



COLLAGE

a journal of creative expression

FALL 2024



Letter from the editor

Art is a form of communication that we need to listen to now more than ever.

The way a brush stroke can emphasize a person's pain or an ellipsis can be a moment of reflecting on one's past, present, or future. Each and every detail means something, and we as an audience should listen.

For years, Collage has been a safe space for those wanting to shout their experiences from rooftops and share their stories with their fellow friends. And each person experiences life in ways others would never have been able to comprehend, which is why showcasing these works of art is a pleasure.

Being selected as the Editor-in-Chief for the Fall 2024 edition of Collage has

been an incredible honor. Having the opportunity to work alongside such talented, gifted individuals working around the clock to produce such an inspiring magazine is a gift I will treasure for years to come. Furthermore, I wish to thank each and every artist who submitted their works to us. It was a pleasure to see the sheer talent that radiates here at MTSU.

With the semester coming to an end, it is important for us to come together as a community and take a deep breath, and allow ourselves to enjoy the culture, creativity, and beauty that we surround each other with each and every day.

We dedicate this edition to all of those who may be struggling with their role in life and to know that you are not alone. Remember that with each passing moment we learn, we grow, and we love despite it all.

~Lena Eccles



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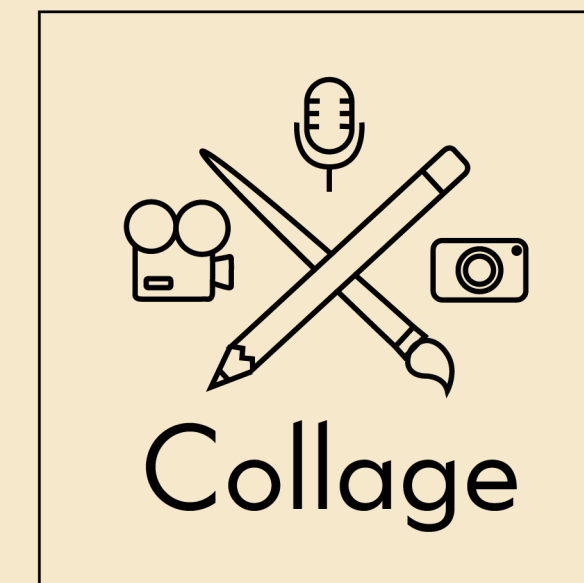
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Collage: A Journal of Creative Expression

This twice-yearly publication, available online by the MTSU Honors College, is dedicated to showcasing the creativity of students and recent graduates. All students and alumni affiliated with MTSU are eligible to contribute, and submissions are anonymously reviewed by a student-led editorial staff.

Collage accepts submissions year-round. Online submissions can be made through our website, collage.mtsu.edu. Creative works such as art, photography, design, short stories, creative non-fiction, short plays, song lyrics, poetry, videos/films, and audios are accepted for consideration.



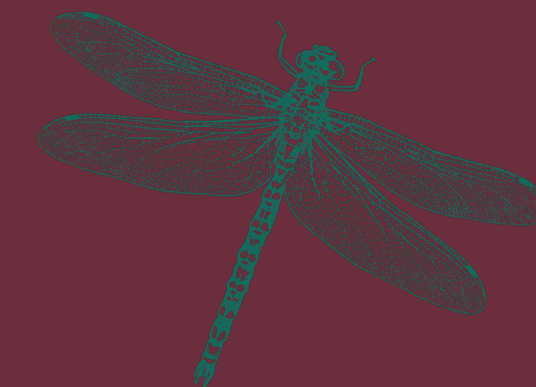
In Memory of Serenity Birdsong



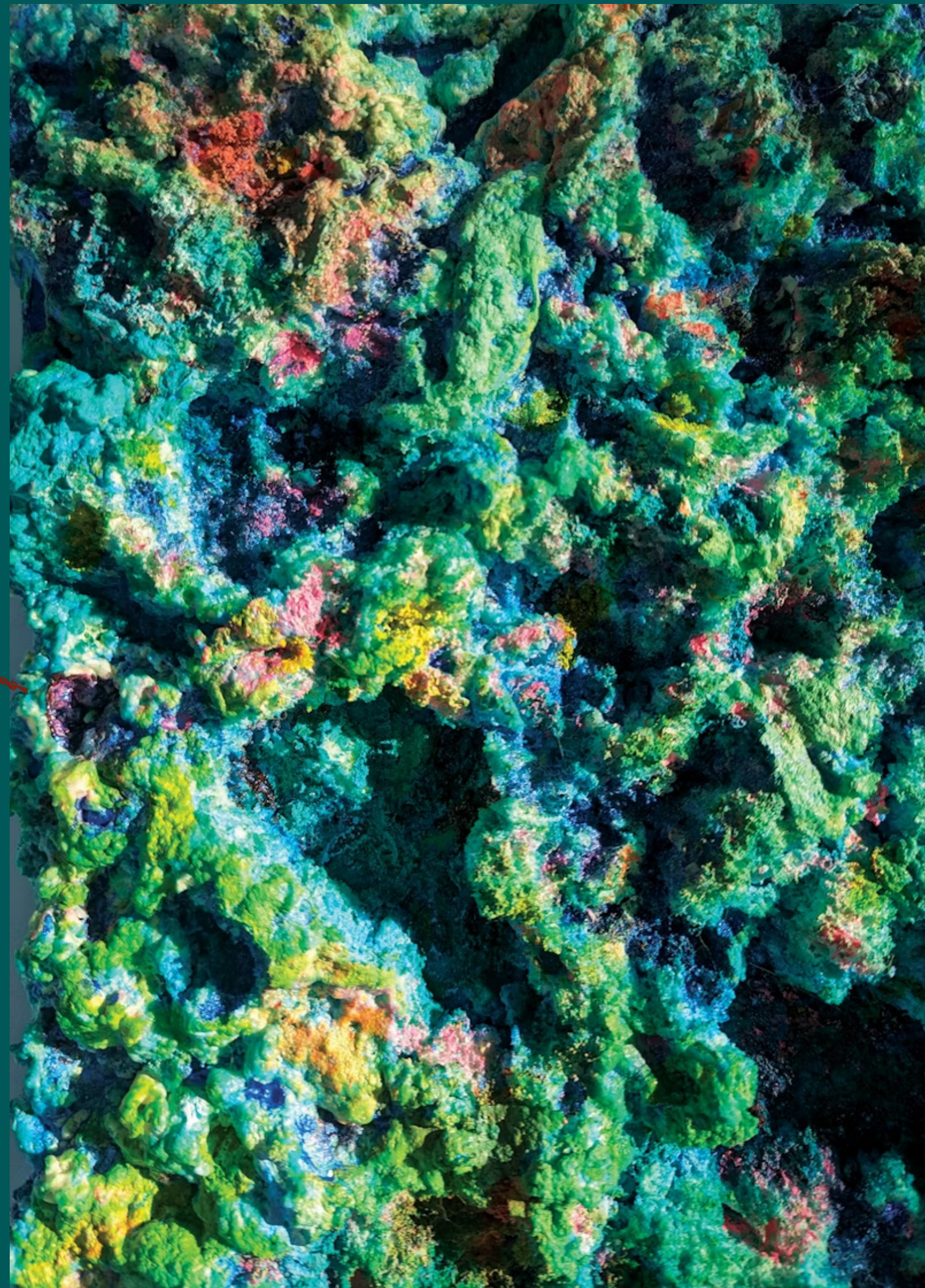
Students gathering at Serenity's memorial.
(Photo: MTSU Sidelines)

For now we stand at semester's end
Greeted with a chance to make a new friend
The life from which we used to know
So far it seems, we have seemed to grow
The troubles of life both big and small
Seem to fade as the obstacles fall
Now we embark on a new adventure
One with which we may joke and gesture
But all in all, that which I hope most
Is that I spend time with those I love, before
I am a ghost.

~Serenity Birdsong



Plexus



by Jess Hayes
WINNER-Sculpture

Beauty In Life



by Kera Reynolds

Good Night Moon



by Trent Wilson

Outer Existence



by Zoe Thompson

Illumination & Night Glare

Tonight, I'm trying to write another love poem;
despite my best efforts, the genre eludes me, but
I keep evolving, loving more and more broadly.
Dear Carson, the heart really is a lonely hunter, isn't it?

I find myself in McCullers, another queer Southern misfit.
We both have chronic illnesses, husbands, a love of
women,
and a tendency to fall in love so hard it sticks with us
forever:
love that is both beautiful illumination and sharp night glare.

I remember when I thought being bisexual was hard enough:
I wasn't sapphic enough; I was a risk or called "indecisive."
When I fell for the man who became my spouse, I thought
I was done with dating, and my happy ending was made.

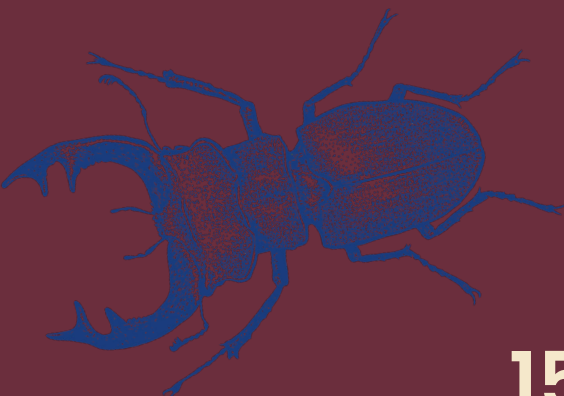
Imagine my surprise when bisexual dropped, when queer
slipped
on comfortably, when a half-playful joke about polyamory
became
real, and I fell in love again. Each of my loves is a reflection in
golden
eyes; time with them passing pleasantly like a clock
without hands.

by Harley Mercadal

Photography



by Summer Kirpal



Dollar Store Woodstock



by Parker Sears

Big Bang Theory



by Lula Baldrice

Remedy Of a Warm Body

It is one of those mornings
when she wakes and finds herself submerged
in grief, her hand outstretched
and clawing for an anchor, a warm body.
The cold, forsaken house is silent
and she is silently crying in her childhood bed.

Her shoulders shake and she remembers
how she would wail unabashedly as a child
and throw herself on the ground, her chest heav-
ing,
her sorrow ripping out
from her throat and unfettering itself.

Her door creaks open and the light thuds
of her cat's paws on the carpeted floor
fill the air. He jumps on the bed and gently butts
her hand, his body rumbling. He nestles
his head in the crook of her neck and laps
from the river meandering down her jaw.

She kisses his head, dries her face, and strokes
his warm body, rising out of her bed,
her cat bundled in her arms
and leaves her room to feed
him breakfast.

by Sabirin Elmi



Sin



by Charlie Elwell

I Remember Her

I remember the first time I felt my shadow.

I remember feeling her at my heels.

I remember asking where she came from.

I remember wondering why she crept in, slowly, with no warning.

I remember feeling dizzy from the circles she would run around me.

I remember the feeling she left every time she spoke.

I remember her words.

I remember her tone.

I remember how believable she was.

I remember the first time I knew she would never leave.

I remember feeling her antagonizations and games.

I remember falling for every scheme.

I remember asking will she ever get tired.

I remember wishing she would just leave.

I remember hoping she would creep away, slowly, with no warning just as she came.

I remember the first time she yelled about all the things that were wrong.

I remember how it felt when she said I would never be enough.

I remember drowning in her words.

I remember how I could never forget her judgment.

I remember the revenge she would seek when I would defy her motives.

I remember it feeling like a game show.

I remember signing up to play over and over.

I remember the first time she showed her kindness.

I remember knowing it would never stop.

I remember questioning if I would ever be enough.

I remember my thoughts would run and run and run.

I remember her.

I remember how she follows me through my thoughts.

I remember that her shadow never left.

I remember her blame for that fateful day.

I remember the scar from the arrow on my heart.

I remember her point to me as she laid on the ground.

I remember her words, screaming it was my fault.

I remember not understanding how to bow was in my clutch.

I remember the panic.

I remember the room around me spinning.

I remember yelling why she would do this.

I remember my throat choking down my tears.

I remember the air unable to reach my lungs.

I remember begging the ghosts to believe me.

I remember her disappearing with a smirk.

I remember repeating it was not my fault.

I remember how they all left.

I remember sitting alone.

I remember the silence.

I remember her creeping behind me slowly with no warning.

I remember feeling her pressure in my chest.

I remember her whispers telling me they all saw right through me.

I remember this is not the first time.

I remember this happens every time.

I remember how she always puts me to blame.

I remember she is a thought, an idea, an illness.

I remember she is not a person.

I remember to take a breath.

I remember she is me.



Heart Eyes



Valley of The Shadow

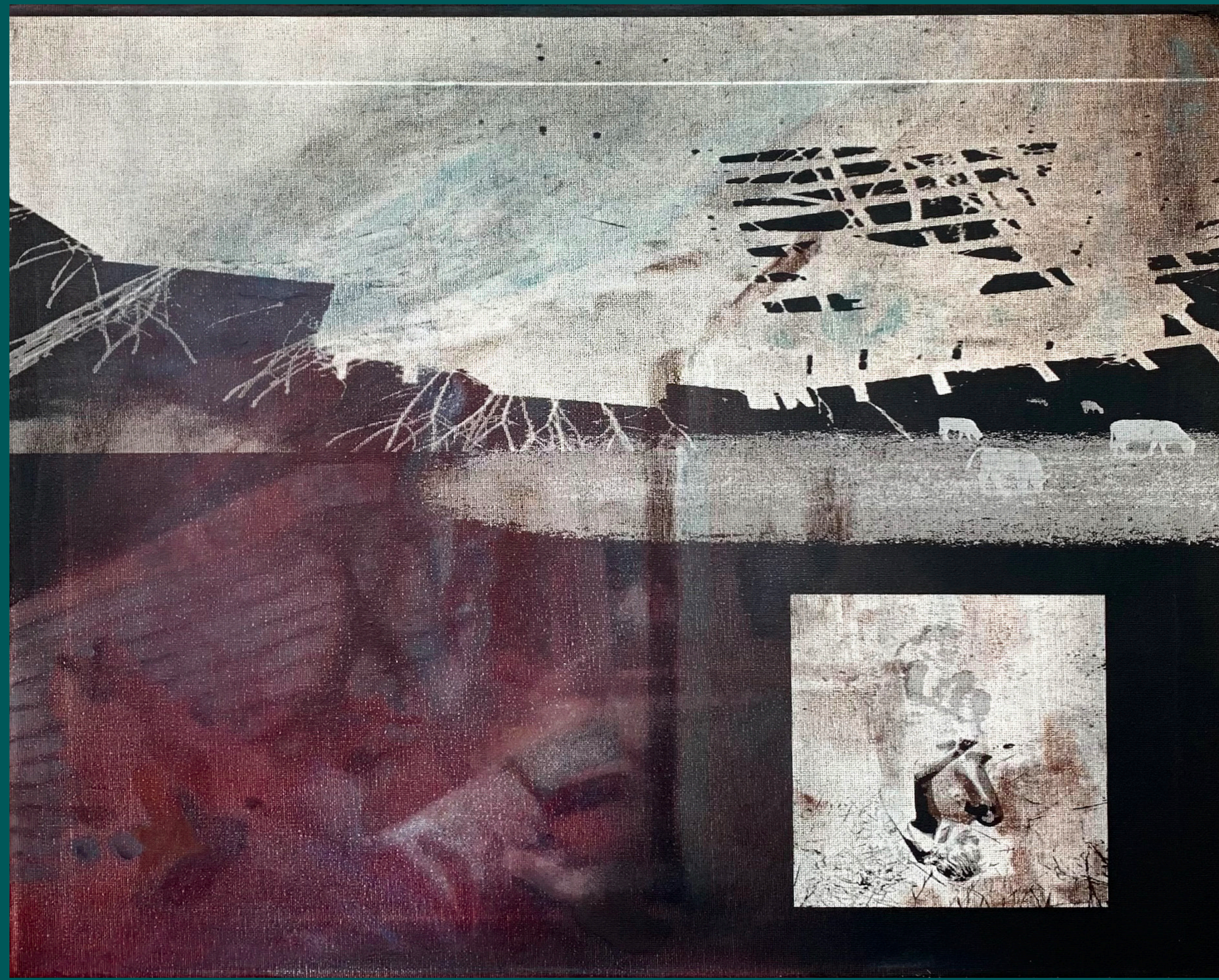


Neon Nights



by Vega Rochat WINNER-Photography

Night Like This



by Charlie Elwell

Abstract Still Life #1



by Sophia Zotti

Maplewood Pyrography

In the waning light of an autumn evening, I sat on the sidewalk joined by my childhood home and stared at the spot where my favorite maple tree used to stand. I cradle a piece of its bark in my hands. I gently rubbed my hand back and forth on its grainy texture as I waited for my pyrography tool to heat up. I soon picked up the tool with its glowing tip with a gentle heat. I brought the tip to the wood and listened to that faint yet loud “hum” as I etched my lines into the wood. Tears strolled down my cheeks. The scent of a burning yet sweet maple filled the air. It was a new yet achingly familiar fragrance.

The smell had unlocked so many memories I thought I had forgotten. I remember those Sunday mornings when the air was thick with mother’s fluffy pancakes, drizzled with homemade maple syrup that would instantly melt through its surface. I would always ask my mom for extra syrup. Just how I liked them; it filled up my belly with deliciousness and love. The tree from where the bark came from also held up my old tire swing, I had since I was five. I would sit on my swing and sip on my apple juice while I watched Daddy do the yard work. When he was done and before he would go in, he would push me on the swing for a bit. I remember him pushing me so high in that old tire swing that I felt like a bird soaring through my town or I felt like I could touch the sun and clouds. Laughter, a sound so pure and joyous like a happy little songbird rustled through the maple leaves of that tree.

With each stroke and burn, I carved the word “family” into the wood. Here’s to the past and a promise for the future. I then held the creation towards the little bit of sunlight left. A tear traced a path down my cheek; it was a testament to the memories the maple tree held. Wiping away my tears, my sweet child’s laughter led me to the backyard. Sweet girl was hiding behind another tree in her yard and playing a game of peek-a-boo with “dada.” He picked her up and put her inside the baby swing hanging from the tree. I watched my girl swing high as “dada’s” hands and the spirit of my daddy’s hands pushed her. With a tender smile, I whispered to myself, “Stay young as long as you can.” The story of the maple tree was not over; it lived in the wood and at the roots of my family. I gave the tree a new life by continuing to build our lives in a place we call home.

by Kera Reynolds

Ruby Red Shoes

Mirror, mirror on the wall
Who is this person I see
You are reflecting some-
one I don't know
How did I get to this place
- the new me?

I've travelled along this
yellow brick road
To see brand new things
But along the way, I lost
myself
It is a little frightening.

Please Miss Dorothy let
me borrow
The bright red ruby shoes
I need to go back home -
find myself
Emerge from these heart-
broken blues.

Maybe home will stir the
old me
The me - I like, I love
It should be buried some-
where
It's the one I'm proud of.

Standing tall and perse-
vering
Not letting the storms
knock me down
Embracing life one-hun-
dred percent
No hiding, cowering, ne'er
a frown.

Clicking my heels - one,
two, three
It seems easy enough.
Please take me home
again
To the me, the me I love.

by Denise Seyl

Portrait of Hopefulness



by Rada Ryan



Nature's Milkmaid



by Alyssa Williams

To Be Complete...

We grow up being told that we can be anything
But we're not told that just being in itself is the gift
We're told that our future holds promises and potential
But some of us carry the burdens our parents wouldn't lift

Some of us grow up breathing that second hand smoke
Skin and bones, changing homes, and our parents yelling
Some of us don't get put back together once we're broke
And then we get torn to pieces by the story our lives are telling

We find peace in the persistence and find little hope in resistance
Seek but never find, a home, a heart, or anyone kind
But we embrace the cold steel of our escape, and seek no assistance
Beyond the cold, catacombs of our discarded mind

We solely seek a hardship that passes, and that we may overcome
We more so seek a place beyond it all that allows our heart to beat
Without a silencing shush, or a leash to pull us back to where we're from
We seek but shall never find, beyond the glimpse of light within our
mind, to be complete

by Joseph VanDeweghe



Unfading Beauty (and the Devil)

Epigraph and Introductory Thoughts:

The whole world is of images that surround us in a single field of signification. Every flower we see is an expression, every landscape has a significance, every human or animal face speaks its wordless language.

– Hans Urs von Balthasar, in *Beauty for Truth's Sake*, 37.

All beauty portrays truth,
all truth is God's truth, and
all creation shows God's glory.

Satan is a foreigner in this land, he does not fit.

I
I see fully flourishing creatures
overflowing with harmonious singing
stretching out to reach Him
glowing from the beginning.

Beauty breaking forth,
old prophecies blooming.
Sacred seeds flowering
in the fullness of time.

Geometrical shapes, symmetrical art,
symbolic numbers, all playing a part
of revealing divine Truth and
reflecting divine order,
the Logos centered world
with Beauty in every corner.

Every piece reflects His name,
every part declares His praise,
every place reveals His fame,
His glory cannot fade.

II
Now I see Satan, the enemy of our souls,
prowling around to destroy,
whining as he goes.
He tries so hard to take
what's good and make it bad,
to take the boundless Beauty,
and make it oh so drab.

(But look! Everything he tries fails.
What has he to be proud of? Nothing!
Let us laugh at him!)

He bumbles around, wearing a frown,
sure he's smart, sometimes he's scary,
but the beast behind the curtain
is really a mightless flea.

A bruised heel,
but a crushed head,
a whimpering dog,
waiting to be fed.
See his power? See his crown?
Of course you can't,
they're nowhere to be found.
He is chased around,
pummeled to the ground,
never to be renowned,
never to be unbound.

III
God's glory is here to stay.
He's set up a kingdom that
will never fade.

Stay alert!
Watch, and pray.
For the day He comes,
and sin passes away.



by Elijah Crouch

Donuts, but I'm Gluten Intolerant



by Ava Byars

Whispers from that Old Coffee Shop

The leaves crunch beneath my feet, the crisp air bites. As the cold door handle presses against my bare hands, the smell of cinnamon, roasted beans, and baked pastries present a familiar aroma. And the mix of laughter and mingling in the distance present the best sound of all.

Seated in a booth with peeling vinyl, steam from my cup fogs up my glasses and the small window that separates me from the world, minus the clatter of dishes and the murmur of conversations.

by Kera Reynolds

The Chill of Life

Wanting to remain:

Like an iceberg between my shoulder blades

The cold chill of life evades me

finally.

The chill of the iceberg carries away what's left of me,

the body the mind the everything, but
The one thing left behind --

my soul.

My soul remains as a storm on the Earth,

My soul, imprinted on those I've left behind.

guiding you haunting you reminding you.

Like an iceberg between your shoulder blades

The cold chill of my life envelops you

forever.

Wanting it to end:

[REDACTED]

The cold [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] chill [REDACTED] what's left of [REDACTED],

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

my soul

[REDACTED] a storm on the Earth,

[REDACTED]

guiding you haunting you reminding you.

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

forever.

by Adele Haun

Death or Birth?



by Sarah Li

And Then, In Dreaming

I've been having bad dreams since I was a child. Blood, rats. Monsters behind the shower curtain. The works. Sometimes I go to work and lose all my teeth. Other times, I'm in school again, except my teacher is my boss is my mother, and I've forgotten my homework. Typical stuff.

But recently, I've just been dreaming of blank pages.

I'm in a world of light that I know somehow is my computer screen and I have to write myself into existence or I'll have never been real in the first place. I have an empty comp book, college ruled, open in front of me but no pencil, and I can't stand up to grab one. There are three sheets of computer paper lying on the floor beneath Dad's desk, but I've forgotten how to hold a crayon. Even when I don't dream of paper, it's still there. The teacher/mom/boss hands out the test but mine is blank. The monster under the bed has white, white eyes. The ghosts are wearing paper sheets with eyeholes cut out. I'm at work and I've lost all my teeth, but I know I just need to draw them back on, if I can only remember how to hold a crayon.

I think my life is infecting my dreams.

I went back to work yesterday—we'd had some time off; the snow was terrible—and I spent the usual morning half hour in the break room.

"Some weather, huh," said a coworker I probably knew.

"Yup," I responded.

We stayed in silence, sipping coffee until we mustered the energy to retreat to our cubicles and sit all day. She went first, and I stayed until my coffee got cold, trying not to think as if I had more to live for than this.

Then I went to my cubicle, and I worked.

My work is nothing special. It's the most mind-numbing work for the least manageable pay you can get for an Associate's degree from nowhere special. The kind of job that the main character has in a Neil Gaiman book before he's swept away into something greater.

When I was 11, after a particularly bad dream, I'd wait for a letter

from Hogwarts. When I was 12, I'd look out for monsters and wonder when I'd go to Camp Half-Blood. Now, I just lie awake and think of empty pages.

I went home late yesterday, stepping over my cheap Home Sweet Home rug I'd thought was funny in college and depressingly ironic now, and heated up a can of off-brand soup. After a bowl, a beer, and a lackluster episode of some 80s family sitcom, I opened up my laptop to write.

In high school, I'd win awards for my writing. Essays, poems, narratives, you name it, I could write it. I was supposed to go to college, get my BA in English and become something, but life got in the way. Classes got too hard, I got too stressed, and words stopped coming easily. I decided to get a quick degree and join the workforce instead. I still think I like to write, but I really haven't written since. Last night, like all the nights before it, I sat down and opened Word and tried to write and couldn't. I just stared, letting pure white burn imprints into my eyes. I've read about writer's block, but it didn't feel like something was in the way of my Grand Creative Power. It just felt like I was empty. I stared until I felt tears prick at my eyes, and I slammed the laptop shut and went to bed.

Last night, I dreamed of empty paper.

I was standing on the set of the trashy 80s sitcom, staring at the blank-faced actors and the blank script in my hands.

"How was your day at work, honey?" the Perky Mother said happily.

The Tired Husband smiled, then turned to stare at me with empty eyes. "Line?" he said, apologetically.

I looked down at the empty paper. "There's nothing here," I said quietly.

The Tired Husband still stared. "Well, you're the writer, aren't you? Just remember what you wrote."

"I didn't write anything."

"Sure you did," said the Precocious Little Girl. "You wrote lots."

"That was before," scowled the Emo Older Daughter. "Before you lost your potential." A tinny laugh track played.

"You write emails every day. What's different?" chirped the Annoying Brother from over his cereal.

I stuttered. "Lots is different. Stories are grand, big, beautiful things. A dream of what the world could be. Emails are...emails." Another laugh track.

The Annoying Brother shrugged. "Whatever dumb book we're reading in school isn't so grand. But it sure is big." Laugh track.

The Perky Mother smiled altogether too cheerily. "What about us? Are we big? Grand? Beautiful? Is any real person those things?"

"You're not real." Laugh track.

"Sure we are," said the Tired Husband. "You're talking to us. Are we real?"

"You're a dream." Laugh track.

The Emo Older Daughter scoffed dramatically. "If this is what the world could be, I'd rather see the real one." Like clockwork, the laugh track.

"Are you getting this down?" asked the Perky Mother.

I glanced down at the empty scripts in my arms, only to see something I'd written before. A homework assignment, freshman year. To write an alternate ending to Romeo and Juliet. I'd hated that assignment. I'd thought it'd cheapened the tragedy to change it.

"Does your life lose meaning if not a tragedy?" asked the Little Girl sweetly.

"Does it cheapen the experience to be happy?" asked the Brother.

"Do you feel grand, big, beautiful?" asked the Daughter.

"How was your day at work?" asked the Mother.

"Write the next line," said the Husband.

Words swam across the papers in my hand, forming hypnotic circles.

With a shot, I woke up.

This morning, I drafted my two-week's notice. Then, I opened a new document and began to write.

I've been having bad dreams since I was a child...



Cowgirl Tex

I know a girl,
a drifter known as
Tex,
who came round
years ago,
to start again,
after she dueled a
fool back home.

She crossed my road
as we went,
my little old town,
where people go to
know,
thymself and where,
the path will go.
Tex was a hex,
would duel a man right
there,
had a cold stare,
eyes lost searching
inside,
she was battling her
own.

I could not tell you
why,
but she and I,
were kindred souls,
we talked the talk,
shot the shot,
had history to share
and mull over,
where I went I
thought of Tex.

One night we were
talking,
soul to soul,
Tex shared her
woes,
her tragedies and
fools long dead,
and as she told
me all and this and
more,
soul to soul,
our bond grew
close,
I knew I was the
next fool.

The next fool
to care for Tex,
to be at her
side,
I'd have her
back,
on the road
ahead,
no matter how
this goes,
I'll be a gun at
her side.

by Tristan Wolsleger

Alchemy



by Brice Copeland

Theseus

My last house was not so peaceful as this, nor as sturdy. That is the nature of castles and caves, and the downsides of cliff-sides and caverns.

The castle I was born in is full of bodies. The walls are made of cement formed from the ashes of the workers who died in construction and the sweat of those unlucky enough to live. The skull of the founder of Athens sits in a case, resting quietly in his rusted crown. We praise his feats in battle, and we pretend the cracks beneath his eye socket aren't there. There are rumors that the body to go with Cecrops's head is also entombed in the building, buried deep within the foundation somewhere, some ancient's idea of a spell to keep it stable. This house is alike in that, though there are many in these walls, I think. You would think this is Hell, for how solidly it stands beneath the earth.

I wish I had not come here.

But years ago, in Crete, the King perceived a slight from Athens he felt could only be settled with blood, and every year since, we have shipped off to die. Every year for as long as I have lived, Crete was waiting. Every year until the end of time, I think, it will be there, ready to feast on Athenian blood. I was its last victim. You will be the next, once you stand up again and begin to walk. But first—hear my story. Err on the side of caution, this time, and don't die a prince, never to become a king. Listen.

*

The first person I met, after King Minos paraded us through Crete's bright-shining capital and threw us in a jail at the entrance of the maze, was Ariadne. She wrapped her thin fingers around the bars of the cage hungrily, watching me with cold delight.

"It is the labyrinth that eats, not the Minotaur," she whispered conspiratorially. "My brother is how the cowards end it quicker."

I stared back at her cool, unblinking eyes. It took me a moment to realize that she was waiting for a response. "What do you mean the labyrinth eats?" I asked. "How can an object hurt, without a man to wield it?"

She laughed. "It can't. You're smart, prince. So, who wields it?"

I stopped, squirming under her unfaltering gaze. She was not the company I would have wished for, but now I was almost afraid to disappoint her. I stumbled through my answer. "...The maze was designed to kill Athenians. The Minotaur eats the Athenians. The Minotaur must control it, then?"

Her lips curled downwards. "You're ignoring me. I can't help if you don't listen. The labyrinth eats your people, not Asterius. He does not control it. Try again."

For all the predator in her nature, her patience is thin; she was bored of me already. I searched for the answer she wanted, combing my memory for all the information on the labyrinth I had. "It was commissioned by your father, correct? The answer is Minos, king of Crete."

She sighed, leaning away from the cell. "But who calls it home?" she asked.

"...the Minotaur?"

Another sharp sigh. "Asterius, and no. I'll give you a hint. He's the only one who knows the maze."

She'd stumped me, and she knew it. The minotaur roamed the labyrinth, why shouldn't he know it? The tales that it was ever-changing were just that, tales, and there was no way he hadn't learned it in all his years of ruling it. When I told Ariadne this much, she laughed.

"They don't tell you much in Athens, do they? Daedalus. Daedalus built it; Daedalus knows it; Daedalus controls it. It is a knife, and Daedalus is its wielder and its welder. You would do well to know that."

"So where is Daedalus?"

She shrugged and began untangling her fingers from the wrought-iron gate. I had finally lost her interest. "He's inside. You'll see him tomorrow when that door opens," she said, gesturing lazily to the wall behind me. Just as she was about to leave, she suddenly turned, sharp eyes catching once more on mine. "Oh! And here's a little gift. Tie it to the gate, and you won't get lost."

I held my hands out between the bars and caught a glistening, yellow-and-orange ball of homespun yarn as she threw it lazily from her bag.

"Goodbye! I would say see you later, but I don't think I will." She stared at me and giggled girlishly, as if my death were just a clever joke at a juvenile sleepover. And then she turned, and was off, leaving me only yarn, confusion, and a name.

Daedalus.

*

I still believe Ariadne's yarn was unending. It's here even now, at my feet. It can't help you anymore, though; you'll never find an exit to tie it to. But it helped me, however small, infinite threads a comfort against the infinite maze.

You know, the stories we tell in Athens are wrong. Well, they're right, I should say. It's our belief in them that's wrong. No one actually thinks the walls shift. No one thinks it's unending. No one thinks that there really is a Minotaur at the center. It is the children naïve enough to believe it that are most wise, in this one case. Never have I seen a place where torches light so little as they did there in the labyrinth.

I walked through the maze for days before I found anything. I think it was days, at least. You cannot tell time when there is no sun to show on dials and no moon to track the months. You simply walk until you can't, then sleep until you wake. The only thing that keeps you moving is the memory of your friends from Athens and Ariadne, waiting at the entrance for you to slay the Minotaur. You picture liberating the maze and sailing away with the beautiful Creten princess, and you start to walk. You picture the Athenian children huddling, shaking, afraid, and you cannot stop. I wanted to make the maze safe for us. I was a fool. But still, the yarn had not diminished by the time I reached Asterius.

When I stepped into the innermost chamber, my blood went cold.

It is not the Minotaur I fear. It is the man who controls him.

The bull of Minos was not a bull. He is a man. But he is wrong. His fingers are too long, and his nails are too sharp, and his mouth is too wide, and his eyes are too dead. The bright yarn in my hands seemed to grow heavier. It was the same color thread as the strings piloting his joints. Ariadne had called him her brother. He looked to me more like her son.

His too-long arms reached for me, stretching out of his too-wide torso. The clay on his joints creaked as the strings were pulled by a puppeteer above, perfect movements creating a slow and graceful attack.

I jumped back out of the room and turned the corner, doubling back on my string. The creature was tied to the roof, strings reaching into tracks above it. He could not follow me far. I ran faster than I had ever run in my life.

Asterius's bellows sound only like a bull's from a distance. With only two corridors between us, I could still clearly hear the roof tiles grinding as he turned. Growing spikes and cracks in the walls and floor denied me breath and ripped my string. I fell after what felt like minutes, more likely hours, winding through the darkened tunnels. You did the same.

Why did you go for him? Why would you try to fight the minotaur? He is not bull, as we believed. He is not man, as I thought. He is a marionette, puppeted by Daedalus and Ariadne, and all the fools in Athens and Crete who believe in him. But why would you leave him, once he was found? A coward's way out does not hurt nearly as much as the way the brave take. Go back. Die to Asterius. Daedalus will make your bones to clay, and you will become the horns on his gruesome puppet's head. He will make strings from your entrails, and you will be the noose that moves the great terror's head from side to side. He will braid yarn from your hair, and its ever-unraveling threads will bring the next great hero to his death in the labyrinth.

And what of me? I hold up this labyrinth; I keep this maze from falling; I make the corridors that fold endlessly around you. My bones, like some ancient's idea of a spell, forever shoulder the weight of the castle of Minos above and kneel on the ceiling of Hell below us. I will riddle you like Ariadne. Why does the labyrinth never fall? Why do its pillars never crack? Because cowards like me choose to die like heroes, and as foundation we lay, swallowed by the labyrinth.

I will ask of you one thing, before you go:

Die like a coward, my friend. Do not fall the way of Theseus.

Denial



by Dante LaBelle

Araneidae

As I grow older
you become more seductive
with your attempts to sway me
into your tight embrace.

I tell myself I am accustomed to
you
but the taste in my mouth
stings more
than your kiss ever did.

Even when I lie in bed
and squeeze my eyes shut
you see through the façade and
know

I think about you.

I do not have to ask for you
to appear, you will do it anyway
without question.

Despite your string breaking my
legs
and causing my eyes to bulge
from my skull,
I long for your final kiss
the kiss of death.

While the longing is fleeting
and I send you away,
you always find your way
back to me.

by Candace Bohne

Our Heart's Silent Rapture



by Lucas De Freitas

WINNER-Audio

Scan to Watch!



Self Portrait



by Emily Rogers

Insomnia

While sleeping peacefully
I lie awake
My mind screaming
Begging to be released

As I drift into gentle slumber
My conscience slowly wakes
Another day moving through
the fog

As I speak, the words sound
Nothing like what I hear
They sit inside my mind –
My voice screaming to be re-
leased

My body moves, but not how
directed
I feel things solidly –
Yet they fall through my fingers
As water

I take a breath and suffocate –
Why must I endure this pain?

As I sleep – I lie awake –

My true self tries to break
through

Yet when I slumber
The world moves on with-
out me

I have no recollection
Of moments ago
Yet I see tomorrow
As easily as if it were right
now

If I could only break free
From the prison within –

Maybe then, just maybe
I would be whole

My day is night
My night is day
My voice is clear
Yet no one can ever hear me
No matter how loudly I
scream

I am locked within
This broken and tattered

Dream...

by Samantha Boling

Endless Night



by Zoe Vecchio



Overconsumption



by Jenna Anderson

My Eyes Are Nothing Like The Sun

by

My eyes are nothing like the sun
Sparkling, glowing with the luster of life
Beaming wide through brilliant blue skies
My eyes are crescent moons
A breathtaking blend that binds East and West
Windows to the soul as deep and vast as the Pacific
My eyes are crescent moons
With hooded lids and sharp cut corners
Drawn up to bowing brow
My eyes are crescent moons
Robed in sweeping shadows bruised blue and black
Stained from shining while the world slumbered
My eyes are crescent moons
Companion of those wandering, wondering in the dark
When all the light has left they will linger still
Solstice to the stumbling, scared, and scarred
My eyes are nothing like the sun

by Abby Kever

Paris



by Misael Avalos Madera

The Spider in the Downstairs Half Bath

In the condo's downstairs half-bath
Across from the toilet
The moving box wearing
my great-grandmother's basket
as a lopsided hat
Is squished

Between the spindly long legs
Of my grandmother's tiny wood chair
And the spindly long legs
In the web-home
Between the box and the wall

As I sit to take a piss
I talk to the long legs
(the spider; not the chair)
Commenting that she also
Has newly moved into her condo

And I know
We both wish
We had a house in the country
But here we are and
Life happens in the shitter

by Annalysa Grayson

Long Distance

Just before we reached the bridge, Aoife and I pulled into the parking lot of a 99¢ store. Bracing ourselves, we jumped out of the car and opened the trunk. Like a match being lit, the streetlamps clicked on and set her red hair ablaze. Boots scuffling on snow and teeth chattering madly. I grabbed a jar full of coins out of the back, and Aoife kept count as I handed them to her. I can't believe we forgot about the toll, I said, feeling my way around the dark opening of the jar. My fingers grew numb and slippery, like a claw machine at the arcade. I placed silver coins into her palm as it slowly turned pink. How much is this one worth again? We laughed, our breath a cloud filling the space between us. I taught her the names of men who once ruled my country.

We made it across the bridge and drove the rest of the way to Philadelphia in silence. Aoife's hand stroked the back of my neck, as Christmas music played so faintly on the radio I couldn't make out the words. The heat was cranked up all the way, turning our cheeks rosy. My nose ran. Call me when you get to Galway, yeah? And she just smiled. I watched her go through the big double doors, then drove off. Wiping my tears, I smelt my hands. The oily, aging, change metal left behind the ferrous scent of iron and blood. It permeated the air.

by Abigail Wells

Worms in a glass



by Emily Rogers

Sepia Summers

The cracked window brings in the evening
breeze colored with freshly cut grass,
coming storms, and the thick haze
of summer's waning.

I watch
shadows of cars zooming by
flickers of rainbows dancing
on my white walls,
loneliness seeping through.

It is August and I am burdened
by all the sepia summers I have spent
trapped in my room, wanting
to settle into my body and be
someone.

It is August and I am tired



by Sabirin Elmi

Phases



by Ava Byars

A Night So Black

I'd been in many hospitals my whole life. You thought an eighteen year old boy would be done with that, but here I was. I lay on a hospital bed, that had been recently changed, for this miracle surgery that was supposed to fix all my problems. Every doctor seemed to ask if I needed last rites, a priest, or just sign a will. I truly didn't care. If I died I died, not like god would care if someone like me would die. They fed through my IV bag and slowly, ever so slowly, I fell asleep. I woke up in what seemed to be a sand dune floating in the atmosphere. The stars illuminated and connected all the constellations I knew and some that probably never existed. It was like a giant sandbox and I was an ant, but as I looked around I was not alone. In front of me was a man with shaggy brown hair, dirt brown eyes, bronzed tan complexion. He didn't speak to me as I surveyed my surroundings. He just sat there and smiled at me. His eyes slowly followed my every step and sway. The trudge of sand on my feet that sank between my toes. The beckoning question of this strange man. Finally my patience broke. "Who the hell are you?" I shouted, kicking sand towards the man. "Relax my child." The man said. His words shook me to the very core, then something finally clicked. The man who sat in front of me was God. The G-O-D God, which left me with only one conclusion. "I'm dead." I said, falling down into the sand. Without a moment wasted, a laugh rang out through the air. "No, my son. This is more like limbo, or more simply a dream," He said to me. This doesn't make sense, limbo, a dream, before my thoughts could swirl anymore, he spoke once more. "You're on an operating

table right now. No reason to be alarmed." His words seemed to fall dead in the air. I laid down on the sand. I looked up into the inky black sky and sighed. This was just a dream. Why was I worried in the first place? Not like I'm important enough to be visited by a divine figure. Just my brain playing tricks on me. "I know you don't pray often, though that doesn't take away the fact that you are a good man. Why do you seem so unbothered?" He asked as I closed my eyes. "'Cause you're not the real god. Just something my mind made up.'" "Oh no. I'm very real, my son." "Then tell something I wouldn't know." I said, leaning up to face this faker. "Your best friend will be the first person you see when you wake up. They'll have something that hints about your surgery and be here." I quickly jumped up out of the sand. I saw his mouth form a smile. That's just a guess. But then again, he said it with certainty. I felt something in my chest. This was a dream but I could feel a pit in my gut that told me he was right. Nothing seemed to lead to a road that would not prove he was God. Then finally I pointed at the man. "I want to fight you!" The words left my lips but I didn't think about the weight they held. "Fight me out of malice?" "No! To see how strong I can be. To truly prove you are the great I am." I said. God smiled. Wait he smiled at my retort. W-what's going on in his head? He slowly got up like an old man. With a sparkle in his eye, he took off his tunic revealing his torso. The indents of his ribs were visible on his tan skin. "Let's make a deal if I win you go back to where you came from and if you win, you can come with me to paradise." God said,

shaking my body to its core. His words left me with questions but nothing I took the time to ask. I rushed towards him. I stomped my foot down. Then I threw my fist towards God's face. He simply put his hand up to block, allowing a slap of skin to skin contact to echo. "Good try, my child." He whispered. His face snapped into a neutral stare. He grabbed my fist, twisting it down, then punched me in the stomach. I felt my body shatter as I stumbled back. Sand over took the air as God slowly walked to me. It was funny. If I were to fight a man like this, I would know to run. But now... But all I wanted to do was keep fighting. I quickly brought my hands back up, blocking his next strike. With a toothy grin, he started to wail at me. One fist towards my cheek, then a jab to my chest, lastly a quick tap on my forehead. I managed to block the first two. I paused as his index finger tapped me. He had just been messing with me this whole fight. I would be honest to say, this wasn't a fight. More like a father showing his son why he was the head of the house, though I truly don't have any doubts he's God. Now though, oh, now I at least had to get a hit in. "Is this all you have, my child?" God teased. "Hell no!" "Ah. My children have such foul language these days." The happy glow from God's face quickly faded. The pop of my shoulder echoed as my fist darted to God's cheek. The hook connected, making him bend down. Before he could respond, I bent down and raised my fist into his chin. He took two steps back then looked at me like a dad who was proud of his son. He spat down into the sand. "Great job! Let's see if you can keep going!" He said, dashing towards me. His next jabs were too fast for me to see.

Each blow sent me closer and closer to the edge. Then finally, he grabbed the collar of my shirt. He held me to the edge. Just one false move then I'd fall down. My eyes peered below me, and the beauty of the world swirled. The clouds of powerful storms. The subtle blues of the ocean and the deep greens of the ground. Then the lights. Those pretty lights that polluted my sky, my whole life. The lights that kept me trapped in hospitals. They twinkled like stars and left me mesmerized. Then I snapped back into my reality. God held my collar and I turned to face him. "It's beautiful isn't it." He said softly. All I could do was nod, watching a radiant light cover the holy man. "You... No. Y'all rather, were my favorite creation by far." I felt his grip loosen from my collar. I grabbed his arm and held myself up. "Are you scared?" God whispered. "Yes! What if I just end up dying!" I asked, tightening my hold on him. "You'll wake up. I promise." His words escaped his lips. Fear. Yes! Fear that's what this was. The thought I didn't want to speak of. The reason why I had this damn operation in the first place. To get out of hospitals. To live my life. I could die... "You know I would never lie to you, my child." God said, letting go of my collar. I freely hung by his arm thinking about every word said. "Was it a good fight?" I asked. "Of course, my son!" "What if I'm alone?" I whispered my hands trembled. "Oh. You're never alone. I'm always here, all you have to do is pray." I let out a sigh as my hold slipped away. My body slowly started to fall and instead of looking at the almighty man in front of

me. I looked at the world he created. The stars that sparkle in the night. The moon looked gigantic in my eyes. The subtle gray tone and the shine of the sun. The world that I am in, where I'm no more significant than dust. I felt my face bend into a smile as my body was enveloped in darkness of night. I might be dust to this universe, but to the man who created me I am their child. Maybe a man who could make a night like this. Is truly someone to pray too. A night so black where the beauty of the imperfections shine.



The Tale of 52

In the vast sea I could not find a soul

to answer my call,

my song of yearning

companionship.

Years of searching

and not a single friend

to swim within a pod.

I could have been doing something

wrong all this time,

but how would I know

when everyone ignored me?

I cannot help my high voice

no more than a sea urchin

can help

its prickly appearance,

but even they get attention.

I got used to being on my own

but I did not want that

not forever. I wanted quality time,

conversation, to cherish someone.

I wanted to feel love

from a soul like mine.

Am I not worthy of all those things?

The thought of sinking to the floor

never compelled me.

I held out hope for so long

and that hope led me

to you.

You were far from me

but I caught wind

of your voice.

Your voice was like mine

almost identical

and I wasted no time

to call out

and join your song.

Inner Flame



by Zoe Thompson

Carrier Pigeon

Plucked from the sky like fruit from the vine,
once free, cradled in Nature's arms.
Taken by man-- like man takes all things --to be
used and discarded.
Tamed, bred, domesticated, docile.
Like the wild fruits once blossomed, now imprisoned
in rows upon rows,
cages upon cages of color copied bodies.
Once the thread of connection between kingdoms-
between empires -
carrying secrets, love letters, deeds to lands and
men, battle plans.
Wind beneath fragile wings bearing the weight of
kings.
Fallen to steam and steel, dwindling from thought.
Discarded like most tools too old to use, kicked
aside, lost.
Plucked from Nature's bosom, from beast turned
tool, turned burden,
a burden we made and no longer bear.
Pushed from a pedestal specially made,
abandoned to wander a world not theirs.



by Graycen Paige

Museum of Disarray



by Kera Reynolds

LOVE OR LOSS

Lima,
peru.
fingertips touch,
hands clasped together thru the
peaks
and
valleys.
dry desert; deep ocean.
lips graze--
bound together, discovering
every nook.
every corner.
my performance deserved an
Oscar.
rain clashes with concrete at
home.
where is home?
it is not
34C.
it is under the blanket--
wool--
where our hearts aren't at war,
yet;
where we clash:
little battles, little wins,
little deaths.
Victor
-y
victory.
victory.
a crescent rises,
we fall,
it falters.
rays reach for
our unclothed skin
early in the warm light.
call out your name just to hear it
reverberate;
Echo.
your voice.
your sweet dri
p

p
ing
dew.
dawn's cool air;
blades of green, i run
my hand thru, i find
familiar fog
and
long drives.
was it one too many?
for now, i hold you
and--
sand--
grain by grain i watch
you slip thru
my arms that were yours
in peru.
Oscar
wilde
once said:
"no yesterday, no tomorrow"
us,
we are boxed into a
purgatory.
i found
refuge in my solitary drives
to the base—
every light to nightfall.
i told myself it was
for you.
it's always been
for you.
but you wanted a home.
Romeo,
you fell for
romeo.
you tired reaching for her
in a foggy space where she tries on
m e m o r i e s.
lilacs in pottery vases,
folded notes in jean pockets.
but romeo wears,
too.
the lace found under
the bed.

our bed.
i heard your car at 2:51 am.
i heard it.
oh, the last line is and of the same.
we played a losing game.
now, i remember the
Lima-
beans.
you made them.
boiled water,
shelled, seasoned, salted
tenderly cared for our meal.
(did you long for me to
care for you like that too?)
and a fabricated focal point,
masking what cannot be said.
and once it's said—
dish smashed.
last words you begin
and i end.
"what is wrong with you now?
i'm fucking tired of this.
tired of what?
...
do you love me?
of course.
say it.
say it?
say you love me.
i do.
...what's her name?
what?
i'm not fucking stupid.
please, just stop.
i can't live like this.
...
if you walk out that door,
if you leave me alone again,
i am done.
...
i just can't take it..."
...
car door—slam. gone.

i pick up
Oscar's
tacos on the way with
silence
as company.
i drive the same route
to the same place
in a uniform
clean
yet
tarnished,
with memories
no god can purify.
and im sorry,
because by god, you tried.
im sorry. I should've seen u were
hurting
maybe we can talk together. i
need u with me.
"i'll b back soon
hey?
pls lmk ur ok? im worried
i love you."
Delivered 8:51 pm
...
51 days.
without you,
the wool is cold.
the crescents move slowly.
I made an empty promise,
you filled with an empty grave.
familiar fog
and
a long drive.
three passing cars,
two windows lowered,
one lone driver.
stopping at a neon
haven;
the smell of stale newport ciga-
rettes
and forgotten garbage
encompasses the area blanket-

ed by
fluorescent lights.
ding.
welcome in
i read her name tag,
Sierra.
(from behind) 22her hair curls
on the ends
like yours.
i keep my head down,
digging thru a pocket with
folded notes
to put coins on the counter.
i can almost taste the
smoke and gasoline
as the engine of my mopar
sputters.
oak trees block piercing rays
throughout the silent drive
alone.
my bottle of
Sierra-
mist
is in the seat you once sat.
the road is an
escape
yet it only ever leads me
back
to your
ghost.
it is for you
every
road
curves.
and i am left with straight ways.
51 miles.
a grassy floral stretch.
those trapped in boxes under dirt
are six feet under me,
shut out from a world that goes on.

not me.
which of us
is truly beneath
now that
you're
gone?

Gracefully Created



by Olivia LeMott

Evangeline

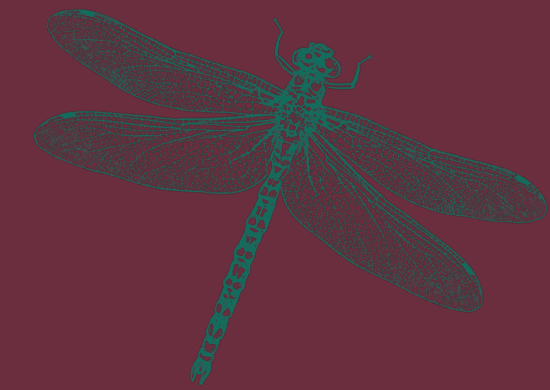


by LaAsia Harris

First Love



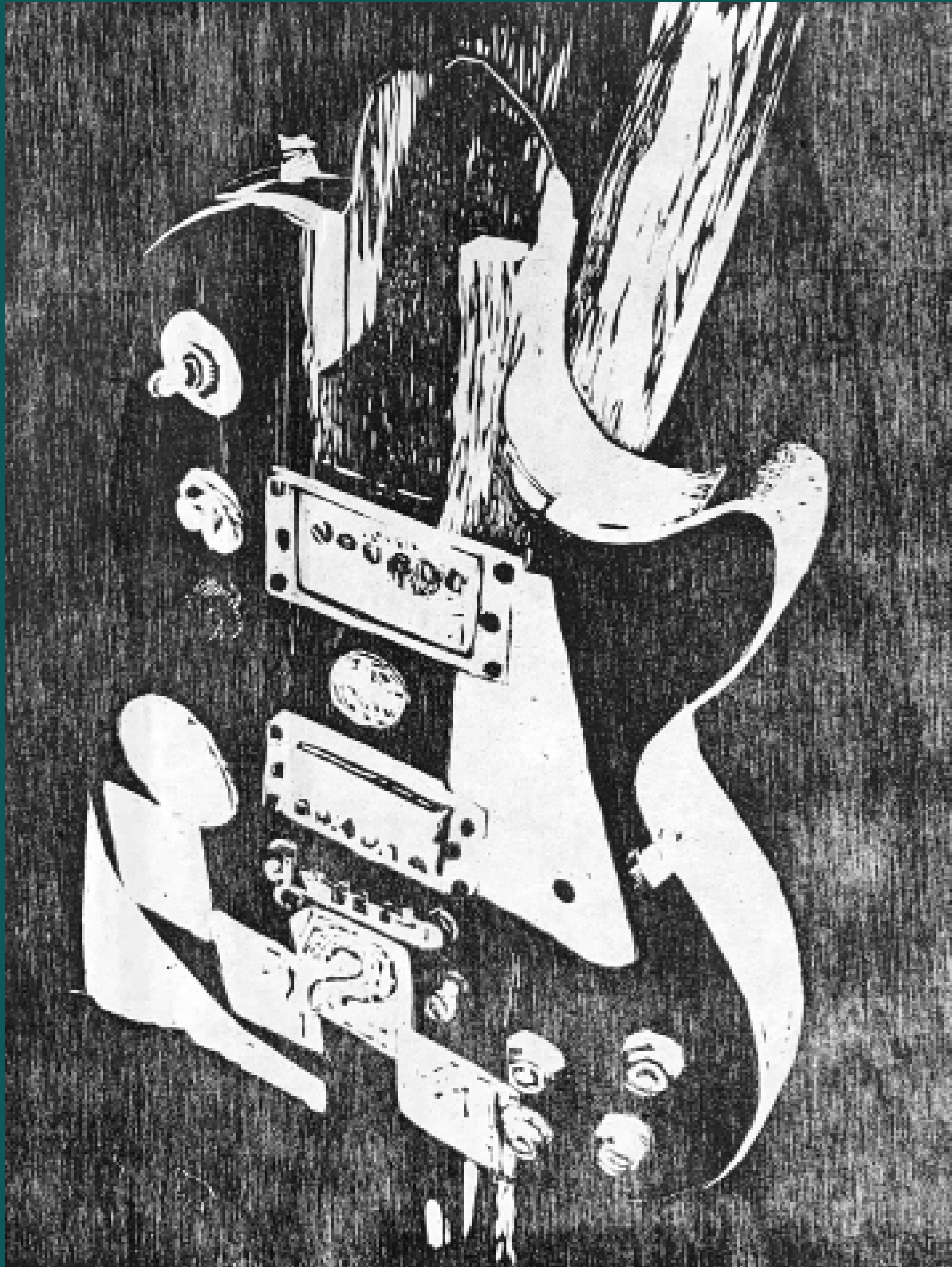
by Will Taylor



Scan to Listen!



Welcome Home



by Charlie Elwell

Ruin

Every time I poured out,
poured into you,
I gave up every last drop.
Tipped the cup to my
dried, cracked lips and
imagined a sensation
like a cool, freshwater stream;
restorative, transformative.
Every time I poured out,
you—exasperated—
lamented; parched,
you cried at my feet
hoping your pleas would
beckon waterfalls from a mi-
rage.
I would feed you my own tears
in their place.
Surrounded by empty cups,
my well running dry,
you begged for satiation
and I would wait
to crack, to crumble,
to blow away like dust.

Kirstie Frank

Dead or Alive

Warning: mention of drowning and dead bodies.

Nobody has written a book on what to do when your dead, childhood best friend appears at your doorstep, looking perfectly alive. His brown hair was still the same shade of Rocky Road ice cream, and his eyes were still the same seaweed green. He looked the same. Charlie looked the same.

Our whole town had been looking for Charlie for the past four months. And, in that last month, the sheriff found Charlie's famous blue dirt bike down by the lake, with his body floating in the cold and brackish water. According to the police, Charlie had been riding back to his apartment from baseball in the rain. I guess he lost his traction and ended up falling down the side into the water. Police concluded that given the rainstorm, Charlie couldn't get up the hill because it was muddy.

I wasn't used to the fact that Charlie was gone from my life. We wouldn't go to the same ice cream parlor 24/7. We wouldn't make fun of the school's stadium, never having the letters up on the side, always being Mer Have Uni instead of Mert Haven Uni. And we wouldn't skip our last class of the day because we couldn't stand the professor's voice.

With all of those emotions welling up inside me, seeing my best friend on my doorstep drew those back. Shock ran through me as I instinctively stepped back. I kept the door wide open. Charlie stepped inside my apartment. His baseball jersey clung to his skin, making him appear thinner than I remembered him being.

He looked around like he had never been in my apartment before, which was a complete lie. He'd spend more time at my place than his own. I never understood why. He had a much bigger apartment than I did — a nicer

one at that.

He didn't speak, which made the whole situation more jolting than it already was. My feet carried my body down the hall to grab him a towel, fully on auto-pilot. Anyone would throw their arms around their loved ones who came back from the dead, but I didn't know what to do. My whole body felt like it was glued together, only allowing my feet to carry me places.

Charlie took the yellow towel from me, wrapping it around his broad shoulders. "I...I saw your bike," I gulped, "Everyone saw your bike. They said you drowned in the lake from the storm. It was brutal, the way police described it. Your mom....she kept your bike. It's, um, still hanging up in your room." I was surprised that I had finally spoken. The way my voice shook was a telltale of how I felt.

Charlie only nodded. He turned to me, his eyes taking me in. His eyes took notice of the slight bags underneath my eyes, a clear sign that I hadn't been sleeping since his 'death.'

"Do you, um, do you want something to drink?" I asked. It felt like a stupid question, but it was the only thing my brain concocted or permitted me to say. Charlie nodded again, his damp hair falling in front of his face. He pushed it aside and slowly sat down on the leather couch.

I held my tongue, not even bothering to ask him not to sit since he was soaking wet. I walked into my kitchen and stood amid the tile flooring. I let go of the breath I was holding, feeling my chest expand as I took in a few gulps of air. My fridge was in front of me like it was telling me to speed up and grab a soda.

It took a few seconds before I mustered up the energy to pull open the refrigerator door. I still had Charlie's favorite orange soda, which I had bought a few days before he went missing. I hadn't even bothered to throw them away or even drink them.

I opened the can, leaving the tab on because Charlie always liked to take it off and play with it. I handed him the soda and sat down on the recliner

across from him. So many questions were going through my head, but I couldn't settle on just one to ask him. He took the tab off of the soda and set it on his knee. He downed the whole drink before leaning forward and setting it down on the coffee table.

He picked up the soda tab, flipping it between his fingers. Charlie admired the edges when he brought it close to his face. He leaned back on the couch and adjusted the towel, sticking it up in the back so it covered his neck.

I nervously tapped the side of my leg at the silence between the two of us. Charlie's green gaze darted around the room. Nothing had changed in my apartment. I kept the same pictures of us, no matter how difficult it was to see me and Charlie in every one of them.

He slowly stood up from the sofa, the towel falling off his shoulders. He walked over to the fireplace where I had displayed a few pictures. Charlie picked up one particular frame: the two of us at our first college football game. Charlie had his arm around me, his cheek pressed against the side of my head.

I remember that day. He had insisted that he paint his face orange and green, our school's colors, which was a terrible idea because he couldn't get the paint off that night. He had to show up to class with his face tinted bright orange and green.

Charlie ran a finger over the glass frame. A small smile appeared on his face. Just that one action helped me realize that this was truly Charlie standing before me. "Still don't get why you painted your face," I muttered. He looked over at me and shrugged before setting the picture back onto the fireplace. Charlie walked around the living room, picking up any picture frames or admiring paintings I had done.

"Ch...Charlie."

His back faced me, not even bothering to turn around at my voice. A second passed, and then another one, and then a few more. I heard him sigh heavily before turning around to look back

at me. "I don't know why I'm here," he finally spoke, the first words he had stated since his sudden arrival. My eyes widened at his voice, but my expression changed when his words set in.

From what everyone else knew, Charlie was still dead. He was still gone, yet here he was, breathing and now talking. I never thought I'd ever hear his voice again. Charlie's feet padded against the hardwood as he walked over to me.

He knelt in front of me, taking my hands into his. His eyes gazed up at me as he sat on his knees. "I don't know what happened," Charlie continued, "I remember falling into the water and trying to get up. Nothing helped. Then, that's when everything went dark, but after a few moments, I woke up in the water." My heart stopped, well, it felt like it did. Charlie stared up at me as the gears shifted inside my head.

"Riley, someone pulled me out from death," he said, "Someone brought me back, and I think it was you. I think you brought me back." I swallowed back the laugh of disbelief when I saw the look on his face. Charlie's words stayed in my brain.

"You brought me back, Riles."

From the Foam of the Sea



by Zoe Vecchio

Feature Story: Shared Humor

A melting pot is an idiom, it references what occurs when people with different beliefs and different backgrounds co-exist together, leading to their cultures mixing into something new and vibrant. America has been described as a melting pot for almost a century now, a state of intense cultural mixture and diversity that come together and make a new identity altogether. New York City and Chicago are some of the first names that come to mind when one thinks about greatly diverse American cities. However, it is not only large cities that boast variety. MTSU itself takes pride in developing an inclusive environment that welcomes students and faculty from all kinds of backgrounds. It is because of such an environment that Firoozeh Dumas was chosen as a speaker at MTSU's 2024 Convocation.

Firoozeh Dumas is a New York Times' Bestselling writer, with a penchant for dry humor and poetic writing. Born and raised (mostly) in Abadan, Iran and then having been immigrated to California as young child, Dumas has experienced what it is like to live amongst different customs, and it is her experiences of those differences that have inspired her and led to the publication of several, well-received books.

Firoozeh Dumas's book, *Laughing Without an Accent: Adventures of a Global Citizen*, was the chosen book for 2024 Summer Reading Program. It is a memoir filled with funny and enthralling stories, all based on her encounters as an Iranian-American, and is a comforting, nostalgic read for immigrants. However, that does not mean you have to be an immigrant to truly enjoy her stories. Dumas knows the best way to bring people together is good food and funny jokes and she sprinkles details of them throughout her stories. The important themes of love, family, and growth in her book also offer great lessons for everyone.

Each chapter is centered on a different memory of Dumas', ranging from her childhood in Iran to her life in California and onto her later travels all over the world. There are delightful characters, such as a trespassing monkey (who appears briefly but leaves quite a mark), Dumas' endearing and hilarious Iranian parents, a charming Frenchman, and many more. There are descriptions of Iranian traditions and mouth-watering foods, showcasing the author's love and appreciation for her culture. There are also comical anecdotes of what life was like for a teenager living in the United States in the 70s and 80s, and the culture shocks one goes through as an immigrant. Everything is brought together through Dumas' wit and calm, conversational narration.

However, there is more to Dumas' stories than comical little narratives to read in one's cozy little corner. She details the propaganda, prejudice, and ignorance she has seen throughout her life and serves a warning to us all to be open-minded and cautious. It is hard and awkward at times but stepping out of our comfort zones to meet and learn from new people can provide valuable lessons. "...Be brave," Dumas told the incoming freshmen in her speech at Convocation. "Trying talking to one another." It does no one any good to be judgmental towards a person without first making attempts to understand them and their ways.

No one lives in their own individual world. We all have an impact on one another, we are all a part of something larger. We are a melting pot. To live a full and enjoyable life, we need to embrace the differences around us and take active part in one another's lives. If you don't know how, sharing a few jokes can be a great icebreaker.



Canvas

I am
trying to practice self-love
until it becomes almost
as unhealthy as my self-hate
and still not enough.
I want to be a mixed-media painting,
watercolor that's dripped
and bled and blended, pinks
and blues that make the purples
accenting my under eyes.
Soft yellow acrylics, brushstroking
my cheeks and my thighs,
the canvas texture peeking
through, always, like
the goosebumps on my skin.
My freckles connecting
like a constellation in someone's sky;
I am their whole universe,
but a universe which still expands
even when no one is there
to observe it.
If I could hold myself up,
beauty forward,
my legs an easel,
I could walk like an art piece
worthy of preservation
in a museum that will always
display my value
even in the afterhours.

Kirstie Frank

In light, alone



by Vega Rochat

Traces

My grandmother drank cabbage juice. The water milky and sparkling with salt. The pale green cabbage swirls like fabric as she scoops it out with silver spoon. I mix the cabbage water and watch the steam roll under the oven light. She and my grandfather sit at the table talking about their day, my cousins, her treatments, his worry. Then she hushes him and gets up, the chair creaking from her constant rocking. The screws need to be tightened. I lap up a spoonful and watch it spin under melon light. She comes beside me. How was your day? I tell her it was good, not taking my eyes off of the pan. I press my stomach to the stove, let the hot glass warm my skin. She moves closer and leans in front of me, calling my name. I move away from it all, smiling. I apologize, it has been a good day, just long. She pats me and draws me in for a hug. I yearn to reach out and tell her how ridiculous it all is, break the tension, this constant searching for doctors that only want her money, that stack white and blue papers on her oak chest. Her own chest caved in and ribbed. Her wood like skin showing spots and lines, is oiled and smells of lavender. Her silver cross, tarnished blue, rests on a softly sloped ridge. The cabbage begins to boil, and the leaves dance under the bubbles, up and over and bursting, leaving salt lines against the rim.

Ella Lancaster

Oxygen Tank

keep an oxygen tank on me at all times.
It's a necessity really.
For the times where I'm pulled back down without a warning - without knowing if I'll eventually resurface.
It's a safety precaution, I guess ; needless to some, silly to others, useful for all.
I don't think it knows that I have one - an oxygen tank.
It's too focused on itself - what's happening in its world, on its time. It's never really worried about me. Not what I'm doing, ...seeing, ...saying... - It just doesn't want me to be away from it.
Not under its grasp, in its world - its depth. It's scared of me being gone but can't wait to push me out?
I'm not really sure - but all I know is I need an oxygen tank.
It's thick and goopy, but I float down so easily. I glide through it in a way I can't describe. Like sugary sweet syrup, but it's sour and melancholy and tastes... bizarre.
I can't put my finger on it... it's

just... just different.
I have my oxygen tank ready and have it on as it drags me down. I don't try to fight it anymore.
It's too much work - I waste too much oxygen in my tank and it's too expensive to keep refilling. I surrender and let it take me.
It's calming in a way - sort of... nice.
I land in the darkest part. Pitch black in the depths below where no one can see the light that I hid on my oxygen tank with the green glow.
I am alone.
No sound, no light except for the small green glow from my oxygen tank, and no warmth.
It likes to keep things cold.
I look around - because what else is there to do?
It didn't like that though. I didn't think it knew that I had my tank with me, but the green glow emitting from it must've been a dead giveaway.
I hear - hissing? A scream, maybe? I didn't notice until I was almost out. But, what can you do? I accept fate, take a final gulp of breath and wait to pass out from my lack of oxygen.
I must be hallucinating because I see lights heading my way.

There's pink and yellow and blue glows heading towards me and I try to tell them not to come this way - it can see the lights - but, it doesn't see them? Or it doesn't care to?
I don't know. It's confusing and difficult to figure out - so I don't try to.
They'll suffer the same fate as me and there's nothing I can do about it because they won't listen.
But, they grab onto me. I see them do it before everything goes black. I try to tell them not to - to leave me, but I'm too weak... too sleepy... to o . . . c o n s u m e d
I am on solid ground. They surround me.
They won't leave my side - even when they probably should.
I don't think I can get them to either - which is... strange ; but it's nice.
I think I can get rid of my oxygen tank now.

Kaitlynn Gumbman

The Tale of Icarus

him fall, no matter how determined he was to see Apollo. Though if the bronze burned him, it was his fault still.

I grab a sheet of bronze and rush to the furnace, snagging a small hammer on my way. I know what my next project is: another songbird—though this one would fly, straight and true. Daedalus would have to be impressed. I start banging the bronze into shape, and I know I'm going too fast, but I can't slow myself down. I can tell Daedalus is watching me without looking away; the sound of him tinkering has stopped. He remains silent until I finish with the base shape and comes to stand behind me when I bring it back to the table.

“Another songbird?”

I hum, a yes and a no. “It's modeled from a petrel, but I think I'm going to have this one fly instead of sing,” I say, gesturing to my little gold-painted bird, collecting dust on a shelf. I ignore the waxy wings hanging above it, the last relic of the worst ride of my uncle's life. Modeled from a seabird. I gently adjust the petrel's wings, turning them more elliptical.

Daedalus walks over to my songbird, opens its chest, and inspects the music box inside. I don't miss how his fingers grace his wings, nor do I fail to hear his sigh. “It looks like the gears froze up on this box, Perdix,” he calls.

“Oil it.”

He sighs again but lifts the little gold creature and does as asked. A few seconds later, I hear the quiet pinks of my songbird. It stops a minute later, and I turn away from the gears in my hands to see him gingerly oiling its wings.

“I think Icarus would have been an acrobat, if he had survived,” my uncle says. I watch him stare out across the sea, a dazed look in his eyes. “You two would have been friends, Perdix. You'd complement each other nicely.”

I don't answer. Daedalus has always been like this, for as long as I have been his apprentice. Icarus, Icarus, Icarus. No matter how great the things I create, no matter how many gears and pulleys I manage to slot into an inch of bronze, no matter how beautiful and meticulously detailed my craft, Icarus will always be the only child he really cares about. Icarus. A dead kid, over me. I am on the way to becoming the next Daedalus, the next great in our family line, and all he can think about is my cousin, who was too dumb to listen to one simple piece of advice: Don't fly too close to the sun. The man talks of nothing else. You'd think he'd get over it already.

I turn back to my work. Tiny pieces of machinery litter my portion of Daedalus's table, dwarfed by the hunks of metal scattered across his. He has always wanted to build big. Giant mazes that are impossible to navigate due to sheer, dumb size alone. Metal bulls large enough to hold a woman and to kill hundreds of Athenians. Life-size wings that melt in the light and freeze up when met with sea spray.

I prefer to build small. Little serrated knives carved from a snake's jawbone. Compact magnetic compasses that always point the way home. A songbird, once, with a music box embedded in its tiny throat. The hollow brass wings flapped so prettily; it was a shame they were only decorative. Had it been I who built his wings, no failings of Icarus would have let

When he turns the bird back on, they spring to life, fluttering a metronome to the quiet melody. Daedalus smiles sadly.

“Icarus used to love that song. Would find the chambers in our maze with the most echo and sing it. I can't imagine how much he would've loved a bird like this.” He walks over to me, puts his hand on my back. “I tell you, you two would have been glued at the hip.”

I shrug him off, scooting closer to the shell of my bird. Its elliptical wings and plump body make the creature the opposite of the seagulls Daedalus must have referenced. I don't think it'll fly very far. But still, I begin work on its motor. It's another half an hour before I hear Daedalus calling from the door.

“Perdix? It's getting late. If you miss dinner, your mother will worry.”

I wave him ahead. “I'll catch up with you once I'm done. Go.”

He smiles. “Just call if you need any help. I've built hundreds of motors, you know.”

I don't acknowledge him, too absorbed in my work. I've got the motor running, but it makes a grinding sound when I turn it on. I don't know any way to fix it, and it's functional as is, so I slot it into the bird. When I look out the window, it's already night. I walk home, careful of the cliffside in the dark.

When I sleep, I dream of birds. Partridge-like creatures crowd around me, shoving me towards the cliff. When they open their beaks, only the sound of metal grinding escapes. They tower over me, forcing me away from the workshop, no matter how I push to get there. I don't know why, but I

need my songbird. I need its song.

I feel rocks slide beneath my feet, and I turn to see the precipice, inches away. I smell wood rot and the railing behind me snaps. I try to scream, but I have the same call as the birds around me. I throw out my arms, and there are feathers where my fingers should be. I am in free fall. When I look up, there is my golden songbird, flying below another. It tilts up, and the song disappears from its music-box throat when it catches fire, fire, and drips of molten wax grace my lips before I hit the ground, dead.

When I wake, it is to the rooster crowing and the songbirds chirping, gossiping about the boy they once saw fall.

Every day after seems to pass the same way. I wake up; I go to the workshop; I carve a new saw. Daedalus talks about Icarus; I sharpen the old saws. Daedalus goes home; I work on the bird on my bench; Daedalus calls me back inside; I have dinner with my family; Daedalus goes out to stare at the sky and think about Icarus; I go to bed. The same every day, as it's always been.

What's strange is that the nights are all the same.

Every night, I dream of birds, and motors, and falling, and Icarus.

Every night, I scream with the harsh voice of the bird I cannot get to sing, and when I am swarmed, the railing my great-great-great-great-grandfather built snaps, and when I fall, I hear a boy sing, his voice

The Tale of Icarus (cont.)

pounding like a word in an echo-filled chamber. And I always, always, die.

The bird is coming along well, though. The grinding has quieted, but the engine still stutters and whirs. I haven't attached its wings yet; the feathers must be fully sculpted before they can be attached to the wing, and then each individual fiber must be able to move with the wind. I can see why Daedalus used real feathers now, but I refuse to stoop low. This bird will be my creation, untethered to nature or gods. When Daedalus suggests feathers for the sixth time this week, I don't respond, pulling molten glass fibers to create each barb of each feather and attaching them carefully to the hollow shafts.

Four months go by of long hours in my uncle's workshop, making feather by feather by feather. My mother gifts me taxidermy so I know where to place them. I am consumed by this bird, and I know it. Something inside me desperately needs this bird to fly.

The day I finish my bird is Icarus's birthday. Daedalus is inconsolable, as every year, and doesn't come to the workshop. I am blessedly alone, devoid of comments on how many seagull feathers there are down by the cliffs or suggestions on how to smooth the bronze bird's engine stuttering. I've decided to keep it; it almost sounds like mechanical chirping. The glass feathers are all different shades of brown, blown from pieces of scrap I found on the beach. I'm attaching its tiny glass eyes when Daedalus walks in.

"Are you finished with it, then?" he asks after a moment of silence.

I nod. "It just needs to cool."

"Mm."

The silence is uneasy, fragile. I hate Icarus's birthday. It's always cold and quiet in the house, and I never know what to do or say. I just stand, staring at my bird.

Daedalus carefully picks up the bird and turns it in his hands, inspecting. After a long moment, he puts it down and nods at me. He turns to leave.

I'm always angry, these days. My mother says everyone is when they're fifteen. It feels fatal. It is so easy to be angry when you are fifteen, and it is even easier to be angry when you have worked for months, and only just realized that the only reason you were building a bird, of all things, was to impress someone who has only nodded and left. Something cruel in me snapped.

"Is that it?" I say. Quietly. Ever quietly. Is that it.

Daedalus turns, and his eyes are red and wet. They are always red and wet today.

"Is that it?" I didn't mean to sound so pleading the second time. I sound like a child; I feel like a child. "Is that all? A nod?"

Daedalus is silent. I crack.

"Is that it? I work for months, and I get a nod?"

"That's it? That's it?!" My voice is loud in my head, louder than it's ever been. I'm not sure that he can hear me. "I could work for years, I could rebuild the world, I could scale Olympus, but I'll never be good enough for you, will I? Not good enough for the legacy of Icarus!"

Daedalus takes a step forward, momentarily infected with my rage. He looks like he wants to hit me. He doesn't. I'm not worth the effort. I don't know if the heat on my cheeks is anger or tears.

"That's the problem, isn't it? That I'll never be Icarus. I'll never be the dead boy who can't follow one simple instruction!"

The world stills. I am shaking, and Daedalus is shaking, and I think that now would be a good time for a thunderstorm to roll in and drown me. The air continues to be perfectly still and the sky continues to be perfectly blue. A minute later, I swear my voice is still echoing around the cliffs. And in one moment, the world lurches back to speed as Daedalus grabs my most long-standing, most beloved project.

Daedalus throws my bird. Its wings activate, and everything is right in the world as it carries itself straight through the air, true and horizontal. Perfect. It heads toward the cliffside, and the thousand-foot drop.

I scream. I have to grab it; I have to save it! I lunge forward and trip over my uncle's leg (when had he thrown out his leg?), and like in my dreams, I hear a snap.

The railing was built by my four-greats-grandfather. It is old, and it smells of wood rot.

I fall.

And like in my nightmares, I hear the whirring call of my bird, and the chirping song of its elder. I cannot hear my screams.

Just before I hit the ground, I stop in the air, and fly panicked to a divot in the cliffside. I scream for help, but again, that same bird caw. A voice pierces the air, wise and feminine.

"Perdix," Athena says, voice thrumming through my head. "Quail".



Shifting Planets

Amelia was over at my house when it happened. We were lying on our stomachs in the living room, the rough carpet digging into our elbows and knees and making us itch. We had bowls of ice cream sitting in front of us, and we bowed our heads to lap the melted remains up like dogs. We woofed at one another and laughed. I flipped through the channels, and we caught the end of a Channel 5 news report. Pedro Ortega was on the screen, standing in front of the planetarium. I remember it was him because I felt weird when I looked at him. Like I needed to pee. The headline said Pluto wasn't a planet anymore. I don't really remember the reasoning. I got real close to the television screen and stared at all the tiny pixels that came together to make Pedro whole. I felt like Moses on that mountain, and Pedro was God telling me a new, unwavering commandment of the universe I had to obey. It was the week before Amelia and I started fifth grade. The first year where we didn't share the same teacher. I remember crying that night when her mom's sedan pulled down the driveway, Amelia's arm poking out of the backseat window, waving goodbye.

Even though it was closed on Sundays, that weekend my mom drove Amelia and me down to the planetarium. We were the only car in the parking lot. She sat there with the AC on and listened to her book on tape, while we walked to the entrance, trying to stand in the very spot Pedro stood for his news report. Amelia held her fingers up to make a little picture window, like a camera, and we adjusted the angle until she said Okay, I think we got it. She kept one eye open, the other squeezed shut to remain in focus. I made a fist and held it up to my chest, pretending I was holding a microphone. Amelia said action and I thought about Pedro. How

scary it must be to be on television. Gooooood evening, Jackson Metrooooo! This is Maisy Smithson with Channel 5. Breaking News: Mrs. Clark at Watkins Elementary—a loud crashing sound startled us. We ran to the side of the building. A moving truck sat with the door rolled up. On a wooden flatbed, a few guys in sweatshirts were wheeling out two halves of a giant sphere the color of mud and red clay. They cursed at each other and maneuvered the halves into the truck. Hey, I called without thinking, what the fuck are you putting into that truck? The men turned to me, stunned. Then laughing, they told us it was Pluto. They were altering the display of the universe, the focal point of the planetarium, in order to be more “scientifically accurate.” Amelia told me to never say fuck again or she would tell my mom. Then we went for snow cones. I ordered cherry, and Amelia got root beer. I sat there, my legs dangling off the edge of the high-top stool, staring down at the red and brown ice and thinking about life in space. What it would be like to live on an exiled planet. Amelia ate her snow cone like she was in a rush, then asked if I was going to eat mine.

— — —
That September, I learned that halves of a sphere are called hemispheres. I wore a training bra and went to the bathroom to lift my shirt and scratch where the elastic itched. I tried cantaloupe. In November, I learned that Pedro Ortega was getting married, because he announced it on the news. I stormed upstairs and screamed into my pillow, kicked my feet hard against the mattress. That January, Amelia stopped being fun. She made a new friend in her class named Bria, who didn't like me very much. One day I asked Bria if I could join them to do cartwheels at recess. She said no, and Amelia said nothing. Her head turned up towards the sky. Like she was somewhere else. I pictured her ice skating on the rings of Saturn. Storm chasing on Jupiter. Running around on Pluto, eating snow cones made of red, frozen methane. Filming each other on the real camcorder I got for Christmas. And I spent the rest of the year wondering what was wrong with me. Why I no longer belonged in her universe. Living in exile on my lonely, little planet we once called ours.

Trolls Edition of Goosebumps



by Mo Marler

My Feelings Sink Deep In



by Gazme Mert

Fading

When I left,
I made sure to hide
the pieces of myself that
you kept. It felt like
cutting little chunks of
skin,
letting them wash
down a drain
in blood and water.
With each passing day
I can feel myself
letting you erase me.
Maybe I long since
have been,
traceless after
you've cleaned
the drain with bleach

by Kerstie Frank

May Peace Prevail on Earth



Creative Expression Award Winners

Thank you!

Our *Collage* staff takes care to evaluate which submissions stand out to us for having exceptional artistry or expression. So many entries impress us that it is difficult to narrow down the winners in each category. We appreciate all the creativity we have discussed and showcased in the magazine, and here the winners of each category are highlighted.

Art

Ava Byars: “Heart Eyes”

Poetry

Emilee Vecchio: “LOVE OR LOSS”

Sculpture

Jess Hayes: “Plexus”

Prose

Katie Olexy: “Dead or Alive?”

Photography

Vega Rochat: “Neon Nights”

Audio

Lucas De Freitas: “Our Heart’s Silent Rapture”

