of coal,
leans forward & pecks
pallid earth.

There's nothing to eat.

The day is soggy & beige
& a black chicken-shaped
hole
absorbs all
matter, creating
light, x-ray light, a chicken
corona, jabbing cold
wormless mud.

Dark Nadir is a large biting fly
more anti-matter, which can't
be consumed.
Nonetheless, it stings my cheek
(or doesn't sting)
then flies away—
dirty & buzzing.

Know this—

There's no fly & no
chicken
only shadow &
the sucking
of galoshes in late February sludge.

I'd take a picture for you
but the silent
screen of my stupid

smartphone stares blankly back—a great nothing
to remind me—
                I ought to be glad for endings
when the mud, the fly,
    & the chicken
                disappear
in the dead light
    of the new moon.

Karl Bertelsen*

Folly Dreams

Thru gardens, moon-lit summer nights you lure me with your charm
Carefree, your love of flowers drawn in ink all-round your arm

Effortlessly, you tie me on a string with just your smile
In my ear you whisper you can only stay a while

Bouncing curls of golden hair fall softly on your cheek
Forever thoughts of you I'll save for dreams and never speak

For another has your hand, but for your heart my hope holds on
Because you're lovely as a rose beneath stars wished upon

Gone summer nights, moons slowly fade to orange-yellow hue
Tuning to fall in folly dreams, I'll fall in love with you

Mylaida Rivera*

Fishing Man

His blue eyes threw me in
Like the ocean with its waves
Moving me with the wind

Every smile took my heart
I had no need to go back
For here I found my fishing man

He came home with lies
Never sober, always wild
With strong perfumes of other fish

Yet here I was
His foolish wife
Who saw his flaws
And hushed her thoughts

Months pass by
Tired of lies
I faced the hook
And get hurt while I cry

I wanted out
But his cage was huge
So much space to move around
Still, I somehow missed the ocean
The waves and the wind

Yet there he was
His comforting net
Hugging my skin
With its hook on my lips

How can I leave my fishing man?
Even if he looks away
He always comes back to me

My scales keep falling
When he comes home mad
But the shine it leaves
Makes me feel beautiful
Even if he diverts from me
I know my glitz will keep him next to me

Joshua Tobar*

Wonderland

Roberta Whitman Hoff

Twilight Hour in the Park

By the pond, the gorgeous trees:
Live old Oaks like the kind Whitman revered,
sprawl like dancers as if spirits as trees ancient and wise,
the sky melting in warm hues of orange and gold
give rest to my eyes like a painting
through the maze of delightful stretching
trees on the other side of the bird-filled pond of life.

The gold yellow coral sunlight mixing in
with all the living creatures of the pond.
Flitting dragonflies. Napping turtles.
Stealth egrets. A giant flock of
Singing Black-Bellied Ducks
standing in the trees against the setting sun,
frolicsome and giddy as
a choir before a performance.
This is no performance: This is
the secret Heavenly Twilight Choir.

Mary E. Tetreault

Confused

Confused!
"Why?" you ask.
Because…

While I was "reading with my eyes closed"
My mind got bent! And squashed! And caught up in a dream…

Waking up became one piece of a puzzle which seems not to have any more pieces!
You don't know whether it was a dream or …
Why are you in a plastic tube with a bunch of dirty dust?
How did you let yourself fall asleep without turning the vacuum cleaner off?

It's confusing!

Yes, you sit there and laugh (it's sort of a meow but better than a sob.)
Old, lame, deaf, I bend over to pick up my cane…

And soon - maybe next week - we'll bump heads – both of us reaching for our canes!
Yes, it happens overnight, in a week, in a blink of your good eye!

Some days, crazy dreams become your reality!
You can only admire your wonderful, brilliant mind when you're asleep…
And then you wake up – trying to put the pieces together.
We'll laugh and compare notes about this confusion, like why can't we remember names?
And where are our glasses (checking secretly to see if they are on top of our heads!)

Mary E. Tetreault

Time Flies

She

Time sure flies when you are killing it!
Yeah, right. Doing a puzzle till bedtime, pretending sleep.

He

Maybe walking into a fight over something stupid.
Wishing you had never started it.

Sorry you came home late
And in a hungry, grouchy mood.

Hoping something is waiting in the oven on warm,
And in the bed on *hurry up!*

You are *so* sorry, *so* guilty,
The talk can go either way.

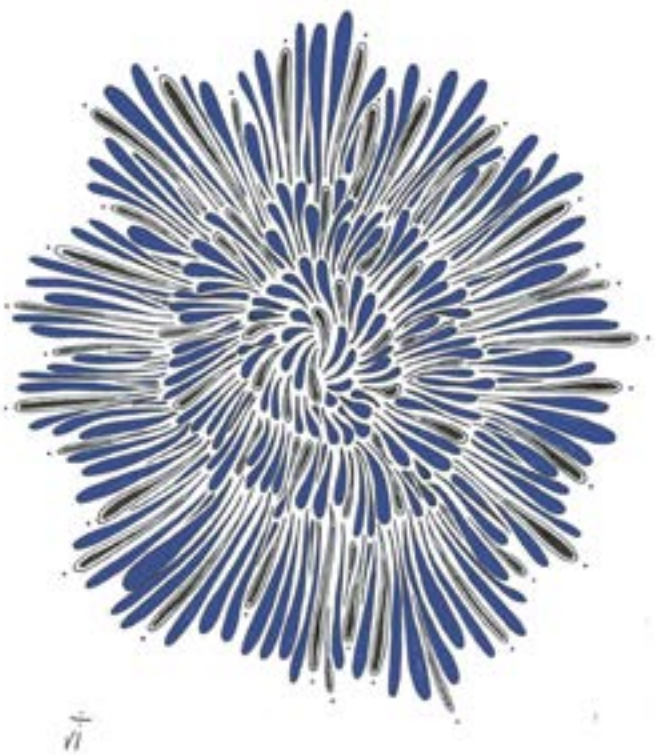
After a quick, quiet supper,
You carry a chocolate bar to her side nightstand
And slip off to your wash up routine.

Please, no yelling!
Just reach for me and give me a chocolate kiss.

Make room for me to slide across the satin sheet
To your warm spot… Touch me to fire.
Know I am guilty, and sorry.
And so in love with you!

Jewel Trujillo

Blue Anemone



Amira Jung*

The Foster Fawn

When I was 10 years old, I came across a baby deer with an injured leg in our driveway.
I fed it goat milk out of a baby bottle on a tarp covered bed of hay every day for a few days until it could walk again.

The day I let it go, I laid awake that night.
Moonlit waves danced in my window
and shadows cast over the void of forest like spilled ink
As I thought to myself:
What happened to its mother?

I wondered how cold and scary the woods must be for the lost fawn;
if its mother is still out there somewhere worrying,
if it'd be able to find its way home in the dark,
If it could crane its neck ever so gently
to find the guiding north star.

A quieter question then crept
in the shores of my own worrisome mind:
What will happen to it?

When I was 20 years old, I came across a lone deer on a walk in the neighboring woods.
We both froze in our tracks, merely a few yards apart.

A part of me knew it couldn't possibly be the fawn
I briefly fostered all those years ago–
yet I still searched her milky black eyes
for personhood, for a semblance of familiarity,
as if to ask: *Do you remember me?*

She stared back at me, unflinching—
ogling with labored curiosity
as my hazy figure rippled gently
in the pools of her eyes, wet like spilled ink.

beneath the oceanic chorus of rustling trees

staking us in condensed breaths
in the minutes of our mirrored silence,
I almost thought I heard her whisper:

"Do you remember me?"

Amira Jung*

To Be Loved Is To Be A Temple

Eyes frozen over like a glacial river,
whose depths begin in the wriggling of life
begging to be recognized beneath its icy surface.
I held your love close to my trembling skin,
it seared me like light stained lace curtains
slightly yellowed by warmth.
It brought me back to a self so ancient,
so metamorphic—
a ferocity yet to be fully fleshed,
a tenderness so unkempt
it etched every imprint of your presence
like geological wonders untouched by mankind.
You were always a warrior
in all your tender glory,
rivaling the softness of a lamb's hide
and the temperament of a burning sun.
The way I saw you,
you would've thought you could bring
lost civilizations to life
upon your gentle foundations
with your heart so mighty and steadfast,
its soft embers burning
a slow sensitive hearth
with flames as delicate as water,
and as striking as sharp waves.
You became my emblem of humanity,
enshrined and forever expanding;
I see you hundreds of thousands of years ago,
I see you at every relevance,
at every wonder,
in every form the world assumes,
in every rebirth where you become anew.
You are there in every peripheral corner,
with the same crystallizing ambered eyes
so wild and clear like an unsharpened gem,
so bright I really believed
they would be immortalized forever,

and I believe it all over again
in every natural or architectural unfathomability,
in every ache of light I see.

Fitz LeHay*

Bearded Vulture

Elisabeth Kennedy

The Vision

for Jonas Salk*

Resolute in the cool
morning, sleepy
on her feet–
she's so Concrete.

This western land where rock meets sea,
& earth rumbles,
Concrete holds fast—expands, abides—
small movements invisible
to the naked eye.

Watch when sun goes up & up
to see how Concrete shines
& hums where cures
begin in questions
–not the answers of our time.

Concrete, her steadfast edifice—
to fire alive each bold scientific mind
*to be good ancestors**
& for each new find
she stomps & stomps, not claps
—until the earth
cracks.

Mary E. Tetreault

She Lied

Hey, Baby, how about some time alone, no strings attached?

She refused it, but her mind kept telling her she'd lied!

She did want to be his "baby girl",
Snuggling up on his hunky shoulder like a smiling child.

She wanted the rest, too –
After she'd gotten her cuddle needs met,
Maybe falling asleep on the couch
Where he had covered her with the soft blanket.
She dozed while he watched his favorite show.

But she had put a period at the end of "No."
And walked away
Because she knew she'd fall in love with him.

Veronica Rodriguez Castro*

Someday

Elisabeth Kennedy

Unrequited

The ring should be on my hand—
not hers, not yours, not his.
Perhaps are my eyes playing
tricks? What is real?
Mother turned to mud
in her flooded ashes.
Though always, always,
through every ordeal

Devoted, I loved her beyond
measure— never meant
to fail in those long-haul
years; I wanted her notice,
full of a mother's bright intent.
We even have the same hands,
you see. Yet in those last driftful
days, pain unrushed

she bestowed another—
the just-wed wife of my brother.
It was not the gifting
I thought out-of-line;
It was losing the gold-ringed
hand of mother.

To see mine hand as Mother's, ever bared,
crushes my heart,
one final token
of her disregard.

Lori Vella Bouchard

Instrument

I could mine your endless layers
Never dive beneath the surface
Lust for gemstones valued
Any more than that I hold
Every time I drive below
I find another paradise
Some will leap to comfort
Others I love to excavate
Mine shaft still extending
Always more to unearth
I am never disappointed
With abundance nearly sinful
We would never go without

I refuse to drain the waters
Of healing pools you bathe in
Roles rooted in your psyche
That seek to get to know me
This bottomless chalice
Cradled in my gentle hand
Cannot overflow since I
Always add another drop
Thirst will not be quenched
Your mouth remains wide open
Asking more, eager to accept
Never exhaust my methods
Of feeding the caged animal

I don't mind doing all the work
I just want participation
There are many parts
Still up for grabs, tell me
You would like the lead
Don't be quiet any longer
Ruling over all the notes
Compose a tune you long to hear

Today I'm your only instrument
Settle down in front of me
Intently look me over
Place your hands upon me
And play…

Victoria Caiza*

G'Day

Submission Deadline: March 15, 2026

Fresh Ink 2026

Naugatuck Valley's Art and Literature Journal will accept works in three categories:

Poetry
Short Fiction
2-D Art

- Up to five (5) individual works will be considered from each writer or artist.
- Each fiction and poetry piece cannot exceed 1250 words in length.
- Only electronically submitted text documents in .doc, .docx or .rtf formats will be considered.
- 2-D representations of any art genre should be submitted in hi-res .jpg format (300 dpi)
- All graphic submissions will be considered for the cover design.
- All entries must be submitted via

NV-FreshInk@ctstate.edu

- Each entry should be submitted separately as an attached file.
- Each file name should be the work's title.
- No author's or artist's names should appear on the submitted attached works.
- Authors' and artists' names, emails and mailing addresses should be included in the body of the corresponding email.
- Only works from self-identified NVCC students will be entered in the NVCC Poetry, Short Fiction and Art contests. All works will be entered into the Luke S. Newton Memorial Contest.

For further information contact Jeannie Evans-Boniecki, PhD *Fresh Ink* Advisor at jean.evansboniecki@ctstate.edu.