



# Black Rock & Sage

Issue 23, 2024  
Idaho State University



*Black Rock & Sage* is a journal of creative works published annually through the Department of English and Philosophy at Idaho State University (ISU) with assistance from the Art, Music, Theatre, and Dance departments. All artistic contributions, from design to literature to music, have been produced by graduate and undergraduate students in departments from across the university. The magazine is open for submissions year round, and each issue's deadline is February 14. For more information about the journal, see our website at [blackrockandsage.org](http://blackrockandsage.org) or @brs\_isujournal on Instagram.

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Cover: "Ear Mount" by Katrina Gilbert

# Black Rock & Sage

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*Sarah Rick*

## Editor's Note

I am often pleasantly surprised by the number and variety of submissions that *Black Rock & Sage* receives from departments across the university. It is easy to become so involved in the English department that I forget we have poets in the biology department, musicians who are health science majors, and painters working on engineering degrees. In a 2017 interview in the *Chicago Review of Books*, poet Evie Shockley explained that one important affordance of art is to provide “a place where we can bring together things that are not usually simultaneously in view.” To my thinking, *Black Rock & Sage* gathers students and departments that do not always have opportunities to associate with each other. We highlight students’ artistic sides, facets their professors and peers might not otherwise get to see. The magazine also puts different mediums in conversation with one another to provide a snapshot of ISU’s creative culture in any given year.

The poetry and prose in this issue represent our students’ diverse perspectives as they confidently investigate demanding subjects through a variety of forms. Ford Swetnam Poetry Prize winner Emma Lopes plays with the structure of a definition to explore “life” through images of its opposite—death. Mel Anderson’s “November” considers physician assisted suicide as her speaker rails against a religion that believes “a man should not leave / this life until each droplet of fresh pain / has been forced from fleshy sponge.” Lindi Dice’s palindrome poem “Recollections in December” hinges in the middle, exploring an abusive family relationship from both ends of life, while Klaus Graham’s “Suspension” asks the speaker to return to his own dead body, a “waxen windchime filled with sin.”

This year's prose takes us all over the world. In "1948," 2024 Prose Prize winner, Antonio Rodriguez, investigates the consequences of Mexican colonization through one tax collector's horseback journey through an isolated country haunted by jaguar sightings. Omotomilayo Lawanson's "Adàbà" examines motherhood and the ways symbols of hope can transform into symbols of despair in the face of water precarity and threats of violence in the Nigerian countryside. Tanner Pratt explores the raising and lowering of life's monuments and the ways we mark time in our lives through a cemetery visit in "Sweet Rapture," and in "Veronica," Shane Comin traces one woman's loss of faith in Catholicism and eventual death in Italy through the recollections of a disturbingly unreliable narrator.

I am thrilled to present you with the 2024 issue of *Black Rock & Sage*. As always, we would like to thank Idaho State University and our local community, as well as the music, art, theatre, dance, and English and philosophy departments, for their support. We are especially grateful for the collaborative efforts of Professors Jon Armstrong and Ryan Babcock in making this issue a reality. *Black Rock & Sage* could not exist without the energetic work of our superhuman faculty advisor, Associate Professor Susan Goslee, and passionate editorial staff—Poetry Editor Russell Osborn, Prose Editor Konnor Whitfield, Advertising and Social Media Intern Brianna Lords, Design Intern Mallori Briley, and our fantastic group of assistant editors. We work very hard throughout the year to find the best creative work that ISU students have to offer, and we are delighted to provide them a place to come simultaneously into view.

## *BR&S* Musical Performances

### “Cargo Shorts”

Composed by Maximo Orr

Performed by

Maximo Orr, vocals

Adam Redd, piano

Payton Chavez, electric guitar

Brandt Moon, electric bass

Phil Inman, drum set

Carsten Kottraba, Lead Engineer

Olympicus, Assistant Engineer

### “Ruin”

Composed by Carsten Kottraba

Performed by

Carsten Kottraba, vocals, drum set, piano, and guitar

James Breker, bass

Alyssa Kolnes, Lead Engineer

Karson Prestin, Assistant Engineer

### “Backyard Shenanigans”

Composed by Cortnie Hulse

Performed by

Amanda Smith, piccolo

Kristi Ballif, alto flute

Stephanie Luker, flute

Cortnie Hulse, flute

Chelsea Romney, Lead Engineer

Beck Jones, Assistant Engineer

“Freedom”

Composed by Ben Graham

Performed by

Ben Graham, piano

Jon Armstrong, alto saxophone

James Breker, electric bass

Reese Thompson, drum set

James Lyttongay, Lead Engineer

Carsten Kottraba, Assistant Engineer

“Psychogenic Chromotion”

Composed by Adam Redd

Performed by

Adam Redd, piano

Jon Armstrong, tenor saxophone

Eddie Ludema, trumpet

Ben Graham, synthesizer

Michael Frew, electric guitar

James Breker, electric bass

Reese Thompson, drum set

Brad Thompson, percussion

Sarah Warner, alto saxophone

Daunte Escalera, alto saxophone

Hinckley Potter, tenor saxophone

Kacey Kennedy, tenor saxophone

Danny Whisman, baritone saxophone

Jaden Hansen, trumpet

Shawn McLain, trumpet

Aiden Niblett, trombone

Ryne Anglesey, trombone



Glen Belliston, trombone  
Matthew Brewster, bass trombone  
Beck Jones, Lead Engineer  
Alyssa Kolnes, Carsten Kottraba, Rihaan Gurung, Karson  
Prestin, James Lyttongay, and Chelsea Romney, Assistant  
Engineers

“Clockwork”  
Composed by Cortnie Hulse  
Performed by the ISU Percussion Ensemble  
Rihaan Gunung, Lead Engineer  
Karson Prestin, James Lyttongay, Beck Jones, Alyssa Kolnes,  
and Chelsea Romney, Assistant Engineers

“Speaks So Loud”  
Produced by Olympicus  
Performed by  
Jodie Schwicht, vocals  
Maximo Orr, Lead Engineer  
Chelsea Romney, Assistant Engineer

“the 3 step”  
Produced and Performed by Coulesse Kindle  
Olympicus, Lead Engineer  
James Lyttongay, Assistant Engineer

“July 25”

Composed by Dominick Hendricks

Performed by Gone After Midnight

Kacey Kennedy, saxophone

Micah Lowther, bass

Dominick Barlow, guitar and vocals

Nathan Gregson, drums

Karson Prestin, Lead Engineer

Maximo Orr, Assistant Engineer

*Lindi Dice*

## Recollections in December

The windows were closed;  
the door was locked.  
He sat there, motionless.  
It was silent, but the air prayed repentance.  
I hid, limbs and all, from him  
inside ultraviolet Crown-Royal bags:  
his house of worship, his holy grail—  
a life-altering prayer drowned in amber.  
I didn't know whether to scream or confess,  
but my throat hurt from swallowing  
my own words. *There's a stone in my gut, yearning to drop.*  
Tom Hanks talked in the background, and it was a,  
*the scene where Jenny took his hand and put it right on—*  
it played again and again, over and over.  
I was four. There were bite marks on my forearm, blood on his teeth.  
Grandpa reeked of butterscotch and schnapps. His nose was bulbous.  
*It plays again—again—aga-*  
Grandpa reeks of disinfectant and plastic. His nose is sharp.  
I am nineteen. There are crescent-shaped divots on my biceps, skin  
under my nails.  
It plays over and over, again and again:  
*the scene where Jenny takes his hand and puts it right on—*  
Tom Hanks talks in the background, and it's a  
—my own words: "There's a stone in my gut yearning to drop.  
My throat hurts from swallowing, but  
I don't know whether to scream or confess."  
*His house of worship, his holy grail—*

*a life-altering prayer drowned in amber,  
inside ultraviolet Crown-Royal bags.*

I have hid, limbs and all, from him.

It's silent, but the air prays, *Repentance!*

He sits there, motionless.

The door is locked.

The windows are closed.

*Tanner Pratt*

## Sweet Rapture

I am 102 and I am standing in front of your daughter's grave.

It's a tall stone, otherwise my elderly knees would prevent me from bending over to scrape the bird shit off the etched epitaph with my mittened knuckle: "Beloved Friend."

I know it is your daughter's because I know the spot. Eighty years ago, we stood only four feet to the left and watched as your mother was lowered into Jesus' company through the roof. That was the metaphor the pastor used at the funeral, based on some story of Jesus healing a paralyzed, ceiling-trespassing man. Eighty years later she remains immobile in her bed. "Beloved Mother, Daughter, Sister, and Friend." I wonder what became of that pastor, if he's buried in this same cemetery. I wonder if, unlike your mother, he was offered Jesus' healing when he trespassed through the Earth's roof. I suspect his decay was as quick as his faith.

Eighty years ago, your father pointed to this adjacent plot and told you one day you would be buried here. We stared at the spot of unturned dirt next to your mother's, two twenty-something girls nowhere close to death. You held me at your mother's funeral while I cried about you dying someday.

Forty-three years ago, the name of your father, who never remarried, was engraved beside your mother's. "Beloved Father, Son, and Friend." Somewhere in between the funerals

of your parents we shed the niceties and easily forgiving nature of youth and cold shoulders spread into cold months and eventually cold decades. I'm sorry I wasn't at your father's funeral.

Five years ago, this tombstone was erected in your untouched plot. I know it is your daughter's because it is your plot and you are not here. I know it is your daughter's because you are the only person I know who loves Austen enough to borrow her characters' names for both the first and middle name of your daughter.

Today, the cemetery is full and your plot is occupied. I use my shaky, shit-less hand to wipe my cold nose as I look around for you. As I crane my neck, I catch the eye of a magpie, resting in the elm closest to your parents. I'm reminded of a story of an old actress, I can't remember her name. The day her father died, a pigeon flew into her home and couldn't escape. I imagine the exhaustion of grief combining with the terror and frustration of a confused bird flying into walls and bookshelves and lampshades. Tired arms and tired wings for what feels like eons. The actress became afraid of birds until she joined her father in death. I wonder what happened the day your father died. What creatures did you begin to fear?

The magpie, ever restless, flies away as I meet her gaze. I am 102 and I, too, am restless. I set the flowers meant for you on your daughter's grave. Wilting zinnias. "Beloved Friend."

## Veronica

She lost her Lord in mid-December. In January, we divorced. She told me she'd try to get him back. She'd go to Mass; she'd read her scriptures; she'd confess to the priest. She did it all, but her Lord didn't return.

"It's finished," I kept saying. "Time to move on."

When the papers were signed, she moved to Boston to live with her mother. She called me in March.

"I'm going to Rome, Nick," she said.

"Why's that?" I asked.

"I've got to. I figure, if there's anywhere I can find my faith again, it'll be there. Not in some chapel in Dorchester where they're on their third priest this year. We can still work this out — you and I — you know."

She arrived in Rome the next Monday. She toured the city until Friday. And on Sunday, she died.

They didn't tell me much on the call. They said they were "Polizia" and that she'd been found by some swimmers that morning. An accident. She'd left a purse and a book and a handful of beads. She'd died in Anzio, but they'd loaded her up and taken her to Rome. I was needed there as soon as possible, they told me. I couldn't imagine why; I hadn't seen her in months. "The body needs identified," they said. They'd called at six. I was in the air over Philly by eight-thirty.

They met me at the terminal. They wore those police hats that you only ever see in cartoons and they sported thin mustaches. We drove into Rome. No rush, no sirens. No reason to hurry, I guess. They pointed out statues and

buildings and ruins and said things like, “Old, very old,” and “Good food there, yep.” The car stopped at a building called the “Obitorio.” The morgue. At the door, a woman who looked like a nurse gave me an evidence bag, with the purse and the other things she’d left behind. “They were left in the grass,” she said.

I told her to “give me a second,” and I sat on a bench. There was no one around. Just pictures of Jesus on stucco, and a thousand crosses. Ironical, I thought, that she was dead, here. I pulled the book from the bag. It wasn’t really a book at all, but a calfskin diary. She’d filled in the pedigree on the last few pages. In the “Husband” box next to her name, she’d written mine; and my phone number at the bottom. I read her first entry.

*I Arrive in Italy*

*March 13, 2011*

*Sunday*

*I’ve gone to Rome. I’ve gone to Rome to find my lord again. I’ve had him all my life. I’ve gone to mass every week. I’ve read my Bible every day. I’ve held my beads and gone my way and sinned no more. But the lord has left me. And Nick has left me because of it. And my mother has sent me away because of it.*

*I’ve gone to Rome because if the lord is anywhere, he is here, with the priests and the Pope, in the Vatican and the Sistine. If I do not find him here, he is gone, and I have lived a lie forever.*

*Nick thinks it’s silly. He always told me to just hold on to the rosary and say my prayers, and I’d be a Christian. That’s how he did it, he said. Just have faith, and the lord will come. What if he doesn’t?*

*Tomorrow, I go to the Vatican. Maybe I’ll see the Sistine. For now, I think I need sleep. The hotel’s nice, but I think it was made when Paul was still writing epistles.*



She signed it, "Veronica."

In the doorway stood a man in a lab coat, buttoned up to the chin. The coroner, I guessed. He said something in Italian and mimed for me to follow him. I mimed that I needed another minute.

As he turned, the nurse-looking woman appeared.

"Are you alright?" she asked.

"I am. Thanks," I said.

"Would you like me to sit with you?" she asked. No accent. American, almost.

"If you want," I said. She sat down. Smoothed a wrinkle from her skirt.

"It's a terrible thing to lose a spouse," she said.

"Yes."

"Were you here together?"

"She came alone. I live in Philly. Flew in this morning."

"I'm so sorry," she said. "It really is an awful thing to lose a spouse." She repeated it, as though she thought I hadn't understood before.

"Yes. Thanks."

I asked if she was married. She said, "Not really, no. Not anymore." We were silent for a while. She smoothed a few more wrinkles from her skirt and looked at the floor.

"I suppose I'll leave you alone, then," she said. "I'm really sorry. I really am." She estimated the coroner would be back in a few minutes. And she left.

I opened the diary again. The next three pages had been removed. Hastily, it seemed. There were fragments of words on the shreds left behind. I checked the bag. Nothing. She'd continued on Monday.

*I Visit the Vatican*

March 14, 2011

Monday

*Today, I toured Vatican City.*

*I started at the art gallery. I wanted to find a depiction of the lord, but there weren't many. St. Peter's taken over. He's in the statues, poking his head out of plinths and asking, "Where have the pupils in my marble-eyes gone?"; he's on the walls, preaching to paint-men and paint-women, and crying from his own cross to his captors; he's walking on water and healing the sick, and if you didn't know any better, you'd think this was the Church of St. Peter, Our Lord and Our Savior.*

*At the end of some hallway is the first sign of the lord. And he's dead. He's being carried to his tomb by mourners and friends. His tunic's fallen, and his arms have dropped to the ground, and he's lost every bit of Saviorism that he should have had. There was a man at the foot of the painting who knelt beneath the stanchion rope and wept. He was joined by a few others. And they cried, and raised their hands, and I thought that St. Peter might come strolling by on the teary river that was forming.*

*And when they were finished, they stood and left.  
I left with them.*

There was a gap in her paragraphs. Above the next, she wrote, "The Sistine."

*I decided to stop by the Sistine. It was beautiful. I'd seen pictures, you know, but they're nothing like the real thing. Crowded. So crowded. The whole place has this smell of oldness and wine. There're cracks in the paintings. Adam and God have*

*aged a thousand years; so have the other hundred naked people up there.*

*On the way to the hotel, I stopped at a chapel. The Santa Maria sopra Minerva, it's called. Michelangelo's got a bunch of things in there too. He's got a bunch of things everywhere.*

*The choir was singing a hymn I didn't recognize. The pews were empty. I couldn't figure out why. This is Italy, for Christ's sake. The priest came over after a while. Asked me my name, how long I'd been in Rome, if I'd been there before. I told him I'd lost my faith and I was trying to find it here. I don't think he understood. He just lifted my rosary from my neck and pressed the cross in my hand and walked away, smiling, as if he'd solved all the problems in the world.*

*Room service is here. I'm not sure what I'll do tomorrow.*

*Veronica*

The coroner was waiting in the doorway again. The woman who looked like a nurse was next to him.

"It's time, Nick. I'm sorry," she said.

"Alright, then." I put the diary in the bag. I stretched. Took a few breaths.

They led me to the freezer. The air burned with the stench of formaldehyde-sweetened blood. Five tables were in a row. Each was covered in a corpse-shaped sheet, feet sticking out the end. At the furthest were my two policemen. The sheet in front of them was pulled away from the head. The body's arms were splayed out and dropped to the ground, the fingers purple and clawed. The hair was matted from saltwater and the eyelids were taped shut. The mouth had gone all tight. Lips curled back. Teeth bared.

“That’s her,” I said, and left the morgue. At the hotel, I ordered up a bottle. Finished it. Ordered up another. She’d skipped a few pages. Her pen had been shaking.

*I Am on the Boat to Anzio*

March 15, 2011

Tuesday

*The boat came at sunrise. The captain’s an enormous man. He says that we’ll be there in twenty minutes.*

*I wish the world were ending. I wish it would burn up tomorrow. And right before it happened, I could hop on the airplane that would take me home; and we’d soar into the sky and I’d be as close to heaven as I’ll ever be; and God could look at me and say, “She’s trying to reach me, she’s right there, she’s on her way, she’s finally done it.”; and the sky could fall and the plane could crash, and I could die, a woman who was nearly Christian, nearly enough to not burn forever, nearly enough to see the lord and know he existed. But the world won’t end tomorrow. And I’ll keep sinking. And the longer I stay, the further I’ll go, until I hit the bottom, where there’s nothing but weeping and wailing and fire and brimstone. And there’s nothing I can do. There’s nothing I can do.*

*I’m going to Anzio to be alone. Nobody goes there. Nothing to see. Just trees and cliffs and beaches. I hope that I can feel him there.*

*My ink is getting sloppy; this boat’s going to fall apart any second, but the captain says we’re almost there.*

*Veronica*

She’d gone to Anzio. She’d be dead in a few days. I pulled

her purse from the bag. It held her usual. A pen, some lipstick, a digital camera. I turned the camera on. She'd taken just one video. It was dated Sunday the twenty-first; the day she died, I think. The wind blocked the audio, but the camera showed a grassy field on an edge somewhere, and an ocean below. Her hair blew around the lens, and when the camera turned, her face filled the frame. She looked tired. She said my name and then something I couldn't understand. She squinted, cocked her head, as though trying to get the camera to do something it was not doing. The video ended. I put the memory card in my pocket and tossed the camera in the waste bin.

She'd tried, I supposed. She'd gone all the way to Italy to find her Lord. She'd crossed the world to do what she could have done in a Boston chapel. And instead, she'd lost herself. But she'd tried. Tried to keep herself out of hell. I hoped she'd succeeded. It looked like she hadn't.

Anzio must have been busy. She didn't write for three days.

Anzio

March 18, 2011

Friday

*There is nothing in Anzio.*

*I wish I hadn't come to Italy. If I had stayed in Boston, at least the lord could have been here. Now that I am here, I'm pretty sure he isn't. I'm not sure what to do. I can't go back. I have nothing there. Nick won't have me if I'm not devout. My mother will never forgive me for losing my faith. And without my God, there is nothing else. And I'm further than I've ever been.*

*I told Nick I'd get him a souvenir. I got him a rosary. I think that's the only thing he really loves. It's all wooden and hand*

*carved. I can't even look at the thing.*

Her last entry. She didn't sign it. I closed the book and sifted through the bag for the necklace. The string was gone, and the beads rolled around the bottom. A shame, I thought. It looked like it would have been a nice one. I used some floss to tie it together and draped it on my neck. A few of the beads were missing.

I tucked the diary into my suitcase. Threw her purse in the waste bin. Flicked the lamp switch. I had an early flight.

As I lay, I recited the Fatima. A hundred thousand times, I repeated it.

*O my Jesus, forgive us our sins.  
Save us from the fire of hell.  
Lead all souls to heaven —  
especially those  
who are in most need  
of Thy mercy.*

*Mel Anderson*

## November

Noon, Thursday, he will raise the hemlock  
to his lips and drink a toast to death on  
his own terms, after he has walked his dog.  
It's bitter they warn, so he must slip one  
or two white Zofran under his tongue to  
dissolve or risk his flesh reject a death  
by other means than cancer. Thursday, noon,  
he will mix diazepam, digoxin,  
morphine and (deep breath) am-i-trip-ta-leen  
with zero sugar cherry Powerade.  
His hospice team will not attend, not his  
nurse, nor the chaplain, nor attendants who  
have brought him oxygen and shower chairs  
and oxycodone, who have cried with his wife,  
and offered their support. They will  
not bear another's burden that they might  
be light because their church does not, eyes raised  
to heaven's sword, believe a man should leave  
this life until each droplet of fresh pain  
has been forced from fleshy sponge, do not  
think their God ever says this is enough,  
it is enough pain, I am satisfied.  
His wife will hold his hand alone and (I  
know her) she will not cry until his eyes  
close. Today he takes her hand, cracks a grin,  
says he'll quit chewing crushed tobacco on  
Thursday, at noon.

## Adàbà

*Iya* Sola tossed and turned listlessly on the mat; her joints ached, and it felt as though someone had taken a hammer to her head. The women had teased her that it was to be another boy, as they were known for giving their mothers grief. The first trimester had been uneventful, but now, in her second trimester, she was all but bedridden. It was not a good time to be sick, as *Iya* Adamu would give birth any day now, and she had to be strong enough to make the trip to *Koro* alongside the other women in her age group. A fire was burning within her, and she could not get relief. The hard ground beneath her mat was unrelenting, and she gasped in shallow breaths through her mouth to alleviate the searing sensation caused by the hot, dry air devoid of humidity that burned through her nose as she took it in. The room stank of a mixture of herbs, the pungent smell of *iru*, and unwashed bodies. Clothes were strewn around, and the brown thatches on the brownish maroon mud house closed in on her each time she blinked. In agony, she shut her eyes again and dreamt.

She dreamt of fish and crabs, lush green grasses, and rain-soaked soil. The smell of the soil after it had rained was a salve to her soul, an echo from a past life. The nostalgic smell of *efun* was in the air, unearthed by the rain on the soil, and her mouth watered at the chalky saltiness of the delicacy. The remembered prickle of bare feet on wet grass and of grasses reaching for her as she ran freely through wet fields in the rain washed over her. She was *Adàbà*, *èdà tí kò fẹ́ ń wọlé*, elegant and free as she soared in the rain, dancing and chirping.

Rain, rain, go away



Come again another day  
Little Tolu wants to play

Her eyes twitched as the echoes of children singing in the rain as they alternately called each other's names pierced through her subconscious. They were happy dreams with a gloomy, melancholic undertone. Iya Sola sucked on the pebble in her right cheek and turned to her right side, seeking relief for her aching joints. The kaleidoscope of images returned, assaulting her senses and punishing her. This time, she dreamt she was in the stream, *Ọ̀dàn èḍá Ajánkúlú*, the black necked cobra exploring the river's depths.

She dreamt of childhood, of innocence, and of waste. The aroma of roasting fish on the kitchen rack above the fireplace, the stories heard by moonlight while consuming plates of *amala* and *ewedu* garnished with *iru* and blessed with chunks of smoked fish. Sounds of quiet chewing and intermittent sucking of fingers to ensure none of the palm oil rich *ewedu* escaped while listening to stories of *Ọ̀jọ́*, the cunning. The sounds of splashing water as hands were washed in plates, splashes as the water was thrown out, wetting the ground. Iya Sola turned on her side once more; the restless *Adàbà*, caged indoors, bound.

• • •

Iya Adamu was overcome for a few minutes, and the women respectfully looked away, cooing over the baby as she attempted to put herself together and discreetly wipe at her eyes. They understood; it was the reaction seeing that much water in their homes elicited in all of them. It had become their reality as the rain had deserted them. Their river had turned into a puddle of mud, their wells echoed with emptiness, and the Great Lake had dried up before their eyes, taking with it the fish and crabs and the world

they had built around water. Their soil had weakened, the grass had browned, and even the bush meats in the forest had deserted them. Adàbà had disappeared for a year and had been welcomed back with hope that the rains would follow, but what followed had been a rain of blood as bandits raided and, finding no value, decimated.

“How are you, Iya Sola?” Iya Adamu enquired.

“I am fine. It was probably this little one making his presence known,” she replied with a soft smile, her hand rubbing her protruding stomach. After the incident, the villagers had sprinkled water on her face, reluctant to see any bit go to waste, and had fanned her awake. As she sat up, she had glanced at Iya Adamu’s house and smiled as she saw Adàbà still perched on the roof. They had heard news of the government’s plan to build boreholes in their community and in neighbouring villages, but the rumour had been going on for many years now without result. Adàbà’s insistent presence, however, made her hopeful that the tide would soon change in their favour. They could not go on the way they were for much longer, something had to give. She had been allowed to rest for a few minutes before the procession of women had made their way to Iya Adamu’s house. As the women sat in what passed as Iya Adamu’s sitting room, Iya Sola cast her mind back to the trip that had brought them there.

• • •

*Eni, Eji, Eta.* One step after the other, Iya Sola could hear her heart beating in her head, hot and throbbing. *Eni, Eji, Eta.* Her legs kept count as she struggled to concentrate. The shrubs half-heartedly slapped at her ankles, seeking water, and the silence was only faintly disturbed by the light steps of the women as they tried to be as quiet as thirteen women with buckets full of water balanced precariously on their heads could be. *Eni, Eji, Eta.* She counted on dreamily. She could

make it; she knew she could. She just had to put one foot in front of the other, and she knew she would be fine. They were all exhausted but struggled to keep their spirits up. They could not burst out in songs as they would have done in the olden days. Now, they skulked like ghosts in daylight as their eyes skirted around, taking note of their environments. The smallest changes would cause a massive panic. Iya Adamu had given birth, and the women were making their way to Koro, the neighboring village. They were joyful at the safe delivery but could not talk as they trudged through the hard, cracked earth and cursed at the unrelenting sun.

The terrain was a long stretch of hilly land surrounded by mountainous boulders towering threateningly over travelers. It was a rough patch of untarred, narrow path, and small rocks stuck out defiantly from the hard ground. They had not been walking for long when Iya Dunni, who was in the lead of the thirteen-woman group, stopped abruptly, and Aduke ran into her. They both struggled to keep their balance while holding on to their iron buckets. Aduke was simply called “Aduke” as she was not Iya to anyone despite being married for five years. Iya Tope, Iya Idowu, Iya Kudirat, Iya Mariam, Iya Deji, Iya Ebenezer, Iya Femi, Iya Soji, and Iya Eniola were followed by Iya Sola, whose protruding belly was almost rubbing against Iya Eniola’s back. Iya Ibeji, mother of twin children, brought up the rear. When questioned, Iya Dunni whispered back that she had stopped because Adàbà had suddenly flown from her left side. The women stilled and looked around fearfully. Adàbà had lost its place of prestige with the drying of the lake and the weakening of the soil and had now become a harbinger of evil.

The women shifted nervously. Their weekly trips to the neighboring village always came with hugs that lasted a little

too long, a little too tight. Faces turned away to discreetly wipe at wet cheeks and elaborate efforts to get their affairs in order before the final goodbyes. The trip would only take a total of four hours, but those hours stretched for a lifetime. Adàbà or not, they were going to make the trip; they had to. Iya Adamu had been a conscientious member of the group who was always present to offer help and had organized many of these trips for other women in the village. They could not fail her when she was most in need. The trip that day was particularly harrowing; heightened paranoia and skittishness did not go well with balancing a bucket full of water on one's head, so it was not surprising when Iya Tope's bucket tumbled from her head as she stumbled from hitting her legs on a rock she had not seen as she kept track of the ominous shadows behind the wilting trees.

The caked ground lapped up her water greedily, bubbles forming as it gasped in relief. The women were suspended in disbelief for a second but were quickly brought out of their inertia by Iya Tope crumbling to the ground as she began to sob. "Iya Tope," the women hissed harshly. Iya Dunni gave her a sharp kick to the side, the bucket on her head weaving precariously as she tried to regain her balance. Iya Tope was putting them all in more danger with her tantrum. Noise carried in the ominously silent bush, which had been deserted by the frogs, snakes, and all other life forms seeking water and food in other regions. Just the previous month, a group of five had been taken from the bush because Baba Suwe, the village gossip, had seen Iya Okanlawon and three other women returning to the village with buckets balanced on their heads, and *Esu* had whispered in his ear and made him tell Iya Okanlawon of her mother's passing. Iya Okanlawon, who had once been called Iya Moyin but was now called Iya Okanlawon

to tell the world she too had produced a male heir, albeit on her fourth try, was so overcome with grief that she had begun wailing loudly, throwing her bucket of water to the side and falling on the ground. Baba Suwe's move to clamp his hand on her mouth was too little, too late, and they were soon set upon by bandits. None of them had been heard from again. Only Moyin had returned home, as she had been obscured from view in the bushes, answering nature's call.

Eni, Eji, Eta. Iya Sola kept count in her mind, attempting to center herself and will her feet forward one step at a time. Her body was still on fire. Her head ached, her joints protested, and her eyes blurred, but she had to keep going. Those who failed to show up, for whatever reason, were skipped when it was their turn to receive the rotational monthly contributions of water that the women had begun some ten years previously. It had not always been that way, as the group had been understanding and accommodating of genuine individual hardships that might have prevented members from accompanying them. That understanding had come to an end when Iya Soji accompanied the women to Koro to fetch water despite losing her youngest, Bimpe, that very morning. Since then, it had become a weapon she wielded against anyone who dared believe they had a just cause for not accompanying the women while still expecting to receive water.

Iya Sola sighed as she heard the quiet sobbing from Iya Tope, who, unable to wail loudly and roll on the ground as she was known to do, had resorted to whimpering like a recalcitrant child trying to guilt her parent into consoling her. As they drew closer to the village, she grew louder, and the women, exasperated, agreed to contribute some water for her, and they all poured some of theirs into her bucket. It was not quite half full when they were done, but it shut up her

whimpering, and Iya Sola could hear her own heart beating in her head again. The signpost at the entrance to the village was a decrepit piece of wood that brought tears of joy to Iya Sola's eye and lightened the steps of the other women. In the distance, they could see villagers milling around, and one would be forgiven for believing they were just mingling and chatting if their rigid, focused gazes on the entrance into the village did not betray their anxiety. As soon as the women were spotted, there was a visible easing of tension as the villagers hurried towards them to relieve them of the buckets on their heads. Eni, Eji, Eta. Iya Sola counted as the bucket was taken off her head, and she fell to the floor, exhausted. Off in the distance was Adàbà, perched atop Iya Adamu's roof.

### Glossary

Agbo	Medicinal herbs
Koro	Neighbouring village
Iru	Fermented locust beans
Efun	Cultural chalk used in various ceremonies and rites.
Adàbà	Dove
Èadà tí kò fẹ́ ní wọlé	The bird that refuses to perch
Òdàn èdà Ajáńkúlú	Majestic water serpent
Amala	Traditional Yoruba dish
Ewedu	A popular leafy vegetable soup in Yoruba cuisine
Òjọ	Tortoise
Eni, Eji, Eta	One, two, three
Iya (child's name)	Mother (mother of Adamu)
Esu	A Yoruba deity known for mischief

*Caleb Greenwell*

# Mars Poetica

*(your face is a map of your world)*

I'm red  
that can be said  
call me Amalgamate—strung theory—threads  
heavier than a feather but still  
light as lead when sought  
like a caught thought  
hot to trot  
revolving around an axis  
(a vehicle—if you will)  
a slowly      Shifting      spot

Years that can feel twice the time  
                                (inside)  
       -the spatial relation-  
between stopped clocks  
            or the resistance of a—sound  
but still only a half second-hand spin  
to let me in  
and bury me  
bury me alive in a landslide

( c  
o  
m  
e  
b  
r  
e  
a  
k  
e  
m  
d  
o  
w  
n )

on a pock-marked plot  
like skin (like sin)  
zoomed in  
every imperfection  
a collection of intersections  
and  
at most...spheres

Lines upon  
Lines upon  
lines                    looping into looping lines looping  
and Loops

where satellites collide-in-scope  
and the orbits of our hoping copes align  
Kilo-metering across the blood-wine firmament  
(but ought not Afraid of what Terror represents)  
the sensation of relation between  
these freezing seasons at the ice-  
-caps of our discontent

We can go back to the form we were be-  
fore but (not quite (as bright or) the same)  
altered—deranged—by the iron in the veins.  
Evolution's mad revolutions howling about  
the brain. Drilling depths in search of design *outside* design.  
A molecule that just might be a sign of life  
a planet and a particle—both matter in the places they  
comprise.  
So now turn as the body burns—boldly go—beyond what can  
be taught (thought—bought)  
—hold gold in the phantoms of your lungs—



carry my curvature—so secure—on a chain made of equator  
attach it at the corner pocket of your Rover's clovered ribcage  
(behind the guarded barbs of your heart).  
Your wheels written over by the whispered winds  
as Ghosts are read into Gordian knots (making use—the  
Bitter End—dead ahead) (o)

*Katrina Gilbert*

Ear Mount



Oil Pastel

35

*West Goldie*

## Death and Rebirth (Coming Out)





*Anahi Ambriz*

Prayer



Acrylic, Mixed Media

*Emily King*

## Unknown





*Madison Hoagland*

## The Frankenstrat's Eruption



Acrylic on Canvas

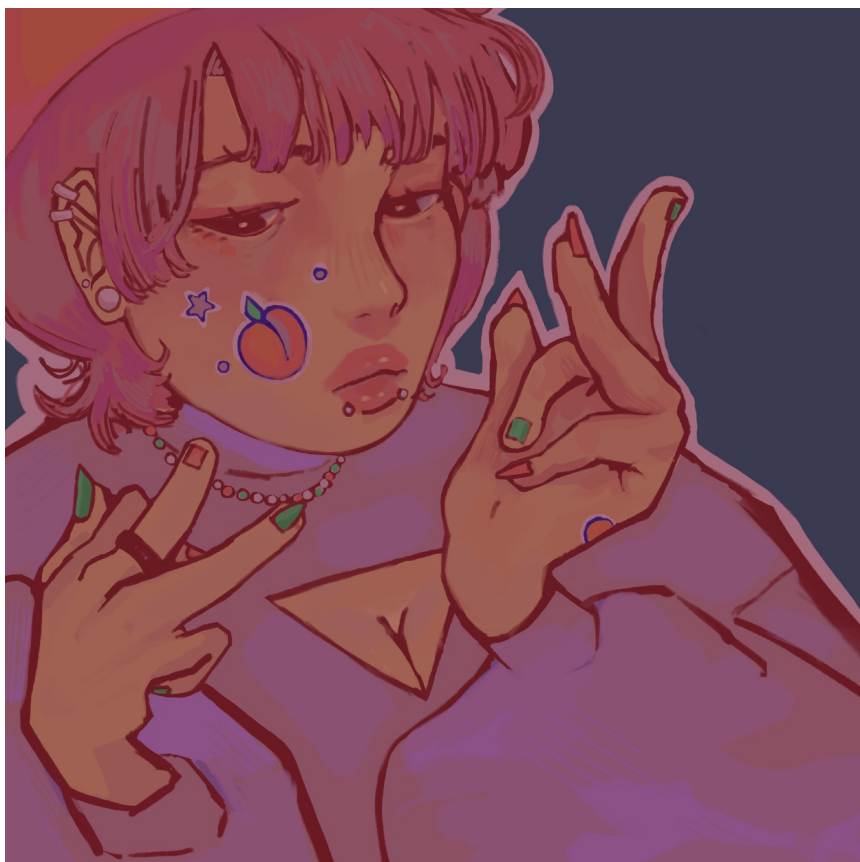
*Jared Anderson*

## Fragility



*Beatrice Austin*

Peach





*Kaitlyn Prado-May*

## Stars



*Eva Newton*

## The Parable of Rollans the Unlucky





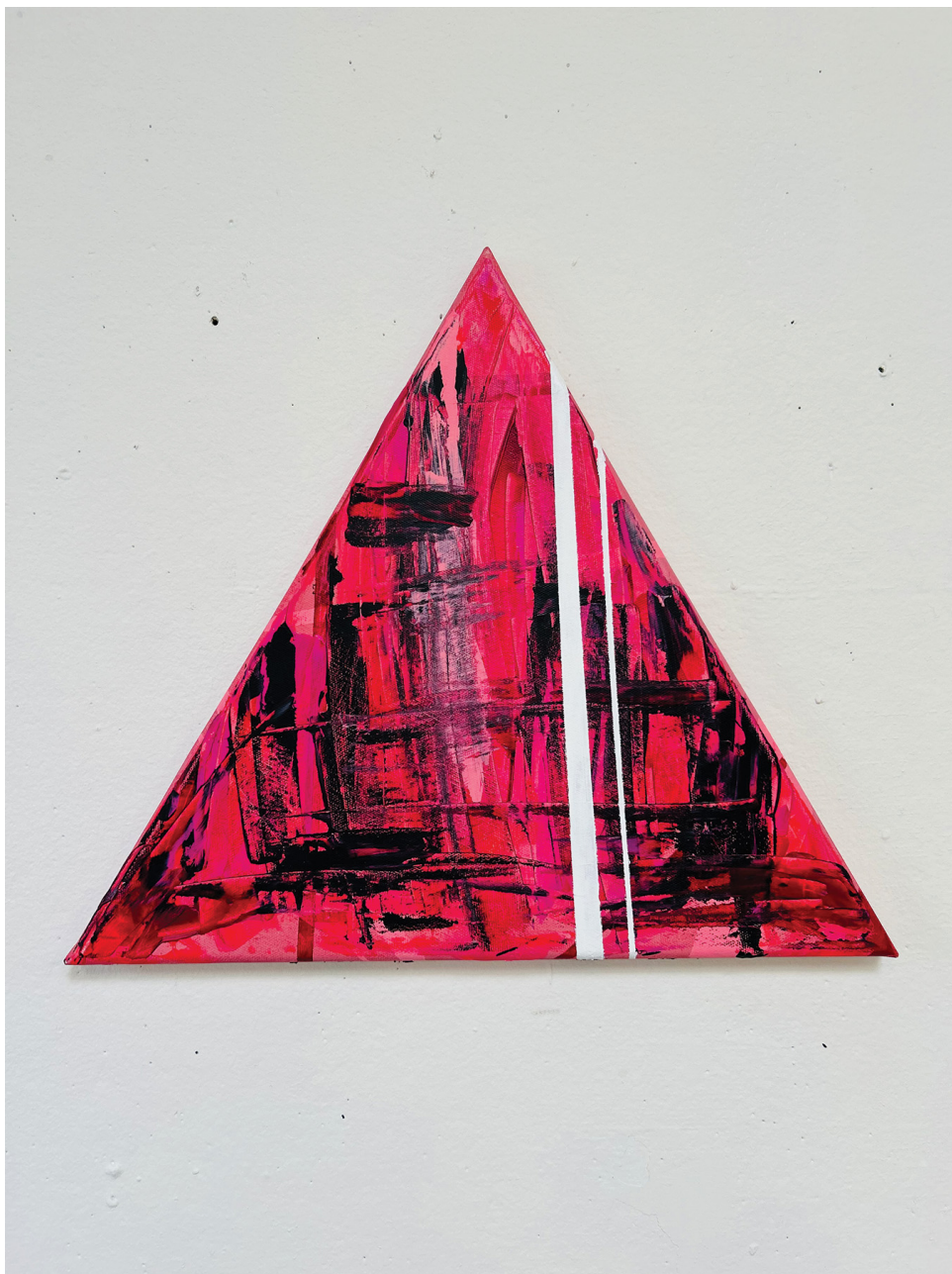
*Anastasia Christensen*

## Cannibal Kitchen



*Cameron Twiss*

## Triangle of Hope



Acrylic

*Victoria Montes*

## Odd Waves





*Kynley Wright*

## Big Horn



*Kristal Herrera*

## Malaquita



*Miranda Sutherland*

## Lotus Bib



Brass, Copper, Silver, Enamel, and Cultured Freshwater Pearl



*Alyssa Mabey*

## Lazy Day in Bed



**Kabuki Theatre  
Costume Designs for**

# ***ALICE IN WONDERLAND***

*By: Jackie Nguyen*

# ALICE IN WONDERLAND

## "THE MAD HATTER"



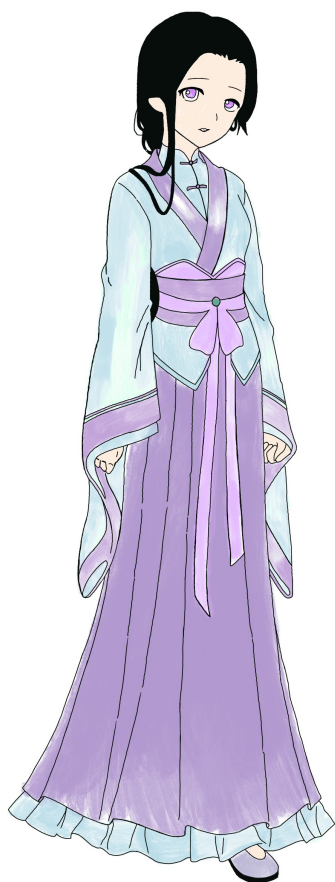
# ALICE IN WONDERLAND

## “ALICE”



# ALICE IN WONDERLAND

## "MARGARET"



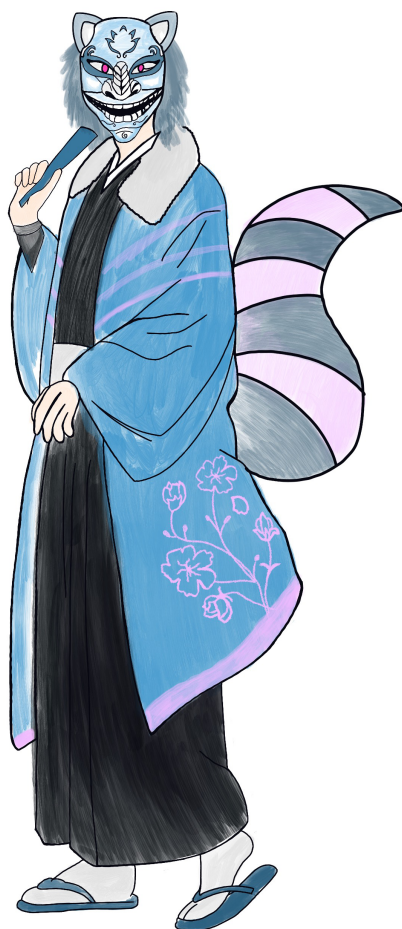
# ALICE IN WONDERLAND

## "THE QUEEN OF HEARTS"



# ALICE IN WONDERLAND

## "CHESHIRE Cat"



# ALICE IN WONDERLAND

## "THE WHITE RABBIT"





*Hunter Giles*

Crow



*Chloe Calkins*

## Butterflies



*Ashlyn Thueson*

## Ethereal Whispers



*Vincent Miron*

## Solace





*Lee Wilson*

## Peek



*Anahi Ambriz*

## Medusa



*Saige Jeffs*

Whit





*Eros Auman*

## Dysmorphia





*West Goldie*

## Oh Come Let Us Adore Him



*Cameron Kress*

## My Girls



Stencil Print

## Mnemogram

It was only as Manolo finished laying the body bag into the furnace that he realized he should make sure no one was watching what he was doing. He peered over the door of the incinerator sheepishly, looking out over the chaparral that dominated the backyard. People moved out here into the soft desert, that's what Teddy called it, to get away from the prying eyes of others, yet they often couldn't help from turning into prying eyes themselves once the sun hid itself. He would need to think of a story in case someone decided to ask what he was doing. *Hit a deer? Roasting a pig? Filing taxes?* That last one might get a laugh, disarm them enough to avoid prying further. He kept it in mind as he walked, not too quickly, to a woodshed off the side of the house.

The last time Manolo saw Teddy alive was four months ago back in San Fernando. There was a cafe, a small one, that overlooked a corner of the cemetery. It was run by a Cuban couple that moved their shop to be closer to their daughter in the convent, and they had a small roaster in the back for their special cafecitos. On Mondays, they baked fresh cinnamon rolls with just the slightest suggestion of nutmeg and orange peel in the dough and icing so sweet that it felt like chewing on needles. But with the coffee, they sang.—

The air in the woodshed was pungent with the smell of drying herbs, just like the last time Manolo was here. Manolo didn't know how a burning body would smell; he assumed it was like meat, so he figured the herbs would hide the scent of what else was being burnt. If it weren't for the circumstances,



he would almost feel thankful that Teddy got into growing his own herbs after Rosa died. He reached around in the dust and dim, cutting down as many bundles of sage and rosemary as he could carry. He walked back to the incinerator with his head on a swivel, checking for prying eyes and making sure he hadn't dropped anything as he walked. The door creaked open on its hinges, and he scattered the herbs inside. He stopped as he was closing the door, set two bunches of rosemary like a crucifix across the chest, and then closed it.

Manolo made his way to the back porch to rest for a moment, breathing heavily as he walked, scanning the horizon for activity in far-off neighboring houses; nothing. The afternoon sun beamed down through a thin cloud layer. Underneath the floating concrete steps was a piece of paper Manolo had set down under a rock before he started cleaning up. He grabbed it as he sat down. The porch was pleasantly warm, and he felt ashamed that the weather was so nice for this time of year. He struggled to unfold the page—he was wearing a pair of rawhide gloves, which were a bit too loose for his hands but perfect for Teddy's, and the thin film of sweat on the inside made things feel slimy. He could take them off if he wanted—the gloves would soon be burnt as well, as would the notebook—but he didn't feel comfortable doing so. After a moment of struggle, he finally got the paper unfolded and went down the checklist of what needed to be done.

If Manolo had to guess, it had been about seven years since Rosa died. Though, truth be told, nobody was sure what had happened to her. It was a Thursday when it happened, he remembered that much. On Wednesday, they made plans to go to the beach that weekend, spend a few hours on the

pier, and get sand in places it would stay for the whole week after. Manolo was dropping off their cat, Shag, after picking him up from the vet as thanks to Teddy for driving him around to publishers' offices the month prior. They were almost nauseatingly sweet on each other as he was setting the carrier down. But then Thursday came, and she was gone. Keys, car, maybe a day or two's worth of clothes from the closet, not to mention the ones that had been thrown to the floor. The front door was swinging wide open when Teddy woke up. Shag had run out of the house at some point in the night; her collar was found tangled in the marigolds by the porch.

He never did find out what happened to Rosa. Neither of them did. The investigation ended up clearing Teddy's name, who Manolo knew was never really a suspect to begin with, but Rosa remained missing.

So, she became dead. It was easier to handle that way.

After a while, Manolo carefully refolded the checklist as best as he could, placed it in his pocket, and went back inside. He locked the kitchen door behind him, then made his way through the living room and locked that door as well. He would need to make things look like a mess. No one would question things that way. He started with the large carpet that dominated the living room, still bearing an imprint from where the body bag had rested on it. Next, the coffee table—he unceremoniously flipped it over, hiding the mark under its weight. Then he sat down on the couch, nestled himself into a cushion, and threw himself backward hard enough to scrape the floor for a few inches. Satisfied, he got up and headed toward the bedroom.

As he walked down the hall, he took care not to bump into

the walls. He was a good deal taller than Teddy was and he needed things as question-free as possible.

*In the movies, Manolo thought, they really overdramatize these kinds of things: punching holes in the wall, breaking everything they can get their hands on. Every room in the house gets involved in some way.* Pushing through the doorway, he made his way toward the single nightstand on the right side of the mattress. *But most of the time, in real life, these things happen a lot quieter. More deliberate. Easier to miss.* In the top drawer was a photo of Teddy and Rosa. Manolo had taken it for them when they invited him to go see Circus Vargas some years ago. *So much easier to miss.* He took the picture back to the living room, held it as high as he could, then watched it fall. It landed face up between the table and the loveseat. He flipped it face down.

Manolo first met Teddy, like most boys, after a fight in middle school. Both men had long forgotten exactly what they had fought about, probably some archaic playground rule, but both remembered the sound their skulls made as they headbutted each other: a clear, pure tone like a glass bell. During the suspension that followed, they discovered they had been living on the same block their whole lives, separated only by Manolo taking the bus and Teddy's father dropping him off at school. Such an everyday coincidence was worth cementing their friendship on, as far as they were concerned, so they did.

Rosa, for her part, entered neither man's life until they were college-aged. Manolo was struggling through an English degree at the time, while Teddy was busy loudly arguing with the college's cafeteria staff about what exactly constituted a meal. He was loud enough that Rosa, Manolo, and a few other

students could hear him through the walls of their reserved study room. She stormed out to get him to be quiet, only to be quickly dragged into the argument herself. They didn't see her again until they had reached the end of their reserved time slot.

Manolo checked his watch. He was working quicker than he thought. He took a minute to breathe, checking the vast bookshelves that clung to the living room walls like ivy. Reading was always a hobby of Teddy's, though it grew to be another obsession after Rosa died. Manolo ran his eyes across the rainbow of spines and read the titles to himself: *Collected Stories of H.P. Lovecraft*, *Clinical Neuroscience Primer*, *Neurophysics*—this book had a quilt of sticky notes poking out from various pages. Should he take it with him? Manolo didn't think that Teddy would be against it, but you can never be too careful with these things. He fumbled in his pocket for the checklist again and worked his way down to the bottom of the list: *move body to incinerator; turn over the house (move these:*  
... ..—

*That can't be right.*

He traced his gloved finger across the lines of the checklist again as if this might change the text written on it and found the words again at the bottom in a more frantic script: ***Check gun safe code 2-7-8-9.***

Teddy moved not long after the investigation had dried up. "I can't be in that house anymore" was what he had told anyone who asked. Some D-list internet celebrity had snapped it up for far more than it was worth, all in cash, saying he wanted it as a production building. Within months, it became a short-term rental. When Manolo told Teddy about this, he didn't seem to mind. Or, if he did, he didn't show it.



It was Manolo's first visit to the new house. Teddy forced a beer into his hand and started to complain about people filing in and out at odd hours of the night, and Manolo followed Teddy around as he led a tour of the property. Teddy chatted excitedly about the plans he had for the place. He pointed out bullet holes that would need to be patched and loose wires to replace and re-hide. It would be the first of many obsessive hobbies that would come to dominate Teddy's life, like the herbs and reading soon would.

"Did you see the incinerator out back? They're illegal as hell here but you can just lie and say it's a composter and nobody gives a shit. It's crazy out here, primo. I want to get a basement in here sometime too, but I don't know where to put the damn door for it."

Manolo stood in front of the open bedroom closet, panting. It had taken more effort than he thought to locate the safe. As far as he knew, Teddy wasn't much of a hunter, nor was he into firearms generally. The gun safe was unlocked and open when he finally found it, and nothing was inside—he could see as much from the doorway. *There has to be some kind of trick to this*, he thought. Was Teddy guilting him from beyond the grave? Teddy wasn't the kind of person to do that, or at least that's what Manolo had thought until now. He felt a weight settle in his gut. With sweat filling his gloves, Manolo reached forward and closed the door to the safe, then he entered the passcode: February 7, 1989, Rosa's birthday. His finger slid around in the leather as he pressed the pound key.

**THUNK.**

The safe moved forward on unseen hinges, and Manolo jumped. It rotated within the closet, narrowly skirting the

hanger bar then soundlessly rested against the wall. A single bulb turned on in the dark space behind the safe, illuminating narrow stairs with a pale cold-white light. Manolo's heart felt like it would burst out at any moment.

*When the hell did you find the time for this, Teddy?* Manolo thought as he turned sideways and crouched slightly to fit through the safe's narrow frame to make his way through this new doorway.

He ran a hand along the walls as he made his way down. They were concrete, or at least they felt like concrete through the gloves. The walls had a give to them that suggested the concrete was just a thin skin painted over the sandy soil, but when Manolo stopped partway down to press on the right wall, he didn't hear any crackling, just the same soft sensation of give. He kept his hands off the walls after that, suddenly paranoid about the possibility of them collapsing inwards. The stairs, thankfully, felt much more securely mounted. But they did seem to go on for longer than Manolo thought they should. People in California didn't tend to have basements on account of housing code changes after the big earthquake, so he didn't have much to compare it to, but he could tell from the smell of herbs that the top few steps ran flush behind the woodshed. By the time he got down to the bottom where a second door waited, lit up by its own cold light bulb, he had counted roughly 60 steps. His heart was pounding in his chest; he took a breath and pushed the door open.

—"Bro, I love you, you know that, but you gotta get outside more." Teddy looked down at his coffee, then back at Manolo, a hunk of donut crammed into his mouth.

"This doesn't count, smartass," he swirled his coffee cup

around lightly, “but it is nice to see you again. I mean that.”

Outside on the mission grounds, a nun was setting out bowls of food for feral cats-turned-holy mousers. As she carried the food bag back into the grounds shed, a gray mop of cat fur slunk out of the bushes for breakfast. “How’s Shag doing, by the way? I still can’t believe you managed to find her; it’s been years, bro.”

Teddy took a large swig of coffee, softening the stale donut enough to swallow it in one go. “She’s doing great, like the day I—we, the day we lost her.” He pounded his chest to try and get the sodden lump of cake to move down his throat faster. “Still sheds like crazy too. But all I’m saying is, that’s how memory works right? Like, it’s real, obviously, but only in the same way that a footpath is real. It’s all negative space that fills back in when you don’t retrace it now and then. Flash drives don’t get heavier the more stuff you put on them, neither does your brain, yeah?” Manolo sighed, perhaps a bit louder than he had meant to. He could see Teddy deflate in his chair slightly.

“All right, all right. Next week, I’ll spend some time outside of the cave. I promise.”

Manolo didn’t know how to describe the structure he saw on the other side of the door. The room it was in seemed normal: concrete floors, dirt walls painted with concrete, exposed joists in the high ceiling that held an array of light bulbs like the ones in the stairwell. It was a bit large for a basement, maybe 50 feet wall-to-wall if he had to guess, but it could otherwise have been mistaken for a perfectly reasonable-looking space. But in the center of the room was a mass of splintered wood and shredded copper wiring, easily 20 feet across. Small golden spheres glinted through the dust and debris, with copper trailing out of them like the spilled innards

of a cracked egg. Peeking through the carnage was a single L-bracket still anchored to the floor, bent inward on itself as if it were struck by a great force. For some reason, he could only stare at it for a few moments before intense nausea forced him to look away, as if something was intrinsically wrong about that heap of wood and metal. Not just wrong, but Wrong.

“Mraow.”

Resting next to the door, something he didn’t see at first, was a small cat carrier holding what he assumed was Shag, her blue-gray moplike fur freshly brushed. There was a spiral notebook on top of the carrier, on which rested another note addressed to Manolo, similar to the one he found on the body bag when he arrived. He leaned down to pick up the note and backed out of the room to read it in the light.

• • •

*Manolo,*

*I hope you’re the one to find this. I don’t want any of this getting back to my parents, and if the cops find it before you well, then, sorry for getting you wrapped up in this too, haha.*

~~**It worked.** But then it started happening again and I got scared and I—■■■■—■■.~~

*I was planning to go out quieter at first, just up and leave and make everyone think I died, but I realized that wouldn’t be enough. I would be there with me. The temptation would always be there, that I could fix it somehow. It all had to go, and I had to go with it.*

*There’s some big matches for the incinerator in the kitchen cabinet. Light one in here, then light one in the living room. I know you probably want to take some souvenirs with you, some photos or something, but I don’t know what’s safe to take.*

*Nothing gets out of this house but you and my notebook. Nothing.  
This isn't something we were meant to have. You'll understand  
once you read my notes. I hope you won't need them.  
I'm sorry I had to put all this on you. Thank you for being my  
friend.*

*Theodore*

• • •

The incinerator burned without smoke, so the extra care Manolo took to stuff it full of herbs had proven pointless. Teddy must have modified it at some point to run hot, as there wasn't even a smell from the strong sage. Still, Manolo stayed around until long after the sun went down to ensure the incinerator had as much fuel as possible, for there to be as little chance of smoke as possible. The house wouldn't burn anywhere near as clean, but he would be far away and back home by the time the fire department managed to get out there. He rested the notebook in the front seat of the car, having tucked the photo he took of Teddy and Rosa into the front cover. He hadn't looked at Teddy's notebook yet. As he sat down in the driver's seat of the car, he realized he was still wearing the leather gloves he had taken, and quickly ran to the feed chute of the incinerator to throw them inside, checking his pockets for the notes Teddy left for good measure and finding them reassuringly empty.

The last time Manolo saw Rosa alive was two years ago. It was at a writer's convention in Phoenix that he was invited to, a "Thirty Under Thirty" type deal for writers with promise, and he was on the shortlist for speculative fiction. He didn't feel like he deserved to be on the shortlist, but networking with editors and other authors could make it easier to get published in the future, so he packed his bags for the weekend trip. He didn't recognize

Rosa at first. Some guy with a name like “Arthur Broadtable” won Best Historical Fiction, and he thanked a woman named Linda for being his rock, and she cheered him on in thanks. Manolo looked over at her, an aisle and five seats away, and felt uneasy. Linda must have felt him staring and turned to look at him. Time seemed to freeze. Her hair was done up in a pixie cut; she looked paler; her face was fuller—but Rosa’s eyes were the same and more than anything, they seemed confused.

Manolo didn’t hear them call his name the first two times and only scrambled out of his seat and up to the stage after he had heard the third call. “I was so nervous that I couldn’t hear anything,” he offered. The crowd laughed in response. Rosa was laughing as well. It was the polite laugh of a stranger. When Manolo returned home and Teddy called to ask how the conference went, he was silent for a while. “It went great. I’ll tell you about it tomorrow.” He kept the news about Rosa, about Linda, to himself.

When Manolo got home, he quickly made his way inside. He set the notebook on the small entryway table and set Shag’s carrier down to open it and let her roam around to get used to her new home. He would need to get some food and bowls, but that could wait until tomorrow. He didn’t think of taking them from Ted’s place until after he lit the matches.

With the door to the carrier open, Shag walked out and mewled confusedly.

“Sorry kid, I would have tidied up if I knew I’d have guests.”

Manolo sat down on his couch and put his head in his hands. *Why didn’t Teddy call me*, he thought. *How come I couldn’t say she moved on, and that he needed to, too? Why*



*didn't I call the cops when I got to his place? Why didn't I just tell him back then? Why burn the house down? Why didn't I see it coming?* Maybe he wanted to give Teddy some kind of dignity in going out by following his last requests. That was a reason he hoped he could live with.

Manolo watched as Shag sauntered over to the sofa, and he bent over to pick her up. She jumped past him, landing on the cushions, and then clambered her way up to rest on the windowsill. When she got there, she lay down and looked off in the direction of Teddy's old house with Rosa. Far beyond the limits of her vision, a gray cat with a scar on its neck was busy chasing mice in the mission courtyard.

Madison Straatman

## Wedding Season

*I see you,  
    lonely darling,  
skulking around weddings  
like a grave robber, slicing  
off the softest, fleshiest parts  
of your body  
like meat at Sunday market.*

*Stop  
punishing yourself for  
    being untouched.*

—Natalie Wee, “Never Been Kissed”

Of all the weddings Jane had photographed, this was the strangest.

Most weddings were fundamentally the same. The ceremony, the reception, the bridesmaids either hooking up with the groomsmen or crying in the bathroom. Sometimes both. Jane wasn’t experienced in *that* part of the traditions, but she knew enough to see the signs. Couples pairing off. Too-wide smiles as socializing circles got smaller and smaller, those left remaining a little sad and frantic behind the eyes. Jane snaps a few photos of the reception, trying to focus more on the whimsical fairy lights and the laughing couples, and less on the hunting grounds of the still-single social circles.

The wedding had gone off without a hitch. Ella and her groom make a lovely couple, dressed in white at the head table. The guests have been herded to the ballroom. The reception's first course has been served: salad and bread. The older couples and already-marrieds sit at the round tables, socializing between bites of too-expensive lettuce and croutons, waiting for their chicken or salmon. The singles remain standing, watching, mingling, drinks in hand. The air here is more predatory than anything, everyone hungry. The ceremony had taken awhile, and no one has eaten yet. At least they get to eat—between being a bridesmaid *and* the wedding photographer, Jane hasn't had time to eat.

“Goldfish?” someone offers. It's one of the bride's stepsisters, the blind one.

“Sorry?”

“Want some goldfish?” the stepsister repeats, white cane held close to her chest. Jane hadn't heard the tap-tap-tap of her approaching. There's deep pock-mark scars around her sockets, like someone's pecked at the skin, pulled her eyes out. “I can hear your stomach grumbling. I've got some goldfish in my clutch, if you're hungry.”

It feels rude to hold the blind woman's gaze—or is it more rude not to make eye contact? Is it wrong to say “gaze” and “eye contact” about eyes that aren't fully there anymore? Jane drops her head, fiddling with the lens of her camera. “I'm good, thanks.”

A dirty martini in each hand, the other stepsister comes

limping up; her open-toed heels are bloodstained; the woman is *missing* a few toes. She gives one drink to her sister, guiding her fingers to the olives on the toothpick before linking their arms and walking away. As they leave, Jane hears her mutter, “Ella chose the absolute *ugliest* bridesmaids’ dresses.”

Jane self-consciously tugs at the bodice of her dress; the sequins on it are scratching her underarms raw. *Salmon* was the exact color; the long, elegant skirts looked like the sheen of fat on a slab of ham. It’s the gathered fabric rosettes at the hips and shoulders that make the dresses—well, in all honesty, they are hideous.

But it’s the other bridesmaids that catch Jane’s attention. They are all *missing something*. Jane takes pictures, maybe to put in the bride’s album, maybe to show her friends. She needs *some* proof of how strange this all is.

The first picture: at the dessert table, Laura Hazzard—a third-time bridesmaid—is telling a gaggle of other women about her quick, *miraculous* weight loss. “Like someone cut it all off!” she says, patting her hips. The jut of her pelvis bone looks painful.

Across the table, most of Eusebia Cyr’s nose is gone. She used to have a proud, arched nose; now it’s too small, snubbed at the bottom, red from constant rubbing. Eusebia keeps running her fingers over the inverted bridge, like a nun with a rosary. Like she has to touch it to remember it’s still there.

A few more pictures, flash adjusted for the different lighting. Another bridesmaid, Jane doesn't know her name, chats with a friend of the groom, as if it's normal she's missing her arm from the shoulder down. She'd had a full sleeve tattoo on that arm; Jane had seen it in pictures shown earlier in the newlywed's reception slide show. And now the tattoo, the *entire arm*, is gone, and the bridesmaid has seemingly yet to notice.

"Have you seen—" a too-hot hand grabs at Jane's wrist, tugging her camera askew. It is only an inebriated groomsman. He holds his hand up in a calming motion, the other holds a glass half-full of something amber and bubbly. "Woah, *you're* jumpy. I thought you saw me." Jane scowls, pats at her skirts. "Did you need something?"

"Yeah, have you seen Khana? We were talking about astronomy, and I was telling her about how astronomy can actually predict how a marriage is gonna go, like how I'm a Leo and she's a Virgo, so we'd get along great, but she said she had to go to the bathroom and dipped, but it's been like, twenty minutes—"

Khana. First-time bridesmaid. At the bachelorette party, she'd told all the other bridesmaids about their astrological signs. Barely into her twenties, nowhere to be seen in the ballroom. "I'll go check on her. Excuse me."

The bridesmaid dresses are hideous, but, miracle of miracles, they have pockets. Small pockets, only big enough for half a cell phone or a tube of lip gloss, nothing terribly important. Jane had tucked a pocketknife into hers. The blade is only as long

as her pinky finger, not very sharp, but it would have to work. Anything bigger wouldn't fit, and anything heavier would have ruined the lines of her dress. It's bad luck to bring a knife to a wedding, but she wasn't planning to give it to the newlyweds, so luck shouldn't matter. It was for her own protection.

There aren't many places Khana could be. The chapel's been shut up for another wedding in progress; the kitchens are off-limits to all but the catering crew. So Jane peeks into the bathroom, all-white tiles, three single stalls, and a wide, wide mirror. The bride's stepsisters stand to either side of the window. The blind one sips her martini and the other one leans halfway out the window, lit cigarette in hand. And there's Khana too at the sink, staring at her reflection with her tongue out. The porcelain is stained with blood and it's splattered on the mirror.

*"What happened?"* Jane screeches. Khana doesn't turn around, but for a moment, her eyes meet Jane's in the mirror. Then Khana looks back at her own reflection. It seems to take a moment for to recognize the knife she holds, that's she's cut halfway through her own tongue. "Khana, what are you *doing*?"

Khana squints but keeps sawing, a single stroke at a time. More blood drips into the sink. Jane rushes forward and grabs Khana's wrists, shaking her until the knife falls and clatters into the sink.

"Why are you—why did you—?" And why in the bathroom at a wedding, with a tiny dessert knife and her own bare hands.



And while the stepsisters watched—or at least the one that could see—doing nothing.

Khana's words are thick with her own blood. Like a dead thing, her tongue flops half-in-half-out of her mouth. "I was talking too much."

"You can't be serious."

"You're one to talk," one stepsister blows a seam of smoke out of the window, cutting her eyes down toward Jane's hip.

"You've got a knife in your pocket, too."

"It's not for *me*. Khana, this isn't right—"

"All the other bridesmaids have done it. We've done it," the blind sister says, waving a hand to her eyes. "It's not that big of a deal." The other sister takes another drag on the cigarette, this time blowing smoke through her nose. "You could get rid of a few things, too."

Khana clears phlegm and what else from her throat to draw Jane's attention. Holding her gaze, she writes on the mirror in her blood, "We all have pockets."

Jane grits her teeth, rubs her eyes. Nothing she could say would change this. "At least clean up this mess."

The stepsister swears at her, tapping her ash into the bushes below the window. Khana is back to pulling her tongue taut in one hand, knife ready in the other.

The drunk groomsman is waiting where she'd left him. Jane puts her hand in her pocket, squeezes the knife blade until it bites into her fingers. "She'll be out in a minute."

*Klaus Graham*

## Suspension

When I awoke, he led me to the woods,  
his slender silhouette guiding the way.  
The sound of snapping twigs under his hooves  
gave rhythm to his tail's haunting sway.  
Beneath an icy moon we walked a path  
of spindly oak dressed in spiderweb lace.  
Moonlight reflected off the horns of glass  
that sprouted just above his crimson face.  
He stopped. There stood the tree that I had climbed  
last night. He pointed to its jagged limbs.  
From fraying rope, I dangled void of life,  
a waxen windchime filled with sin.  
He spoke. "This night is cold, I sense a storm,  
take my hand and I'll take you somewhere warm."

*Aurora Keene*

## The Things I Loved in Childhood

A white-spotted stuffed dog that I named, brilliantly, Spot. A purple blanket patterned with dogs, made by my great-grandmother who is a vague shadow that I may or may not have dreamed. The color purple, which was the kind of favorite color that made you better than everyone else because it meant you were pretty and refined, but not in a pink way. The show *Martha Speaks*, Tuesdays and Thursdays on PBS Kids because Nickelodeon was for rich people, and also my mom said *SpongeBob* was dumb anyway.

*H is for Honor*, a book that army men in camo uniforms distributed to families when we said goodbye to my dad at the airport—but I probably only liked it because my mom read it to me so many times that it became less of a book and more of a lullaby. A ratty stuffed lion named Liey that I won during a game in preschool. *The Lion King*, even though Mufasa's death made me cry hard enough that my mom Skyped my dad to prove he hadn't gotten trampled by Iraqi wildebeests. Sunday afternoons in the summer because my mom dropped me off at my grandparents' house while she worked, and my grandma baked cookies for me. Hiking with my grandpa in the Snake River Plain—which looked like the Middle East I'd made up in my head—where we excavated fossils of long-dead monsters. Zoology because I learned that wildebeests did not live in Iraq. Grandpa, whose skin weathered away into veins and who was still a source of assurance even after he started taking amitriptyline twice a day.

My father, who was away in somewhere called Mountain

Home or Gowen Field or Afghanistan and who couldn't come home even when I cried and twisted my bedsheets. My mother, who bought me books like *What Sisters Do Best* every time she had a new kid because what sisters do best is help moms manage younger siblings. My half of the bedroom, separated from my sister's with a purple curtain that we sometimes pushed aside so I could teach her to read. When my father came home for Christmas and we all sat in the living room as he told us stories about Iraq and Afghanistan while I passed out presents.

Skyping him while he was gone, when he talked to us from inside his dim tent with the shadows of his army buddies meandering behind him. The metal dove he brought back for me; its beak was decorated with citrine crystals and its belly opened but couldn't fit much. The lush forests we hiked through during his weekends with us after he and my mom split, and listening to his podcasts about Bigfoot on the way there. His dog, whose eyes bugged out and whose drool made your pants stink and who eventually got put down because of kidney stones. Veterans Day, when my dad met me in East Valley Middle School's cafeteria once a year and we perused a buffet, gorging on snickerdoodles from a box until we had to pretend we were stuffed. Every fourth Wednesday when he took me out to eat at a restaurant where he and his girlfriend—who I'd never met—had already been. Visiting his house every other weekend and diving into VR worlds with his Oculus Quest as my younger brother watched *SpongeBob* on the couch nearby. But most of all, the drive back to my mom's house, where my half of the room was familiar and home.

## Vain Gilds

“She was taken to different hospitals, but no one could tell us what was wrong with her. Her stomach kept swelling, and she always complained of painful movements, yet we were told she was not pregnant. Eventually, a doctor pulled my mom aside and said it had to be spiritual and beyond anything modern medicine could handle.” Adaku stared wide-eyed at Chinazor’s bright smile and crazed eyes. Her first mistake had been assuming Chinazor was just another 11-year-old girl stuck in a boarding house eager for human connection. Her second mistake had been mentioning the stomach ache she had been nursing since that afternoon. She had no idea why she had spoken to Chinazor because, before that day, they had not as much as smiled at each other or bothered to say hi. All they had in common was that they had both been assigned the same room and were just starting out their journey as secondary school students.

“My parents took her to different pastors and observed the fasting and prayers recommended, yet her stomach continued to swell. I remember her once begging my parents to help her because she did not want to die.” Chinazor seemed genuinely upset for the first time since she began her tale of horror. “Anyway,” she continued, “they eventually took her to an herbalist.” “A dibia,” she clarified, as though Adaku had no idea who a dibia was. “My father was a deacon in our church, so no one could know of this.” Chinazor cackled maniacally, looking expectantly at Adaku as though she had said something funny for which she expected Adaku to laugh.

Adaku managed a tight smile and looked around frantically for someone to rescue her. Her gaze landed on her neighbour, who was conveniently asleep the one time Adaku did not mind running errands for her.

Adaku had just returned to the hostel from the dining hall, where she had stared in horror at the eba and slimy water someone had dared to call okro soup on her plate. She had been one of the first to jump out of her seat as soon as the end-of-dinner bell went off. She tossed the food, washed her plate, and dashed off toward her hostel, pretending not to hear the calls of “junior girl,” “hey you,” and her personal favorite, “hey, pink house,” from the senior students looking to send the junior ones on unending errands. It was a good thing she was not the only student wearing the pink house check day wear. She knew that sometimes the seniors were not calling anyone in particular; they would send anyone gullible enough to fall for that trick.

She had not had a proper meal that day as she had been unable to swallow the cold and lumpy akamu that had been served for breakfast and had nibbled on the child-sized moimoi that had been served alongside. When it was break time, she had gone to the school canteen in hopes of purchasing something to eat. The school canteen was a small building that had once been painted yellow but was now a disturbing shade of gray and brown with graffiti designs all over it. It was an old building with a single door and window; the door always stayed shut while students were served through the window. There were iron bars on the window that prevented anyone from jumping in but were large enough for the exchange of money and goods. The canteen was always



crowded, and Adaku tended to avoid it, but she had been particularly hungry that day and decided to give it a try.

The students had no concept of a queue as they squished, squeezed, and pushed until they made it to the front of the window where they waved around their money until the frazzled mother or daughter within snatched it up from the sea of other waving hands and attended to the student. Once the student was attended to, she had to squeeze and push out of the crowd as other students pushed forward. The tap on Adaku's shoulder just as she made it to the front of the window and waved her money around brought tears to her eyes, which she blinked away furiously, for she knew what came next. "Hey, out!" she heard from behind her, and, unwilling to add a headache to her list of woes from the slap she was likely to receive if she refused to obey quickly, she stepped out of the line as the senior student stepped forward to place her order. She had returned to her classroom, defeated. Her stomach was grumbling, and her vision was beginning to blur from hunger when the end-of-day closing bell was rung.

Her determination to eat whatever was placed before her in the dining hall that evening did not hold strong in the face of the stone-hard eba and watery okro soup that were served. She successfully maneuvered past the vultures trying to reel in gullible junior students, and dashed towards her hostel. The one senior student who managed to stop her was told that she was "running an errand for Maytee," and she was promptly released for fear of crossing the school's matron. She breathed a sigh of relief when she stepped into her hostel and saw her neighbour asleep. It was such an unexpected reprieve

that she lay on her bed for a few minutes, savoring the sense of freedom that brought tears to her eyes. While she could escape the senior students outside, she could not escape her “neighbour,” as it had been spelled out to her from her first day in school that it was her duty to wash, iron, clean, fetch water, and run errands for her neighbour.

Adaku curled in on herself from the hunger pangs, and that was how Chinazor met her, learned she had a stomach ache, and said her only sibling used to experience stomach pain as well. “So they took her to a dibia and he said it was indeed a spiritual issue. She was from the marine kingdom, and they wanted her back. She stayed with him for seven days before he sent for my parents. He told them he had observed her, and his first assessment had been right. Her swelling stomach was home to a growing snake, and he had to perform some rituals after which he would remove the snake,” Chinazor said. In addition to her stomach pain, Adaku’s head had begun aching, and a debilitating fear had taken hold of her. One of her greatest phobias was snakes, and, with her bunk close to a door that could not be completely shut, she could practically see the snakes crawling in at night and climbing onto her bed. She shivered with unease but made no move to stop Chinazor’s tale or to leave. Her legs were not touching the floor, not that night or ever, if she had anything to say about it.

“My parents paid for the rituals, and, on the day it was to be done, I was told by my parents, as I was not allowed to be present, that after the dibia had done the necessary rituals and said the accompanying incantations, he had approached my now comatose sister and, with a sharp knife, cut deep into

her stomach. He then put in a plastic pipe, like those used for plumbing purposes. He said he could see the snake but was waiting for its head to be properly placed so he could suck it out. After waiting almost 30 minutes, with blood flowing out of the wound, he placed his mouth on the pipe and sucked.” Chinazor was silent, appearing to be lost in thought. Adaku was now in a fetal position, shivering. “He said the snake escaped at the last minute,” Chinazor murmured, almost too quietly for Adaku to hear. “Her burial was the next day, and my parents told everyone her illness had progressed beyond medical intervention.”

“For one so young, the turnout was surprisingly huge, but it was mostly people from our church and from neighbouring parishes. My parents avoided my gaze as the pastor preached that it was the will of God. ‘The Lord giveth and He taketh,’ or something of the sort. My parents didn’t correct him. How could they not tell him that she was a marine spirit and her people had come to claim their own?” Chinazor’s voice rose in the still darkness, and Adaku believed everyone else who was awake was listening because the dormitory had never been as eerily quiet as it was at that moment. “It was a test. The pastor said it was a test from God to ascertain the strength of their faith. My parents had been dry-eyed up until that point, but that absolutely shattered them. They would tell me later that they had failed the test because they had not believed in God enough and had resorted to black magic. They said it would be their private shame, one they would bear for the rest of their lives, and they would not make the same mistake with me. I insisted they come clean with their church, and, a week later, I was shipped off to boarding school. If I didn’t know better,

I'd think they were hiding me from the world so I don't expose them. Of course, I know better; who would believe an eleven year old, right?" Her soft laughter was weighted, too old for one so young. "Anyway, you should go to the clinic tomorrow and complain about your stomach pain. You might want to tell them not to inform your parents." She stood from Adaku's bed; how she had ended up on the bed, Adaku could not have said.

"It's just hunger pangs," Adaku murmured quietly, too drained to speak any louder. Still curled up tightly with her hands around her legs, she managed to get her covers up to her neck. She stared at the bottom of the upper bunk, and the curling design on the mattress above made her shut her eyes tightly. "Blood of Jesus, Blood of Jesus, Blood of Jesus," she chanted beneath her breath, as she was taught to do in Sunday school when there were snakes and serpents close by that needed to be defeated. It would be hours before Adaku would drift off to a troubled sleep where knives teased her belly and worms tangled in her hair. That night, the chants were much louder than they had ever been:

Tortured and twisted and shackled is your flight  
You heave and buckle and toss in vain  
Truth afloat on hushed whispers  
Burrow with us in depths unimagined.

## The Last Dance of Don Quixote

I began to fiddle with my skirt as I sat in my seat on the balcony of the Kennedy Center. The fluid-like fabric soothed my nerves slightly, but I kept my eyes on the stage since its reds and blacks reminded me of the colorful costumes my father used to wear. My mother sat next to me with a similarly nervous expression. She seemed unsure why she even agreed to attend the premiere, but I assumed it came down to her simply wanting to see her husband dance, just one more time. This would be our first time seeing him since the funeral, and I think we were both just hoping he still looked like he did in our minds, powerful and graceful.

The lights in the theater dimmed to signal the ballet was about to begin. The lower the lights became, the higher in my throat my stomach seemed to rise. I wasn't sure if I was going to be able to make it through the night without losing my lunch all over my outfit.

The curtains opened, and my father floated onto the stage. He seemed so light on his feet, I wondered if it was actually him. But there was no mistaking his face. Even after the Parkinson's disease, when he became so thin I thought he would simply blink out of existence, my mom still lovingly referred to him as "Rushmore." His jawline and cheekbones, features that became more prominent the skinnier he got, seemed carved from stone.

I removed my hands from my "stress dress" to give my eyes a quick wipe, just to ensure they were clear. When I looked back at the stage, I could still see my father's face,

but I was unable to see his eyes since they were closed. I began to wonder if they stuffed his costume so that he'd appear more robust. I also wondered if it was possible to perform plastic surgery on a corpse.

He'd always danced on air, but this evening his toes barely touched the stage as the music carried him around the other dancers. Yet his *allégros* still left the audience in awe and his *battus* seemed to bring thunder with every connection. The arch of his *cambrés* could be considered an upside-down "u," yet something seemed off about his movements to me. His lines were impossibly clean; his movements were just a little too perfect. He looked like some type of flesh-covered automaton on the stage. I blame my attention to detail on my father, who I consider to be the greatest ballarino to ever have existed, but I am willing to admit my bias. It was he who taught me to see beauty in the movement and art of kinetic expression. This "thing" could execute perfection, but that is only a fraction of the art form.

Above my father's head, I could see shining slits of silver shooting across the stage like stars. At first, I thought they were part of a shimmering backdrop, but my eyes traced their origins to my father's position in the middle of the stage. They were connected to his head, shoulders, elbows, hands, hips, knees, and feet. The strings came together in a straight line as they wound my father into a tight pirouette, spinning him until he was only a blur of black and gold. When he came out of the spin, there was a crack that split through the auditorium. Perhaps it was the bombastic score, but to me, it sounded like the pop of a shattering shoulder.

I watched the first act in a numb daze. I was snapped



back to reality during the second act when, on stage, my father and his ward, Sancho, were witnesses to a miniature performance in the town square. A dancer approached the center, twirling two marionettes as he pulled the strings in an attempt to make them feel alive. I wasn't certain, but I swore I saw a slight downward curve form on my father's lips. I even thought I caught the glimmer of a tear on his cheek. He too was a macabre marionette, forced to dance and watch his miniature kin do the same. In my version of events, this is why Don Quixote actually assaulted the stage. He acted boldly on behalf of his bestrung brethren. It wasn't just about saving the wooden princess from her pining brother anymore but emancipating these stringed slaves from their staged captors. I had always thought of him as a hero.

I could no longer look at my father on stage, my eyes were too fixated on the strings that did the dancing around him. When the lights came up for intermission, I heard murmurings amongst the rows around me.

"Only a dead artist could breathe so much life into *Don Quixote*," a woman said.

"I think they should have gotten the corpse from *The Nutcracker*," muttered someone else.

"Are you sure this guy is really dead? I can never tell the difference anymore," questioned another voice as the lights went down and the curtains reopened.

My eyes maintained the top half of the stage for the rest of the ballet, wondering if it was one or many men behind the movements of my father. When the performance finally came to a close, I turned to my mother amongst the roaring

ovation to plead, "CAN WE PLEASE GO HOME? I DON'T FEEL GOOD."

Her eyes maintained their forward position toward the stage, even though her view was now only the back of someone's flaky, balding head. "Soon," she replied so I could barely hear her. "We have to go see your father backstage first." This statement nudged my stomach even further up my throat.

She sighed heavily, grabbed my hand, and we made our way through the cheering crowd to the aisle. When we arrived at the door beside the stage, one of the always-smiling producers led us to a large warm-up floor next to the dressing rooms. At the back, I saw the glass case that held my father. He looked a little like Snow White, except his casket was left in a standing position, the strings still glinting under the dull backstage lights. Next to him, another one of the producers was smiling insincerely and holding a black leather suitcase. When my mother approached, he opened the case, revealing a large assortment of green bills. The case was so full that some even spilled out as the top lifted. The pile looked more like a type of moldy green fungus than money.

As they tidied the money, I made my move toward my father's glass prison. The front of the enclosure wasn't locked, but it was reminiscent of a china cabinet, a place to appreciate or entrap artifacts of the past. As I pulled the door open, I heard someone start to yell, but they were too late to stop me. I wrapped my arms around my father's waist and pulled with all my might. The sound of strings snapping filled my ears as I felt my father give way, slumping unevenly

toward my efforts. Footsteps accelerated their approach, and I gave a final tug against the strands supporting his corpse. After one last TWANG, he collapsed on top of me with the same POP and CRUNCH I heard during the performance. After I shoved against my father's body to sit up, I saw a broken femur protruding from his right thigh, and the foot of his left leg was twisted the wrong direction. It was then that the contents of my stomach finally escaped my throat and emptied onto the floor at the producer's feet, flooding the bills scattered across the floor. My mother's shrieks echoed across the empty seats of the Kennedy Center, filling the halls with the sound of a haunted opera; where the dead wander, watch, but hold their applause...until the curtain finally calls.

*River Kamplin*

## Night's Out

*High School Creative Writing Contest Winner*

Ash awoke one morning to two things: his alarm and his cat jumping on his gut. He grunted as his hands shot up to cover his middle, but he only succeeded in whacking the cat. “Dammit! Sorry, Cheeto. Ugh, I don’t wanna get up,” Ash groaned, but he forced himself to get out of bed anyway. Cheeto was meowing loudly, demanding food. “I know, you glutton, I’m coming.” Ash stood and raised his arms above his head, stretching his body with a loud groan. He sighed and relaxed again, grabbing a blue bath towel from his closet and leaving the peace of his bedroom.

Ash filled Cheeto’s bowl with food before heading to the bathroom for a shower. He shut and locked the door, casually avoiding the mirror as he turned on the hot water, letting the steam gather in the room. Ash’s shower was quick, and he dried off just as fast. Wrapping his hair in a small white towel, he went to make some coffee before heading back to his room, taking the extra time to decide if he wanted to wear something simple or something he really liked. Eventually, Ash decided he was just going to grow up and wear something he liked. Why should he care what people thought of him? —He cared because he’d been stuck with these same people for two years, and he would be for two more. “Shut up, Ash. It’s junior year—make a good first impression and all that,” he mumbled to himself, sipping on his coffee as he returned to his bedroom.

He put on light-blue baggy jeans that were a size too big and rolled up at his ankles, a brown knitted sweater

with stripes of different shades of brown, and a dark-gray journeyman's jacket that was also a size too big. Lastly, he put on an old pair of black, ratty Converse. Marker smudges covered the sides, and they were horrendously sun-bleached, but they were his favorite. Ash looked down at his outfit, satisfied, and turned off the lights in his room before grabbing his simple brownish-tan messenger bag. It used to be his mom's.

Ash shut the door but returned quickly to grab his earbuds, and then, giving Cheeto a quick goodbye, he left the house, locking the door behind him. He didn't live alone, but both his parents worked most of the day, and he figured it was good practice for the future. Ash walked down the block to where the school bus was supposed to pick him up. He waited for about fifteen minutes; the bus was late. Ash scoffed, not entirely surprised. He'd been riding the same bus with the same driver for eight years, and Ash had always hated her.

Finally deciding to walk to school, he took only two steps before the bus came around the corner and stopped, its doors opening. He sighed and looked into the bus, seeing the old woman peering down at him with her usual scowl. Ash rolled his eyes and got on the bus, finding a seat in the back and setting his bag down next to him. He put his earbuds in, turned on his favorite playlist, and stared out the window. His knee started bouncing nervously as the bus passed buildings, but it stilled for a moment when it stopped in another neighborhood. Ash was usually the last stop on this route, but maybe there was a new kid. Some jock-looking guy Ash had never seen before walked onto the

bus and sat next to one of the popular guys in the front.

Ash looked back out the window. Another jock was just what his school needed. That was sarcasm, but as long as the guy didn't bother Ash, then he didn't actually care too much. All too soon, the bus was pulling up to the side of the school. The doors opened again, and the students gossiped and chatted, reeking of flowery perfume and putrid body spray, as they got off the bus. Maybe that's why the bus driver was such a grumpy old stick in the mud—all the high schooler fumes were violating her nose and brain.

Ash got off the bus last, not wanting to be caught in the middle of the crowd. He pretended not to notice the bus driver glaring at him as he walked toward the tall nightmare-inducing school building. That woman hadn't liked him since the last day of fifth grade when he had brought a bottle of dish soap and two bottles of water and made the bus's walkway a slip-n-slide of death. Ash smiled at the memory but was overcome with the usual feeling of doom as he made his way toward the big double doors.

He made it to his first class and took a seat in the back corner. He spared a glance to the front of the room and had to do a double take. *There's a seating chart? On the first goddamn day? You have to be joking!* What's worse, Ash was seated at the front. He grumbled under his breath and grabbed his wallet from his bag, taking out a few dollar bills and hiding them up his sleeve. Ash smoothly appeared in front of the teacher's desk and asked to be placed in the back corner where he was sitting only a moment ago. When the teacher denied his request, Ash slipped one of the dollars out of his sleeve and handed it over.



It took three dollars, but the teacher eventually allowed him to sit in the back. Ash counted that as a win. Taking his seat again, he took out a notebook that contained many little cat doodles and started doodling even more cats. It wasn't long before other students came in, but Ash didn't give any of them a thought. Then, the new guy came in. Some coincidence. Ash glanced up to the front of the room, curious about where he would sit. Oh. Right next to Ash. He was starting to regret his choice of seating because he was now stuck in the back with a jock on one side of him and a wall on the other.

Ash tried to ignore it when the new guy sat next to him and gave him a curious look. He just kept drawing cats. Most of them were dumb-looking orange tabby cats, a lot like Cheeto, but some of them were more majestic drawings, or different breeds of cats, and some were these tiny things that sort of resembled cats. Ash eventually got bored and leaned back, letting his head hang off the back of the chair, his dark, messy hair finally getting out of his face. He styled it like that on purpose, though. Looked good and stuff. When the new guy turned his body toward Ash a bit more, Ash sat up again.

"I like your outfit," the new guy complimented in a deep, monotone voice. For whatever reason, Ash immediately thought he was being mocked.

"Whatever, jerk," Ash replied.

The new guy looked taken aback and then irritated. "What the hell is wrong with you?"

Ash ignored him, scoffing as he put in his earphones and scrolled through whatever on his phone. The new guy rolled his eyes and muttered something, turning away and crossing his arms in his seat. More people began to file in, each one

looking annoyed at the arranged seating. It was completely understandable. What teacher assigned seats on the first day?! The class was less than half full when the first bell rang, causing the noise in the hallway to pick up immediately with bustling students trying to make it to the right place. Ash reluctantly took out his earbuds, turning them off and stuffing them in his bag as the second bell rang.

The teacher stood at the front of the class and cleared his throat, holding a brown clipboard in hand. “All right class, listen up,” he said with a subtle Canadian accent. “I have no patience for first days, and we’re going to try to get this done quickly and quietly, right? My name is Mr. Balenger. I don’t care if you call me that or Mr. B, just don’t call me by my first name.” Mr. B was older, but not old. Probably mid-forties. He had thinning sandy blonde hair and hazel-ish eyes. He wore a simple light-blue button-down shirt with a dark-red and navy-blue striped tie, dark-brown, reddish pants, and black dress shoes. Ash wouldn’t have been caught dead in an outfit like that. Seriously, he knew teachers had stricter dress codes, but couldn’t they at least make an effort to look a little bit good? “I’m going to call roll, just tell me if you’re here. Don’t be inappropriate or annoying, right?” Mr. B began calling out the names of students, but Ash zoned out, not listening until his own name was called. “Here,” Ash replied to his name, zoning out again as he messed with a loose string on his jacket.

The rest of the day went much the same—finding his classrooms, bribing his way to a back corner seat, and waiting to leave. His second class was Psychology with Mr. Warner. New guy wasn’t in that class. Ash’s third class was English with Mrs. Garcia. No new guy in English class either. After

lunch, his fourth class was Drawing with Mrs. Vanderbilt. New guy was in that class, but he sat across the room, sparing only a few glares in Ash's direction. Finally, Ash's last class, Band with Mrs. Kensington. Honestly, Ash only joined because his best friend, Vee, did band, and he wanted to learn how to play the drums. He played snare drums, of course. He wasn't a pro or anything, but he wasn't horrible. He practiced on his uncle's drums because he didn't want to sound like a fool and a newbie. Just Ash's luck, new guy was in that class. He played the trombone.

Ash grumbled to himself, but then he noticed Vee in the back examining a flute. Ash scurried in her direction, excited to see her after she'd been away all summer. She'd gone to Sweden to stay with her aunt Agnes and some cousins. Vee had transferred from Sweden roughly two years ago, and Ash had talked to her and showed her around and stuff. The two hit it off almost immediately and quickly became friends. They shared a lot of interests, experiences, and even some dislikes, and their energy matched. Neither one ever tired of the other because they were both a little whack.

Vee was sweet, funny, and very tall. She had dark orange hair, hazel eyes, a mole below her left eye, and very few freckles across her cheeks. She dressed in a casually formal style and was usually the best dressed at parties. She was also a total pro with makeup. She had always said it was just a hobby, but Ash thought she could seriously go places with it if she wanted to. Vee was very pretty, but she'd only had one boyfriend. She always said she'd never found the right person, or she wasn't looking for romance at the time. Ash didn't really care, whatever made Vee happy.

Ash cackled and snuck up behind her. “Vera!” he yelled, once he was only inches away. Vee jumped so high that Ash started laughing a bit too loud. People gave them looks, but Ash was too busy wheezing his guts out to care. “You should have- seen your fa- face!!” Ash choked out, pointing at Vee. She scowled and punched his arm, making him pout childishly. She chuckled.

“How about your face?” Vee asked, picking up the flute she’d dropped on her backpack to make sure it wasn’t damaged.

“Oh crap. I forgot you were holding that. Is it broken? I’ll pay for half if I broke it. Sorry, Vee,” Ash apologized. Vee snorted and shook her head.

“Nah, it’s good. So, how’s your summer been?” Vee asked, sitting down with her flute in her lap and leaning against her backpack. Ash did the same, except he used his bag as a pillow.

“Eh, it was alright. Odd dreams, but you know me. I never have normal dreams,” Ash shrugged. “I got a new skateboard, and my aunt taught me archery. Then my cousin took me out to the empty area behind his place and taught me how to ride his dirt bike. The fractured knee was totally worth it,” Ash said with a grin.

“Fractured knee?!” Vee yelped, shocked, but it quickly turned into an amused cackle. “You’re a dumbass, Ash. You know that?”

“Oh no, really? I am?” Ash gasped dramatically, putting a hand over his heart. Vee rolled her eyes and shoved his shoulder with her foot. They chuckled before the teacher came into the room. Ash sighed. He didn’t want to do this today. Vee and Ash shared a look and grabbed the snacks

they'd brought. Ash had brought two cans of Monster, Ultra Peachy Keen for him and Ultra Rosa for Vee, and Vee had brought Pringles. Healthy? Absolutely not. Delicious, though. Ash opened the Ultra Rosa and handed it to Vee, who did the same with some Pringles. That's how the two spent the rest of class—gossiping, sharing summer stories, and snacking on energy drinks and chips.

The end of class came quickly, and Ash decided he was going to walk home instead of taking the bus. He hated riding the bus in the afternoons—everyone always stank like sweat. Vee followed him, declaring that they were going to hang out after spending all summer away from each other. On the walk home, they noticed a small cat on the side of the road. Ash slowly stepped closer and realized it was a kitten, a very young one. The poor thing's fur was dirty and matted, and its leg looked mangled and twisted. Ash was weak for animals, especially cats. He grabbed the thin hoodie he'd brought in case his jacket got too hot out of his bag and slowly picked up the meowing kitten, wrapping it in the hoodie. It was shivering and twitching.

"Oh my god. Vee?" Ash muttered.

"Yeah. We should take it to the vet, come on," Vee said as she ushered Ash up. "We need to start walking now if we want to make it home before midnight." They both started walking toward the vet, which was on the complete other side of town, an hour's walk at least. They would have driven, but neither had a car, and they were kind of each other's only friend. They'd been walking for half an hour and realized the vet was further than they had thought. The wind picked up, and it started to rain.

“Are you serious?!” Ash yelled to the sky, covering the kitten with the hoodie. He groaned loudly as he began stomping instead of walking. “One day, that’s all I want! One day for things to be calm and normal, but no! Now I’m gonna be stuck walking across town for two and then some hours, soaked, with an injured kitten!”

Vee sighed in agreement. “I’d call my mom, but she is on a business trip. She’s coming back the day after tomorrow,” Vee moaned in dramatic despair, crossing her arms and shivering as she walked. “So, there anyone you like?” Vee asked out of nowhere.

“No,” Ash snorted. As if! His school was full of jocks, frat boys, and other people that were not his type or just downright assholes. “How about you? Anybody you fancy?”

“Fancy? What are you, a gentleman?” Vee barked out a laugh.

Suddenly, the two heard a car honking and turned around to see a gray Subaru Ascent full of guys from the school’s volleyball team. Ash rolled his eyes. What did they want?

“Yo! What the hell are you guys doin’ walking out in the rain?” the driver called, looking at them like they were weirdos. Ash was about to make a rude reply when Vee stepped in.

“Long story short, we found a kitten. It’s freezing and injured, and we need to get it to the vet. We can’t drive, so walking is our only option,” Vee explained, taking a step toward the Subaru. The volleyball guys spoke among themselves for a moment before the back door opened.

“Come on! We’ll give you a ride, it’s better than freezing to death,” the driver offered with a smile.

Ash sighed and followed Vee, hopping into the car. The two sat shivering in the second row. The guys had moved to the front and back, some even to the trunk, just to give them space. It was still crowded, though, and Ash had to work hard to not get irritated

enough to just keep walking. The driver accelerated in the direction of the vet.

“So, who are you two?” the guy in the passenger seat asked, giving them curious looks.

“I’m Vera, this is Ash,” Vee said with a small smile, pointing to herself and Ash.

“Ash? Aren’t you that kid that’s in the school band? You play snare drums, right?” passenger guy asked again, leaning toward Ash a bit. “And Vera plays the flute. Don’t you? You guys rock those instruments!”

“Uh, yeah. That’s us,” Ash murmured. “Also, don’t call me kid. I’m only, like, a grade below most of you. Two years younger tops.”

The volleyball guys just chuckled. Ash looked down at the small kitten in his lap. He unwrapped it from the hoodie—it was wet now and wouldn’t be much help. The hoodie went back in Ash’s bag, and he hugged the kitten close to his middle, sharing body heat. He’d deal with the possibility of fleas and diseases once he was at the vet, and he’d give his clothes a few runs through the washer as well.

The drive was another thirty or so minutes, and the guys decided they’d wait for Ash and Vee out front to drive them home once they were done. After about ten minutes of sitting in the waiting room and twenty minutes of getting the kitten taken care of, they were finally out of there with the little, now clean and slightly healthier, kitten that Ash had taken the liberty of naming Rocky Bob, mostly because it had gray fur. Fortunately, the kitten wasn’t in as bad a shape as Ash had thought. His leg was an easy fix, and, after a good wash and brush, he already looked much happier.



When the guys saw them come out of the vet, they waved them over, and Ash and Vee got in the car again. Vee was behind him this time, leaving Ash in the middle of everyone, pretty squished. He didn't mind, though. Rocky Bob was being adorable and keeping him distracted.

"Is the little one doing better now?" passenger guy asked, receiving a nod from Ash in response. "Hey, we know your names, don't you wanna know ours?" passenger guy questioned, grinning and wiggling his eyebrows. He thought he was being funny.

"I already know your names," Ash said with a shrug. Vee gave him a look. "What? I go to every school game, match, and tournament to get out of the house. I'm bound to remember a few names," Ash huffed, rolling his eyes as he pet Rocky Bob. Maybe Ash could call the kitten Robby for short. Yeah, Robby had a nice ring to it.

"You know all of our names?" a guy in the trunk asked, not believing him. Ash raised a brow.

"Yeah? I just said that, and it's a dumb thing to lie about. Your name is Marcus, the driver is Damien, passenger guy is Luke, the guy to my right is Xander, the guy to Vee's left is Denver, the three in the back row are Jameson, Noah, and Brandon, and the two in the trunk with Marcus are Ben and Gavin." Ash listed off every name, and he got silence in reply. "I could list last names too, but that's easier because they're on your jerseys."

"You're a strange kid," passenger guy, Luke, mumbled with a tiny grin. The rest of the team nodded in agreement, but not in a way that was meant to be rude or offensive. That was certainly foreign to Ash. Vee eventually nodded with them,

and Ash shot her a betrayed look.

“Anyway, where are you two headed now?” Damien asked, stopping at a red light. “Home?” he guessed.

“Yeah,” Ash confirmed, telling him his address. They made it to Ash’s place in a surprisingly short amount of time, and Damien parked in Ash’s driveway. Denver opened the door and got out to hold it open for the two. Vee hopped out, Ash followed behind, and Denver got back in the car and shut the door, waving through the tinted windows. “Thanks for the ride, by the way. We appreciate it,” Ash hesitantly said to Damien, who’d rolled down the window to let everyone yell their goodbyes. Ash wasn’t used to people being nice to him and, in turn, he wasn’t used to being nice to people. The team smiled and wished them good night before they drove away, and Ash and Vee hurried inside to warm up.

When they shut the front door, Ash’s mom peaked around the corner. “Ash? There you are! Where were you? You should have been home two hours ago!” the woman scolded. Ash felt bad.

“I know, Mom. I’m sorry. I meant to text you, I really did, but we found this poor guy on the side of the road and got distracted,” Ash muttered apologetically, showing the little gray kitten to his mom.

Ash’s mom looked at the kitten. “You aren’t going to keep it, are you? You already have Cheeto, and I still can’t believe you named him that. What title did you assign this poor guy?” she asked, petting the kitten.

“Rocky Bob, Robby for short,” Ash said with a proud smirk.

“Okay, Robby isn’t bad, but Rocky Bob? What is it with you giving animals atrocious names?” She sighed and stepped back.

“Okay, Ash, if you want to keep him, you can. You need to take care of him though, understand? You will be held totally responsible. Oh my god! Vee! Hi, I had no idea you were back!” His mom looked

excited—she liked Vee a lot.

Ash smiled as he went to his room to find Cheeto and introduce the orange tabby to his new gray friend. If Ash had to guess, he'd say Robby might be a British Shorthair. Ash was no cat expert, though, so truly he had no idea.

"Cheeto! Where are you? Come meet your new little brother," Ash called. Cheeto meowed and came galloping out of Ash's bedroom. "Hey buddy, look at him! Isn't he adorable? I know you can be pissy around new cats, but you don't get to do that this time." Ash knelt and pet Cheeto, trying to calm him down a bit before introducing him to Robby. Cheeto purred happily as Ash slowly set Robby down in front of him.

Cheeto hissed at Robby, but the kitten didn't seem to care as he jumped on the older cat. In response, Cheeto hissed louder and whacked Robby a few times. Ash yelped, trying to separate the two, but Robby kept trying to climb all over Cheeto. Ash tried to keep the orange tabby from hurting the kitten, despite how determined he was to get hurt, but eventually the older cat calmed down. Robby was beside him, trying to climb on his back and failing. Cheeto gave Robby the stink eye a few times, but other than that, they seemed fine.

"Huh, what do ya know? See, Cheeto? You're fine; you were being overdramatic," Ash huffed with a smile. Vee snuck up behind Ash and whacked his head, and he let out a startled yell. "Vee! What the hell?!" he turned to glare at her. Vee only laughed at him and bent down to pet the cats.

Ash scoffed and rolled his eyes, failing to hide an amused grin. Vee picked up Robby, Ash picked up Cheeto, and they went to Ash's room. They set the cats in the kitty corner and themselves on Ash's bed in front of the TV. They both agreed

to turn on *Trollhunters: Tales of Arcadia*. DreamWorks did well with *Trollhunters*—it’s a spectacular show. Vee and Ash had watched all the shows together multiple times, but they were starting over again because it was just that good. They’d also heard that a movie had come out, and they wanted to refresh their memory of every episode of every show before they watched it.

While the first episode began, Ash left the room to grab a few snacks: soda, popcorn, cookies, and chips. He appeared back in the room, whistling a tune. It was eerie, but also nice. It had been stuck in his head for days, and he had no idea where he’d heard it. He had Shazamed the tune countless times, whistling it, humming it, and singing any song that could possibly match. There was nothing. It just didn’t exist.

“Nice song. What is it?” Vee asked, snatching the cookies from Ash’s hand.

“Not sure, actually,” Ash said with a sigh. He was silent for only a moment before he whistled it again. “God! Dammit, I don’t get why I keep doing that.” Ash was irritated with the repetitive whistling. Not that he didn’t like doing it, but he just didn’t get why this specific tune, which didn’t exist anywhere. “Chill out man, it’s nice,” Vee said before she stuffed her mouth with cookies and popped open a can of Dr. Pepper.

“Whatever. I can’t stop whistling it, and I can’t find anything anywhere that matches it. It wouldn’t be as frustrating if I knew where the hell it came from...” Ash’s voice was quiet as he trailed off. He was trying too hard to figure it out, but it was bothering him. He really wanted to know where that song had come from. Maybe it was some commercial jingle, or maybe it had come from a dream. Ash

had never made up music in his dreams though, so it was a bit confusing.

“Yeah, okay crazy. Come on, sit and watch with me. We gotta get through these and see if that movie is any good!” Vee exclaimed with an excited laugh.

“You do know it’s going to take, like, a week to get through all the shows. Right? We can’t pull any all-nighters on school nights. It’s fine on Friday and Saturday, but not tonight,” Ash said, also laughing. He plopped down on the bed and forgot all about the tune as he watched *Trollhunters* for the ninth time. They made it to Episode 7 before Vee got a text from her mother.

“Oh, what?! Mom is coming home early tomorrow morning, and she somehow knows I’m gonna try and stay over. She told me to go home,” Vee whined, pretending to cry. Ash was disappointed, but not upset.

“Go home then, it’s not worth getting in trouble. Plus, you can just come back tomorrow,” Ash shrugged. Cheeto jumped into Vee’s lap, as if he were saying goodbye. Robby was far too entranced by the squeaky toy that Vee had bought for Cheeto after she first met him. Vee gave the orange cat a hug and did the same with Ash. She said goodbye, lightly punching his arm before she left. Ash blew a raspberry at her back, calling out goodbye as he heard the front door open and close. It was only then that Ash realized she’d have to walk all that way in the rain.

“No! Vee! Wait, you idiot!” Ash called, hurrying to the front door and throwing it open. “Vee! Come back! Me and mom can take you home, don’t walk in the rain. That’s stupid!” Ash yelled. Vee turned around and laughed loudly before she agreed. Ash and his mom got in her car, and Vee hopped in the back, thanking Ash’s mom for the lift. She smiled, happy to give Vee a

ride any day.

Ash looked in the rearview mirror and smirked at Vee, flipping her the bird over his shoulder. Vee grinned and did the same back to him, announcing her undying love for Ash in a very overdramatic tone.

“Uh huh, love you too dummy,” Ash replied with a snort. Soon, they pulled into Vee’s driveway, and she got out of the car, thanking Mrs. Wright again before retreating inside her house. Ash and his mom drove back home. He was exhausted as he quickly changed into his pajamas and flopped onto his bed, passing out in seconds.

It seemed like he had only been asleep for a moment when Ash shot up with a sharp gasp, the faint echo of that whistle in his head. His body was drenched in sweat, and his blankets were discarded on the floor. Cheeto woke up and peered at him before he meowed and laid back down, uncaring. That little turd.

Ash took a few deep breaths, standing up and going to the bathroom to splash cold water on his face. So, he really did get that tune from a dream. He couldn’t remember anything about it, though. Not one little detail. There was only that stupid eerie whistle haunting him again. Ash went to the kitchen and got a glass of water, downing it in one go before rinsing the glass and setting it on the counter by the sink. He would do the dishes tomorrow. Ash spared a look at the clock on the oven—it was 4:21 in the morning. With a sigh, he trudged back to his bedroom. Laying down again, he slowly fell back into a dreamless sleep.

## Ford Swetnam Poetry Prize Winner

The rhetorical and formal inventions of “**life**” spiral like a helix, the poem playing with the form of a definition through a series of moody images, as changeable as weather. Though the poem flirts throughout with exhaustion, it deepens and darkens, and gets colder, from the “brisk, all-too-early morning air” to “whispers in the wind that leave skin cold and tingling.” The poem’s arrival at “lethargy” and the speaker’s “inanimate” state are belied by the energy in its sense of return, the lively way line breaks fracture a paragraph construction, and the searching, wild arcs of its diction. The poem itself is a “brief escape for fiery hearts,” even if they must ultimately be “snuffed out by day.”

## 2024 Judge

Lisa Bickmore is the author of three books of poems. The second, *flicker* (2016), won the 2014 Antivenom Prize (Elixir Press). She won the 2015 Ballymaloe International Poetry Prize for the poem ‘Eidolon,’ which appears in her third collection, *Ephemerist* (Red Mountain Press). She is the founder/publisher of the new independent nonprofit Lightscatter Press ([lightscatterpress.org](http://lightscatterpress.org)). In July 2022, she was named the Poet Laureate for the state of Utah, and in 2023 was awarded a fellowship from the Academy of American Poets for poets laureate.



*Emma Lopes*

life

life /lɪf/ n. 1. Tiny clouds drawn from tired exhales in the brisk, all-too-early, morning air. 2. Dark circles and haziness from nights spent nose-deep in fantasy novels; a brief escape for fiery hearts snuffed out by the day. 3. Love and loss, abandoned whispers in the wind that leave skin cold and tingling. 4. Death's paramour: a frigid dullness / this debate if blood is red or blue / daily rhythms drifting at 60 to 100 beats per minute in plotted veins / an exhaustion that hunts the dragonflies I caught in my weather-beaten hands; draining / a marathon tailed by lethargy where I run blindfolded and inhale the air I need only to return it / to inevitably wind up in the same place / an inanimate phase.

*Antonio Rodriguez*

1948

*BR&S* Prose Prize Winner

In the relative shade of the bank's back office, two men worked on finalizing the planned collection route across the northeastern Mexican states.

"I heard at the store they saw a jaguar out in the wastes—be careful out there, compadre."

"Of course, of course. I know you'd hate to have to replace my horse." The younger man, Ismael, laughed at his own joke, while the older man struggled to maintain a serious look beneath his large mustache. "Lighten up David, it's probably just a puma." He clapped a hand on David's shoulder, "They don't go after horses with riders on them anyway. Now back to that route, when I get out of Durango..."

• • •

Even as the century reached its midpoint, many small towns still relied on the strength of the horse to travel great distances and cross rough terrain. Mexico was no exception, and men young and old rode out on horseback as mail carriers, lawmen, or hired guards. Ismael was one such man, employed by the bank in Coahuila to collect taxes from the great ranchos and the smaller rancherías across Coahuila, Durango, Nuevo León, and Tamaulipas. The bank usually hired four for such journeys, but Gabriel was forced to return south last year to manage his late father's holdings, and The Indio's horse returned to the bank last spring with taxes but no rider. So the responsibility fell on Ismael and Thomas, a guero from Mexico City, to collect from the bank's northern and southern clients. They rode east together out of town, hitched their horses to

a nearby tree, and smoked cigarettes to brace for their four-week rides ahead.

“Heading home, huh? You’re lucky to have the southern loop, compa,” Ismael nudged Thomas in the ribs with smile. “I wish I had my parents to help me out.”

“Aw that’s not fair, I can’t say nothing back to that without sounding cruel.” He shoved back and the two laughed. Thomas was a diplomat’s son as far as anyone at the bank knew. His Spanish still had that stressed drawl of a new speaker, but his word choice could be alarmingly rich. The two sat for a while, letting their cigarettes burn down in their hands, checking the length of the shadows on the ground.

“What do you think about jaguars, Thomas?”

“Well, I know they make their territories further south these days, but I don’t think much past that. You worried about what David was saying about that puma?”

“I told him it was a puma too! But no, not worried. Just curious, is all.”

The shadows were getting shorter, so the two men gathered their horses from where they were idly grazing and made the sign of the cross for each other as Thomas turned south and Ismael carried on east to Durango for the first round of collections.

• • •

The sun shimmered overhead as Ismael rode through the desert scrub. He and Dulce—a secret name he had given the horse—had been riding for about an hour, and it would take another hour yet to get to the first rancho on the schedule. He could almost feel the exposed skin on his hands and face getting darker. As a child he was fairer in complexion, fair compared to his father at least. When he began riding at 15,

he started removing his hat and gloves during the hottest hour of the day, slowly turning from a pale tan to a rich bronze over three sunburnt years. He took a measured drink of water from the skin slung across his back. The father in his memory, though, was still darker, like wet soil to Ismael's baked earth. He leaned back slightly in the saddle. The landscape stretched on ahead.

Rancho Gomez was a small plot of land, though before the wars it was easily the size of a small town with its own chapel and cemetery. The former holdings rested in five hands now, all clients with the bank, and Sr. Gomez's house and two fields were at the very end of the dirt road which connected all the plots. As Ismael rode through the main gate, he saw a fist-sized chunk of stone was missing off the right pillar as if blasted away.

"They can't find two men to hire, but they're still asking me to make the same payments...and they're making a young man like you waste his youth. What an age to be alive in, eh?"

"It's not so bad," Ismael took a drink from his glass of water, "David's paying us double until he can hire more help."

"Double, huh? I should be charging you for letting your horse drink, then!" Gomez slapped a heavy palm into Ismael's back and laughed, and Ismael laughed with him to be polite. "Don't look so tense, amigo, you're my guest, business or not."

Ismael watched as Gomez made his way toward one of the large windows of the room. He was an old man of 70. His sons had passed some time ago (French Foreign Legion, he recalled David saying solemnly), and his daughters, if he had any, would have been long gone in pursuit of their own fortunes. Gomez was heavysset in his old age, and though he still had

most of the great strength and vigor of his youth, it lacked the outlets it once had. He walked with a slight limp in his right leg, hissing with every step—a limp which wasn't there when Ismael had come to collect last year.

"I see you've taken up wrestling, señor." When Gomez turned around, confused, Ismael patted his own right leg.

"Ahh," Gomez nodded, "not quite, amigo. None of the men around here would be able to take me down if they tried." He took a drink from his own glass. "No, something tried breaking into my chicken coop last week. I chased after it in the dark and my foot," he tapped his toes on the floor, "caught on a rock and I hit the ground. Hard. I could see it staring at me after I fell and, whatever it was, it ran off after I shot my rifle." Ismael nodded. That would explain the missing chunk of stone from the main gate, though he decided to keep that to himself.

"Do you think it might have been a jaguar, señor?"

"A jaguar?"

"People in Torreón were saying they had seen one."

"It was probably just a coyote. Jaguars haven't been this far north since I was your age."

• • •

Ismael tied his horse off to a long lead, which he then tied around the base of a pepper tree. His mother once told him that the pepper tree was originally from another place in the world, brought to Mexico by the Spanish for their own needs. His father told him that as long as the tree was here then we should learn how to live with it. Ismael snapped dead branches off the tree to build a fire while Dulce grazed on the choicer patches of grass and scrub. They were halfway through the trip by now, deep in Nuevo León on their way to Tamaulipas, and

still no sign of any jaguars. He had seen a number of coyotes walking the hilltops, scared off a puma or two with his pistol, but no jaguars. *Years, maybe centuries ago, the jaguar hunted as far north as southern Texas*, Ismael had heard this from one of the clients he collected from in the northern area of Coahuila. He kicked or threw the larger rocks away from his makeshift camp and laid a thick blanket from his pack onto the ground. He didn't carry much when on the road: a blanket, his water skin, and a pistol with a handful of bullets, all gifts from his parents before they moved north to The United States in search of a comfortable place to retire. Any food he needed he ate when in town. *These days, however, most Jaguars stay in the forests to the south. I couldn't imagine one coming this far north unless it was desperate. Too desperate, even.* He tended to the campfire, giving it enough fuel to last for most of the night. He continued to think about the jaguar as he watched red and black spots crawl across the surface of the kindling. A lone coyote called out somewhere in the night. A second joined the call, and they howled together for a time. If he had to guess, Ismael would say it was 2 in the morning. It was difficult, but necessary, to force himself awake this early in the morning, this late into sleep. Bandits were rare, and animal attacks uncommon, but both were incidents he needed to avoid so far from any town. He forced himself upwards on his blanket, rolling his shoulders and letting his eyes adjust to the night. He knew he only needed to be awake for an hour at most, just long enough to feed the fire enough to last till sunrise. The two coyotes were singing again as Ismael fluffed up some dry grass into kindling. Thomas had told him, before they left town, that he had a fiancée he was "saving money for

to marry.” Said he wanted to earn as much as he could on his own, to prove it to her. Ismael didn’t know what needed proving. If you have the money, why not use it? Most women would love to be married to a diplomat’s son, he figured. He lowered in a few small branches, and the fire slowly strengthened again. As he arranged the sticks around the center, Ismael wondered if he would ever need to save for a wedding.

The coyotes’ howling faded and was replaced by playful yips. The fire seemed good enough to last till morning. Ismael settled himself back down for sleep.

• • •

Ismael sat in the shade of a small clutch of cacti while Dulce sipped from a thin steam that traced a line in the dirt. He was a few miles outside the border of Nuevo León and Tamaulipas; his parents had moved from there when he was young. He thought over the remaining stops on his route: after getting to Reynosa, he would need to double back and head southwest to—the tall grass to his left began to move. He grabbed his pistol from his bag and waited. Just the wind. He let his shoulders drop, put the pistol down, and clasped his hands in a small prayer. As far back as there had been people, he assumed, there must have been people in Mexico. The Aztecs, once the most renowned, were the ones with special reverence for the jaguar. The wind growled softly as it stalked across the wastes around him. Many others called Mexico home when it wasn’t known by that name: Pueblo people, the Chiricahua, and the Lipan. Ismael’s parents never talked about how they met or where they came from before settling in Reynosa for his early childhood. His mother swore up and down that they were Spanish, and his father, when he would



comment, would simply state that they were Mexican, because they lived in Mexico. And yet, they were the ones who told him the names of the Indios who had lived here before him. Would his grandparents have been aware of jaguars? Would they have held any special reverence for them? He decided to give Dulce another ten or so minutes to drink while he repacked his satchel.

• • •

Ismael's final stop was the Rancho Ezquerra, a respectable piece of land a few miles south of Monterrey in Nuevo León. Once he got to the gate, he dismounted and patted Dulce on the shoulder. He rolled a lit cigarette between his fingers.

"It's a small domestic concern, señor." The ranch foreman who had walked up told him. "If you'll just wait here, I'll return with Sr. Ezquerra's dues." And so he waited, debating on whether to roll a second cigarette. As he squinted through the cigarette smoke, he imagined he could see Candida through one of the windows of the main house. She was one of the younger daughters of the Ezquerra family, though she was just shy of two years older than he was.

Ismael thought about Thomas saving up money for his eventual marriage and wondered about his own prospects with Candida. They had talked a few times before, had mostly gotten along well. She was pretty, there wasn't any question of that. But mixing work and pleasure rarely pans out well, especially when your job involves taking money from the girl's father. She could be hard on herself, too, and that's hard to like in anyone. When he came to collect last year, a passing compliment on her hair was repaid with "Oh, you don't mean that. I'm so ugly and black." In that moment she sounded so much like his mother that Ismael grimaced. She caught his expression and tried to

perk up and salvage the genial tone of their conversation. He wondered what his parents would say if he introduced her to them.

The foreman returned with the tax payment before he could pursue that line of thought any further. A quick check of the paperwork to make sure everything was in order, a firm handshake, and Ismael was on his way once again.

• • •

Ismael was following the road back to Torreón after four long weeks of collecting. He was a bit leaner now, as was Dulce, yet his thoughts were fat with the jaguar. He must have asked over a dozen people along the route what they knew of jaguars, and every time they gave him nearly the same answer: *They haven't been up here in decades*. Despite that, the idea of the jaguar had made a nest of his mind. It growled at all hours to remind him of its presence. Dulce walked slowly along the road as the sun inched closer toward their destination past the horizon. They would need to make camp soon, unfortunately. A customs stop in Tamaulipas had set Ismael back by hours. Riding at night wasn't particularly dangerous on the main highways as long as you carried a gun, but he also carried the jaguar in his thoughts, and that made him nervous. He looked ahead to a strong-looking tree surrounded by clutches of tall, tan grass. That would have to do. He clicked once with his tongue, and Dulce picked up her pace.

• • •

A twig snapped in the dark and Ismael's eyes edged open. He heard footsteps nearby, heavy footfalls moving slowly to be as quiet as possible. But not quietly enough. He stayed still, watching the dying embers of the fire through squinting eyes,

and listened. No growls, no alarmed whinnies from the horse. Ismael was still alive as well, so it couldn't be a jaguar. He heard the sound of papers and coins being gently removed from his saddlebags. This was a bandit, a man. He could deal with those. He took a breath and reached beneath the bundled coat that was his pillow for his pistol.

"I wouldn't do that, my friend." Ismael heard the click of a revolver. "Turn over. Slowly."

Ismael did as he was told. The man digging through Ismael's bags was lean and tall. His revolver gleamed in the moonlight.

"I was hoping you'd stay sleeping through this little visit of mine. I suppose that's my fault, friend, for not minding my steps." He twisted his toe in the dirt. "I'm not a fan of killing my fellow man, believe it or not," he sighed wistfully. "But, unfortunately, that is what has to happen now." The bandit leveled his pistol at Ismael, still on his blanket on the ground.

"You've been following me, haven't you?"

The bandit nodded. "Since Tamaulipas, friend."

The sky was black behind the man, and the stars gleamed like pinpricks through paper. Though there was no wind, a few feet behind the man, the tall grass began to sway. Ismael could see, just barely from the firelight, a wooden cross on the man's neck.

"May I say a prayer first, before what happens?" The bandit's teeth gleamed in the starlight, sharp and hateful, more like a coyote baring its fangs than a smile.

"Why of course, friend." The bandit eased the hammer back against the revolver's frame. "It wouldn't be right of me to deny you that. In fact, I'll pray with you, if you'll do me the pleasure." The grass right behind the man swayed, and Ismael imagined he

could feel a breeze. The bandit steeped his hands around his revolver.

“Our Father, who art in heaven.” The bandit’s voice was a lyrical growl.

“Our Father, who art in heaven.” Ismael repeated, watching the grasses shift.

“Hallowed be thy name.” The bandit rolled his fingers on the barrel of his pistol.

“Hallowed be thy name.” The breeze changed direction, and the grass moved with it.

“Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on Earth as it is in Heaven.”

“Thy kingdom come,” Ismael said. The grass stopped swaying. “Thy will be done,” and two new stars shot across the sky.

Ismael wasn’t sure what happened in the moments that followed. A gleam of white daggers, a man’s voice crying out in surprise, then screaming in pain, and then a loud crunch that returned the night to silence. Two golden stars peered out over the blood of the dead bandit, growling as they dragged him off into the dark, the tall grass parting to welcome them. Ismael stayed awake through the rest of the night, his back pressed into the pepper tree, clutching his pistol. Every star was another jaguar’s eye staring at him. Every breeze a hungry growl.

The next he knew, Ismael was riding into town with the sun beaming overhead. His eyes were wide with terror and focused on the bank. Every shadow held a jaguar, stalking him through the gaps between buildings. In a daze, he tied Dulce off in front of the bank and collapsed to the dirt. He

needed water. A stranger fanned his face with their hat, and in the noontime haze he swore it was Candida fanning him, that it was The Bandit waving his gun at him. A desiccated scream stuck in his throat. He heard David rush out of the doors shouting his name and felt David drag him into the shade of the building toward the bank's entrance. Through his blurring vision, Ismael swore he could see a jaguar perched in Dulce's saddle like a man would ride, waving him off as the door closed after his boots.

## ISU Land Acknowledgment

The land on which Idaho State University's Pocatello campus sits is within the original Fort Hall Reservation boundaries and is the traditional and ancestral home of the Shoshone and Bannock peoples. We acknowledge the Fort Hall Shoshone and Bannock peoples, their elders past and present, their future generations, and all Indigenous peoples, including those upon whose land the University is located. We offer gratitude for the land itself and the original caretakers of it.

As a public research university, it is our ongoing commitment and responsibility to teach accurate histories of the regional Indigenous people and of our institutional relationship with them. It is our commitment to the Shoshone-Bannock Tribes and to ISU's citizens that we will collaborate on future educational discourse and activities in our communities.

## Colophon

Issue 23, 2024 of *Black Rock & Sage* is set in Dutch 766 BT type at Idaho State University using Adobe InDesign. *BR&S*'s cover and footer font is Futura Medium. The journal is printed on 80 # natural Cougar opaque smooth by Bookmobile in Minneapolis, Minnesota.

## Contributors

**Anahi Ambriz** is an undergraduate student majoring in digital media. Ever since buying that very first sketchbook, she has been obsessed with visual art. Her main goal would simply be to continue growing/learning in the art field (and hopefully to be able to do this as a living, of course). She is especially interested in visual storytelling, game art, and 3-D art.

**Jared Anderson** is a student at ISU who hopes to major in computer science and minor in graphic design.

**Mel Anderson** is a graduate student at ISU. She writes poetry because it's cheaper than therapy.

**Eros Auman** is a trans, ADHD, and autistic artist who dabbles in various mediums with a preference for metal working. They enjoy making kinetic, wearable artwork that raises awareness for ADHD and autistic issues and self-expression. Some of their work also depicts their struggles with mental health.

**Beatrice Austin** is an ISU undergraduate student working toward a BFA. She specializes in digital art, but still likes to branch out to other mediums. She enjoys working with paint, sculpture, metals, wood, and yarn, and hopes to use her passions to become an independent artist.



**Chloe Calkins** is an art student at ISU who specializes in digital illustration. She is from Idaho Falls but currently lives in Pocatello. She plays the electric guitar and bass in her free time and would like to be in a band. She is aiming to do freelance art and have a career in the art or animation industry one day.

**Anastasia Christensen** is a queer, Idaho-based artist who loves to explore new ideas through their art. Though primarily a fiber artist, they enjoy experimenting in other mediums, especially digital work. When they aren't making art, they love to kick back with a good book or spend time with their family.

**Shane Comin** is a fiction writer from southeast Montana. He studies psychology at Idaho State University. He hopes to live in the east someday where oak trees outnumber pines and seabirds fly through town. He enjoys art and the outdoors, and he hopes to continue writing as long as his life allows.

**Lindi Dice** is currently a junior at Idaho State University majoring in English with concentrations in creative writing and literature. She is minoring in linguistics. Lindi is a large fan of large sweaters, exploring the outdoors, her cat Felix, and all writing done in form. She hails from Melba, Idaho.

**Katrina Gilbert** is a first-generation biology student at ISU. Born and raised in Idaho, she strives to create a better life by getting her degree. She spends a lot of time outside for work and recreation, and she uses art as an outlet to gain control amidst chaos and create something beautiful.

**Hunter Giles** is an art student from southern Utah who focuses on painting nature and inspirations around him. He enjoys utilizing bright colors and works hard to capture distinct value to add dimension to his work.

**West Goldie** is a trans man making art about the intersection of his queer identity and his Catholic upbringing. He currently lives in Pocatello with his wife and child. He is almost finished with his BFA in art, minoring in art history.

**Gone After Midnight** is an alt rock band whose music gives motivation, meaning, and hope to the lives of their listeners. Band members use their drive and passion for alternative rock music to spread a message of hope. Hailing from southeastern Idaho, they understand what it means to be abandoned or feel like nothing, so it is their goal to bring hope, motivation, and meaning to their fans. Their fans are not only touched and encouraged by their music, but also receive something to hold onto when they have nothing else. As they continue their drive to create connections that are heartfelt, deep, and relatable, the mission of their music stays the same: to spread hope and comfort to all who will listen. Be encouraged, strengthen your hope, and listen for yourself!

**Ben Graham** is a commercial music major with an emphasis on jazz piano. He started playing piano at age 6, received jazz lessons throughout high school, and is currently receiving classical instruction from piano professor Dr. Kori Bond here at ISU. He is also receiving jazz lessons from Director of Jazz Studies, Prof. Armstrong.

**Klaus Graham** is a sophomore at Idaho State University studying creative writing and linguistics. After spending the last five years in New York and Salt Lake City, Klaus is now living in his hometown of Idaho Falls to focus on his education.

**Caleb Greenwell** is in the final semester of the English master's program at ISU where he is writing his thesis on the American horror genre in the aftermath of the Civil War. It has been through the constant support and guidance of the English department and the creative writing program that he has managed to achieve this level of academic success.

**Kristal Herrera** is a senior at ISU. She is currently working toward her BFA. She works in a variety of mediums with her primary medium being metals.

**Madison Hoagland** is double majoring in art and education. She enjoys drawing in her free time and watching various Netflix shows in a relatively short period of time. Madison enjoys spending her summers outdoors by camping with her family and pets, and she is usually found reading or hiking in Idaho outdoor areas.

**Cortnie Hulse** is a junior at Idaho State University studying both music education and flute performance. She has been playing flute for eleven years and has plans to attend graduate school to earn her doctorate after graduating from ISU. Cortnie plays in the Idaho State Civic Symphony and with the Bengal Marching Band, and is continuously searching out new and exciting performance and learning opportunities. In her spare time, Cortnie enjoys spending time with her pet chickens, composing music, and collecting vintage Avon bottles.

**Saige Jeffs** is a junior at ISU. She started as an ecology major but decided to follow her passion for creativity and craft and became an art major. She has a great love for nature, and when she's not creating art, she is spending time with her dogs, horses, and partner adventuring in the great outdoors.

**River Kamplin** is a sophomore at Pocatello High School. They enjoy spending time with their friends, family, and four dogs. They spend their free time reading, drawing, and writing new stories.

**Aurora Keene** is an undergraduate student at Idaho State University who is pursuing a bachelor of science in physics with a minor in creative writing. She hopes to someday become an astrophysicist who writes science fiction alongside scientific papers, ideally with a cat or two nearby for emotional support.

**Coulesse Cristiano Kindle**, (born June 19th, 1999), is a producer, engineer, gamer, DJ, and self-taught drummer from Pocatello, Idaho. He specializes in making sample-based hip hop beats, but can also make several different types of electronic music. He is a university studies major with a focus in commercial music and management. He has recently gotten his first album credits as a tracking engineer and is motivated to get more. His inspirations include his father, Walter Kindle, Akira Kurosawa, J. Dilla, Knxwledge, Earl Sweatshirt, and DJ Premier, to name a few. He was also in a band called "Side Chick" with a couple of his friends. Coulesse now looks forward to working on an album for his capstone project and learning more about the industry.

**Emily King** is an undergraduate in the digital fine arts program at Idaho State University. She would like to do storyboarding for video games or illustrating for books or TV shows and is currently enjoying the process of learning. Her many passions include art, video games, figure skating, and DnD.

Born and raised in Boise Idaho, **Carsten Kottraba** has had a growing obsession for music since the age of 7. He plays piano, guitar, and voice. His main goal musically is to create and venture as deep as he can into the musical world to experience the many possible joys it can bring into life.

**Cameron Kress** is from a small town called Bliss, Idaho and grew up in the small-town community. She is currently a senior at ISU in the art department and has found her passion in the arts. She loves all that art entails and hopes to learn as many mediums as possible. Her current focus is printmaking with a desire to learn all that printmaking has to offer. Cameron loves all that is whimsy and fantastical and expresses these ideals with her art. Along with being a growing artist, she is also a growing bookworm and movie buff and spends her time with either when not using her creativity.

**Omotomilayo Lawanson** is a doctoral fellow at Idaho State University in the English and the teaching of English program. Her lifelong dream (still unfulfilled) has been to find a job that pays her to read. As an avid observer and writer, Tomilayo is inspired by the complexity of the human experience.

**Emma Lopes** has attended a variety of universities and studied in a few different fields, including materials science and chemical engineering. However, she has always greatly valued creativity and expression and is thrilled to be studying English. She also enjoys drawing, painting, music, gaming, and food, to name a few.

**Alyssa Mabey** is an undergraduate student working toward her BFA. She is pursuing a career as a tattoo artist. She loves to draw pen and ink drawings. When she's not drawing, you can find her crocheting, bingeing a TV show, or playing rugby.

**Vincent Miron** has been creating art his whole life. Born and raised in Pocatello, Idaho, Vincent enjoys outdoor recreation and learning. He also is working out ways in which he can make a living off his art, and one way he is doing this is by sharpening his skills in college.

**Victoria Montes** is a first-generation college student in her second year of college studying art education. She aspires to teach children to appreciate the arts and to push them to think creatively. She wants to share her passion for ceramics, not only with students, but with her community. Victoria also has a self-made brand called "Mud by Montes" that she hopes will grow into a local pottery studio where she can teach the community about clay and pottery.

**Eva Newton** is a self-taught artist pursuing a digital media degree at Idaho State University. Eva enjoys Dungeons and Dragons, as well as writing, comics, and video games. Her work focuses on narratives and storytelling, but she has recently developed an appreciation for abstract expressionism.

**Jackie Nguyen**, from Twin Falls, Idaho, is in his 4th year of his undergraduate degree at ISU. You may have seen him take on the roles of Lucas Beineke in *Addams Family*, Ralph Herdman in *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever*, Porthos in *The Three Musketeers*, and most recently the Narrator for *The Twits*.

In 2017, **Olympicus (Kole Archibald)** emerged from a tough relationship and relocated. Immersed in Spotify tunes, the strains of Toby Fox's "Undertale" caught his soul. Curious about the game, he played it upon reaching Maine, discovering a coping mechanism and a newfound passion. Olympicus drew inspiration from Toby, delving into music and self-expression. His debut album, conceived for personal catharsis, aspires to touch others as Toby's work touched him. Olympicus envisions a future where his music leaves a similar impact.

**Maximo Orr** has been a student at ISU since 2020. He loves writing music, choral and commercial, and wants to teach choir at a collegiate level someday.

**Kaitlyn Prado-May** is an ISU freshman from a small town called Weiser, Idaho. She makes art about feelings she can't explain. She enjoys hanging out with her friends and family. Kaitlyn currently lives in Pocatello, Idaho, and she enjoys living in this much bigger community.

**Tanner Pratt** is a recent graduate from the English department at ISU. He now lives in Boise and enjoys reading, writing, cooking, hiking, and collecting vintage media.

**Adam Redd** has been composing for most of his life, culminating in pursuing ISU's commercial music degree to make a hybrid contemporary-jazz, instrumental album. This piece is about the inner workings of the mind and how opposing ideas can cause massive cacophony under pressure! Previous *BR&S* compositions include "Clockwise" (2021), "Presyncope" (2022), and "Embracing Ebbs" (2023). All of these compositions will appear on his capstone album in some capacity. Adam is excited to continue to write his album and produce his best possible work with his remaining time in ISU's commercial music program, fearlessly helmed by our very own Professor Jonathan Armstrong. Thank you!

**Antonio Rodriguez** is an aspiring author and senior psychology student. A lifelong fan of old mystery shows, Antonio's writing focuses on identity and mundane and disappointing fantasy. His hobbies include testing the LD50 for caffeine, complaining about popular movies, and bothering the campus custodial office's pet cat, Benina.

**Madison Straatman** was born and raised in Idaho as the eldest of four daughters. She grew up working on her family's small farm, raising livestock. Those experiences heavily inspired her writing. She's always been a bookworm, which led to writing as a hobby, and eventually to becoming an English major.

**Miranda Sutherland** is a metalsmith who currently resides in Pocatello, Idaho with her husband and two cats. Miranda specializes in making unique jewelry that can withstand the test of time. She is a senior at Idaho State University and is pursuing a bachelor of fine arts. Influences that can be seen within Miranda's work are architecture, flowers, and Nepalese culture.



**Ashlyn Thueson** is a 2023 Thunder Ridge High School graduate who is passionate about art and has embarked on her pursuit of a bachelor of fine arts at Idaho State University. Enrolled as a freshman, she aspires to deepen her artistic skills, aiming for a fulfilling career in the creative realm by embracing higher education and honing her talents.

**Cameron Twiss** is a queer artist who primarily uses bright colors in acrylic paint. He takes the abstraction of painting and connects it with important topics to the artist. He references queer history, paying respect to the LGBTQ community. Additionally, he also explores his own personal life experiences and losses in his work.

**Lee Wilson** is a multimedia artist originally from Kamiah, Idaho. They have a love for all things music and art and plan on pursuing a career as a tattoo artist after school. They are currently trying to figure out how to have a support cat for their clients in their future tattoo shop without breaking any laws or health codes.

With over 10 years of experience in her own creative practice and 7 years of teaching art, **Kynley Wright**'s passion still burns. Her creative work is currently inspired by her love for the outdoors. Her work demonstrates her interest in the animal form, as well as understanding the interactions humans have with nature.





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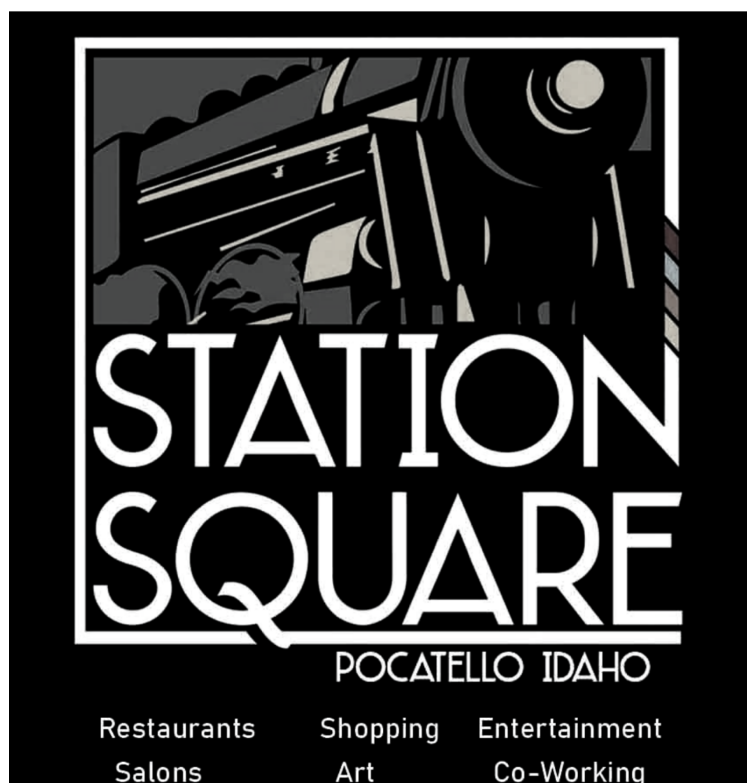
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