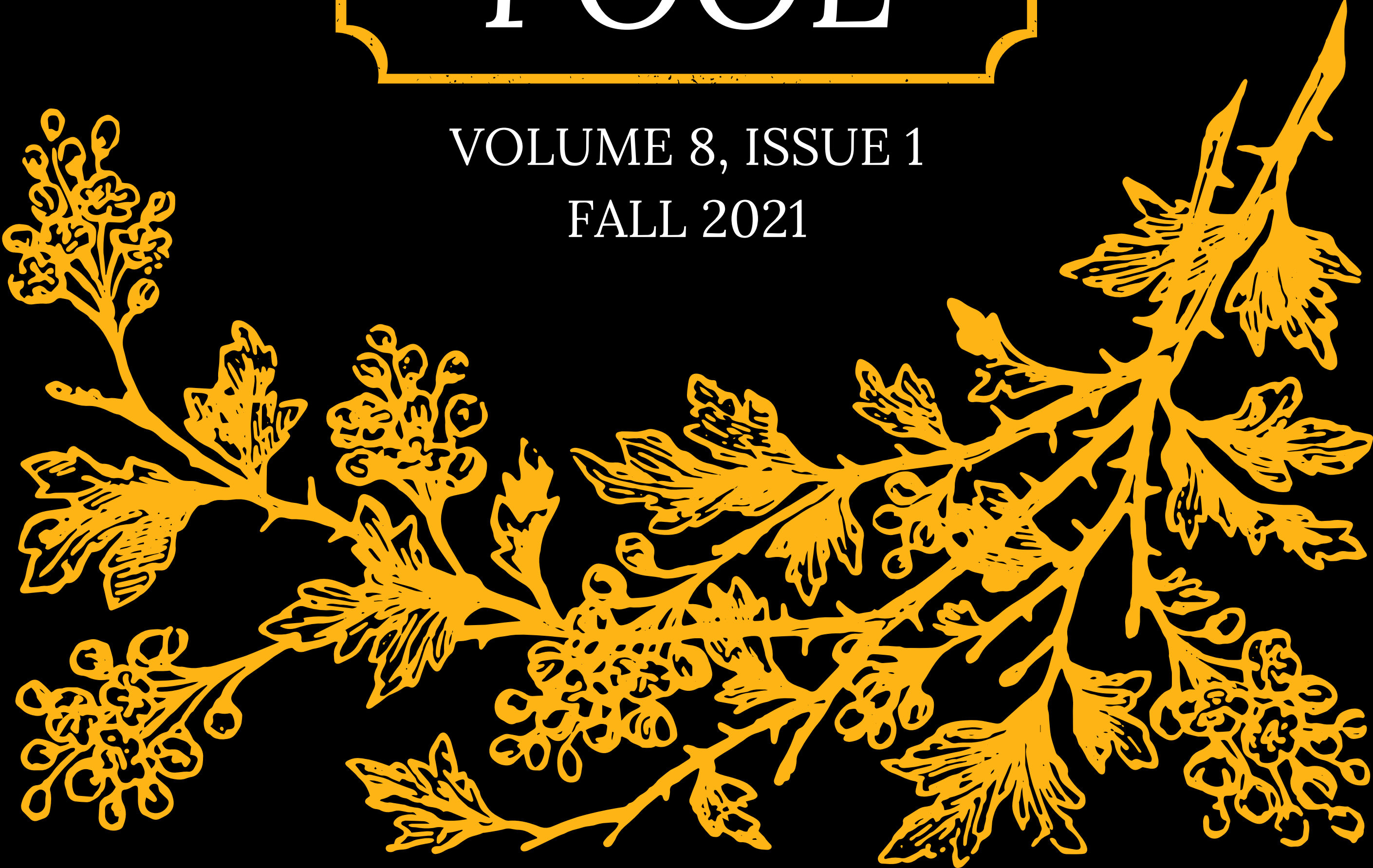




University of California, Merced's Undergraduate Creative Arts Journal

THE
VERNAL
POOL

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The Vernal Pool, Volume 8 Issue 1
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Letter from the Editor

Dear reader:

Welcome back.

As our editorial team's work on the first issue of the eighth volume of *The Vernal Pool* concludes, so too does UC Merced's first semester back on campus since the spring of 2020. The road has been long, but as we approach the new year at rapid speeds, it seems as though what lies ahead will hopefully be a little easier on us all.

The Vernal Pool provides our fellow undergraduate students at the University of California, Merced with the opportunity to cherish that path however, and publish their incredible writing, art, and other creative works within our pages. Our own journey would simply not be possible without the contributions from the campus' diverse student body, for both creative submissions as well as our publication itself.

To our managing editor, Marisa Robinson, thank you for your flexibility and skilled handling of our team's communication. To our web manager Preethi Merugumala, thank you for going above and beyond with website editing and PR work throughout the semester. To our social media manager Adan Montes, thank you for your beautiful design work and solid consistency; and to our podcast director Madelyn Lara, thank you for helping us get the spoken word out about *The Vernal Pool* and for taking so much initiative in getting *The Reflection Pool* published regularly. To our copyeditor Arianna Mengel and junior copyeditor Miranda Rosas, thank you both for your keen eye for detail and care for authorial intent. Thank you to our advisor Callie Kitchen, whose guidance and experience have been integral to our team's success this semester, and to the advisory board of *The Vernal Pool* as well for their support.

Last but certainly not least, I'd like to thank our authors for their beautiful contributions to our journal and our readers for their support of it. *The Vernal Pool* simply could not exist without you all. It has been the greatest honor and pleasure to work with all of the varied people over the course of three semesters on the journal's editorial team, and I am especially proud to present this particular team's excellent work as my final issue.

All the best,
Remy Sumida-Tate
Editor-in-Chief
The Vernal Pool

Contest Winner

Upside-Down Swing by Ying Wei Zhang

(cassette scrapes; button press; pause, then whirring)

I have seen hell drop from the sky.

They say, on the Great Chain of Being, the closer you are to the top of the sky, the closer you are to God. That's false.

I'm not a religious man, and also a non-believer in the supernatural. I am an atheist and biologist. After my seven-year-long dissertation, post-doc, and institutional recognition, I'd consider myself an educated person. A man of healthy doubt. But my expertise fails to find a reason for her — 'it.'

The 'it' I refer to is not my sister Miracle. That thing might imitate Miracle's appearance, but 'it' is not her.

She's dead. I saw her die myself. 'It' is not her. And 'it' disappeared into the sky the night she died. But now I see it outside the doorway, a hellish thing hanging upside down and bloated like a raindrop. 'It' found me and I'm not sure why ...

(pause; button press)

It was that damn swing set! That damn swing everyone at school spread rumors about like the plague. Superstitions, my ass.

And, regarding Miracle, I truly didn't have bad intentions.

(shuddering breaths)

I have a confession to make.

I hope it'll resolve my lifetime's worth of suffering. Yes, a tall order even though I don't deserve that type of relief. But I don't want to carry the guilt — I can't anymore, and I don't want it with me in case the worst happens.

I'll leave this recording here in case someone finds the house empty. Or occupied by my rotting body. *If* someone does bother to check on me. And I know what I say next might sound outrageous but be assured I am not a man of outrageous imagination. I hope the recording catches the noises 'it' makes. It'll have to suffice as evidence. If not, refrain from judgment too soon and listen to the end. Please.

(fabric shifting)

My little sister Miracle did not die from a nasty fall.

I killed her. The swings at the old playground at the park behind the apartment units killed her. One forceful push from me and she fell off her seat. Dropped to the ground. They called it bad luck.

But what I did, I swear I meant her no harm! When I took her out to the swings that night, it was only to get back at her for the books that she stole from my room and the other things she trampled on and broke. She even denied her wrongdoings when I confronted her. It was the millionth time she'd disrespected my things and I was a petty boy.

While I had seethed, looking at the mess in my room, I recalled a story the children in my grade passed down around about the swing set in that particular park.

I was never prone to believing these tales, especially not from other boys like me. Ridiculous urban legends and conspiracies. But Miracle was gullible; the story was scary enough to work with. I'd bully her, make her cry, and be done with it.

I hid rope in my hoodie's pocket and invited Miracle to the convenience store for ice cream, smiling and reassuring her I wasn't mad about the mess she made of my belongings. 'Let's call a truce.'

We reached the playset, and I good-naturedly shoved her towards the swing set.

'Sit on the swing. I'll push you and tell you a scary story.'

She glanced back at me, eyes sparkling and mouth covered in chocolate fudge. 'Ok ... you better not try anything.'

Miracle might've been devious, but she was not smart. As she sat down and she held onto the swing, I gripped one of her hands and pulled the rope from my pocket, binding her wrist to the chain. After some struggle, which resulted in my bloody nose, I had her other hand tied as well. It was a clumsy job, but I couldn't bind her too tight. She would show our parents the marks as proof of the torment. She began crying.

'There was a boy who died where you sat. Apparently, his death left a curse on the swing.' I said. 'Do you want to hear about him?'

Ignoring her protests, I pushed her, adding flourish to my narration. ‘There was a young boy whose hands were tied to this swing’s chains by bullies. The older boys thrashed him back and forth and listened to his cries, but one of their pushes was too rough.’

Miracle slowly tossed upwards, then fell back against my ready palms. She wiggled on the gray plastic seat and tried to stand, but she was a six-year-old. I drove her forward again. She immediately fell back into the plastic seat.

‘The force flailed the swing seat in every direction. Frightened, the boy kicked his legs at his bullies. His violence was his downfall. He smacked his head against the ground and sent his feet above him in the shape of a scorpion. His skull spilled like an egg.’

‘Stop — I get it!’ She cried. She twisted and pulled at the rope. The chain jingled. ‘I’m sorry ... I won’t mess with your stuff anymore.’

I smiled at her sobs as she jerked her arms. The ropes wouldn’t leave marks; she’d have nothing to show. ‘Supposedly, if you rode the swings at the exact time the young boy died and propelled yourself high enough, the curse from the boy’s death will kill you. My friends told me your soul would fly out and be blown away, unable to return to stable ground.’

‘I get it. Stop!’ She screamed. ‘I hate you! I’ll tell on you if you don’t stop.’

I grabbed her. The swing stilled and she looked at me with relief until I backed up and threw her with all the strength and spite I could muster.

‘As for what happened to the bullies —’

Before I could finish, physics propelled her up as Miracle’s thrashing undid the ropes.

(pause, then a snort)

I was twelve and had never seen a dead body before, but there is some primal part of all of us that can tell friend from foe or safety from danger. It must’ve been that same instinct that recognized how she flew, like a ragdoll, and flopped on the playground was not normal. How she hunched into herself, her knees tucked in, one arm above her head and the other splayed at her side unmoving ... No, that wasn’t what struck me the most.

The most unnatural part wasn’t the unexpected quickness of her death. Not how unbelievable the limpness was of someone who once tormented me, as siblings do. Not that she hit the ground without a sound. Not that her neck — I heard it clearly — snapped and twisted mid-air to stare down at me.

What struck me the most — the most unbelievable part ... I saw her — another her ... no! An ‘it’ which looked just like her, *that* ‘it’ — fly out. Not metaphorically. ‘It’ screamed as it peeled like a sinewy apparition from the real Miracle.

In the split second that she flew from the seat, my sister hung in the air as ‘another her’ separated, and ‘it’ floated, upside down and away, like a balloon while Miracle fell into her pathetic pose. No. Not like a balloon. Not in the hurried way balloons disappear into the sky.

More like a sack of meat.

At a leisurely pace, ‘it’ smacked heavily against tree branches and buildings as something pulled her by the feet into the sky. It was like watching a pig on a hook moving on an abattoir line. Up and up the overhead conveyor system.

You must be laughing! I wanted to laugh in disbelief too ... I desperately did.

This doppelgänger, unlike the body on the ground, screamed like an animal being tortured without relief.

I stared back at the swing. The chains squeaked as gravity stilled its movement. I turned my head back to find ‘it,’ but by the time I could peel my eyes away from the swing, ‘it’ disappeared from sight.

(long inhale)

I truly don’t know how they righted her head for the funeral, but they hid the neck with a thick collar. Law enforcement investigated the incident. An autopsy found nothing, no struggle other than the red marks where I tied her wrists. The neck joints undid themselves cleanly. They interviewed me but what kind of twelve-year-old had that strength?

(pause)

But ‘it’ must’ve been an illusion, right? I must have been mistaken to suggest ‘it’ had any tangibility.

No one but me in the neighborhood reacted to that screaming thing. ‘It’ passed by a balcony where a woman hung her clothes on her laundry line. ‘It’ howled without a reaction from the woman. No response from the other neighbors outside, who were intoxicated and making out. Nor from the boy on the top floor who squinted down at me in curiosity.

(a raspy chuckle)

No. That can't be. 'It' smacked against everything in its path. And since then, I have heard her — 'its' — voice out of nowhere. This didn't happen too often — rarely enough that I could pin the reasoning on lack of sleep or someone else's cry in the distance.

But the older I get, the more frequently 'it' *hounds* me. Sometimes a groan from the other side of the street, a high-pitched whine as I pass over the bridge, or a howl — the same howl from that night — behind my left shoulder.

A week ago, 'it' finally returned. While I walked home from the grocery store, a continuous screech startled me. I swung my head to and fro. I remember clearly because the plastic bag's handles dug harshly into my skin. I expected to see nothing as always — it was a habit of comfort I suppose. But from where 'it' held onto the branch of a tree, I made eye contact with its bulbous dead eyes and dropped my goods.

'It' had changed appearances since I last saw it. 'It' still looked like Miracle and wore her clothes, but hanging upside down seemed to have pulled all its bodily fluids towards the ground. All the curves and joints in its legs and pelvis showed while the lower half hung and fluid stretched the limits of its skin. In contrast to its lower limbs, the arms were sausage-like. It was a miracle its fingers could bend enough to grasp the branch. The facial features bulged and it would've been comical if not for the fright it put into me. A hellish sight.

"Miracle," I whispered and ran.

'It' moved slowly, unable to truly give chase. With a saint's patience, 'it' dragged itself from branch to branch, tree to tree, overhead power line to power line. A methodical sloth. Its fluid-filled half swayed and bounced.

Hours after I slammed the door to my house, locked every window, and sought refuge in my bedroom, 'it' reached me. It bashed itself against the windows, squelching with every self-inflicted impact.

I didn't sleep. I listened to the noises all night. But in the morning, my fear lessened enough. I tiptoed to the hallway to see the sun had cast its shadow through my front windows. The drop-shaped thing hadn't stopped throwing itself at my house. I laughed to myself nervously.

'It'll have to give up at some point,' I assured myself. In the meantime, I wouldn't leave the house. I had enough canned goods stocked to last a long while. I could pay my bills digitally and avoid the walk to the mailbox.

(silence; button press; then the sound of an attempt to choke back a sob)

‘It’ hasn’t left. It’s been a week at least. I can’t last here. ‘It’ painted every window in gore searching for me. I’ll go crazy before any of them break.

‘It’ frightens me. I don’t know what it’ll do. Does it want to kill me? Can I kill it? Maybe it wants to drag me into the sky too.

(pause, then slow laughter)

It must want me to die — it must!

That night, I wasn’t able to finish the story before Miracle was flung off. The bullies who tormented the boy — all ended themselves. No one knew why. They weren’t reported to feel remorse by any accounts nor did they report seeing any floating devil from the sky but the coincidence of their deaths —

I see now. The swing set. The curse — it didn’t end with the death of the boy. The ones who were truly cursed were the bullies. The one who was cursed wasn’t Miracle. It was me.

(muffled movement; groan)

Miracle. ‘Miracle,’ a pain in my ass. I never liked you.

(frantic footsteps; cabinets fling open; a drag of rope)

A crying, whining, yapping runt the moment you slid shit-covered out of our mother. I haven’t slept well in so long. You relentless *thing*, what do you want from me?

(a chair yanks across the floor)

You can’t have me! If you’re destined to be dragged up into the sky — if you want to take me there too — I’ll simply tether myself here until you rot away —

(creaks of wood and rope)

— you won’t have me!

(fall of a chair; final click of the recording; cassette whirs to a stop)

Visual Art

Eat Butterflies Like Your Father by Arianna Cristina Mengel



Creative Nonfiction

How you love me by Trinity Jenae Gonzalez

1. *We drop seeds in the winter snow
in hopes that the season will change and
we'll survive the cold, blooming
into something greater than we are now.*

Umm ... You know I heard Ms. Cavish is going
on leave because of everything with —

God I hate this, I hate you.

I know.

Ugh, I don't hate you, I just — hate that
things are awkward now.
That we're stuck to small talk and banter.

I know.

I'm trying.

I know.

Is that all you know how to say?

I'm sorry?

I know.

*We shared a laugh, an experience that had become so foreign to us now, though
it was once the only thing we knew to do.*

I didn't mean to hurt you, I just ...

I get it.

2.

Well not really but it's not
like I can force you to love me.

I do love you.

Just not like that?

I don't know if I'm
even capable of love like that.

Why not?

I don't even know how to feel
about myself. How can I even
think like that?

How can you say you
love me but not understand
Love?
Your words feel empty.

I just don't, OKAY!?

At least not fully, and I'm not about to
use you as an experiment for my own
self-discovery.

You wouldn't be using me!
I would've been fine with you figuring things out.
I LOVED you!

You're only willing cause you're
assuming the best. What if I said "yes" and
dated you only to turn around and say,

3.
“Actually no, sorry but I don’t like you like that?”
You know how cold, how cruel a person
would have to be to consider that!? For while I
was so desperate to figure out who I am
that I would have let you be a casualty of my
curiosity. So I’m sorry but I just don’t
understand, and I shouldn’t make that your problem.

I would die for you.

Damn. Like it’s true but
you didn’t have to be so
blunt about it.

Still, it feels wrong to
mention it.

...

I ... okay.

... I know you would but
that doesn’t really mean
much coming from you.

Am I wrong though? I know
better than most how you
feel about death.

I would much rather
you live for me.

Or just live in general.
Even when you don’t want
to. Even when it's hard to.

4.
You know what I really hate?

I know I’ll eventually
fall for you, if I ever figure out my
shit.

Yes. Since I want you to move on.
You're so warm. So good.
I think I’m meant to miss
out on you.

Neither do you.
You will
if I try to keep you.

It’s a bit cheesy. I don’t think
we couldn’t be friends if we tried.

What?

What?

Would that be so bad?

You don’t deserve to miss
anything.

Is it cliché to say
we’ll always be friends?

That's for damn sure.
...
Actually, you know what?

5.

I don't think you will have to
worry about missing out on me.

Julian —

It's because you don't love me like that.
And I don't think you ever truly will
and that's OK.

But how do you know for sure?
I don't even know that.

I'm not you, so I can't say for sure.
But I think you just love
the idea of me. The idea that someone
will love you unconditionally.
That someone will see the worst of you
and stand by your side regardless.
And when I look into your eyes I see traces of
longing and that used to give me hope
that you would love me back, but
then I realized you're not longing for me.
You're longing for someone to make you whole,
someone who you won't hold doubt that
you love.

But how do you know that's not you,
how do you know that one day I won't
wake up and realize that you're the best
person I could ever know?

Because when you look at me
I don't just see longing,
I see such care, compassion, joy and so many

6.

wonderful feelings towards me.
But it's not quite the same as it is in my eyes.

What do you mean?

When I look at you I know that
I could give you the sun and the
moon, but you would never look at me
the way I look at you.

Huh, that's an interesting way to put it.

What? Still not convinced?
I mean, I can only say so much ...

Can I ask you something?

Shoot.

When snow melts,
what does it become?

...
Spring.

Yes, I suppose it does.

*May his spring come soon.
I'm fine waiting for the ice to melt.
Even if it never will. I just know,
that more than anything,
I want him to find his happiness
as he wants me to find mine
even if it's not by each other's side.*

May we each find our soft epilogue, my dearest friend.

Visual Art

Critter by Mary M Russell



Poetry

Weeds by Erick Alexander Ramirez Olmos

My backyard is full of weeds,
plants in the wrong place
unwanted greens consume the dirt floor,
spreading rapidly, like a known virus
and contaminating otherwise
healthy thoughts.

Within each passing day,
I watch the weeds grow
through the filthy window
and see a faint reflection
of my face in green
memories of wanting to be.

Despite my efforts,
picking, plucking, pulling,
the weeds linger
like an unwanted guest,
who took my bedroom,
and made it their own.

The weeds – as if tapping
on the window –
show me
someone I despise,
feelings
of memories buried
underneath the roots
of who I wanted to be.

My Lady in White by Arianna Cristina Mengel

You appear every evening, my Lady in White
Out in the meadow, behind the tall trees
You like swaying by the creek no one visits
Do you wait out there for me?

I always see you partnerless,
For they avoid the death-touched land
But your face, it looks so lonely
I want to take your hand

You beckon to me, and I answer,
guided by moonlight
This realm is unable to touch you
but mortal hands might

I worry I'll pass through you
phantom spider thread in my grasp But as
my soul beats beneath your fingertips Your
cold hands firmly clasp

With a wave you invite me to dance
And I'm the happiest I've ever been
Each turn brings me closer to you
Or perhaps they do me in

Our twirls soon turn wild
The swift spinning showing me stars
As I feel my thoughts escape me
I wonder if there'd ever been a dance like ours

Only I remain, my dear Lady
when I awake next dusk
In a white garb like yours I miss you
Pitted, I am a husk

It seems you moved on without me
but I can no longer leave
Now *I'm* to haunt this lifeless place
A last dance all I need

So each night I wait for someone to pass
Perhaps they'll set me free
"Fancy seeing you here, dear stranger
Care to dance with me?"

Eulogy by Richard Camarena III

I could live a thousand lives
And never sail the sun;
Touch a million moments,
My head resting on my thumb.
Wash my hands of dust,
Still, still, fail to reach between
the little wrinkles.

It is my place, my time, my peace
To always stay with you,
To always watch you,
And, to always wear you with pride.

It is my belief, my thought, my dream
That we grow older together, but never apart;
Then again, I did lose you so many times.

As little things were big enough to me,
So much so that I live this one life,
To share a piece with you in it.

There were few moments growing up
When I felt I could truly grasp at you,
And many moments when I felt nothing —
Nothing but eggshells under my feet.

Does this remind you of someone?
It reminds me of the real, the rare, you.

I don't need to find again
What I once found.
I don't need to see again
What I once saw.
I only need to live on,
Live happy,
Live kind,
Live honest,
Live once as we do.

I do have love for you, the real you,

Hospitality,
Dark humor,
Love of food,
Before memories become blurry and silent...

Peace,
I love you at peace.

I could live a thousand lives
And never sail the sun;
Touch a million moments,
My head resting on my thumb.
Wash my hands of dust,
Still, still, fail to reach between
the little wrinkles.

Rehabilitation by Richard Camarena III

The Lean

The good old days must be the opposite of bad young days, sun tanning my skin before I'm placed on the stretcher, carved out by my people, treated like an animal.

"There are billions of us shitting and consuming our way to global warming!"

You could go out with your family to see me on the farm, but you don't, a government protects what is green, private, and logical, but is really a prison we share. Every day I train to live until my eventual death by a bullet to the head or lonely age to join the herd of other nobodies with numbers instead of names. Legacies eaten up until they exist in the dirt and the rain, one might go as far as to say that my happiness was always near, that I could have enjoyed my pastures for what they were worth. Unfortunately for me, my existence was only as absurd as I understood it to be, so when a human sees a steak on a plate, my smile is unnoticeable ...

"As it should be. As I wanted it!"

If I only had the hands, the mind, the body, the fingernails, I would crawl my way from here, far from here, where I could smile like you do, and laugh so awkwardly, be surrounded by false familiars with jokes made of grass and hormones! I would hide too, all my life, from the animal in me that wishes to surrender to nature's grimace, however absurd, however insufferable, however unspeakable, I would force a grin for the sake of will! Instead of letting the world eat me alive with nothing but tears to show for my time, I'll pick which cut to give. You'll call me more than cattle.

As the name you taught me was:

"Beast!"

Seasonal Bounty

Reverberations between the curtains,
Conversations of nature's eternity,
Like a harmony sounding in scorched ears,
Take me away with silent lightnings from the causeways along carcass routes where the stalks
curl towards a relieving sun.
Feathered serpents to crown my nose,
With the sweet ashes of divine miracles,
Just as was prophesized, just as was fulfilled by the pseudointellectual whose speak is but a
dream killer on a holiday.

To slash through reality for the sake of nothing memorable —
this crucial time of echoes and whispers and delusions —
To take shape through the sacrifice of the naïve listener you called lover for all these rotations,
Even the preponderance of these times shared as I get stuck between you and your ego,
Makes the thought of thinking a most insufferable conclusion to my winter; into a harvest of
fanatical love.

Let me flavor this rot in the air,
Let me bitter alone in dormancy,
Let me transform wicked in absence ...
Exclude me from the bounties of your season.

Winter's End

Love must be to you my silhouette behind the door curtain.

Waiting for me to enter and rescue you from the debt,
That inconsolable, seemingly-forced-upon imprisonment
Here in the boondocks of your overcooked mind,
But I am the harvester you raised me to be some time ago,
I am the reaper of the blighted truths many purport with vainglory,
And you, you huddled on the bitten and scratched leather sofa
Meant to feel so comfortable from the safety of rehab,
You in the shape of my sister, distorted shadows stepping on my feet,
Hypocritical, yet due to this form of my love, also undeniable,
What you deserve is a glimpse of the torment that I feel from talking to you without speaking,
Only breathing with the trees beyond the window behind this family therapy session;

Yes, I feel a connection with the invader of the packed parking lot,
Overlooking enough families to fill a Jehovah's heavenly mystery,
Without a bit of marrow in me wanting to shed a leaf for you,
I want to be the one distorting this structure with little effort,
To uproot, to thrash all of our memories to the endless plains,
Where my humiliating whimpers cannot be heard over the wind;

Yes, that wind we used to play in as kids in the summer,
If only you could hear it bending this pain, forcing me to grow wicked
Behind you, behind you, spiraling through the window one morning,
This clouded Monday, wishing to fall into the fractured asphalt below,
Wishing to freefall before you defenestrate what's left of me now,
In favor of the clean silhouette that will replace the shapeless conditionals.

Love must be to you, and me, the forgiveness of the wind at winter's end.

Aphantasia by Juan Fernando Guzman

Tonight, I was forced to be God.

Far past daydreams,
She was not to be imagined.
Not pictured by the fairest of thoughts,
by the simplest of imaginative processes.

Tonight, I was forced to be God.

The aphantasia had challenged reverie,
She was inconceivable to elementary musing,
Impossible to perceive
by the mortal instruments of human memory.

Tonight, I was forced to be God.

I was to be influenced by glinting stars,
by comets grazing dissipating clouds —
and the fated day
healing from colorful pigmented scars.

Tonight, I was forced to be God.

I had to be reminded of her
through the whispers of wind and its rise,
brushing my ear tips,
I, receiving, of all of its lovely-crafted lies.

Tonight, I was forced to be God.

I'd sketch her image
from guavas, pomegranates and pears,
a figure unforeseen,
in good taste to my immovable and guiding stare.

Tonight, I was God.

Architect her from visual angle,
Echoes of semblance,
to create her in written word

through what the quintessence of nature enabled.

Jewelry Box by Juan Fernando Guzman

A lozenge cut gemstone,
inhales light source,
exhales sharded
fragments onto wall fixtures.
Gemini born with
pricked earlobes, and pinned
red rubies rimming rigid.

Floral counts, sterling gold,
adorns her delicate neck,
a flux of metal to maple skin.
Treasured petals, rich in curvature,
gives glare – angelic slant angle
reflects coffee bean eyes, added
hinted colors of the outside.

Crucifix diamond-speckled
ring on slim touch,
accentuates nude nails and
outlines promises of
crossed fingers to former
friendship, valuables of past.

Set on her desk, paternal presents,
two earrings cast in steel,
holiday flair from father;
broken aureate locket, one-sided
and missing a centered brilliance,
but character it still yields.

Beside them, gothic threads of
religious catholic gesture,
ancestral strings, now in her possession –
a gift from El Salvador, of the motherland,
though too expressive for her measures.

Stories bastilled in a jewelry box,
stored safely, secured
her favored jewels –
one day spilling over

as a ring I offered rolls by to
rising beams, a solar start to morning dew.

Visual Art

Galahad by Mary M Russell



Poetry

The Last Supper by Juan Fernando Guzman

Emerging
from a grinding of
doctrine, a ridiculous friction
inside of me, I affiliated myself with
apostasy at *my* last supper beyond the
dense and cumulus clouds, high heavenly.

I had renounced my faith, questioned the normalcy,
and criticized every facet of religion. From round-cheeked
congregants to preaching priests. From catechesis tradition to
out-of-date laws in the book. From vile, mocking looks to self-serving
charitable action. From pious sector to those who believe just to believe.
From a need for spiritual comfort to a need for social status. From a considerate
proverb of “thou shall not kill”, to a contradiction of “kill if your beliefs differ”. From
the singing of the choir to the screaming of the hate. From the friendly acceptance to the
odious denial. From the man at the cross to the hanging of the man. From the worshipping of
God to the reverence of political actors. From a reason of logic to an excuse to do as they covet.
From the confession of sin to the release of guilt.

I had renounced my faith.

Had.

I had found my faith anew in the breaking of bread,
in legs divided, fractions of you – given to me. In your pleading prayer, withstanding rug-burned
knees at the altar. In a deep infatuation, conjured breaths fogging up the stained-glass sun. In
a clinging to bodily fever in front of the flickering flames of votive candles. In the holy water
at four contact points, a formation of a cross at the chest, shoulders, and forehead. In my
questions being answered through your carnal miracles, surrendering to defeat. In an
inferiority to a divine power that you hold over me. In the ecstasy of my murder —
a gaining of status during rapture, the end of my days. In the reclaiming of belief
of the possibility of fervorous intimacy. In the embracing of a pairing meant
to encounter. In the sound of lust, and the reverberations deriving from
the Garden of Eden. In your worship, in your persistence for me to
enter those gates. In the control of your impartial judgment to
destiny. In the hellfire of your paradise, in the pit of nirvana.
In the confession of guilt, and the release of my sin.

Emerging from a grinding of focus, a

sensual friction outside of me,
I affiliated myself with faith
at *our* last supper in
the inferno of
purgatory.

Star-Crossed Collection by Kaylin Insyarath

blueberries

you were my first taste of love.

it's bittersweet
how frivolous and young we used to be
clutching onto each other like we
were actually soulmates,
as if our drunken text messages
and the blueberry waffles we ate
on that Monday morning
could ever be classified as something so

cosmic.

you were also my first taste of heartbreak.

star-crossed

you love our little town
full of small circles
and familiar crowds.
you find peace
in knowing everyone's name.

but to me,
this town is decorated
with the letters
written to my lost loved ones,
the pavement is made out of
the remains of my broken friendships,
and the names of the
boys who broke my heart
are carved into the walls
of my favorite coffee shops.

you would never beg me
to sit with you on the sidewalk
of our town's busiest street.

I would never ask you
to buy a suitcase.

and so,
this lifetime must be lived
without each other.

coffee

we lived
on opposite sides
of the world
for six months.

the distance
made my heart grow
fonder but yours
grew heavier.

it carried the need
to be loved by someone
who could stand
right next to you,
someone who
could talk to you
without having to turn on
a cell phone.

and so,

you gave
all of my kisses
to her
and left me
with the faint taste
of the coffee we drank
on that rainy,
Monday morning.

dinner

I would have loved you
for a lifetime.

I would have willingly
tucked away my dreams
in a graceful, wooden box
and stuffed my pillowcase
with the pages of
this poetry collection.

I would have put on the apron
and the Laotian dress
and I would have
thrown hand-me-down sheets
over our bed
and I would have smiled
while eating the food
that you put
on our table.

I would have settled
for a lifetime with you.

thank you
for breaking my heart.

Ocean Deep by Veronica Marie Vejar

Where my feet began to skip
and our shoes followed its shadows.
The hue golden on the skin
and our hearts are at play,
but why do I stop to wonder why the sand gives me
unbearable warmth.
The tidal wave suffocates my air.
Still tethered with you like seaweed,
wrapping me dearly.
Slowly my soul is floating
and I sink numb to the bottom
submerged into the frigid sand.
I see the other creatures intertwine with your divine
and I cannot spare a movement to stop it.
I lay barren
mute,
still you hold me tightly in your
flowing grip.
But they watch me die —
Their smirks burn my sight
and my final tear becomes one with the large abyss
of the ocean.
Still your grip,
is there.
It is manipulated
and eventually snapped —
the creatures
hated my necessity.
Washed away,
lost in the depth of my
sub-conscience.
I gaze at your eyes,
back in the warmth of the sand
and remember my hand intertwined with yours
and the sun gleaming perfectly on your eyes.
Reminding me
you
are
mine.

Leaf Green by Kai Matsumoto

Attractive four lines of symbols
accompanied by blue-green diffused light.
Stark contrast to the bleached frame
smooth to touch.
Golden excitement rising
four, five, or even six
three, as I stared at my monitor.
Glowing clear green like a radish
just watered and displayed
at the market, displayed clean and crisp
looking fresh.
Some, or rather many, would be bitter
stirring strong memories of NyQuil
accompanied by Halls cough drops
as I sat on my bed
with a high fever and sore throat.
Slowly dragging my finger across
leaving smudge marks
on the reflective crystalline display.
My luck is no better in any dimension.
Just as bad.
Just as RNG.
Just as annoying.
Just as undependable.
Took the risk.
And the risk bit back hard.
Suddenly hoping that I have backed up.
A flashpoint to which I can return
as I scramble within my mind.
Maybe there is a solution
a solution best of both worlds
a solution rough and coarse
but not as irritating as sand.
The same display will come up.
Many many more times
each with their own set of disappointment
each with their own set of stories to tell
with a test towards my luck.
Testament towards how terrible,
accompanied by my frustration.

I will try again,
slowly loading back to the menu
green hue crawling across
the white dry walls of my room.

The cycle repeats
as the clock ticks over
indicating 0:00, midnight.

The cycle repeats
Step by step, slowly but surely
like a ticking time bomb
until the day comes,
be it diffused or explodes.
The day where luck comes around
allowing the clock to finally rest.

But
back I go.

Into the roulette
once again.

This time,
maybe the outcome will be something.
Something different.
Something better.

Solitaire by Kyle Ocampo Magro

You open your eyes and
on your black desk is a cage,
one that makes your mind a solitary cell,
a cruel constant of its silence
is one that you cannot escape.

Each day bleeds into the next,
and you realize that this is your sentence.

I remember late last night,
you stared at the blue light
hoping things would be different.

Yours is the captured soldier's lonely path,
and they've kept you busy with a prisoner's tasks.

Treading the first of three paths
in your divine comedy.

You run your slender fingers through each motion,
each portion of the cold metal bars.

Rusted and faded like the reality of your life.

A few hours later,
you ball your hands into fists, protesting the death of an artist,
the death of an individual.

In the morning you wake,
and on your black desk is a promise,
you made it to yourself that you would keep.

But you and I know the truth you try.
They taught you to submit and listen,

like a warden's noble mission.

Here your subtle sorrows
are spoken in the muted words that leave the sting of your lips,
but you'll find there's no one to hear them
in this quiet place.

Every grievance,
starting from the pain in your palms,
to the strain in your bloodshot eyes,
an executioner weighs the decision.
And maybe on your black desk,
it can be two things at once,
like when your window was the painting
that described life and its infinite complexities.
In that painting was a different sort of freedom,
and that was the last time I saw the gleam in your eyes.

I knew this realization hurt as much,
as that time you stared at the chains you clutch.

And so, I smiled at you this evening,
and you returned the hollow gesture from the dirty mirror,
there must be a thousand rusted cages here,
and I don't want anyone else to end up like you.

I know what I have to do,
I'll tuck the key in my pocket and save it
in your backpack with pencils of dull ends,
a notebook with its pages ripped out from cover-to-cover,
and the cord that came with the cage,
wrapped around the waist like a hostage.

'Till we get to the door,
and I try the key again,
but it doesn't work.

It's no use, and the blue light shines once more,
close your eyes,
maybe tomorrow will be different.

Beneath the Skin by Monika Robles

At the end of the day, I take off my skin.
It is mangled and tattered
from long days of unrest.

I take off my face
To no longer stare
at the purple crescents below
my drooping eyes.

And I pull out my tongue
When will I use it anyway?

I cough up my lungs
because breathing has become too hard.

I rip out my heart,
cradle it
as I lay in the dark.

Visual Art

Medusa by Remy Sumida-Tate



Poetry

The Little Boy with the Horns by Monika Robles

His banshee shrieks pierce
the night air
as he purges wisteria trees
and demolishes the earth.

Specks of dirt freckle his face
from his boisterous outburst.
The fire in his belly flourishes
with a desire for more destruction. He forges the gates of hell
and bares his teeth at those who cross him. He dances and somersaults
around the fragments of his decimation, until only he remains.

His hoots and hollers fade
into the pleas and cries
of a little boy who wants
acceptance.

Is anybody listening?

A little boy
is scorned
for having
horns.

He is a monster.
Or so he is told.
He saws away his horns
to be less of a monster
but new stubs of keratin grow
firmer than before.
There is no love for such a beast,
He is well aware.
Though he bears these crooked horns, and a relentless amount of anger thrives within his
chest,
he still hoped for a savior.
A shining, white knight
to free him from his name.

He is more than his darkness, the shadow that lurks behind him like his cape.

He is a monster,
forever the abandoned child
by those who saw no redemption. He is the little boy with the horns.

When he eats his shadow
he will become whole.

Chills by Angel Sanchez

Fear consumes us all,
we cling to anything that can bring comfort,
any tools we can find,
needles so precise,
threads – soft to the touch –
in hopes of survival.
These threads shield us,
from the imminent danger that looms in everyone –
every voice, every breath –
even in the words,
“It’s just another cold.”

The stores become bare,
a ghost town – tools nowhere to be found.
I can grab only necessities
for anything else would be too dangerous,
not just for me
but everyone else too.
I am left only with a needle,
the one at home – with new threads,
knitting what I can – for comfort,
and survival.

Alone I knit,
in the warmth of my home,
wrapped in a thick blanket on a rainy day,
as the fabric envelops my body
it smothers my mouth –
“I can’t breathe!”

Those threads weren’t there for my safety,
but for those around me – those that also seek
warmth and comfort.

I’ll never forget the day,
under the threads I wore,
that day I *felt* secure –
it came from a stranger,
a malicious breath –
through the threads they wore,

ones that feigned protection,
or indicated ignorance.

I found it on my person – *invading*,
it needled its way through my body,
a rough wire –
with a strand that wasn't mine,
one that was a strange color,
and extremely cold.

It took over my veins,
and yarned itself
into my threads,
it made my blood run cold,
and left me with chills.

Now I await the day,
a new needle – one of steel,
with a new strand that isn't mine,
a strand of a different color,
but this time the strand is warm.
It's the tool I've wanted,
one that secures my safety.
Seeking warmth,
the comfort I yearned for
since the fear began.

Vault by Lauren Tang

A vault collecting dust;
a vault filled with fears and secrets,
a vault filled with poems and lyrics,
a vault I can no longer touch.

Shining stars guide me
on to the stage — a blinding spotlight,
preventing them from seeing me.
Eyes stare back at me and none of them are you,
but I know you can hear me.
You showed me how to belt from my chest,
how to play piano, and write from the heart,
but my fingers have forgotten.
My fingers have forgotten the smooth, cold ivory,
but the ghost of you will always guide me, overshadow me.
You taught me how to dance before I could walk,
how to sing before I could talk.
You took my infant, fragile hands
and treasured them as if they were molded of gold.
My fingers tried to mimic your experience,
your notes imprinted in my heart forever.
Even after you are gone, I hear your choruses.

I play the keys to unlock the vault of your memories.
I write the songs to perform your phantom harmonies.
I will sing loud enough for you to hear from above.

This vault is filled with you,
your jacket, your dress, and I will wear them like a badge.
I will no longer live in grief, but sing;
using my chest, the way you taught me.
I will no longer keep your gift in my pocket,
I will show it off to the world.
As I stand alone on this deserted stage with the sun beating down on me,
I will stand tall.

Tangent by Ying Wei Zhang

I've been dishonest:

No I'm not satisfied —

the reports returned and they're happy to announce it is benign, the mole that appeared like a miracle; and the discount chocolate from Walmart tastes like the cardboard heart they packaged it in;

And, *God*, I'm tired —

I never liked the poetry recital competitions in language school; to sway in place and flourish aloud the metaphorical masturbation of a dead man surnamed Wang, surnamed Li, surnamed Zhao, surnamed Chu, or whatever goddamned surname you have because if you share a surname, they must be your super-great granddaddy from the Tang dynasty but I think they all could be anybody's granddaddy; and the mommies turn on their camera flashes to guarantee that you pity circus ponies; prance and dance and break your legs over your ancestor's epitaph;

Yeah you've upset me —

when Didion wrote *Maria*, she was right; *emptiness and ennui of an American generation*, she promised and delivered; gambler's optimism is a well in Death Valley, somewhere to coil with rattlers and scour the sky reflected in your glassy gaze; but there is no well in Death Valley and no rattlers and no sky; *nothing*; *Maria*, cover your eyes; soon coins will fly and hummingbirds will sink in the swimming pool, and then will you still play the game;

As I've upset you too —

monkey see, monkey do; neurons that fire together wire together; we're neurons shooting unfriendly fire; synapses, synaptic connection, Hebbian learning, Pavlov's dog, Skinner's box; *meditate*, says the armchair occupant; meditate, again, I shall meditate; name a concoction, I tasted them all; sit in silence, scream into a pillow, watch the sunset, look at this seagull, this impromptu hypnosis, this seven-day mindfulness guide; I *promise* I'll try the thunderstorm next time;

You don't deserve this —

my eyes can't see, I'll turn blind, and my fingers fumble the needle and thread on the embroidery, my homemade gift for you but it's ruined because, if you couldn't read, my eyes couldn't see and my fingers fumbled the needle and thread; bloodied feathers don't fit the white swan so I cut through her fabric breast and stole you a souvenir sternum instead;

Undeniable sense of irony, all —

who's the voice in your head; *you hear me*; your mother, your father, your friend, your supervisor, your favorite singer, your dead sister, your future child, your newscaster; and by the way, did you hear about the ice cream man; he has an appointment at the clinic, he orders packages online, he saves leftovers for tomorrow, he knows his wife will eat the leftovers saved for tomorrow; but he looked at his watch, said goodbye on the phone, and slipped on the street and the bus didn't stop in time and his wife loved him; and I couldn't help crying wondering who'd cry for her;

Because I'm scared —

you're full of hate and nothing good.

the universe is a spider in a little downspout opening by Ying Wei Zhang

There is a spider in the little downspout opening outside this classroom. Its abdomen is big, though not longer than its limbs. It is also an abdomen that in sunlight reflects reddish. It has shapely limbs that support a cartoonish body hanging on the web. I do not disturb it. It has not done anything to me. I recall a nursery rhyme and wonder how the spider might fight the next rainfall. Surely as a full-grown arachnid, it has seen much violence in its brief life. Do birds swoop down occasionally in an attempt on its life? How quickly can the spider hide in the shadow of the pipe? How speedily can those limbs dash up the web? It is an insignificant spider in the grand scheme of the universe, in the overall population of spiders that have lived, live, and will live, and in the temporal stretch of my own life. If not for my reflection, the spider may not find itself as another's muse and solidified in another state of existence. In the breeze, it slightly flutters on the web. Not helpless and not vulnerable. Just warming up its stiff limbs. Perhaps if it were a person, it would stride across streets as an unbothered swan glides on a lake. It would not even spare the drivers waiting behind the wheel a cold glare. *Hit me. I dare you.* Its air of obstinance permeates unbothered. It is a stench we feel and begrudgingly acknowledge. But if a car does crush it, will the spider, when its time comes, die with dignity? Will it lay out on the pavement with limbs stretched out or curled in? Will a bird, either experienced in its own old age or a callow youngling without fear of that reddish abdomen, swallow it? Melt it into the stomach swamp of other melting spiders? Become one with other creatures we call 'spiders' but of different breeds? Become bird waste? An insignificant splatter on the pavement no longer recognizable to its siblings, to predators or prey, and no longer categorizable as 'spider?' How pitiful. I feel pity for the spider but I am not the spider nor is it me. Who am I to pity its existence when perhaps in its spiderly existence characterized by spiderly eyes and spiderly legs and spiderly abdomen and spiderly web and spiderly diet and a flutter of the breeze — it finds itself quite a content creature?

Fiction

White Swan by Miranda Celeste Rosas

All eyes were on Selene, as she danced gracefully upon the stage, each spotlight focusing on her every move. She had a certain poise, beauty, and charm that exceeded all expectations. Everyone in the theatre was watching how she tiptoed across the stage. It was her moment, and no one could steal this from her. She was the swan in her white leotard and tutu, each gold accent radiated across her costume in every move. Across the stage playing the piano was Jaime, who was dazzled by the way Selene carried herself; he was merely a speck in her world vying to somehow grasp her attention. While she was quietly in awe of the music that he played for her solo. The two were in admiration of one another, little did they know the universe had a plan all along. With a sudden flicker they could not take their eyes off of each other. Both stared back, the connection between them could not be broken. Nothing could pull them apart in this instant, as the theatre around them seemingly moved forward, leaving them both behind.

Time refused to continue on in these few seconds as every vulnerability between them was revealed. It was here, in this moment, that Jaime saw a different side to Selene. Something that many tried but could never uncover before, he viewed the pain behind her dark brown eyes. The pain of being unable to go beyond the expectations that were set out for her. He felt *her*. He felt her tiredness, frustration, and anger as no one understood the pressure that crawled around inside her. It danced alongside Selene on stage—it was her black swan. No one in that moment noticed it, as no one could take their eyes off the white swan and the way she pirouetted across the floor. But Jaime uncovered the mask beneath her, the one that she tried to cover up. He saw beyond her beauty and grace, and noticed the scars around her feet, the swelling of her ankles. He knew there was more than being told by the white swan.

In that moment, together, they reminisced on a dance they shared in the practice room not long ago. Selene stayed late that evening, frustrated that her part of the duet did not live up to her expectations. Jaime found her crying on the floor, he had never seen her in this position before.

“Hey, you doing alright there?” Jaime asked while walking towards the door. He stayed later than usual, getting in extra piano practice before the opening show.

“No ... I ... I can’t do my routine. Everything feels off. My technique is all wrong, I just can’t seem to focus.” Selene said as her words drifted off. Her eyes were staring at the ground and her once neatly tied bun was falling apart.

“Do you want to practice with me? I may not be as experienced as you, but I can be a strong lead.” Jaime says walking closer towards her.

“You know how to dance? I thought you only played piano?” she asked, tilting her head. Her big brown eyes seemed to light up at his words, and she grabbed his hand, as it was extended towards her.

“I mean, I practiced for a while but just felt drawn to the music instead, so I focused more on that.” He then gently placed his hands on Selene’s waist as she got into position. Selene then began counting them in.

“Five, six, seven, eight...”

As if they were on stage, music filled the air. They were no longer in the practice room, instead on a stage of their own, he was her Siegfried and she, his white swan. Their bond was integral, and they complimented each other so perfectly. When looking into one another's eyes, Jaime felt *her* pain, tiredness, and sorrow as she graced the floor with her dance. All he wanted to do was protect her, be there for her any way he could, as he knew she needed help. They each felt something real, their guards were let down, and both came out stronger compared to when coming in. Angels in the sky were watching over from the heavens above in admiration of a beautiful couple they made. Eventually, the dance came to an end, yet the twinkle in each of their eyes remained and they could barely part.

The flashback then dissipated and suddenly remembering where he was, the song continued on with Jaime playing on the piano. But Selene had seen the story through her eyes as well, longing for the moment they shared to never end. As applause broke out, roses flew onto the stage, and all attention was on her, the only person on her mind was Jaime and their special moment.

Found by Chance by Juan Fernando Guzman

The thick dew settled in by the pier as sailing ships docked for a night's rest. A young man sat at a booth at the bar, writing on a napkin, as a young attractive woman peered over his shoulder without shame. It was almost closing time, there was an emptiness sitting by their sides, and the cough of an old man wafted from the corner of the room. The waiter scratched at his grey stubble, cleared his throat, and tapped at his watch — hinting that they didn't have much time left.

The woman sat next to the young man and asked,
“What are you writing?”

The young man flipped the napkin over, and answered,
“Just my errands for the day.”

The young woman chugged the rest of her drink, to its final gulp, and then slammed the cup on the wood.

“Maybe you should take it more lightly,” the young man judged.

The young woman peered over at the stack of cups that the young man had accumulated to his right side, as she responded in a snarky tone,

“You're one to talk. Besides, it's peach tea. It's my favorite.”

The waiter then rounded up all the cups and wiped the bar clean. He gave the man and the woman their debit cards back and walked them to the door, probably eager to go home himself. It was around two in the morning, and the lights from the docked ships irritated their eyes as they walked in the same direction out of mere chance.

“You know, just because I talked to you first doesn't mean that you're allowed to follow me,” said the young woman in a joking manner.

The young man ignored her banter as he crossed the street and continued walking on the opposite side of her.

“I didn't mean to scare you off! I was just playing!” the young woman explained from the other side of the street as her voice echoed.

The streetlights that drained the night stuttered, sometimes on, sometimes off. There was no one out and the lights from the buildings were mostly off, blinds shut. The young man, after finally biting on the young woman's taunts, replied,

“I am not following you. I live up ahead, in this building here. I hope you have a good night though. Stay safe.”

The young man turned the corner and went on inside. He climbed the flight of stairs and felt the walls move slightly from the alcohol. He entered his apartment and turned on the night light at his desk. The napkin he had started writing on at the bar was crumbled up but still in fine condition. The young man finished what he was writing and folded the napkin in half, setting it on the corner of his desk, when a loud knock on his door startled him.

The young woman had returned. She explained that the waiter at the bar had mixed up their debit cards and she had not noticed until she had made it home but had come back — remembering where he had told her he lived.

The young man thought nothing of it, but she kept chattering on about how sweet the peach tea at that bar was and how it did not compare to the one from the coffee shop down the street. As the young man was about to end the conversation by shutting the door, she asked with a hopeful smile,

“Are you busy tomorrow? I have no plans. Maybe we can try some of that peach tea.” The truth was, he had not had any plans for tomorrow in a while nor the next day, or the day after — so he had agreed. He didn’t know if he had agreed just to shut her up, or because he was tired, or because he actually wanted to try the peach tea that she had been going on about, but it did not matter. The point was that he had plans tomorrow.

After they went to the coffee shop, they spent most of the day just walking around the port. All of the sailing ships had left by the early morning and the beach umbrellas opened up by midday. They ended their stroll at the pier by the bar they had met at the day prior and looked off into the endless ocean.

“You ever think about how one day we will get old and become as shriveled as a raisin?” asked the young woman.

“No. I don’t think that far ahead,” said the young man.

“Why not? It’s everyone’s fate to get old.”

“Not everyone, some people die young. Maybe they are the lucky ones.”

“Why is that?”

“They don’t get old.”

A cruise ship passed by as the people on board all cheered to the ones on the beach. The ship honked towards nothingness, as it shrunk with distance.

“I just can’t imagine my skin wearing thin — as thin as tissue paper. And the wrinkles starting to form and my hair greying. It’s a sad thought.”

They both looked underneath the pier at a couple that was inside of the ocean, and the pesky seagulls that flew up overhead, snatching the sandwiches out of people’s hands. There was an older couple that was applying sunscreen to each other’s backs and bickering at each other. The young woman turned to the young man and joked,

“Can you imagine being that miserable?”

“No, but I can try,” said the young man.

They both ran out into the ocean and undressed as the cherry waves collided. The young woman laid flat on her back, floating on the ocean top and she turned towards the young man. Her hair edged her eyebrows as she smiled at him, her eyes squinting. The young man nonchalantly laid his head on her stomach, as he watched the sky turn blue and gold. They slowly became of one mold, skin-upon-skin and they watched it hold.

A few years later, the young man and young woman were no longer so young anymore. Their fingernails had hardened and yellowed, their hair had gone and greyed, their skin was

blotched with age and their teeth were as fragile as paper. They had returned to the place at which they had fallen in love and took a final walk on the pier.

The man had been diagnosed with terminal cancer, and it was said that he would not make it past this week, so they had set out to spend the weekend there. They had grown a big family, two daughters and two sons — four in total, but had decided not to bring any of them as they had their own families anyways by now and would just ruin the fun. They went up to the pier, the one by the bar, and they stared out into the ocean just as they had before.

“Everything has changed, hasn’t it?” said the old woman.

“I don’t think so. After all these years, I still have you. That’s the only thing I planned on keeping constant,” replied the old man.

She smiled at him and put her head on his drooping shoulder.

“Do you still feel the same way as you did back then?” The old man brushed the back of his hand on her face.

“In what sense?” she questioned.

“In age, and growing old, and all that came with it? Do you still believe that you are not as beautiful as you once were?” asked the old man.

There was a group of young men and women playing volleyball, their youth was apparent by their quick movement and the glow of their skin.

“No. I think that only your opinion matters at this point. And you have reassured me day after day, for as long as I can remember, of how beautiful you think I am. I am always reminded of how lucky I was to have found you,” the old woman expressed.

“And it should stay like that, even long after I am gone,” he concluded as he gave a heavy cough, and then added, “Loving you for this long has been as sweet as that peach tea you had at the bar.”

They both laughed as the waves crashed the shore, and the smell of sea salt crowded their nostrils. They breathed in their final moments together and had spent the entire day there, just watching the business of the beach.

The morning after the funeral was an especially emotional day, all of the family had shown to console the old woman and celebrate the life of the old man. They had gone out to lunch and had tried to keep the old woman company as the solitude would serve her no good. Eventually, everyone had lives to attend to and could not be there with her forever, so it was up to her to remain strong and not let it get to her.

The oldest son had to go away for a week because of work, and so he had asked the old woman if she could take care of his two kids while he was away. The old woman had gladly agreed, she needed the company after all, and it would surely keep her busy.

That afternoon, the kids were playing in the attic and had created havoc. Shoe boxes were turned upside down, lamps were on their sides, and boxes were ripped open. The old woman did not bother scolding them as she was too old to exert that amount of energy now anyways. She just told them to come down and have lunch with her and that she would clean

the mess up later.

After lunch, the children had taken a nap on the floor rug and she had decided to begin cleaning the attic. She picked up the lamps, resealed the boxes, and placed the shoe boxes in an orderly fashion when one of the shoeboxes stood out to her — it had a napkin peeking out of it that looked rather familiar.

She placed the shoebox down and removed the napkin from inside it. It was the one that the old man had written on, 50 years ago. The old woman flipped it over and began reading,

“I don’t know what I am going to do tomorrow. Maybe nothing. Maybe something. I am just tired of life. I think I am going to do it tonight. I have all of what I need at home, I just need to finish this beer and go home.”

There was an empty space beneath it, and then it continued,

“The girl I met at the bar was something else — really attractive. Wish we would have met sooner, maybe I would have actually said something to her. Maybe we could have made plans. Tonight, I have other plans though — time to finally rest.”

The old woman began sobbing as a sense of realization funneled through her like hot wax being poured down her throat. And she cried until her eyes dried, and then she smiled for there was nothing to be sad about — she was crying over something that had, fortunately, not come to pass. They had lived from young to old, and that’s all she could have wished for, nothing else.

Had it been an arranged meeting — or had they found each other by chance?

Nothing Gold Can Stay by Kyle Ocampo Magro

A somber breeze blew through the overcast clouds, and a quiet passing of rusted cars signaled a day of reprieve. On the black metal fence hung an assortment of flowers and cardboard signs with messages of remembrance and compassion, yet no one ever paid much attention. In the humble shade of the oak tree stood a boy and his companion.

“It’s better here,” the girl said.

“I doubt it,” he answered.

“Look, if you keep doing this to yourself, it’s not going to get better.”

“I know, I’m fine.”

“Then put the flowers down, please for me?”

“I can’t, that’ll make it real, and I just want to stand for a second.”

“Okay,” she responded. The two stood for a while as if it were a contest to see who would speak first. In the boy’s hands he clutched crimson-red cardinals, the color of blood and life. The girl started to fidget with the faded wooden cross on her neck. She sat down, motioning the boy to follow, but like a soldier, he remained standing.

“What do you remember?” she asked.

“I remember the green park down the street and the metal slide that shone like a quarter on a sunny day.”

“I was there too; I loved that park.”

“In those lush fields we ran like there was nothing to worry about, everything was easier back then.”

“And then what happened?”

“I’m not sure, things got complicated,”

“As they do, that’s just how things get.”

“We grew up and we were no longer children anymore.”

“You’re still a kid you know that right? Just cause you’re nineteen doesn’t make you an adult.”

“Really? After everything, I don’t feel like a kid anymore.”

“Then let’s go back, tell me more about what you remember.”

“I remember the corn maze, the nighttime bonfire, and the backyard with a trampoline.” She stood up and placed her head on his shoulder.

“What color was the trampoline?”

“It was black, surrounded by a rubber circle of blue, the same material of a tarp covering. The black net covered the whole thing so we wouldn’t fall off the trampoline. I remember one autumn; it was covered with a hue of orange shades. Spent nearly thirty minutes trying to get all the leaves off.”

She smiled at him, but the boy maintained his gaze. His brown eyes were grey and empty. She placed her hand on the bottom of his palm and loosened his grip on the bouquet.

“How about you let me hold these for a second, I want to see what they smell like,” she said as she gently raised the flowers to her rosy face.

“Okay, so what do they smell like?”

“Like flowers.”

He broke his gaze and smiled back at her.

“That’s because they are flowers, you could be more specific than that,” he said.

“Okay, it’s like being in the warm greenhouse at one of those hardware stores. The ones that remind me of a colorful museum. You walk in, and suddenly everything feels as if you’re lying in a field of poppies,” she replied.

“That’s something, can’t say I’ve been to one of those places in a while.”

“Well as long as you remember, that is something to me.”

“I suppose.”

“Oh, come on, we were doing so well.”

“What do you mean?”

“I was doing so well as your therapist; we were making progress you know,” the girl said. He smiled again for only a moment before returning to his laconic gaze. “What’s on your mind now?”

“Nothing, I guess.”

“You could lie like a devil to everyone else, but I know you better than that. Talk to me, please. What are you feeling right now?”

“Guilt.”

“Guilt?”

“Yes. I feel nothing but that.”

“You realize that none of what happened is your fault. You keep feeling sorry for yourself like that and nothing is going to help you. You aren’t responsible for what happened —” The boy sharpened a look towards her and maintained his silence.

“That’s not what I meant. I’m sorry, I didn’t mean it like that,” she stammered.

“It’s okay.”

“I’m sorry, I know it’s difficult — ”

“I know, I’m fine.”

“Okay.” She cradled the cardinals in one arm and placed her other arm around him. “Tell me more about what you remember.”

“I had a red bicycle.”

“Okay, tell me more, please.”

“It was the first time we felt actual freedom. Like the world was ours, we traversed the whole city like pariahs looking for a purpose.”

“Where did you go?”

“Everywhere, first it was the blue elementary school down the street, the green park, and eventually we crossed the bridge over the railroad tracks.”

“Tell me more.”

“I remember the graffiti that covered the walls there, and we looked at the tags as if they were painted by da Vinci or something. It was beautiful there; we would sit on our bikes just looking at them.”

“Da Vinci? You’re kidding me right. Of all the artists, you choose a renowned Renaissance painter and inventor. You amaze me sometimes.”

“I guess I do.”

A moment of silence followed. A few seconds turned into a few minutes.

“Can I ask you something?” The girl said.

“You are asking me something,”

“You always have to be smart with me.”

“You know me.”

“Okay well, earlier, you said you felt guilt. Why?”

“Where do I even start?”

“Try me.”

“You should’ve seen the way his mother looked at me, there was nothing I could say to her. I’ll never forget the way she cried as she hugged me. I could do nothing but try and console her. What are you supposed to tell a mother who loses everything? More than anything, I wanted to tell her I was sorry for not being a good enough friend,” he said with watery grey eyes.

“But you were a good friend. And I was there that day, you did everything you could.”

“No, I wasn’t a good friend. If I were, he’d still be here. And you know that.”

“Okay no, that’s not fair to say. You need to stop blaming yourself, you were a good friend. No, you were an amazing friend to him.”

“I wasn’t there for him when he needed someone the most. Where in that fact do you think makes me a good friend?”

“We grow up and go our different ways, nobody can say what’s to happen after that.”

“And what happened then?”

“It’s better now, you said it yourself. There’s no more suffering.”

“I guess.”

“You guess?”

“I guess, there’s nothing to be done about it now.”

“He wouldn’t want you to be like this, you know.”

“I know.”

“Things changed after I moved away, and I guess he was different after that.”

“He was a product of pain and circumstance and I could never speak of the demons that rested on his shoulders. He ran with a tough crowd when we got older and got involved in things that were beyond me, but he always had his principles.”

“I see, I can’t say I had much contact with him as we got older.”

“Things change.”

“They do, don’t they?”

“Yeah.”

“When did he start — ”

“I don’t remember. Just a year ago I couldn’t even recognize him anymore.”

“I see.”

“We grew up together, I don’t get it. He was dealing with so much and I never knew. Demons resting on his shoulders and you wouldn’t know a thing.”

“They aren’t blocking his wings anymore,” she said.

“I know.”

For a time, they stood there in silence, taking in the world.

“You know something?” he asked.

“What is it?”

“He reminds me so much of Johnny from *The Outsiders*.”

“I don’t remember much about that book, that was middle school after all, seems like that was nearly a lifetime ago.”

“Well, this one character named Johnny would do anything for those he cared for. Even if it meant risking his own life,” he told her.

“Oh, I remember now. And who are you supposed to be? Ponyboy?”

“That’s funny.”

“Well?”

“No, Ponyboy was good.”

“You are good.”

“I’m not, if I was innocent and good, I might have said something to him. Things would have been different.”

“Nothing gold can stay. So, why don’t you just speak to him now.” She hands him the collection of cardinals.

“What do I say?”

“You know what to say, tell him how you feel. You can do it.”

The boy paced forward a few steps and stared at the engraved marbled stone on the fresh-cut grass. He took a deep breath and placed the red cardinals on the bed of dying flowers, crumpled notes, and burnt candles. The girl remained under the oak tree, staring at him as he whispered to his friend.

“*Stay gold, Ponyboy, stay gold,*” she repeated to herself quietly.

He returned to the shade of the oak tree and she placed a hand on his shoulder as the golden-tinted clouds came and went.

Caged Birds by Juan P Luzuriaga

“Good morning, babe. I brought you breakfast,” he happily announces.

The words *babe* and *breakfast* make me feel a wave of nausea — I’m a shitty person. Here he is, happy as a bird making me breakfast, but if he only knew.

I look at that naïve stupid smile and respond, “Hi hun,” as he flies in for a peck.

I wish I weren’t so good at this, but I am. I’ve provided so many clues for him to reveal my secret, but maybe he’s too pure. After all this time, his talons still can’t grasp the situation. Maybe he’s not very smart after all or maybe he’s doing the same thing behind my back? No, he couldn’t be, I would detect such a thing right away. It makes me angry that he’s this stupid. What else do I have to do? I’m practically spelling it out for him, and the worst part is that I’m stuck in this cage with him.

“Hey baby, how’s your back feeling?” he warbles while his neck twitches to look at me.

Ugh, maybe this is his technique. To treat me so well that he makes me feel bad and I end up telling him everything. No, I’m just giving him too much credit. Either way, it’s not going to work.

“It’s better, thanks for the massage yesterday.”

I turn my head and look at our pictures on the wall. Trophies, all *brooding* on once-upon-a-time stories that are far away from reality now. This is no longer that fairy tale — that egg won’t hatch.

I fantasize about how to murder him on a daily basis, and every scenario ends in me cutting his smiling little beak beyond recognition, so I don’t have to remember that stupid fucking gesture.

“Anything for my pretty lady,” he chirps. “You know I love you.”

I grab the kitchen knife and sit down. I take a slow look at it, spinning it around, flirting with the edge, and I can feel his concerned bird gaze on me.

“It’s time we call the guy who sharpens the knives.”

“Um, yeah, uh, let me do that,” he cheeps. “But first let me see that knife.” He tries to take it from my hands.

Without breaking eye contact with the knife, I slowly move it away from him. Looking at the knife, I imagine him as a bird perching next to me. I want to tell him everything now. I want to tell him I’ve been having affairs on the bed, the couch, the chair, and even on the walls.

“Babe?” he sings while gazing at a predator holding her freedom knife.

I want to tell him that the truth is that they were all better lovers than him and that I won't be raising another caged bird.

As I lift the knife, I stare at my round belly and whisper, “Take this. Little bird.”

Visual Art

Esto Perpetua by Remy Sumida-Tate

