

Collage

A journal of
Creative expression

e

2025

S p r i n g

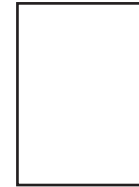
A Note From the Editor:

I have been honored to act as *Collage's* Editor-in-Chief this semester. I admire all of the hardworking staff and have genuinely enjoyed collaborating with each of the incredibly talented individuals who make up Collage behind the scenes.

The works we've received this semester make up such a beautiful mosaic that represents MTSU. Each person's piece of art tells a story, not only of themselves, but also of the larger community to which we all belong. In a world that has seemingly become even more volatile, we can all find some comfort in creative expression, which can never truly be taken away from us.

It is our hope that you will take these pieces and find in them something personally meaningful for you. We are grateful to everyone who shared their talents and their souls with us to be able to bring you the Spring edition of *Collage*.

Thank you for reading.



S P R I N G ²⁰₂₅

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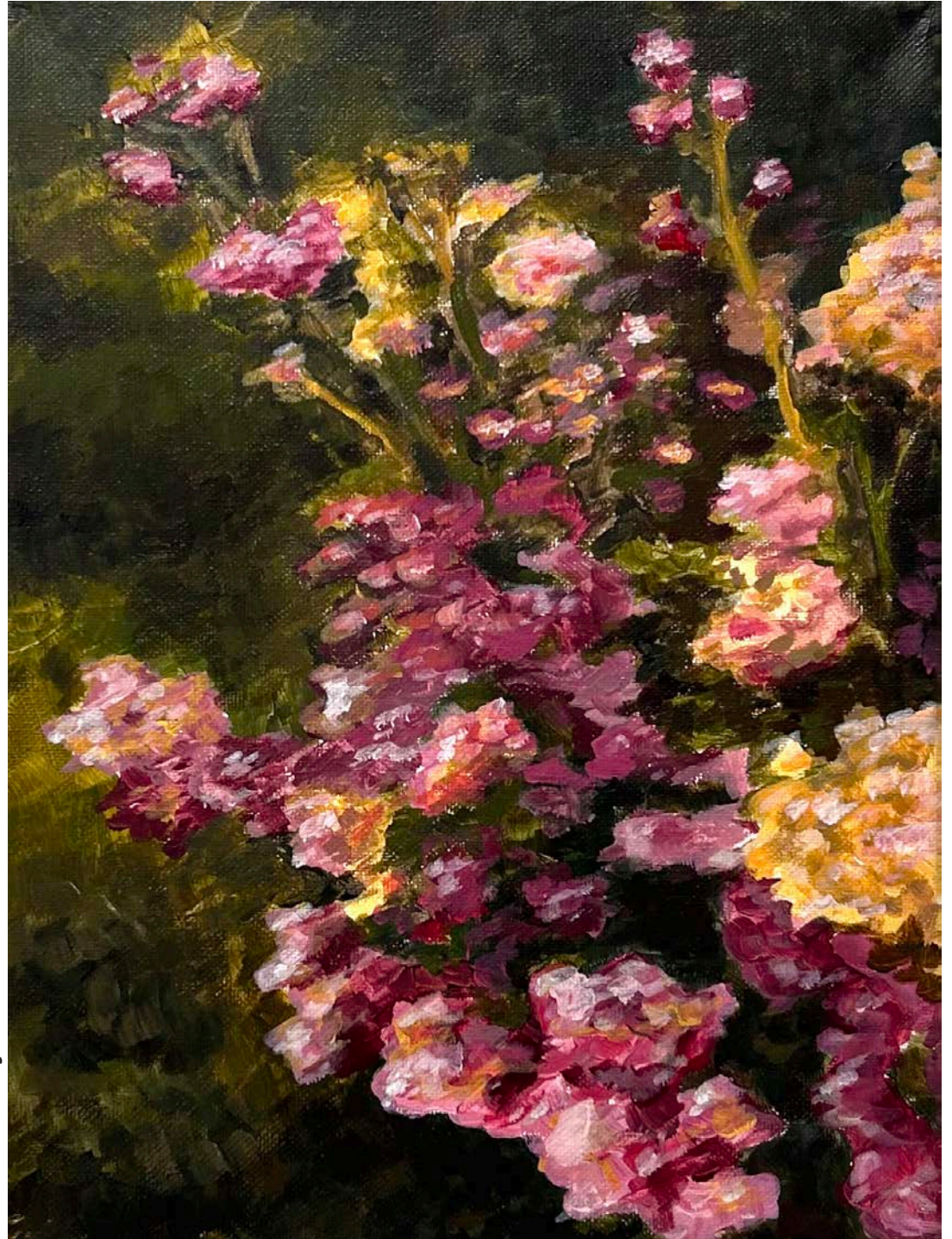
Contents

Renewal – Aliyah Shuman	5	Trash Fish – Sam Roth	20
Sunrise – Jessica Law	5	Shelly Duvall Ceramic – Paige Corlew	20
Memorial Striations – Charlie Elwell	6	Family – Emily Rogers	21
Saints in the River, Mourning – Harley Mercadal	6	Conversation – Charlie Elwell	22
#30 – Mercer Powell	7	God loves you but not enough to save you – Kasey Janke	23
We were Girls Together – Aliyah Shuman	8	In the Clouds – Cadee Havard	23
entwined – Alyssa Williams	8	Where are you? – Isaac Snyder	24
Honey Seeker – Alyssa Williams	9	Sinners – Alyssa Williams	24
Lounge – Daisy Gonzalez	9	Invisible Ladder – Sarah Patrick	25
Prelude – Zoe Vecchio	10	Quilted Contortion – Charlie Elwell	25
Down South – Annika Raines	10	Desolate Jay – LaAsia Harris	26
Apart – Charlie Elwell	11	Unspoken – Jenna Brooks	27
Under Your Watchful Eyes – Russell	12	Botanical Garden – Sam Roth	27
Chamberlain		The Drunkards Three – Alex Tumbleson	27
I Think, Therefore We Are – Roe Medlock	13	In The Beginning – Alex Tumbleson	28
Refracting Golden Light – Harley Mercadal	14	Watercolor – Sam Roth	28
Burning – Alyssa Williams	14	Dreaming Meadow – Holly Lynch	29
Creative Flow – Ava Byars	15	Life's Mission – Candace Bohne	29
Encore – Sarah Patrick	15	The Stranger – Alex Tumbleson	30
Zeva – Cedric White	16	Collective Effervescence – Aliyah Shuman	33
Taking Form – Zoe Vecchio	17	The Forgotten Garden – Meghan Chamblin	34
Untitled 1 – Sarah Li	17	CHARLOTTE – Cadee Havard	34
The Psyche's Rock – Cadee Havard	18	Watchful Gaze – Alyssa Williams	35
Across the Oceans into the Unknown – Raquel	18	Pine Forest – Emily Caudill	36
Barbalat		Shepherd – Emily Rogers	36
Rust – Alex Tumbleson	19	Spooky Photography – Jude Cox	37
Bella – Cedric White	19	Ode to 2619 – Aliyah Shuman	38
		Hummingbird – Zoe Vecchio	39
		Scrabble – Jessica Law	39
		The Cow – Paige Corlew	40
		The Hole in the Wall – Paige Corlew	41
		Waiting Game – Cadee Havard	42
		Philadelphia – Alex Tumbleson	43
		Untitled 2 – Sarah Li	43
		I Came Out of the Womb Singing – Skye Kletz	44

Sunrise - Jessica Law

There was something in the Kentucky air when I saw you at last. I hadn't seen you in ages, yet I longed to be touched by your hues of pinks and purples once again. There is something peaceful about you compared to your sister. While your sister represents the start of night and endless longing, you show me the light and how all things you touch grow and blossom under your kiss. I didn't realize how much I needed to see you, until I saw you break through the clouds once again and hold my gaze. You saw through me and even then you told me you loved me. I couldn't help but cry at your beauty.

Renewal - Aliyah Shuman



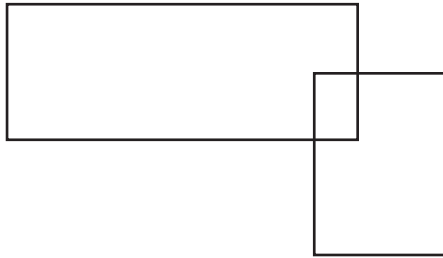
***Saints in the River, Mourning* - Harley Mercadal**

Kingsport smells of capitalism- the paper mill, Eastman, craft breweries,
and Pal's hotdogs— so the goose-shit smell complements my dread
when we cross the swinging bridge
Nellie Pratt left to empty a particularly small, red box.

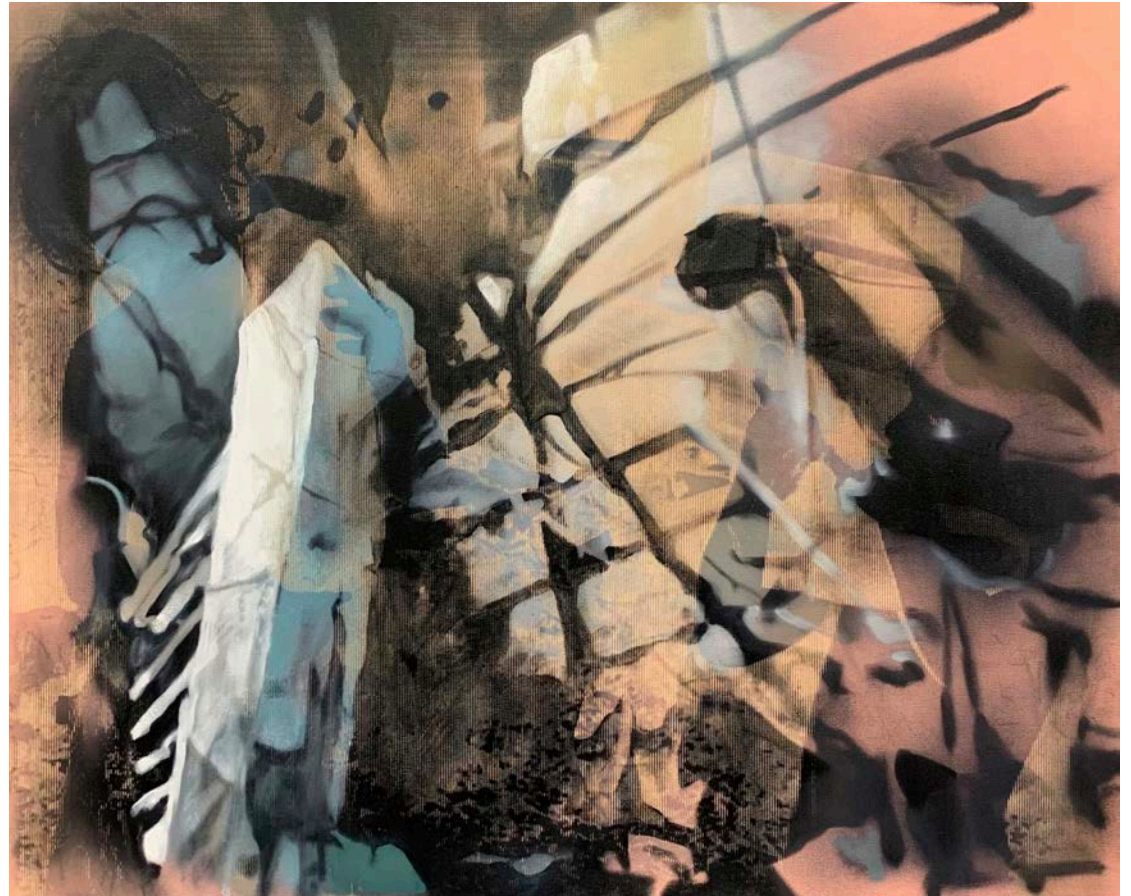
Brianne palms our father's ashes into the Holston River;
similarly, my grief and relief mix into clouded brown waters.
I want to submerge my face, open my eyes, see if there are
saints in this river—maybe ghosts—or simple morbidity.

Do I have any last words? No; nothing appropriate, anyway.
My sister soaks in her mourning like her roll-cuffed jeans, and
I, dry-eyed at the water's edge, wonder if river-fish eat bones.
We watch our father wash away, and alone, I don't look back.

- Poetry Winner -



***Memorial Striations* - Charlie Elwell**





#30 - Mercer Powell



We Were Girls Together - Aliyah Shuman

***entwined* - Alyssa Williams**

we are two vines
entwined
though we're not from the same seed

we were brought together by sets of hands
repotted over and over
losing bits of dirt
until we inhabited the same soil

testing the waters
sharing fertilizer
resting under the same sun

we are two vines
entwined
though we're not from the same place

we reach out with tentative leaves
gentle strokes
against the other
until our stems began to touch

we are two vines
entwined
and the world brought us together

we circle each other constantly
inseparable
together
determined to share our life forever



Honey Seeker - Alyssa Williams



Lounge - Daisy Gonzales



Down South - Annika Raines

Whenever I am near,
I can feel
Death
In the air.

I can hear
The procession
Of mourners
Passing on gravel.
Their sobs
Rip through the wind.

The ground is
Unsteady and broken.
The mounds rising
Through the pasture
Hinting at my future, unspoken.

The crowd rises and falls
With wallowing
And despair.
As the dirt smothers the
Poor soul,
Lying down there.



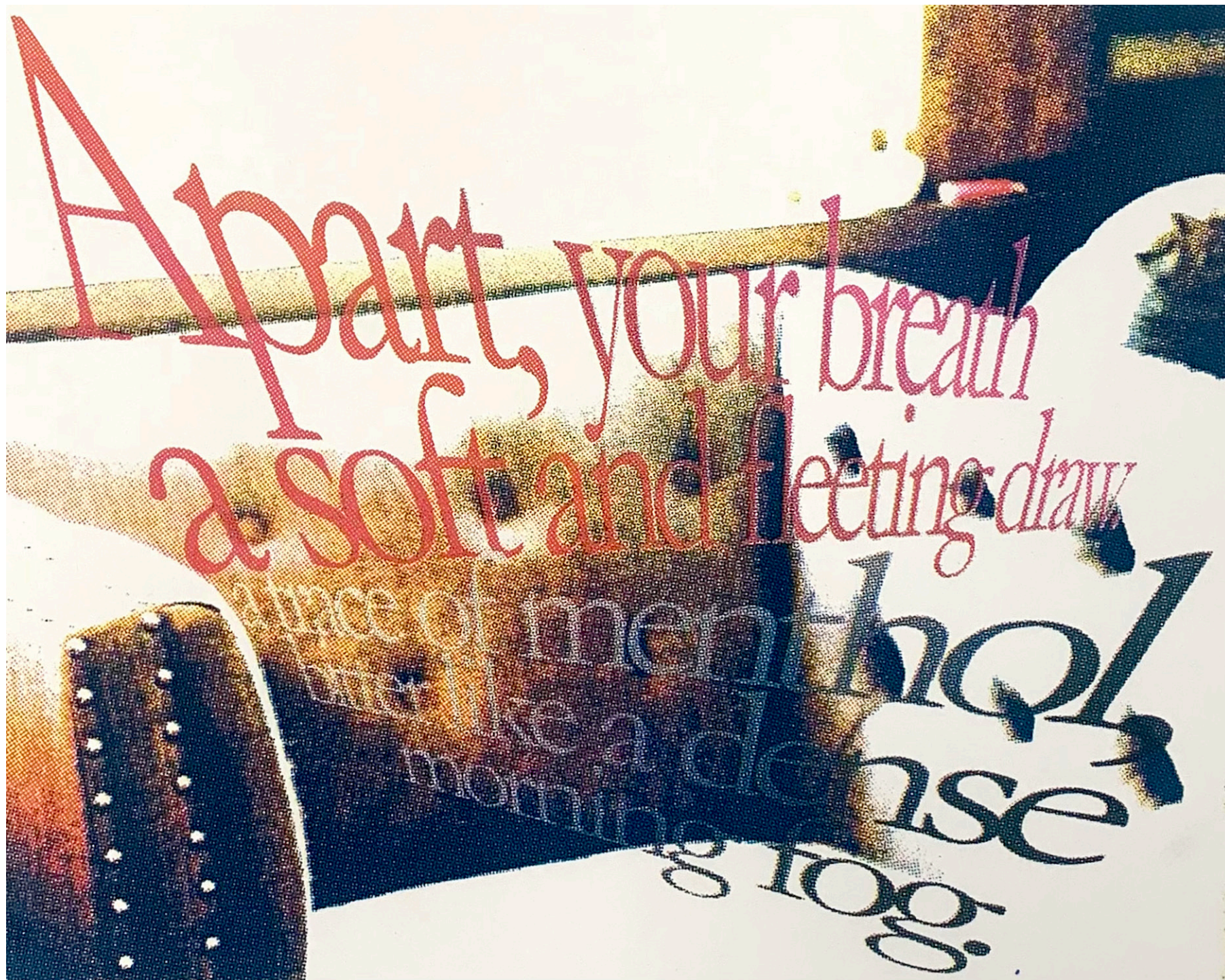
The air feels
Lifeless.
With only hollow
Hymns and cries
To fill this morn.

In the pallid parlor
At repass,
Here, their faces look worn.
As they choke
On the words
Forever left unsaid,
And go make bitter peace
With their futures
When they lie in their bed.

The closer I get,
The closer Death seems.
Don't make me go
Down South.
I want to die unseen.



Prelude - Zoe Vecchio



Under Your Watchful Eyes - Russel Chamberlain

Julia felt more beautiful when she thought of herself through his eyes. Her faults didn't seem so glaring. She wondered why she was so critical when she could see herself improving slowly with every passing day they spent together. She recalled one night in her previous relationship when her ex had spoken of his view of love. They had just finished making love. She had not finished, but she appreciated the intimacy and closeness. He became philosophical in his post-coital bliss.

He had said, "We present our best and most perfect selves when we are in love. We want to be cherished in our frantic, exhilarating high—the thrill of discoveries and revealing ourselves to this new person. Perhaps we enjoy the vulnerability that comes with sharing our lives, but I believe we are more likely to fall in love with the self that we show to our partner. They help us unleash the dormant aspects of our more vibrant selves. This is the self we aspire to be, the one we feel compelled to show others. I've heard people say that we ultimately fall in love with ourselves. Others say, 'I love who I am when I am with you.' I think that maybe I love myself when I am with you," he had said with a goofy smile.

Julia saw his point on some level and offered a counterpoint: "On the other hand, when a relationship turns sour and resentful, we discover a painful truth about self-loathing. We detest who we become in the presence of that other person. We don't hate them; we hate the versions of ourselves that emerge in that relationship." He did not argue with her. He just grew quiet. She soon realized he had fallen asleep while she lay there speaking.

In the end, he was more than happy to share this feeling with others; it seemed he preferred the feeling of falling in love and liked how he looked in their eyes. Anyway, he

had always been critical of her, and she was better off letting him go so he could have the freedom to be whatever it was he wanted to be in those other people's eyes—to experience the feeling he so valued with them and not with her. She told herself it was best it ended.

As Julia reflected on her current relationship and aged, she focused on all the little imperfections in her face and body, the slight wrinkles on her forehead, the lines near her nose, and the corners of her eyes. Her breasts were not as perky as they once were, and her backside didn't seem as firm. When she looked in the mirror, all she saw were wrinkles and slow sagging. While her stomach wasn't fat, it wasn't tight either, so she had given up on bikinis a while ago. This understanding wasn't about the true self or anything selfish; she felt an insecurity she imagined was all too common.

Strangely, though, over the past few months, her new love had told her how beautiful she was. She almost believed him, and something peculiar happened one morning. She almost felt like her skin seemed firmer, and her breasts appeared perkier. When she caught a glimpse of her backside in the mirror, she thought, despite not having used the stair climber for the last month, it looked like she had.

Was it possible that her body had slowly begun to change and reflect his view? Had she always been this beautiful and simply failed to notice it due to her own critical perspective? Was she just seeing herself through his eyes? Could it have been a perception change? She didn't feel this was true; it seemed absurd, but she knew something had changed. She noticed people noticing her, and she had even received compliments. Perhaps it was psychological. Maybe she was just more confident.

She didn't know, but she would swear that

some of the subtle lines on her face had reversed, and she hadn't had a single shot of Botox. When she went out for dinner with a girlfriend, her friend seemed genuinely surprised by her appearance.

"You look amazing," her friend said. "Dieting, exercise? Something medical?"

Julia assured her it was none of those things; she just felt better than she had in years. Her friend told her she was full of shit and insisted that she looked five years younger. She felt her friend was irritated with her, assuming she was lying.

Julia had no explanation. Later that night, she cried because her friend was mad at her. In a way, it hurt her feelings. She felt good about herself, but her friend insisted it would take surgery for her to look better; at least, that was how she interpreted the comments. As she looked in the mirror that night, she thought she saw hints of her lines returning. Her eyes looked watery and red, not just from crying. She felt ugly, and her looks seemed to be changing. It was as if the magic was being undone.

The following day, Julia woke to her new love, who had brought her coffee in bed. He kissed her, and she felt that comfort return. She didn't care about the cruel things said the night before and felt rejuvenated again.

She confronted her love the other day about all this, and he insisted he had done nothing. She shared her ex's theory of love, and he said the opposite: "Love is not selfish—just a way to validate ourselves. Love is giving. Maybe you needed this, and I have given it to you."

She wanted to argue that these things didn't happen or, more to the point, that they could not happen.

Before she could say anything, he offered, "Maybe it is a kind of magic, but if you are happy, I would not take it back."



I Think Therefore We Are - Roe Medlock

Refractions of Golden Light - Harley Mercadal

I find it difficult to write poems about love.
Maybe sadness is easier to package because
I want those moments to cauterize and end,
or maybe my poems are like gravestones,
marking each tiny death of a part of me.

But this poem is supposed to be about love,
though I can't quite capture its meaning: not in
poems, not in life, and definitely not in my mind.
What I mean is I know how to love other people,
but I struggle to let go and allow people to love me.

I've spent a good portion of my life feeling guilty:
guilty for *who* I'm attracted to, guilty for *how many*.
I say I don't believe that love is a finite resource—at
least not when I'm giving it—but when other people
give love, it climbs and whirls like honeysuckle vines:

sweet-smelling, delicious, and beautiful to behold.
My attempts to love bloom self-doubt and anxiety,
feeling more kudzu-like in its suffocation of other
surrounding growth, feeling like too much, feeling I
should trim myself back or dig out the root bulb.

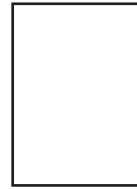
Edith Wharton wrote that "There are two ways of
spreading light: to be the candle or the mirror that
reflects it," and if love like light is truly infinite, then
I will position myself just so, turn my face to their
light, pose, reflect, and be both of my candles' mirror.

Burning - Alyssa Williams





Creative Flow - Ava Byars



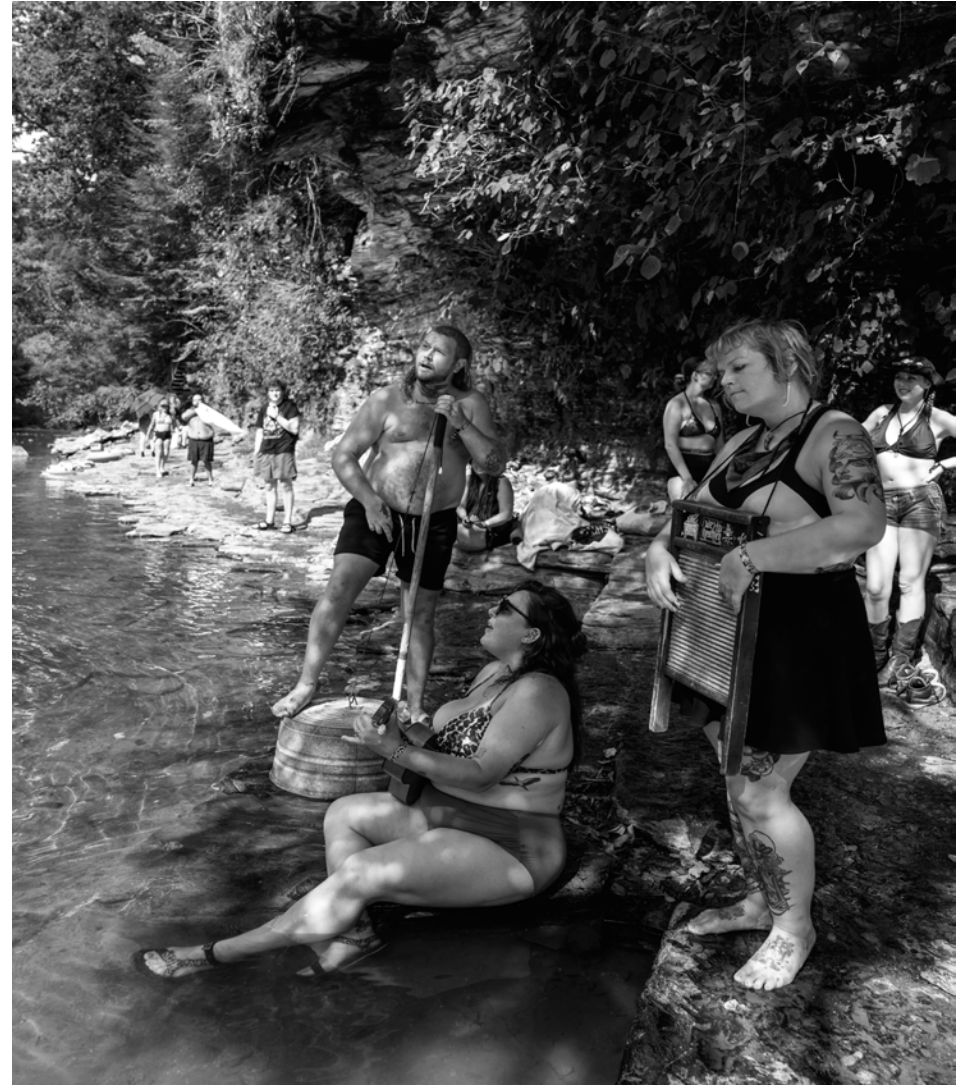
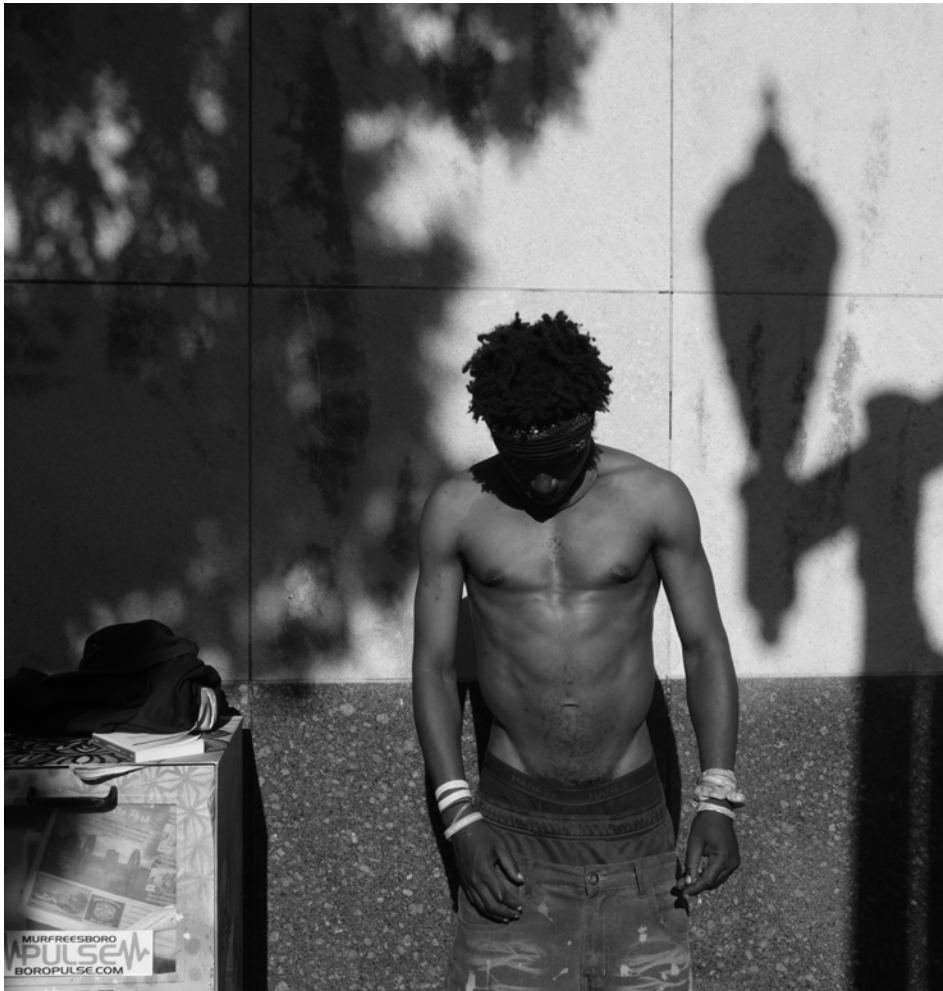
Encore - Sarah Patrick

I am pleading with a loser
 to like me
 to want me
 to need me
 to see past their engulfing self-obsession
 and replace that obsession
 with that of myself
 I am aware of this
 yet still I hurl myself into the abyss of desirability
 further and further I fall
 into the pits of self-effacing phenomenality
 brutally I highlight my extroidanance
 shining and spinning and blinding the potential you hesitate to see in me
 suddenly I find myself in the embrace of others
 they run to meet me on stage
 they throw flowers my way
 they speak of an after-party
 performance over
 audience won
 yet in my peripheral
 you sit
 silently demanding an encore
 never satisfied
 is the loser
 with the extension of myself, I have placed in his lap



Zeva - Cedric White

Taking Form - Zoe Vecchio



Untitled - Sarah Li



***Across the Oceans, Into the Unknown -
Raquel Barbalat***

I packed my dreams in a suitcase small,
Stepped into a world where I knew no one at all.
Across the oceans, under foreign skies,
A new journey began, with wonder in my eyes.

New faces, new names, languages to learn,
In the maze of classrooms, my soul did yearn.
For connection, for laughter, for stories to share,
And I found them all, beyond my own despair.

The cafeteria buzz, the library's glow,
Late-night talks with friends I barely know.
Yet, in their smiles, I saw something true,
A bond that crossed borders, forever new.

Each book, a portal; each lecture, a key,
Unlocking horizons I'd never thought to see.
From physics to poetry, culture to art,
Each moment here shaped a piece of my heart.

And in the silence of homesick nights,
I found strength in the city's twinkling lights.
For though I miss where I once called home,
This campus, too, is where I've grown.

So here's to the friendships, so sweet, so rare,
To the bravery found in the new paths we dare.
To the laughter, the tears, the lessons we glean,
In this shared adventure, where life feels serene.

Across the oceans, into the unknown,
I found myself, and I'm not alone.
For every step led me to see,
The beauty of humanity's tapestry.

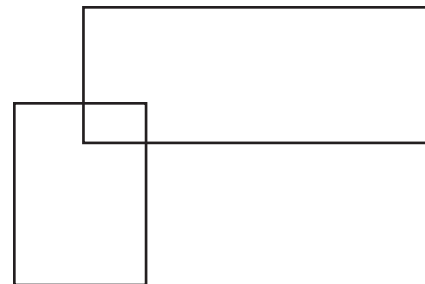
The Psyches Rock - Cadée Havard





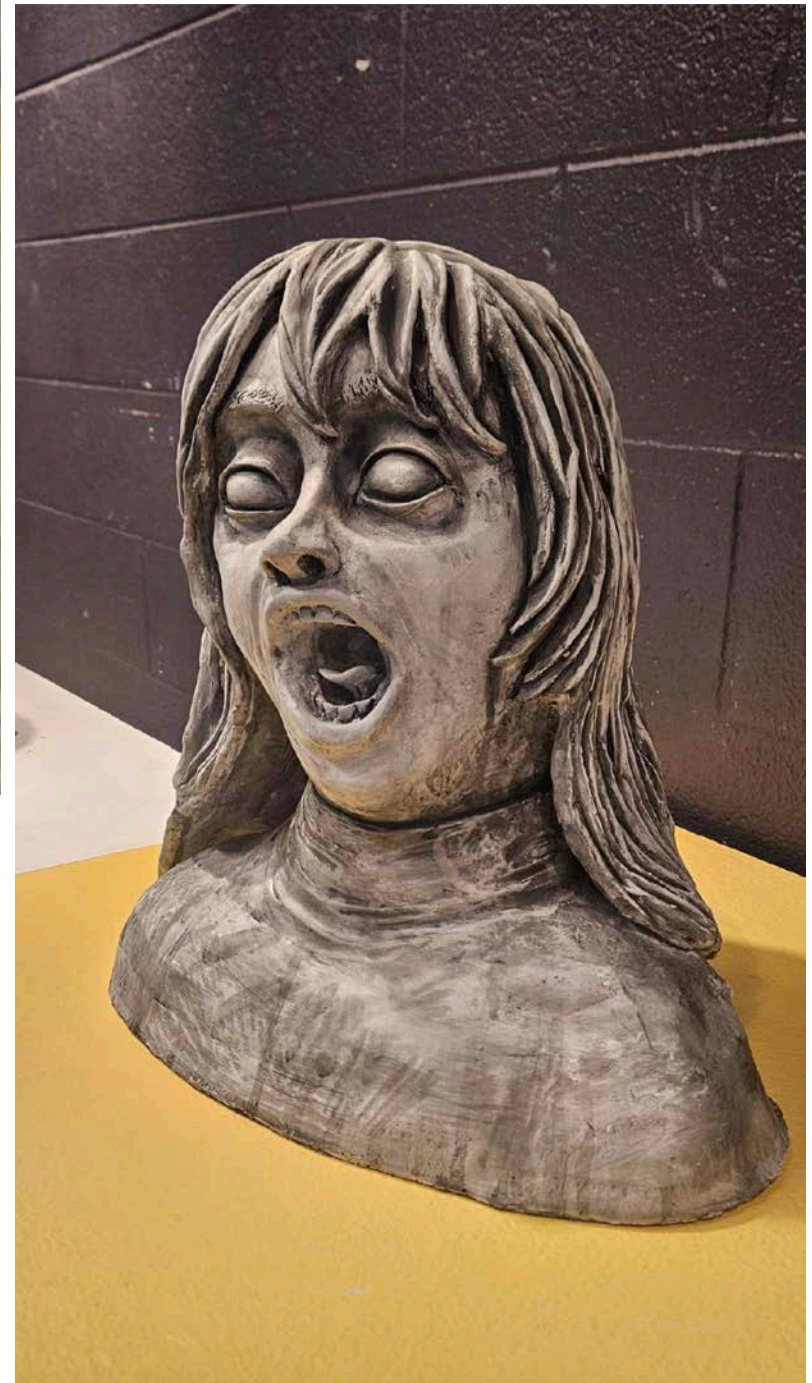
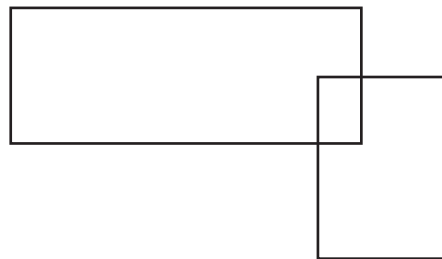
Bella - Cedric White

Rust - Alex Tumbleson





Trash Fish - Sam Roth



Shelly Duvall Ceramic - Paige Corlew

Family - Emily Rogers





In the Clouds - Cadee Havard



God loves you but not enough to save you - Kasey Janke



***sinner* - Alyssa Williams**

a vision in the dark
sent by god - draped in white
with a soft voice and serene smile

i worship

angel
oh angel

i'm on my knees in prayer
soft fingers against my cheek
combing through my sins
you pick out the red
to make it clean

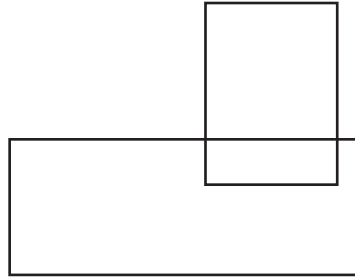
i pray

please

deliver me
to bow at the altar
chosen by the divine
to sing in prayer

to reach heaven's gates
to taste god's pleasures
to bless the holy
and become supreme

angel
oh angel
please
deliver me



This Invisible Ladder - Sarah Patrick

My relationship with you has grown little over time

Plateauing itself at low height

But still I climb

this invisible ladder

In an attempt to reach the heights of the potential I once saw in you.

You reach to me from down below

Calling out my name

while never once considering

the possibility

of growing wings to meet me

offhandedly you add to the disappointment

that will forever harbor itself within me



Quilted Contortion - Charlie Elwell





Botanical Garden - Sam Roth

***Unspoken* - Jenna Brooks**

Memories linger in the soul,
Reminiscing shadows,
Revealing stories of things that could not be.

Voices haunt the spaces in between,
Whispers lost in endless time,
Reverberations fading through the void,
A presence no longer found.

The still ice burns-
The frost creeps through the veins of immobility,
While the fire heals the miserable,
The flames devouring the pain.

To live in irony,
Wrapped in the laughter of ghosts,
While the truth sleeps under the ashes.

To die in sincerity,
The last breath, bare and true,
Echoes in the stillness of memory.

***The Drunkards Three* - Alex Tumbleson**



Watercolor - Sam Roth

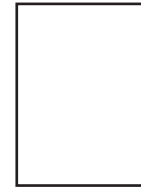


In The Beginning - Alex Tumbleson





Dreaming Meadow - Holly Lynch



Life's Mission - Candace Bohne

The sky is an ocean, and I long to swim
through the stars

I will dance through the waves of debris,
run on the sands of
Saturn's ring

I will explore every reef in the Milky Way,
observing creatures with
wonder and joy

I may wander into the deep end, beyond this
spiraling sea

But if I venture far, the Sun will dim into
nothing and the planets
with it

My curiosity may be my killer, and
I will drown in the icy
waters of space

My dreams, like others, will be lost in the
ripples of the universe

The Stranger - Alex Tumbleson

This is the story of the Stranger. Though I have told it many times before, it is no problem to tell once again. We who remember are growing old, and forgetting, and dying, so I feel it is a duty to tell the tale to anyone who asks, while I am still here to tell it.

The truth is he simply walked out of the desert one day. When my family approached him in the village square the first thing we noticed was his cart, which he pulled himself. It was adorned with gold leaf-patterns along its vertices, and on each face were colorful depictions of kings and monsters and wise men. The fabric of his clothing mushroomed out in odd places and little bells jingled on him. We thought his costume was silly, but assumed it must have been the normal dress for traveling ambassadors in whatever country he had come from. His language was guttural, to my ears: it sounded like rocks scraping together, or trees creaking in the wind. Physically he was highly peculiar, looming taller than anyone in the village, with ivory skin and features that narrowed to elfin points.

But it was his Inventions that mesmerized us the most. First he showed us a wooden box with little wooden musicians who were propelled by a strip of paper with grooves in it, and by changing out the roll of paper one could thereby change the tune they played. He pried open the back to reveal a baffling matrix of metal components which interacted with one another in ways my eyes could not quite grasp. Before we had recovered from the wonder of this, he broke his cane into sections and swiftly constructed a tent from a lightweight fabric wound up within each piece. Into the shade of the tent he set a chest, and drew from it yet more miracles. The first of these was a large hoop with a shimmering soap-bubble in the middle, which two children out of the gathering crowd

volunteered to hold upright while he passed various cuts of meat through it. This process encased them in a transparent film, much like glass, and preserved them for storage. By this point, it seemed the whole village was thronging around, craning for a look.

Children sat on their parents' shoulders and described what they saw, and old people were guided to the front for a closer view of these marvels. Next the Stranger opened a gilded trunk, releasing big white orbs that hovered overhead and illuminated the ground, which was swiftly darkening into night. When it came time to unveil the evening's final Invention, the Stranger took his time in unclasping its case, appearing to know that it would be the most useful and the most dazzling one of all, to us desert people. I say he appeared to know, for his face was so placid and unreadable that one could not be sure. The Invention didn't look like much, at first: it was a large V-shaped structure with an unknown fabric stretched between the two poles, and a clear jug at its base. But once it was set up it rotated of its own accord, and in half an hour the jug had filled with at least four gallons of clear, pure water. Our hearts swelled in our chests; the Stranger took a bow.

For a time, things returned to normal, although word of the mysterious Stranger who lived at the edge of town was on everyone's lips. The water-nets spun on rooftops, box-band music played from windows, and orb-light lit the streets at night; but it was still possible, on certain days, to live as we had before, and hardly think of these things. This period, it must be said, did not last.

One night, weeks later, I was awakened by the sound of heavy footsteps in the street. I went to the window. It was the tailor McClellan, staggering like a zombie beneath the pale orb-light. He appeared to be sleepwalking, yet heading with unwavering fixation toward

something.

I passed by his shop the next day and saw him through the window, seated at his desk. He looked sickly – hunched over, hands trembling on the table – but he wore a strange sort of frozen smile, as though the muscles of his face had permanently contracted. I walked on a little ways and glanced back through the window. He was alone.

In my memory, that was the last day of normalcy. I went to work, spinning pottery with my uncle, and we spoke of nothing but the task at hand, and the fine weather. But a dark feeling troubled me all the while.

On my way back home I passed the shop again. The windows had been covered up with black cloth, but I could hear McClellan moving about inside, whispering to himself as he worked.

A few days later he emerged, sporting the first of what we came to call "suits." Only his face remained exposed; the rest of his body had been armored with dark scales. They shimmered with refracted rainbow-light when he turned in the sun. The material was, of course, supplied by the Stranger. On the street outside his shop McClellan gave a demonstration of the suit to a gathering crowd. He had a metal anvil dragged from within his shop by five men, and when with heaving groans of exertion they had finally toppled it at his feet he asked if anyone would like to try and lift it. The crowd stirred, but no one came forth. With a grin he took hold of it and, as though it weighed no more than a basket of apples, raised it high above his head. The crowd gasped as one. "Now," said McClellan, sweating, "watch this." He crouched low and then leaped into the air, and the anvil rose up higher even than his storefront's painted sign. The ticket of commissions, by day's end, reached his feet.

From that day on, all the town's talk was

continued >>

of suits. Who had gotten one first, who was getting one next. But in the following weeks it became clear that the suits made their own demands. Suit-wearers spent hours each day basking in the sun, and on cloudy days they hid in their homes. And once they'd received their suit they showed no interest in ever taking it off, seeming to fear the very idea. Yet soon more people were wearing them than not.

McClellan's shop was busy day and night. The streets flashed silver, as though my neighbors had been replaced by schools of fish. My uncle and my sister and myself and all the rest of us who held out did our best to keep on with our lives as we had before, and pretend that nothing strange was happening. The Stranger stalked the streets in the evenings, growing taller and more wraith-like each time I saw him.

One day, on my way to work, I saw a man in a suit tottering down the road, presumably on his way to the fields to bask. This was hardly worth noticing.

But when he drew nearer I saw that his suit had stiffened along the spine, holding him upright, and his body sloshed like jelly within it. I didn't sleep that night. In the early hours of the morning I heard the Stranger's feet scuttling madly past my window. I waited a minute, then pulled on my clothes and followed.

The footprints ended at the great half-circle of boulders at the village's edge where the Stranger had parked his cart, but there was no sign of the Stranger himself. Examining the cart up close, I felt in my guts that something was wrong. At first I couldn't tell what it was. I put my hand against it, traced the outline of the shapes. Then it clicked. The elaborate illustrations I'd seen a month before - which had appeared to chronicle the history of a foreign people - revealed themselves at close range to be but

a meaningless patchwork of color. I took a couple steps back, squinted. It was as though the painter had copied out these images blindly, with no understanding of what they meant to depict. I stepped forward and drew open the round door. The cart's interior was dark and it smelled musty. I took up a book from among the odds and ends that lay piled on the floor and cracked it open. The early-morning light was weak and thin, and the print was small. I held the book under my nose and paged through it. Gradually, the illusion of a foreign text faded, and I recognized instead what I can only describe as a scale-pattern - a masterpiece in blind mimicry. The book's pages only superficially reminded me of paper; the pages and the binding and the carriage itself all seemed, beneath my fingers, to be made of the same waxy substance as the suits.

I dropped the book and ran to the village, feeling the thing's eyes on me. The sun had risen by the time I got back. But the streets were vacant. It seemed everyone had gone to the fields. I hurried into my home, grabbed some flint and a pot of candle-oil from beside the hearth, and rushed down to McClellan's.

By this time he'd been working for weeks as though hypnotized, powered by some unknown source of energy, and as far as I knew he left his shop only under cover of night, to meet the Stranger. But when I got there he was gone. The door stood open. I set the oil-pot on his desk and began searching the place high and low.

When I tried his closet door a flood of silver and gold coins avalanched out and buried my feet. But they clacked dully; they were forgeries, made of that same malleable substance. I doused all the terrible machinery and set it aflame.

I hurried down the empty streets to the

courtyard, lugging the oil-pot, but when I arrived there it was deserted as well. A great drag-mark led away from the courtyard, banked around some homes, and proceeded into the open desert. From the village's edge I could see an immense form receding at high speed. I ran after it as fast as my legs could carry me, and as I closed in, lungs burning, I saw what the Stranger had become.

It was nearly twenty feet tall. Three spindly legs on either side of its body propelled it over the desert floor, and what had once appeared as bells and frills adorning its clothing had warped back into the ridges of a scaly exoskeleton. It dragged more than half the town behind it in a translucent sac, and those who had not yet fully dissolved into the metallic fluid pressed their faces against it and cried out to me for rescue. I ran after it. Once I'd dodged through the jittering legs I had to sprint to keep from falling behind. One leg flicked around to brush me away; I ducked, and it went sailing by just inches above my head. I yanked the cork out of the oil-pot. Another leg lifted, about to bear down on me. There was no time to pour out the oil. I raised the pot over my head and brought it down on the exoskeleton with a great crash, and had the flint in my hands when the leg slammed into my chest, and the sky and earth went whirling around me.

I came to, not knowing how long I'd been out. Huge waves of pain surged through my lungs. I tried to breathe but could only draw in a little air; my chest felt crushed. All I could do was roll a little onto my side and lie there wheezing. Had I gotten a spark out? I couldn't remember. The thing was just a point in the distance, but by raising my head a little I could barely make out a thin trail of black smoke issuing from it as it raced on toward an immense shadow - as large as God himself, I thought deliriously - which waited to receive it.

A voice approached me from behind.

A moment later McClellan, stark naked, sailed over my body. He landed on all fours, scrambled to his feet, and tore on at a full sprint, waving his arms and shouting, "Wait, wait!" The pinprick that was the Stranger disappeared into some chamber or orifice of the shadow that had opened up for it, and a minute later the whole earth began to shudder. I could see pebbles jumping up and down. Within minutes the great shadow had buried itself, once again, beneath the sand. The survivors carried me home. Months passed before I recovered enough to speak. Each night I lay wheezing and listened to McClellan shouting in the desert, where he was to remain until the end of his days, searching tirelessly for the angels who had shown him visions of heaven, and forgotten to take him with them when they returned.

We still hear rumbles. They come from deep within the earth. We tell each other it's only burrowing, or moving somewhere else, and that life can go on as before. But the village has nearly emptied out. People depart quietly, often at night, leaving empty houses and stables behind. Those like my uncle who swore their commitment to rebuilding our village don't act quite as proud as they did before. His new community church sits half-constructed, abandoned for lack of resources. Desert animals shelter there when it rains. People piled the music-boxes and orb-lights into abandoned houses, preferring to forget about them rather than destroy them. But if you go out on the streets during the day you'll see water-wheels turning on every rooftop. We don't talk about that much - I think we feel some sort of collective guilt about it.

As soon as my ribs healed enough for me to speak, I began making preparations for leaving. After what happened, I don't think anyone blamed me for wanting to get away. Maybe my uncle felt betrayed. If he did, he kept his thoughts to himself.

The evening before my departure, after

piling everything I owned into a small wagon, I went down to the little bar to say my farewells to whoever happened to be there. My fellow potter Tommy was there, and the barman Will, both of whom I'd grown up with. They were good sports about my leaving. They set big cups of wine in front of me and clapped me on the back and recounted my heroic encounter with it. But pretty soon I felt I had to leave. There was something I wanted to see.

I returned to the place where the Stranger's cart had been. The survivors had intended to burn it, but by the time they got there with their torches it had melted away to a sort of black jelly on the ground, and the next day the jelly hardened to dust, and the dust blew away. But that wasn't what I came for.

The big semicircle of stones shone silver in the moonlight. I'd always felt odd about them. The desert is full of rocks eroded by the wind into weird forms, but I'd seen plenty of those, and I knew what they looked like. These were different. The texture of the rock face was lumpy, as though smaller stones had been piled here long ago, and time had flattened and fused them together. And there - that small opening, the one I'd kicked many a ball through when we'd played here as children - I realized then that it was a window.

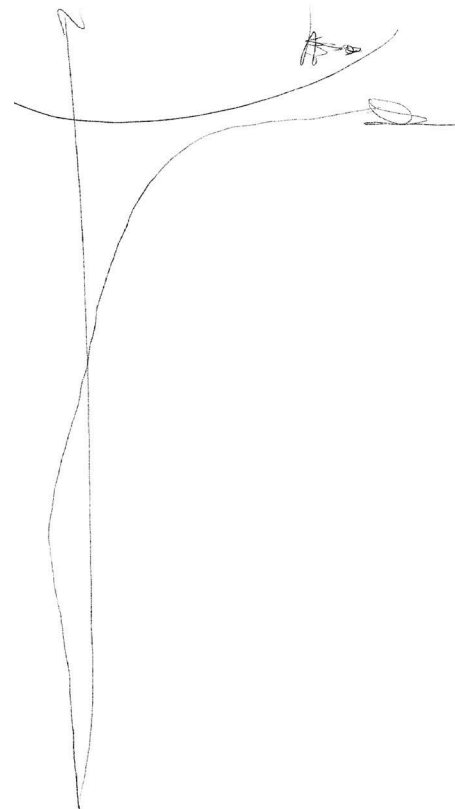
I was standing inside a ruined castle. I found a flat rock with a sharp edge, returned to the castle, and began to dig. The deeper I went, the faster my arms scooped up the dirt and tossed it away. I felt crazy. But an hour later I still hadn't found much. A few bits of gray chalky stuff that crumbled in my fingers. A blank shard of pottery that could have been from any time. A tarnished piece of metal - half a ring, by the looks of it. I kept digging until I hit what must have been the castle's stone floor. Then I began widening the hole, working more by feel than by the weak moonlight that was quickly dimming away behind the clouds.

I wish I could tell you I dug up some stone

tablet that night, or uncovered a wall of carvings that explained the thing's nature. Something that told me what to do next. But there were no answers. As the night turned cold I lay breathing at the bottom of the hole I'd dug, gazing helplessly at the stars as they went blurry behind my tears.

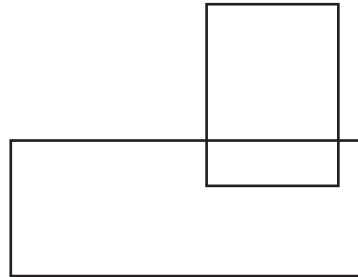
I made it back home before dawn. I washed my hands to the elbow, wrapped myself in some blankets, and sat at the table, gazing into the flame of a solitary candle. When the room began to brighten I hardly noticed it. Just kept my eyes on the candle flame, shearing this way and that, and thinking, How quickly the strangest things become familiar to us.

Then I nodded off.





Collective Effervescence - Aliyah Shuman



The Forgotten Garden - Meghan Chamblin

There's a garden over the horizon, over yonder down the mountain.
The garden is where all the lost things grow,
Where the forgotten go.

Old dreams bloom in the rosebuds.
Dancing ballerinas in the form of tulips and puppy-dog daisies.
Somewhere in the garden live all the versions of me that have passed.
There, none of my friendships know the word, "end."
Graycie and I are still playing on the swings,
Katelynn and I are still being called twins.
Braiding hair trains never stop.

There's a tire swing like the one in my childhood,
Still up—the rope no longer snapped.
All my great grandmothers sit in rocking chairs talking about the weather.
The willow tree from one of the many childhood homes, weeping of tomorrows that never have to come.
I think I see a younger version of my sister, before she falls off.
I see a distant beach, the one I grew up with.
Seashells line the shore.

Go to the forgotten garden, just down the road, across the street, and past the sunset.
Go to the forgotten garden where all the things you thought were lost are always found.
Just go over the mountain, trek the rough roads, and move the brush out of the way.
The garden is waiting for you.
Have you forgotten?



CHARLOTTE - Cadee Havard



Watchful Gaze - Alyssa Williams



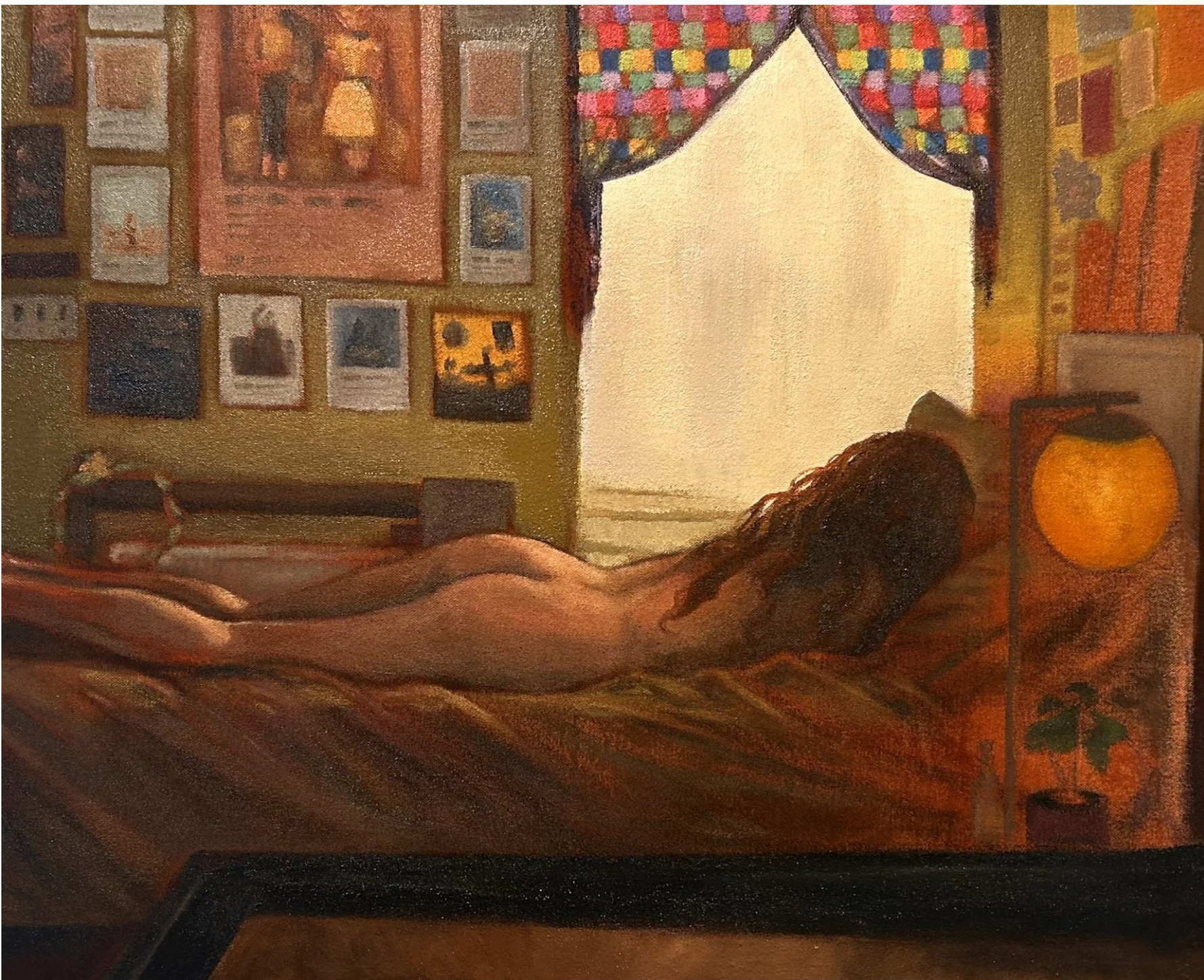
Shepherd - Emily Rogers

Pine Forest - Emily Caudill





Spooky Photography - Jude Cox



Scrabble - Jessica Law

Laying on the hard concrete floors, with only a thin carpet between the floor and my skin, I fell in love with you. I made the first move, placing "HOME" on your center. I laughed while my sister and I took turns placing letters on your flesh. You gave me an opportunity to win, with your squares highlighting the places I should touch, but I was left with a "Q" and no place to go. I lost the game, but I still think back to my joints aching on the floor as I hunched over to play with you. Oh, how I loved it...every second.



Hummingbird - Zoe Vecchio

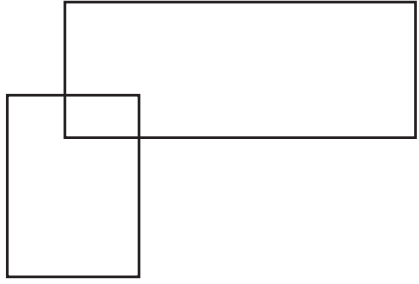




The Cow - Paige Corlew



The Hole In the Wall - Paige Corlew



Waiting Game - Cadee Havard



Philadelphia - Alex Tumbleson



I came out of the womb singing. That's what my mother always told me: that the entire hospital lit on fire with the sound of my voice, and the labor and delivery unit received calls about my cries from three floors up in oncology. I doubt this was as much true as it was her claim that I was born with a destiny intertwined with my voice.

She died the day I turned 50. No one sang that day. The cake we purchased went uneaten, and the candles we bought got stuffed into the junk drawer. My husband decided we'd save the "5" candle for when I turned 51 and the "0" for when I turned 60. I told him that he would turn 60 before I did, so why shouldn't we just use the "0" candle then, but he ignored me and we forgot about it, except I didn't because I'm bringing it up now.

I'm 54 now. I had once supposed the theater would boot me the moment my age began to show under the hot lights, but I have been bringing them crowds for almost three decades, so it's safe to say either they're not ageist or I am profitable enough to keep on the stage for at least a little awhile longer. They're planning my 30-year celebration solo showcase in April that has already sold out with a six-figure approximated revenue. They've even flown in a renowned composer from Turin who claims he is a descendant of Scarlatti to teach me a song he has written for my performance. I am not sure I shall be fond of him, but my love for the opera supersedes my disdain for the annoying.

Speaking of annoyance, there's a kind of irritability that keeps my company as of late – an anklet of paperweights that has attached itself to my feet and drags behind me, wearing me down.

I am certain, at 54 years of age, that my stamina has worn out. This is what irritates

me. It was to be expected, of course, that I wouldn't always function as I did at 24 when I began my opera career. I can certainly still belt my way through an improvised cadenza, and I have mastered a critically acclaimed portamento after all these years, but I am left quite strained nowadays. My throat always hurts. It's a difficult thing to swallow. Getting old.

I first felt that pernicious lump I could not swallow last week. In truth, I think I've felt it for much longer, but I have never cared to admit to myself what it could possibly be. But I knew what was there in that pocket of space deep past my tongue where my voice sat: my destiny, as my mother would say. That rotting edge of reality that dictates our bodies are not meant to remain youthful forever. It was only a matter of time before I began to wear. When the camera first shone down my throat into the blinking eye of my glottis, the doctors could not perceive any visible protrusion. It was instead in the scans where I lit up just like the fire of my voice in the hospital all those years ago. You know the word.

Cancer.

It is this inevitable self-sabotage of the body that is always meant to happen to others. It is not meant to happen to you. You are meant to live into old age, coming out on the tail end of the expanse of life with a smile, happy to have escaped its suffering. But the suffering was here, knocking at my door and rising out of my throat like the smoke of a dragon, clouding the vision of my stinging eyes.

What were my options?

That was what my husband first asked the laryngeal cancer specialist while I sat on the observation table, silent for the first time in my life.

I was lucky, the doctor said.

The way the tumor was attached to my vocal cords meant that, with a simple procedure, they could cut the cancer out. I would make a full recovery after six weeks, and I could carry on with my life, unlikely to face this same cancer again. But I would lose my voice.

I was lucky, the doctor said. The hospital had excellent resources, including a virtual sign language education program and text-to-speech machinery of varying prices and quality, which I could utilize to maintain my ability to communicate.

But I would lose my voice.

I gripped at my throat, peeling at that loathsome thing under my flesh, digging to rip the lump out with my nails, hoping to kill the evil hiding inside the center of my soul. The voiced hum of my screams vibrated against my hand curled into a choke-hold upon myself. My husband, noticing, quickly and gently retracted my fingers from my neck to hold them inside the electric warmth of his palms. However, he failed to bring me back to life with his defibrillator hands. I was gone – flat-lined since the flames first started to lick at the open wound of my soul.

After the doctor's visit, my husband tried to convince me it wasn't as bad as I thought it was. I would live – it was a miracle! Thank God we caught it before it had the chance to spread. Right. Of course. I'd be silly not to thank God for giving me a cancer that hasn't taken to the rest of my body yet. To thank Him for putting that cancer dead center in the middle of my throat.

I still had the choice as a patient, with freedom and rights and what have you, to

continued >>

decide whether I wanted to pursue tumor removal. My doctor told me to let them know my decision by Friday so they could get me in for surgery within the next two weeks. So, there I was, finding that, within the span of days, I could sing before an audience of thousands and then permanently surrender my voice to the perfect surgical blade of a knife.

Oh, but it could have been worse. Thank God.

It's easy to be on the side of reassurance when the devastation is not happening to you. There was nothing reassuring to me in that, in losing my voice, I would still maintain my ability to communicate my needs. What I needed, more than anything – to avoid the devastation – was to sing. Certainly, I could type into my text-to-speech device the lyrics I wanted to convey, but a robotic impression of the human phonation would not be the same thing as singing.

*No, no, sulla tua bocca lo dirò
quando la luce splenderà!*

*Ed il mio bacio scioglierà il silenzio
che ti fa mia!*

Today is Friday, and my answer is due. The anniversary concert is in a month. I have not yet told anyone at the theater. How could I? In my silence, perhaps I shall just endure into a state of quiet at all times so no one questions the moment I truly cannot make sound anymore, but that Scarlatti guy is rehearsing with me on Monday so I cannot refrain from using my voice – how could I ever bear to do so?

My husband called off work this week to spend time with me, and instead I have gone to the theater. It is the only place I can escape from the inevitable, at least until I sing for too long and my throat hurts while I verge into states of near collapse from exhaustion. Maybe I don't have to say anything to anyone at the theater. Maybe they already know.

I woke early this morning while my husband still snored, and I left immediately for the theater, neglecting to eat breakfast or brush my teeth. My breath probably stunk with the odor of the cancer lodged in my throat, speaking for me those hideous ineffable words that elicited sympathetic looks as tangible as get-well-soon cards I'd sooner burn than cherish.

I parked in the lot adjacent to the backstage door and made my way up the small set of concrete stairs I once fell and chipped a veneer on. Inside, the backstage hallway floor shone with scuff marks. The air pulsed with the smell of fresh paint and the dye of black curtain fabric. Someone passed me with a "hello." I forgot to respond.

I wandered through the stage door propped open by a crooked stool because of its tendency to squeak as people moved in and out of the wings all day. I entered the darkness and surveyed the crew under the blue lights as they worked to set up today's rehearsal before the performers' call times. I was uncertain which production they were working on, but no one cast their eyes up to me as I drifted past the props master, labeling a table with an apprentice and some runners discussing the thickness of their blocking tape with an assistant director. I glided past, a ghost, rattling the obsidian skirt of the stage curtains as I wandered out into the heat of the overhead lights.

A few staff were scattered among the audience, cleaning the rows of seats. No one looked up. The distant whir of a vacuum accompanied the dial tones of my phone. The line rang for a few moments.

*Thank you for calling St. Philip's Hospital's
Office of Head Throat and Neck Services. Your
call is very important to us. Please stay on
the line, and a representative will be with you
shortly.*

I had dreaded, but equally figured I'd be put on hold.

*All calls are recorded for quality assurance
purposes. If you have further questions about
the information we gather, call our data
services team at 745-3623.*

The dull knot of a headache pounded behind the center of my forehead, knocking incessantly, begging me to open up and confront it. The tears already covered my face, hot and fuzzy. Their bitter taste fell upon my lips, preparing them for the words I was going to say of a diminishing lexicon that was soon coming to its end as if I were a TV turning off, with all of my light dragged to my center and reduced to darkness in a single instant.

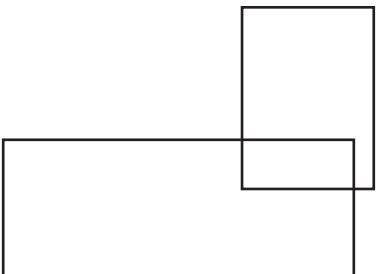
*If you'd like to leave a message, please
press 1.*

Chirpy music bounced in the background, scratching along – a singular shrill nail across a chalkboard – under the filtered quality of the phone call. It had no reason to be played other than to fill what would otherwise be a silence, as if callers would somehow find themselves in too great a fear of what lives–or, more rather, what dies–in the vastness of those quiet pauses between the repetitive utterances of a cheerful voice actor. I think I prefer the nails on the chalkboard.

The automated messaged looped, repeating at least ten times – almost taunting me to give up by leaving a message. But I held on, underneath the spotlight, standing center-stage – determined to make the last words I had in me count for something. The vacuum whirled closer. A ringing interrupted the automated message, and a click came from the other end.

"Hi, you have reached the Office of Head, Neck, and Throat Specialist Services. How may I help you today?"

I parted my lips. No matter my decision, I would soon never sing again.



Untitled - Sarah Li



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Collage
Middle Tennessee State University
1301 East Main Street, Box 267,
Paul W. Martin Sr. Honors Building, Room 224
Murfreesboro, TN 37132

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Gold Crown Awards

2012, 2013, and 2015

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