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THETHREADMAG.ORG

# THE THREAD



The Thread  
Vol. 2 Issue 1  
Central Oregon Community College

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*The Thread* is the student literary magazine of COCC, established to spotlight the creative work of student writers and artists. We believe there is strength in variety of perspectives and revere the honest, inspired writing of the intrepid literary adventurer. Through the mediums of creative nonfiction, fiction, and poetry, we provide opportunities for students to connect and inspire others with voices *sui generis*. Whether it's a journal sewn by time, or a confession crocheted at 2am, we believe the strands of our diverse voices stitch a unifying thread.





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## Editorial Staff

Katya Agatucci    Raimi Nolta  
 Anne Carne        Stanley Souza  
 Angelina Miller    Vaughn Wheelis

## Faculty Advisor

Eileen Sather

## Design & Layout

Mariah Ayers

# Hesitance

by Stanley Souza

*“The flower fades, but the hesitance  
Of the petals, last and sweet,  
Is the quiet of a dream complete.”  
— Ezra Pound*

A chrysanthemum flown in fall is gold, and it fades  
to amber-honey—cooling color, autumn’s  
feather accedes its vibrancy,  
retains its sensual symbols; cropped fields,  
assurance in the light of the sun, a wound,  
the sacrifice of distance, flag from green  
urged by the thrill of its star, and award of patience  
that tests itself in time to gain its beauty,

where the eye reads ‘fidelity’  
until the cool wind of winter culls.  
Each season authors its own perfection.  
The heart’s act of naming brought indoors  
rests on our kitchen counter to call you home.  
Can you read it there? Have you found warmth?



# Kalamata Olives

by Lindsey Spakousky

I tromp down the steep stairs, angry thoughts filling my head. Over the past month I've been exhausted, a feeling that has transformed into anger when it seemed no one cared. People think it's easy to be a full time college student. They think there's no mental toll. They think it's ok to ask more of me than I can give.

But the worst. Oh the worst is my friend. We had a huge falling out a month or two ago and it was a miracle we came back to being friends. Except there's a toll. Everything I do around her is wrong. "How dare you think that, it's dangerous." "Why didn't you tell me?"

*You never cared enough to ask*, my angry mind bites, thinking back to her words. Day and night it haunted me, reminding me I'm a bad friend while my homework piles higher and higher above my head.

A loud growl comes from my stomach, distracting me from dark thoughts. Yes, that's right. Food. The whole reason I was making the trek down Mount Grandview when my next class was in Jefferson.

I had a bad habit of not getting up in time to eat before class, and today I was paying for it. I couldn't get home until 2:30 and had forgot to pack a lunch. I'd searched all around the vending machines for real food and come up empty. All I had on me was a single \$5 bill. I was hoping I could find something in the café that cheap.

I watch the cars on College Way stop as someone crosses the street. She didn't even wave at the drivers.

*Bitch*. I shut my eyes tight and breathe deep. No. I don't know this girl and that was a very rude thing to call her. I don't even like that word! I feel my frown deepen and the darkness in my mind growing from a puddle to a pit.

This is why I didn't think I deserve kindness. Yet all I want is for someone to shine a tiny light on my dark head. I can picture it- a flower growing from a bed of ashes of burned down friendships and mental health.

I get to the crosswalk and watch as a couple cars pass me by. I'm starting to get frustrated that no one will stop for

me when a car finally slows down. I make sure to wave at the driver and jog across the road.

Before me lies the café. The endgame. I pray they have something under \$5. My stomach demonstrates a whale call.

Inside the café there's a short line. A display features all their food items and the price. I'm scanning looking for something, \$6, \$5.50, there! \$4.75. I can afford that!

Relief floods me. I won't starve. It's some Greek noodle salad, not my first choice, but it doesn't sound gross either. I'm not sure anything would sound gross at this point. I get to the register and order the noodle salad. The woman at the register doesn't seem like she wants to be there, she takes a long time getting the salad, and there's no greeting. She rings up the salad and I see the card reader screen flash \$5.50. Maybe I read that wrong. If she says I don't have enough I will point straight at the sign next to the noodle salad stating it's \$4.75. I will fight her.

But I don't get the chance. I'm pulling out my dollar bill and it's halfway to her when she says "We don't accept cash." She stares at me, waiting for me to pull out a card. I don't have one with me. That was all I had. Her gaze is bored, and she clearly doesn't care if I can't pay for this.

I'm angry at her, angry at COCC, and angry at the world for thinking cashless is even a good idea. But rather than responding in anger, I deflate. I feel my shoulders slump and my face turn down.

That noodle salad is the only thing I want. It was my only hope of surviving the day. I can't have it. I stand broken and confused for a moment, trying to figure out what to do with myself. Do I argue with her or try to walk away with the dignity that has washed away with her words?

Out the corner of my eye I see a card tap the screen.

What happens next is so fast it's hard to break down, and I'm too confused to understand what's going on. I look to my left and a tall boy is holding his card out, having



clearly just paid for my food. I'm floored. My jaw hangs open for a moment before I attempt to compose myself.

I gush out a thank you, but it's not enough. I must pay him back, I can pay for my meal even if it isn't directly to the café. I hand him the dollar bill. He holds up his hand up and shakes his head; he won't take my money.

I'm too confused to know what to do with myself. I'm trying to find the best way to thank him as he grabs his drink. Before I know it he's gone, walked out of the café. I stand with my mouth open next to the cash register,

holding a pasta salad someone else paid for. A stranger. A stranger who I already forgot what he looked like, who I never got a name from, who, in the rush of it all, I can't promise I thanked him properly.

A stranger who didn't think twice about helping me when he received nothing in return.

Eventually I shake myself out of the stupor and find there's nothing for me to do except grab a fork and eat. My mind still reeling, I find a couch and sit down. I eat the salad, it's not as good as I'd hoped, yet the kindness shown to me today made it worth every bite. I refused to pick out more than half the Kalamata olives, despite not liking them, because someone else paid for those olives. It was a little detail, but I would not let his kindness go unappreciated.

I'd woken up and the whole world had been dark, and getting darker by the minute. But I suppose the world isn't as dark as my mind is. Because there's

people who shine a light in it. People who have never met me and take the time to care.

As far as I know I've never met this boy again. Later in the year, when I started liking a boy I entertained the idea that he'd been the one to pay for my meal and that was our meet-cute, but looking back I know that can't be. Instead, whoever paid for me came into my life for three minutes before leaving, yet showed a light that I'd failed to see for months.

## What Memory Steeps

*by Madina Aria*

Steam hissed out the kettle,  
not a disturbance,  
but a loud reminder  
of what awaited me.

In the cabinet—  
cluttered, crammed,  
colorful—  
sat my mug.

The mug I filled with:

A teaspoon of loose tea leaves  
A pod of cardamom  
A dried rose bud  
All shriveled at the bottom.

But I couldn't forget  
the fiery red saffron,  
just a sliver  
piled one onto another.

The elements,  
once small and dehydrated,  
soon bloomed back to life  
at the touch of the hot water.

The aroma mixed  
with steam,  
filling the air,

reminding me of  
my childhood,  
my home,  
my mother.

The contents swirled,  
spread in the heat,  
tinted the water a rich gold  
like my memories.

Too hot to taste,  
I blew once,  
twice,  
yet still burned  
the tip of my tongue.

Just like I had the morning before.



# Street Lamps

by Katya Agatucci

“Oh my god, just *lie*,” Maddy hissed at Skye, rolling her eyes as her fingers flew across the keyboard of her Motorola Backflip. She tossed her waist-length blond hair over one shoulder and readjusted her mini denim American Eagle shorts that had been riding up the entire evening.

“What if he calls me when we’re already there wanting me to come home?” Skye’s use of going to Maddy’s house when they actually were sneaking out was starting to become a tired excuse, and she could sense it in her dad’s voice each time she used it. She mindlessly fidgeted with her silver thumb ring as she awaited Maddy’s wrath.

“That’s your problem. He shouldn’t even care that we’re going to the park, we go all the time.” Maddy’s voice started to falter from her usual sugary voice to a shrill yap: “Nothing is different about going at night. Suck it up. You’re such a baby.”

Olive and Layla froze while they witnessed the two of them argue. Their eyes darted back and forth from Maddy towering over her and Skye’s demeanor shriveling as she avoided the conflict. Skye was the newest addition to the group; there was an unsaid form of hazing that the rest of them enacted upon her (mostly distributed by Maddy) even though they enjoyed her company. Her nickname in the group was “twig” since she was the least developed out of the group and still couldn’t fill out even oo jeans, though she certainly tried, making her clothing consistently unintentionally baggy.

“C’mon guys, I want to go swing,” Olive protested, breaking the sudden silence between them. “We’ll be there for maybe an hour!” Her big sister energy emulated even in the group, unfailingly being the voice of reason. She was the shortest of the four and the least talkative with long naturally ringleted brown hair that had a red tint in direct sunlight.

Layla’s eyes—caked with 3 layers of Covergirl Lash Blast mascara—lit up and she immediately

seconded Olive: “I agree with Liv. I’ve been waiting all day to do something outside, we’ll go alone if we have to.” She rose to head towards Maddy’s front door, grabbing a scrunchie from her wrist to tie up her mousy brown hair as she turned away from them.

“Absolutely not!” Skye squawked, finally finding her voice, “I’m going, we’re going.” gesturing to the four of them, reluctantly making eye contact with Maddy as well.

It was midsummer of 2010, and the night was begging for some adventure from Skye, Maddy, Olive, and Layla. They were all freshly 13, lived within walking distance of each other, and had a sliver of freedom for the first time their entire lives.

The relentless dry heat had rocked the girls into a cyclic haze the entire season: wake up just before noon since Maddy’s mom slept well into the afternoon, brace the heat on her trampoline or stay inside Skyping current boyfriends, and run around their adjoining residential neighborhoods in search of something to entertain themselves come sundown. 9 times out of 10, it was a five minute walk to the local elementary school park, and that night that’s exactly what they decided on.

The four of them walked in the middle of the road, barefoot because the asphalt was still warm from the heat of the day, stretched out across the black top with Maddy at the center strutting along the yellow median line. The street lamps sat at the edge of the residential housing lining the two way street, illuminating the girls in a marmalade-like glow as they walked. They all took a sharp left turn away from the street lamps into the dark that led to the last stretch before arriving at the park; the moon was full and the sky was littered with clouds, but from a distance they could still spot the glisten of the metal poles from which the swings hung. There weren’t any lights surrounding the school or sidewalk towards it, but the dark was

enticing. It created an atmosphere of mystery to them that they were always peckish for.

“Last one to the bark doesn’t get a swing!” Olive broke into a sprint and the rest of them ran after her to claim a spot.

Olive crashed into the metal chains of the swings right as Layla did, leaving Maddy and Skye battling for the last one. Maddy was a competitive gymnast; she had legs for days and the attitude of someone who never loses. The two of them were dashing forward at the same pace and when Maddy realized it, she shoulder-checked Skye, giving herself a half second advantage to jump onto the last seat.

“Ha! Sucks to suck!” Maddy spat in a peal of laughter.

Mid-swing and up in the air, Olive reassured her to break the tension: “I’ll be done in like 2 minutes, I’ll meet you over by the monkey bars!”

Skye trudged over to the playground, head down and fighting the urge to walk home without a word. She didn’t bother entertaining herself, she just sat on the edge of one of the wood planks bordering the area. She couldn’t help herself from staring over to them taking turns swinging in perfect synchronization with each other, squealing competitive claims over their spaces.

“Get out of my shower!!”

“Nonono, we’re married!!”

“We’re double dating!”

“Now we’re triple dating!!!”

Skye huffed and turned her back towards them, thinking again about abandoning her friends: *Why am I even here. They make me feel like shit. I should-* Her thought was interrupted by the snapping of bark right out of her earshot, opposite of the swings.

*Great. Just what I needed,* Skye thought as she realized it was probably their friends Maisy and Erin walking over from their neighborhood next to the school. She didn’t even look up, expecting them to see her and come up to greet her.

When no one emerged from the darkness, she finally got up and walked towards the sound. She hadn’t been paying much attention to this side of the playground the entire time, but she finally turned

towards one of the slides off to the side and realized someone was standing at the top of it, completely still.

Chills ran down her spine, but she ignored it thinking that maybe it was just the silence that was throwing her off.

She forced out a laugh as she said “Erin? Have you been here the whole time? You should have texted one of us! We would have come sooner.”

Nothing. Silence. They didn’t even move.

“Ha-ha, very funny. Come down, there aren’t enough swings but Liv said she was getting off soon.”

Skye was about to call out for the girls when she heard Olive jogging towards her. “Wh—who were you talking to?” Olive panted as she slowed to a walk.

Skye answered by slowly pointing to the top of the slide. Olive didn’t respond. Skye broke her gaze towards the figure and was met with Olive’s eyes bulging out and staring at the rest of the playground. It was too dark to make out most of the area when they first arrived, but Skye’s eyesight adjusted right as she noticed Olive’s horrified look.

Skye turned towards what Olive was looking at and realized that they hadn’t been alone the entire time. Eleven people were spaced out, sitting or standing every few feet, along the play structure: the figure she thought was Erin at the top of the slide, one on the stairs, two on the bridge, one every three or four feet on the flattest part leading to the kiddy slides, two sitting atop of the monkey bars, and three on the ground underneath the bridge. Every single one was facing them, all immobile as if they were rooted in place. Their silhouettes were identical: tall and hooded. Their stillness made every hair on Skye’s body stand up. Something wasn’t right. The only noise they could hear came from Layla and Maddy urging each other to jump off of the swings at the same time.

“Okay! One, two, three!” Maddy landed on the grass in front of the bark surrounding the swings first, “Shit! My phone fell out of my pocket, is it by you Layla?”

Layla made a graceless landing right after Maddy, toppling right next to where she was searching: “Just have Liv call you, I left my phone at your house. Hey! Liiiiiv! Get over here, call Maddy so we can find her

phone! I know you have enough data left over to call her. Why aren't you answering?"

"Let's just go to them, I'm over the swings." Maddy huffed, patted grass off her shirt, and ran with Layla over to the playground.

"Are you two ignoring me on purpose? What the hell is going o—" Layla was stopped in her tracks as she took in her friends completely transfixed by the group of people that were wordlessly stationary on the play structure.

Before any of them could speak or realize what they were doing, all four of them were sprinting towards the field leading to the side of the school. The brick building's side entrance had a small overhang and a glass door that wasn't visible from the playground, so they stopped there to catch their breath.

"Okay." Skye gasped, bent over with her hands on her knees as she tried to find the words: "That was weird, right? Why did none of them move?"

Olive was about to respond to tell everyone to keep running when a fluorescent ceiling light flickered on and off inside the building. The light sporadically turned on and off until it finally stayed on, revealing one of those figures inside the school hallway—hauntingly motionless—right underneath that light maybe 30 feet away from them. The person was facing them but the

dim overhead lighting cast the space where a face should be in a hooded black shroud.

Layla let out a blood curdling scream which seemed to jolt the other three out of their trance and they all bolted as fast as they could towards Maddy's house. It only took a couple of minutes for them to reach her street and once they finally got back, they were all too petrified to turn around to see if anyone followed them.

"We need to sit down for a second before going in." Maddy slumped down onto the sidewalk curb and fell backwards onto the lawn, "Fuck, what am I going to tell my mom about my phone!"

Skye was turned away from the house, facing the main road they had just come from:

"You guys..." she shakily let out.

"God, Skye! Can you shut up for one second and just let me calm down?" Maddy's hands were covering her face and her voice was muffled.

"W-w-where's Olive..."

The three of them went silent as they stood up, one by one, staring at the road. They didn't say a word to each other, but they could all hear their breathing become more and more staggered as they realized that the street lamps were flickering.



## Beneath the Tree

*by Madison Hermon*

You're beautiful, shielded by your branches and leaves

If I could, I'd cut you a stick  
place it beside your bowing form  
hold you up, make you stronger  
but that's not something I can do

all I can do is sit beneath you  
appreciate the sunlight through your leaves  
let the dew seep into my skirt

listen to you rustle  
hear you creak

and pray that you won't fall

I revel in your shade  
resist the urge to hug your trunk  
to kiss the leaves that fall around me

I release my hope like a bird  
the hope of being someone you could love  
and still

I sit  
beneath your tree





# From Hopeless to Hope

by Courtney Miskell

Some of my earliest memories of reading don't come from quiet libraries or even cozy bedtime stories, they came from moments when I needed an escape. Growing up reading wasn't just a hobby—it became a doorway out of a chaotic home and into worlds where I could feel safe and in control. Each stage of my reading life, from a third-grade pizza reward to discovering poetry and true crime, helped me understand myself as a reader and person today.

I still remember sitting in my third-grade classroom when the librarian walked in holding a stack of colorful papers. The room smelled like pencil shavings with a musty smell coming from the heater. She started talking while I had my head down, doodling on a piece of paper and when I heard her say the word “challenge,” my whole body seemed to snap to attention. I sat up straight in my chair, lifted my chin up and listened with intensity. At first the idea of having to set a monthly reading goal sounded like it was too much work. When the librarian said the magic words of earning a “free personal pizza” for meeting the goal, my heart thumped with excitement and suddenly reading felt like something I could win at.

The first month of the “challenge” I set a goal of reading three books a week. From the moment I opened my first book, the world around me had faded and loneliness blurred. My mom worked long hours while my stepdad filled the house with yelling that echoed through the walls. Most nights I ate dinner alone in my room with the door cracked just enough to hear the rise and fall of his voice and eventually would fall asleep waiting to hear the faint voice of my mom when she came home from work. While reading I wasn't a kid stuck in her bedroom anymore, I was inside the story, living and experiencing someone else's life. Before I knew it one book turned into two and then it turned into five a week. I would wake up on my bedroom floor at 4 am to the soft footsteps of my mom getting ready for work, quickly pretending that

I'm asleep again when she kissed my forehead before she left for work in the mornings. As soon as the door closed, I would flip my book open again and continue reading until it was time for school. Reading had become my secret refuge and being able to earn those pizzas felt like earning little tiny pieces of freedom. This memory matters because it was the first time that reading had felt powerful, like it was something that could protect me, distract me and reward me all at once.

By fifth grade, I had worked my way from short chapter books to thick novels. I remember checking out a book called “Crank” by Ellen Hopkins from the local library for the first time. The first thing that I noticed was that it was written differently from other books. The

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*While reading I wasn't a kid stuck in her bedroom anymore, I was inside the story, living and experiencing someone else's life.*

pages were written differently; it was written in free-lance poetry. Instead of paragraphs it had white spaces filled with short paragraphs. Her writing pulled me in immediately. I felt every emotion, every spiral, and even every moment the characters struggled. It was the first time I realized that writing didn't have to

follow certain rules to be meaningful. This moment revealed that reading and writing could be raw, real, emotional and artistic. This had planted the seeds for my own writing. This started me writing in a notebook any time that I felt a feeling I didn't quite understand and didn't have anybody to talk to. It helped me cope with the loneliness that I had felt and gave me temporary happiness of letting out the emotions.

By seventh grade, I wasn't just reading poetry; I was writing it also. I filled my notebooks with messy lines writing about the characters I loved from the books I had read. Then it slowly turned into writing about myself, my own feelings and my own experiences. I wrote about things I didn't know how to say out loud, and I wrote about the emotions that wouldn't go away. The scratch of my pen on a thin piece of paper became a kind of therapy for me. Writing has given me a voice when I felt like I didn't have one. This memory and experience show how

literacy became not just a coping mechanism, but also a form of self-expression. Seventh grade version of me had no idea how much writing would shape the adult that I have become. Even now when life feels heavy or confusing, I reach for a pen and paper before anything else. Journaling has helped me understand myself, calm my thoughts, and find clarity when everything around me feels too loud. Because of this, I have taught my children the same thing, that writing can hold the feelings that they don't know how to say or the emotions they don't know how to express. What started as a quiet survival skill has become a lifelong practice that keeps me centered, resilient and honest with myself.

As I got older my interests shifted again. At the age of sixteen I came across a Sandra Brown novel which was my introduction to true crime books, and I felt a new kind of immersion. My heart raced with the characters. I felt their fear, their tensions and the uncertainties they faced in the novel. It was the first time I realized how deeply a book could pull me into someone else's emotions and feel the fear they experienced. This stage helped teach me empathy, emotional reading and how authors can build suspense and connection at the same time. Even now that moment at sixteen still echoes

who I am. True crime became more than a genre—it became a daily part of my life. I listen to cases in the car, in the shower, while cooking and even while doing schoolwork. I end up falling into deep rabbit holes of information trying to understand every angle of a case. That curiosity has shaped the way I think, the way I analyze, and the way I understand people. It's what has pushed me toward psychology, toward wanting to study the minds behind these stories instead of just reading about them. This interest has become a steady source of motivation, reminding me why I'm pursuing my degree and what kind of work I hope to do in the future. It's another example of how literacy, reading, listening and researching continues to guide me toward the person that I want to become.

Each of these memories marks a turning point in my relationship with reading and writing. From escaping a difficult home life, to discovering poetry, to finding my own voice, literacy has shaped who I am. These experiences also taught me that reading isn't just about putting thoughts on paper, it's creating a space where I can breathe, reflect and grow. Together, these memories reveal why literacy has always been more than a skill for me; it has been a lifeline.



## The Boxes

*by John Hyland*

The boxes in the attic

I think of them now and then  
Are they tales lost to time

Or just refuse of things that went  
The boxes in the attic

I think of them time to time  
Are they full of jewels and diamonds

Or just a few old tarnished dimes  
The boxes in the attic

At times they touch my thoughts  
Are they filled with hopes and wonderments

Or just failed loves, rust, and loss  
The boxes in the attic

They often cross my mind  
Are they adventures of knights and dragons

Or lost dreams, broken and blind  
The boxes in the attic

I went to look at them today  
When did I age and become so lonely

I close their lids, tear stained  
The boxes in the attic

Climbing up there hurts the knees  
How many lives have I forgot

Amidst those dusty eaves  
The boxes in the attic

I can no longer mount the stairs  
I wish I could open them one last time

Before I forget they are there  
The boxes in the attic

Frozen memories, shuttered, lifeless  
It's too late now to pass them on

I pray they are found in kindness

# When I Think I Am Real the World is Bright

by Jude Rivera-Bock

Saturated, storybook, sunlight  
As if I could just reach out  
And by proxy of being,  
Touch something substantial.

When I think I am real the world is bright.

When I was a child  
I wrapped cotton around my eyes  
Felt it in between my hands, fastened it tight.

When I think I am real the world is bright  
Communication, consequences, conflict  
As if I could  
Just by proxy of being,  
Be and ruin it all.

I see the world through blurred figures, form is a carpet sunstream  
It reaches forward  
And retches my ribcage open

A glass box

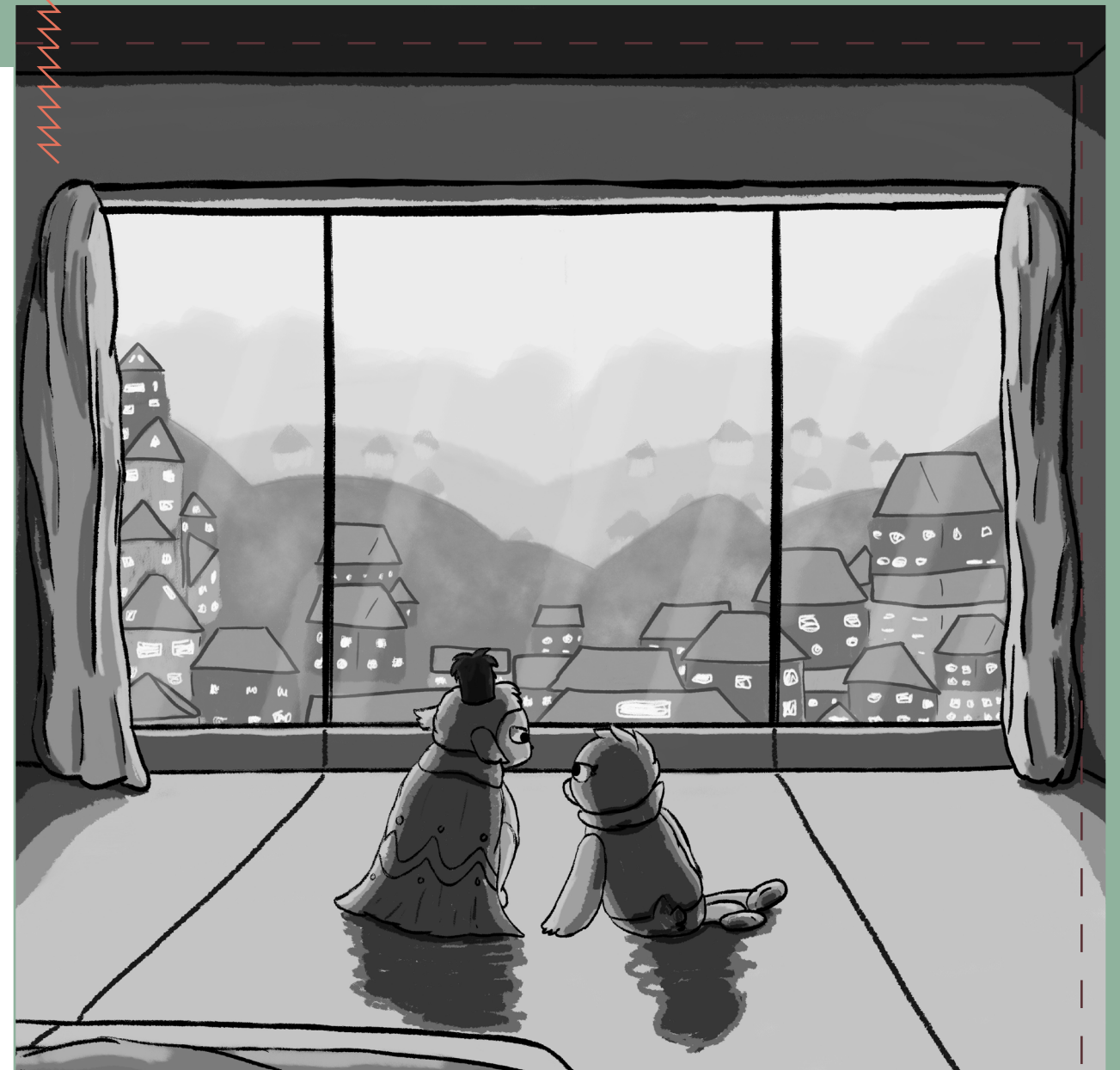
That's all that's shoved in my chest.

A glass box

Surrounded by blood.

When I think I am real the world is bright.

She resides in my chest, surrounded by cotton strands  
I reside in my chest, surrounded by glass shards  
When I think I am real the world is bright.



Everything is darkness and all I hear is

Bang

Bang

Bang

When I was a child I wrapped my eyes in cotton  
And then I wrapped them in glass.

I stand outside, my fists would be red if they were real

To anything she can see through cotton.  
She stands inside, she could be sympathetic  
If my hands weren't covered in glass.

# Crawling Back to Her

by Arden Pooley

Cool air hit my fingers as they pushed through the soil, reaching up, up, toward the bright moon. Cold and lonely were my first thoughts upon fully breaching the surface, pushing my torso above the ground and adjusting my eyes to the sudden cool light.

My next thought was *Her*. I thought of my Love and the last I'd seen her, eyes shining with tears rather than starlight, rimmed with red and bearing deep, mournful shadows. It was then that I knew that the deep chill in my bones was not due to the autumn breeze washing away summer. It wasn't the moon's pale blue radiance covering every inch of my body, nor the lack of flowing blood within it. It was the lack of *her*. It was the miles of distance between us, every inch a knife buried in my cold, pale flesh.

I was overcome with the overwhelming need for her warm embrace; I could nearly feel her hands pressing into my skin, fingertips pouring heat and life into my decaying body. I imagined her chest pressed against mine, her fingers tracing the line of my rigid spine; her face buried in the crease of my neck, whispering words of love and devotion and kissing them into my skin.

I needed to find her. I needed to feel her and breathe her and be one with her once again.

I pushed myself to my feet, immediately collapsing back to the ground in my haste to begin my trek. My second attempt was slower and steadier, carefully testing the sturdiness of my legs. Once fully standing with little threat of falling, I didn't hesitate to begin walking toward the gate of the cemetery.

As I walked, my mind remained occupied entirely by *Her*. I heard her kind voice in the whistling wind, a soft melody soothing my dead nerves. I felt every leaf and twig beneath my bare feet like a soft push bringing me closer to her with every step. The air felt thick like sweet honey, and it took all my strength to tread through it. Every step I took pushed my retired joints to the limit, but it was my still-cooling heart pulling me forward, *Her* ethereal face vibrant in my mind like a colorful van Gogh painting hanging proudly behind my eyes.

Leaves drifted down from overhanging tree branches, reminiscent of the thrown rice and flower petals the day I exchanged vows of eternal devotion with *Her*. A creek bobbed nearby, water clear and crisp like that of the lake where I first felt *Her* in her entirety, inside and out, her doing the same to me. Birds sung like she did for me, holding me firm against her heart, words pouring forth to sooth my sorrows, as they did time and time again.

I looked up to the moon, soaking in her light as I did with my Love countless times before, the two of us bathing in her radiance, hearts and souls bared to her as well as each other. I longed for those enchanting nights like I once might long for fresh air or water. But neither were necessary to me now; all I needed, in the entirety of my being, was *Her* and everything she might have to give me.

I carried on through the night, one step at a time. I could feel the flesh on my feet wearing down, my weak joints threatening to give out on me. Earth covered my light clothes and nearly all my skin. It even coated the bits of bone exposed along my arms and legs, not previously noticed in my haste. I paused to touch the rotting wounds, my fingers visibly pale and nails caked with dirt. I could feel each and every bone in my body, the way they protested the interruption of their eternal rest. I could feel the stillness of my insides, no blood moving to or from my aching heart. My body was decomposing before my eyes and yet I could feel no pain besides that of my soul and the way it longed for the only thing that mattered.

And so I continued.

Whether it was minutes or hours that passed as I walked, I couldn't be sure, thoughts of *Her* disrupting all sense of time. But eventually the sun began to rise, its golden rays pouring through the foliage above, and yet the world around me only grew darker as my eyes began to fail me. One ankle had given out, crumbling like ancient stone and it now dragged behind me, unable to aid the other in holding me. The single foot pushing me forward was worn down to the bone, flesh breaking apart beneath me as I continued to limp forward.

But I couldn't stop. Not now.  
And then I saw it.

Not so far in the distance I saw my home. Our home. I hurried forward, spurred on by the thought of *Her* waiting for me, my Love, my Life, all that was left of me. As I got closer, I saw her on the front porch, curled up and sleeping on the bench where we'd spent countless nights sitting together and watching fireflies dance around us. They were here this night as well, leading me closer, like they knew where I needed to be.

I felt my leg snap beneath me, the weight of my body and my passion too much in its weakened state, and I fell to the leaf-cushioned earth.

I couldn't stop.

I continued, using only my arms to pull my body along the ground, closer and closer. My fingers trembled and my eyes continued to grow weary, my vision becoming increasingly dimmer.

I couldn't stop.

I nearly reached the front step, mere feet away. I opened my mouth to call out to her, but no sound could be found. My muscles slowed and stopped, one at a time. I'm here, I thought. I've come back to you, just like I promised.

The world grew dark. I took one last look at my Love, her peaceful form a sight I'd treasure for as long as my soul continued to exist.

Her eyes opened just as mine fell closed once more.





## Mother's Daughter

by Caylee Adams

If I am my mother's daughter, I must also be her rage,  
That of which I feel at night and when it's hidden out of sight,  
Lurking in a blackened corner though I can't deny its there,  
I feel it with me every moment, even when I'm fair.

If I am my mother's daughter, I must also be her envy,  
That wicked thing which spits and traps things in its dark embrace,  
Twisting 'round to a new shape which can be leveraged to  
Make you think you meant 'that thing' and what you 'tried to do'.

If I am my mother's daughter, I must also be her face,  
That of which tells you cruel things and that you're her true grace.  
That thin-lipped smile and nasty words make you think that she's  
The best and worst thing in your life that can and can't be seen.

## Regrets, at the End of a Drumstick

by Neil Weiss

I quit my oldest passion, playing drums, once I graduated high school. It happens to most of us one way or another. Once our childhood passions brush up against the heaviness of adulthood, they seldom make it out intact. We must then face that indomitable question, "What's next?". While I'd like to fancy myself someone of great constancy, someone who keeps tempo, reality is the ageless comic, who in its boundless boredom, makes fools of anyone who dares to maintain some level of consistency. It's thermodynamics; entropy. The nature of anything with energy is to someday fall apart.

I was doomed to this heat-death from the very start. My parents had two daughters when I came around, and as the singular son, my father somehow wrangled the supreme naming rights. I inherited, of course, his last name Weiss, and my middle name Ryan comes from a baseball player I know nothing about—this was one of the few things my father never succeeded in instilling in me. Neil, the heaviest name among them, comes from the late Neil Peart, lyricist and drummer for the band Rush. They're one of the quintessential nerd bands of the 80's, and my dad is a huge fan. Every element of this name comes from him, and somewhat ironically has excluded the heritage I actually possess in favor of reference to things he likes. From the beginning, his influence has presided over my life, guiding, or perhaps predicating my actions.

His musical taste is indicative of much of my father's mannerisms. He favors the progressive side of rock, with odd time signatures, syncopated rhythms, nuanced lyrics and metaphor and allusion. He's an intellectualist to a tee, and I was his protege. Much of my childhood was ordained by my father, and maintained by me. His musical tastes, his wit, his playful side. We're builders, him and I, people who enjoy tinkering and constructing. Inspiration comes to us in mixing up the most fundamental elements of the art, and veering far off the beaten path. In that same vein, he's a contrarian,

someone who enjoys rationale even when he himself hardly believes the argument. The pleasure is in the argumentation for him, much to the chagrin of the rest of the family.

This was the mixture that largely constituted my childhood being. All of high school was a continuation on a theme I'd been playing since the 4th grade, the development of a witty, generically smart kid with wicked skills on the drum set. I had taken on much of what my father had played to me, and excelled for some time without having to learn much else.

Yet, at times I questioned the person I had become. As I grew older, I grew critical of those who raised me, and especially the man who'd seemingly predetermined my path. This uncertainty was only compounded by the rapidly approaching critical choice—whether or not to

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*Once our childhood passions brush up against the heaviness of adulthood, they seldom make it out intact. We must then face that indomitable question, "What's next?"*

play drums in college. Like any fine art, the job market was sketchy, to say the least, and the idea of commitment frightened me. Wariness married itself to ill-preparedness as the pandemic struck, and by the time I was sitting in my first college lecture, I was a journalism major with no idea what to do and no idea what came next.

It took one term for me to drop out of college.

Thus began the second act of my life, one less rooted in my father, and more in my mother. Decades ago, a six year old girl immigrated to the United States from rural Mexico. Coming from poverty, she persevered through hard times, tragedy, and discrimination, and is now a PhD-wielding, dual-language-school-principal, mother-of-three. All her children went to college and beyond, though one in particular (me!) has had a significantly more tumultuous journey than the rest. Nonetheless, her push for us to realize our potential was deeply internalized, and so it was only a matter of time before I found myself back in higher education.

My priorities shifted from drums—before becoming a college dropout, of course, but especially now.



Complimenting my father's artist, my mother brought the ultimate realist. Her bestowment is empathy, understanding, and a different emphasis of intelligence—that awesome fortitude of mind that deals in absolutes (math, for instance) rather than abstracted ideas such that my father would prefer. These traits I dusted off and polished after university, becoming attached to the idea of community. In working at a middle school, working briefly in public health, I gained a sense and appreciation for the kinds of people who could make society run, who could bring others together and affect change. They were people like my mother, and I soon sought to join their ranks.

Going back to school, community college, music wasn't really on the table anymore. As much as I was my father's artist, I was more my mother's educator. The path I had been placed on wasn't the one that was right, and I had to crash and burn to realize it. But once I found my own song, drawing more from the music of my mother than my father— but still both, I began to orient myself and exorcize the existential dread which had followed me since the end of high school.

We (who have two parents) are a triple concoction. There's what we get from our mother, our father, and the nonsense that's entirely our own. The latter is influenced by all sorts of things, but the former's a little easier to identify. We inherit their strengths, their food, their taste in music, their weaknesses. And there's another thing— this isn't some set amount. As we age, we discard the things our parents gave us, and substitute them with our own firsts. Failing for the first time. Picking yourself back up. Finding what works for you. We stockpile an ever increasing selection of experiences which belong to us, and those which are shared with our parents get pushed to the back, quickly outnumbered. They're never truly gone, but for better or worse exist vestigially.

One day, we'll all become more like ourselves than our parents. If we're lucky, it'll be a sadness, not a relief.

In my later days of high school, I primarily played marimba. It's a big old wooden thing, the keys are

arranged like a piano, but you use four yarn mallets to play it. I first became obsessed with it when I heard two drummers from another school perform Ivan Trevino's *Catching Shadows* for marimba duet. It, to this day, is one of the most incredible things I've ever been in attendance of. After that, I simply had to learn marimba, even though I didn't know how to read melodic music yet.

Melodies have always stood out to me more than drums, even when I was engrossed in the drumming world. I rarely focused that much on the drums in music, I cared more about the lyrics, the meaning, the way these sounds in conjunction with their imagery informed emotions. Learning marimba, falling in love with the instrument, it made me wonder— do I even really like drums? As much as I love percussion, I can't shake the

feeling that maybe the dream would have stayed alive had I rooted it in another instrument. I'm content with my choices now, and doubt it, but the idea of starting it all over is tantalizing, even with as far as I've come.

Marimba was a good compromise though, and in 2022 I had the opportunity for one last hurrah. My underclassmen friends in high school were in their last year at a marching percussion camp we'd all done before.

Eager to play drums with my friends one more time, I bit the bullet (the cost of attendance) and registered, 2 years out of practice.

I played well. It all came back to me so easily, even the few times I've been able to play since then, it's like coming home. Well— coming home drunk, but I still remember the hand motions, the intervals, how to do a one-hand roll, everything. Well enough, in fact, that I decided to sign up for Solo Night, pulling out an old favorite, *Moon*, by Adam Tan. It was a song that I'd spent the quarantine perfecting, so I think it will take many, many more years before I truly can't play it anymore. At the time, I didn't think I'd ever forget it.

A girl came up to me after the performance. Apparently, she'd seen me play before, and was enthralled by my performance. She told me how I inspired her, and that

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my performance touched her. I think I should have done something differently than what I did, which was say “thanks!” and run off with my friends.

I’m not an amazing percussionist. Especially not right now. There was a time when I was en route to become one, but for whatever reason I couldn’t. Speaking to her, I couldn’t help but feel cynical, knowing that she was talking to someone who for a start, sucked, but also who’d left behind that dream years ago. But I’m not entirely rash, and I also understood that I had genuinely affected her and my role had shifted from the performer to something mentor-adjacent, someone who could pass on the things I’ve learned. Regardless of how I conceptualized myself, here she stood, talking to someone she looked up to. I was presented with a choice.

She was only a few years younger than me. Maybe I’m being annoyingly patronizing to this fellow person, who is a whole person and doesn’t need me to wax poetic

about how I owe it to them to be better and support them. But I know that I didn’t say the right words to her at the time, and now whatever part of her which had spent time idolizing me had been at least a little wasted. What path was she on? What song would she have played? I’ll never know, and I’ll never know if I had instilled help or harm in her story.

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*But I know that I didn’t say the right words to her at the time, and now whatever part of her which had spent time idolizing me had been at least a little wasted. What path was she on? What song would she have played? I’ll never know, and I’ll never know if I had instilled help or harm in her story.*

We don’t choose the parts of ourselves that inhabit the minds of others. In the thralls of time, I think it’s a constant battle to become the kind of person who would have shielded your past self from all the harm in the world, even as you are weathered and bashed against the rocks of adulthood. I have my father’s artist in me, my mother’s

fortitude. I also inherited a malicious wit, a judgmental eye, I give too much of myself. These things, I’ve spent my life unraveling the threads, tracing them to their origins, where it all began. The goal is to diagnose, and one day heal. Someday I’ll have a clearer image of myself, and how to help someone else.

When people open themselves up, you are given a choice—“How will I affect you?”. It’s a vulnerability and a great privilege. Sometimes we enhance the lives of those we love. Sometimes we fucking suck. But I get the feeling that it requires vigilance to maintain a standard of quality in our relationships with others. This, on one hand blows; I do not want to actively think about my actions all the time, I want to autopilot through all the boring parts of life and eat tasty food and drink sugary beverages. Then again, I doubt every interaction is so pertinent as to require a neurosurgeon’s care.

I don’t know who I’d be if I never picked up a drumstick. Despite the turbulence, I don’t regret playing drums. Nonetheless, if I could help someone find their passion, I’d hope I could help them nurture something more uncomplicated than my relationship to drums.

Until then, I’ll be marking time in making better choices, and when the long, long song ends, I think it’ll be a performance to be proud of. For now, however, I think there’s really only one question left to ask.

What’s next?



## Unpoetic

by Joseph Fernandez

I don’t feel poetic now,  
My mind’s not here; it’s gone.  
To bring it back, I know not how.  
It’s likely off on some far lawn,  
Enjoying its freedom, perhaps  
Watching the sun set.  
And feeling the grass in the gaps  
Of its toes; I bet.

Let it go, I don’t care  
With where I’m at, it’s true,  
I don’t need anything up there.  
However, I still feel blue.  
He’s off having fun,  
But back here, my attic  
Aches with no programs to run:  
I live a life automatic.

And yet, I’m happy for him.  
I’m miserable and lonely,  
And my life feels so horribly dim,  
But this isn’t about just me only.  
Because if he breaks down,  
I have no window out;  
I’m left all alone.  
That’s what this is about.

When he escapes I can follow,  
Leaving behind what’s wrong,  
Leaving my poor body hollow,  
But pulling myself along.



# Positivity Epidemic

by Chris Gonzales

The process by which a contagious disease spreads typically follows a path known as a chain of infection.[1] This chain includes six links (*susceptible host, infectious agent, reservoir, portal of exit, mode of transmission, and portal of entry*) that is not broken, can lead to a pathogen being passed from one host to another, and can be the start of an epidemic that infects an entire community.

Negativity is a social disease that has the power to spread just like any contagious pathogen, through symptoms of hate, jealousy, and passive aggressive. It is a state of mind that is marked by features of hostility, withdrawal, or pessimism that hinder or oppose constructive treatment or development.[2] Negativity has a unique attraction that is evident in everyday life, such as the news, reality TV, and social media, just to name a few, and its effects can latch onto the most vulnerable people, thus creating an epidemic, or widespread occurrence of negativity within our community.

Take a moment to listen to the conversations around you. Negativity is prevalent. Throughout my life, one of the hardest things for me is being around all the negativity and not succumbing to that mindset. Don't get me wrong, I am no stranger to it. In fact, I was a fountain of negativity for a large portion of the last 14 years of my life, yet I'd like to think I have turned a new leaf. I became aware of the role my attitude was playing on my daily life, and generally speaking, it wasn't a positive one. This energy consumed me and it took a lot of self-reflection, disappointing feedback from others, and damaged relationships for me to come to terms with the fact that I needed to change my approach. This is when I made the decision to change my life for good.

I started by removing myself from the toxic company I surrounded myself with in the years prior, and once this happened, I slowly gained the understanding that I was in total control of my own thoughts, feelings, and actions. With this understanding came a priceless epiphany: *negativity is a choice!* For years, I lived in a headspace that was swimming with negative thoughts. I was depressed and dealt with anxiety that had

accumulated over years of anger and resentment. I often let others dictate what happened in my life and prioritized other's happiness over my own. Living this way has a shelf life and my mental health had rapidly spoiled. Not because I was selfish, but because I wasn't happy and my actions reflected that. I was still full of the same depression and anxiety that consumed me before; the only difference is that my mask had faded and I had nothing left to hide behind.

After years of repressed anger, I resorted to fighting as a way to release it. I did things that were not like me – I lied to those I loved, and often manipulated others to get what I wanted with a complete disregard for how I was affecting them. As a result, it had a negative effect on the relationships that meant the most to me. I am not a violent person, but the more I embraced the negativity around me, the more my actions impacted every aspect of my life from the top down.

Negativity had become my norm, and positivity was a strange place I visited on occasion. I became a host for this behavior, carrying the weight of negativity around my neck like a piece of jewelry. This type of energy consumed me until I finally made a choice to break the chain, and instead *chose* to be infected with positivity. The day I left the toxic habits that held me hostage for so many years, my entire life changed for the better. I chose positivity, and in turn, I chose my own happiness over living to make others happy. I quickly realized that happiness is a state of being. It isn't set in stone. Change



is all around us – it's inevitable and infinite. We have to continue evolving in order to continue being happy, and positivity is a tremendous tool we can use to achieve happiness.

Once I began to think positively it quickly changed how I felt, both mentally and physically. Thoughts are creative and they guide our emotions. The beauty of all energy is that it's cumulative. It feeds on itself. If you think positive thoughts, they will generate positive feelings, and the more you allow yourself to feel that positivity, it all translates into positive actions. For me, positivity was exhibited through being of service to others. I became more active in my community, and rather than lie and manipulate others for my benefit, I made a choice to dedicate my spare time for the benefit of others. Making myself available to those around me, in

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*I quickly realized that happiness is a state of being. It isn't set in stone. Change is all around us – it's inevitable and infinite.*

a non-selfish way, provided an avenue for me to connect with people on a deeper level and allowed me to develop mutually beneficial relationships.

Make a decision to embrace positivity and challenge yourself to maintain that mindset each and every day. If you keep doing this, you will develop a new habit, positivity will become second nature, and it will spread like the flu. The more you are positive, the more positivity you will create. When you are positive, other people will reflect that energy back to you and it becomes contagious to everyone who witnesses it, and at the end of the day, you were the source of it all.

Embracing positivity doesn't mean your life will instantly get easier, yet one positive thought can lead you in the right direction. We will still experience ups and downs. That's life! How we react

to it is the most important part. CREATE POSITIVITY!  
 Realize that you can't change what has happened to  
 you, but you can CREATE a positive perspective to help  
 you work through it. I am challenging myself, and I  
 am challenging you to become a host for a positivity  
 epidemic and infect everyone around you.

[1] Teague, M., Mackenzie, S., Rosenthal, D. (2024). *Your Health Today*. (p. 356). McGraw Hill.

[2] Merriam Webster's Dictionary, Eleventh Edition. (2020). Merriam-Webster Incorporated.



I am from cup,  
 the cracked and well used one.  
 I'm from kodak and canon,  
 the old film in my antique camera.  
 From the canvas on my easel,  
 the paints and brushes.

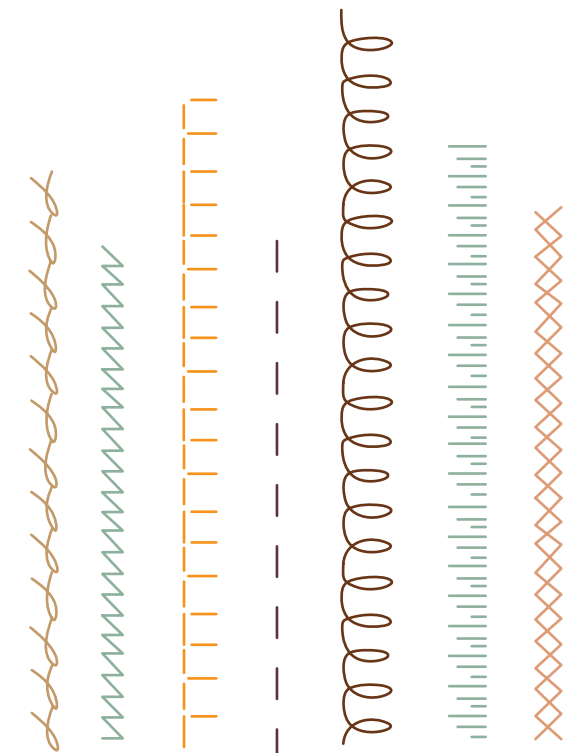
I am from traveling and moving,  
 airport, train, and bus stations,  
 the open land, sea, and skies above.  
 I'm from the intelligent and creative.  
 I am from the God above,  
 wonderfully and fearfully created in His image.

I'm from Chicago and Bohemia,  
 lamb and sauerkraut.  
 I'm from grandpa's special wooden chest,  
 the one hidden away and locked,  
 and grandma's bookshelf filled with treasured books.

I am from the forever gone and never to be returned,  
 for all was lost over the years gone by.  
 I'm also from the found, redeemed, and restored,  
 like an old vintage car restored to its former glory.

## From Where I Come

by David H. Roepke





## Asking for Help

by Anthony Paul Mathis

“**M**athis, roll up!” was the first thing I heard as I opened my eyes. Sitting up in my bunk the only thing I could hear was the soft snores and noises of 75 sleeping men, in dorm 10 at Inverness Jail in Portland, Oregon. As I quietly packed my stuff I woke up my neighbor to give him my commissary and hygiene products. With my paperwork in hand I said my goodbyes and proceeded to the sally port, when the door slammed shut behind me my stomach turned into a knot. My palms and my armpits started to perspire profusely. I was finally getting out, but most importantly I didn’t have a plan, or anywhere to lay my head.

The day before, I was finally given my day in court. After four very long months my attorney was finally able to formulate a deal that the D.A. agreed to. The deal was an intensive drug program called MCJRP (Multnomah County Recovery Justice Program). That was an 18-month program, and a 48-month prison set if I failed. I didn’t care how much prison I was looking at as long as it got me out of jail! My attorney said, “Mr. Mathis, Make sure you don’t get into any trouble! Tomorrow when you get released go check in with your P.O. before 5:00pm or they will issue a warrant. If you need help with anything they have access to a wealth of resources, utilize them. Good luck Anthony, you have a lot of potential, don’t screw up!” My first thought was yeah right, the last thing I’m going to do is ask a cop for help, let alone be vulnerable in any way to a P.O.

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*With nowhere to go, and no one to hold me accountable, I walked... I traded my north face jacket for a balloon of heroin, sat in a tent and started chasing the dragon.*

On a cold February morning in 2018 I was finally kicked, it was 7:45 am. All I had to my name was a dead phone, a couple bus tokens, and a pack of smokes. With the P.O. office not closing until 5:00 pm I had a little over 9 hours to try and figure something out. All I got to do is not get high, or get caught up doing anything illegal. I love life when I am clean, going to N.A. meetings I get to meet genuine people who actually care. Fresh start in a new city, with no bad blood or bad memories of my past. I moved to Portland from Medford Oregon to start over, and distance myself from all of the wreckage of my past.

I’m at a disadvantage though, I have no family or friends within 400 miles. Alone, with nowhere to go, no money, prospects of a meal nor a place to lay my head. With all of these thoughts racing through my head I began to believe I was better off in jail.

After getting my phone on a charger at Starbucks and scoring a free bagel with my charm, I called momma, and like always she sent me some survival money. With nowhere to go, and no one to hold me accountable, I walked. Ending up where all the junkie’s hangout (the train station). “I need to find some where to live, I wish I was back home in Medford.” I thought. At the train station it was so easy to cop. I traded my north face jacket for a balloon of heroin, sat in a tent and started chasing the dragon. Immediately I felt a wave of concern, guilt and panic! Am I really about to embark on another run, committing crime after crime, continuing my addiction? Or am I going to go to my P.O. and ask for help, like my attorney suggested yesterday?

At the Probation Office called the Mead building, on the 5th floor I made that choice and checked in at the window. After contemplating leaving for 5 minutes, a young woman called my name telling me to follow her. Her name was Amy, she was so pretty, yet so scary! Something my parents always told me at a very young age kept racing through my head. “Don’t dare talk to the cops, if you tell them anything they will take you away,

keep your mouth shut!” Walking back to her office I made a choice to go against what I was raised believing. After introducing myself! word vomited until I had said everything I needed to say. “Amy, I need your help! I’m scared asking you and I hope I don’t regret it, but I just agreed to do this MCJRP program and signed a 48-month suspended sentence. I got out this morning, immediately I went and got high. I don’t know anyone in this town, nor do I have a place to sleep tonight. You have to put me back in jail or find me a place to live! If you don’t I’m going to keep getting high, commit crime,

## [I taste copper]

by A.M. Morrow

my own blood has become indigestion / acid reflux / making its way up my esophagus / the shard remains of the old me / a burnt testimony / flames of passion turned smoldering rubble / the asphalt melting from the heat / yet the temperature still rises / 100 / 200 / 300 degrees / the smoke fills my lungs / how hot is the sun / I can’t run / I can’t walk / crawling is my only option / inhalation / I am not retardant / engulfed / my throat is parched / darkness in my mind’s eye / my soul sparked this fire / take part in this glorious torch / my words are kerosene / my face carries a heavy burden / expression is an art / tension pent up / remembering how it start / ulcers in my gut / erupt through my heart



and end my butt in prison, PLEASE HELP ME!” She took a deep breath and said, “ok, lets see what we can do. Anthony, thank you for your honesty!” She made 3 quick phone calls one after another. 15 minutes later, I had a bed at a “Bridges to Change” house. There was hope, an opportunity, a safe place, plus a shot to stay clean.

She was so kind that she set me up with a monthly bus pass, a food-stamp card, and she personally drove me to my new residence to introduce me to the house manager. The authorities aren’t out to get us and take us away from our families, they are also there for our benefit, to serve and protect. I asked this complete

stranger for help, I was honest with her, yes it was scary. By advocating for myself and being a little bit vulnerable I was able to lay my head down in my own bed that night. A Probation Officer gave me a helping hand up, ultimately giving me a fair shake at staying clean and out of prison. Amy and I had a great professional relationship from that point on. She helped me in so many other ways throughout the years, from getting work boots and tools, to getting vouchers for clothing. Throughout the years I have taken this lesson to heart. If a belief no longer serves you, it’s time to replace it with another. I continue to self-advocate, and I will always “ask for help!”

## mariposas

by Neil Weiss

masa, manteca, sal, y agua  
and mix  
and mix  
your mother too did this  
when she was a girl  
and now she moves through you  
and when we make tamales  
i think she comes over me too  
two vessels in the straits  
us shaking ships two  
i think get my wavy hair from you  
and she glides down the ebony strands  
and she flutters around my head  
fleet on the surface of the water  
never going under  
never easing her hunger  
there’s no time to rest when crossing borders  
there’s somebody ripping wings off mariposas  
i think of mexico  
adonde en jalisco  
you would shower in a bucket  
and the floor was dirt  
and your father’s shirt  
he’d take off when he ate spicy food  
and your mother called you gordita  
and now you can’t eat grapefruit  
there is somebody else in my body



# Excerpt from “Loss of Control”

by Alex Cruz

Since he could remember, his family had engraved in him that his name meant quiet tragedy. His entire life he had been ready for something to happen, he feared on the daily what would become of him because of it actually. He never assumed this meant his demise would come quietly, he just found himself slipping into a quiet mindset.

The more he aged, he found himself slipping into this pattern of silence, he'd lean towards solitary interests, photography in particular. He enjoyed admiring, making attempts to figure out exactly what his parents had meant by his being as a whole engrained into a destiny as grave as a tragedy. He did not mean to lean into predictability, yet he had, but what more could he do if his name truly did define him.

Realistically Orin had envisioned an outcome like this happening. If before now he had been told that he'd meet his demise to a tree, he wouldn't doubt it, in fact he'd find it entertaining. The gears in his mind would turn, attempting to map it out.

He wasn't used to anything going kindly towards him, and on this particular night he'd gotten cursed. The moment his head hit the pillow each night, he knew any prior agreement he'd made with himself would leave him, like to wake up, be on time and have a day that for once was timely. Yet he'd stay out late anyways and allow the urge to wander grab hold and lure him out. Out into the public. He ended up at a bonfire with a bunch of college kids, not fully knowing how he'd ended up there but he had hope that he'd meet new people or make some kind of connection. This felt like an all time low with how he hated college kids that were adamant about partying and only partying; but he knew he needed to get out of his comfort zone.

Orin was antisocial, but not by choice, he had a history of trying to make connections big or small, romantic or otherwise. Yet each one ended with him leaving with paper cuts to his dignity or getting nothing but calculus in return. So when he did try to make connections, he'd prefer to skip idle talk, going straight for how their brains worked or what they'd do when panicked.

This wasn't his kind of people, and the more he'd stood there the more Orin found that apparent. Each conversation rang out, a flash grenade in either ear, because all he could hear was incessant noise, absolutely no words directed towards him and even less registered in him. The more he stood the heavier he felt, because there were too many eyes occasionally gleaming directly at him like they knew he didn't belong, it was so intense that they were practically x-raying him down to his structure.

It was making him second guess himself, especially when two guys approached him. One very familiar guy in particular was in the pair. “What're you doing here?” the familiar one of them began, condescension in his gaze but his words and how he'd articulate them, came out as natural as someone greeting an old friend. Which only gave Orin chills because they were the farthest thing from friends. Asier was around Orin's height, 5'8ish on a good day, but he always felt taller, like he existed only to make Orin feel shorter than he was.

They had a history, one that Orin hated remembering. They had both been a part of the Basketball team in middle school, but more than that they were practically inseparable, side by side any moment they could. After all, Asier was the reason he had his camera in the first place, and Orin's main muse, they were the best of friends. Two cords intertwine to make one rope, but not all ropes hold, sometimes one side is frayed and others come along. The moment they had hit high school Asier cared more about his own image and craved the noise. Orin however didn't and he preferred the quiet, so even if the two cords couldn't stay intertwined, both cords can still be used, especially if you burn the frayed end.

Orin never answered. He kept quiet in hopes they'd leave, he didn't even need Asier to utter a word more, his mind was already racing, and his hands were itching for a release.

“You told me you knew him from middle school, but now I get why you never mentioned him before now.” The unfamiliar of the two remarked, a smirk accentuating his words. He turned to expect Asier to

back him up, as if Orin had done something worth condescending in the first place. There was a long pause, Asier only scoffed lightly in response, taking a sip of his beer without even a slight thought towards it.

“What did I do?” Orin asked blatantly after he had a chance for his reason and his anxiety to fight one another.

“You don't remember?” Asier finally turned his attention to Orin, and now there were two pairs of eyes, drilling into his own; he turned away. Of course Orin remembered what happened, but that didn't mean he knew what Asier was talking about. The two had very vast perspectives on the situation, entirely apart, and entirely separate.

“I guess not. I guess he doesn't remember how humiliating it is to have his perverted secret spread. Isn't he the one you were telling me about Azzy? The one that idolized you, and took photos of your every move, like a creepy little stalker.”

Orin knew none of it was true, but that didn't stop him from slowly growing uneasy to thoroughly uncomfortable in the matter of a few words. What ended up happening was he had left his memory card in one of the cameras he had borrowed from the school. That day he had forgotten his camera at home but had wanted to transfer his photos to his computer, so he put the hard drive in one of the schools but forgot to take it back out after the transfer. To the old Asier, these photos were seen as welcoming and a show of their close friendship, but to the new Asier, this was disturbing. So he twisted the truth, making it sound like Orin had been watching him and documenting him for years, when in reality Asier is the one who thoroughly insisted on becoming his test subject... his muse.

It wasn't the fact that Asier had spread lies, it was the overwhelming fact that still, so many years later, Asier was spreading lies and framing him to be a creep, when the subject was so heavily irrelevant. The thought disturbed him, but more than anything gutted him out from the inside because what he had been doing in that classroom, that mid day in spring, was putting together

an album of his favorite photos and memories of him and Asier. He had wanted to tell him he'd developed a deep found attachment, infatuation maybe, but more than anything he wanted it to be love.

He still hadn't let go of the grudges he had against him, he hadn't recovered. It felt like his arms were filled with toxins, he felt anxious. But this time, for the first time he needed a release. He needed to leave.

He turned on his heel, wandering off from the first and only bonfire he'd ever been to, heading deep into the brush and trees that seemed to swallow any light the moon dispersed. On this particular night he went to where his comfort lay but it didn't help him. He

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hadn't been in his right mind, never was he not aware of his surroundings. But that night he'd found himself getting lost in his own emotions, taking his knife that he always carried like a safety blanket, and plummeting it deep into the bark of the biggest tree he could find. One that in the light of day he had admired with the lens of a camera and a critical eye. This wasn't under the light of day though.

He didn't remember much, just the rush of his knife slicing into the tree effortlessly, he kept his knife sharp for a reason not to be used on others, but in case the world ever did scare him. What people don't realize is that things look vastly different in the light of day than they look at night. He didn't know that this tree held the souls of the ancient Zavis people, who fed on envy and hungered for their next vessel.

If anyone was a worthy outlet of 100 souls who emulated nothing but spite, it was Orin, especially in such a vulnerable state where his mind caved in with ill intent and intense hatred. All Orin remembered from that night was the rush of intense satisfaction and release as his knife channeling his turmoil plunged into that tree, this feeling lasted no more than a few minutes before the feeling was drowned by an intense paralysis. What he'd remember last was this excruciating feeling, and the world bubbling up, flashes of the scarce light he could see, numbing out and going static. However, what really was happening was the Zavis people taking hold



of his soul, filling every gap in his being with remorse and intense envy. Their emotions alone would have been enough to make anyone pass out, but souls with such intense hatred did not care if they caused harm to a vessel, they'd passed on their trauma, grief and pain they all had felt when they were burned. Burned alive during a war far before Orin's time and left to feed the soul of the tree that towered before him.

After that night he had no idea how he'd made it back into the safety and comfort of his own bed. But he felt off. Following that night he'd begun to hear voices, ones he couldn't fully decipher because it felt like there were so many whispering at once from inside him.

The following couple of days he went through the notes he'd initially started making on the great tree in that little forestry area. What Orin had discovered when he looked into the tree, was that the Zavis people were from the 18th century, during a small battle that took place during the Seven Years' War, the Zavis had been large in numbers. He'd learned that a war had broken out on their tribal land, after one day one younger member of the group, around 16 or 17 stole from one of the troops nearby. A small moment of intrigue led to the Zavis peoples name having a deeper meaning. Zavis soon became the name of greed and envy, due to that one youth's intrigue. Orin learned that the entire fight had originally never been in the favor of the Zavis, they did not have weapons; all they had was fire and natural resources, they did not favor firearms. Therefore a war breaking out only led to a cruel outcome, with each one being ridiculed for their greed by the Englishmen and treated like no more than a few bodies lost, let alone a whole tribe. They had been burned alive in their ceremonial ground. Orin remembered flipping through the pages and making a note, they called it the "eternal flame"; it was a large fire pit the size of a large tent. He'd sympathized with how they didn't know they'd be discarded in the place where they found peace and unity with one another, their sacred grounds that had grown to be the same tree he thoughtlessly had stabbed.

After having time to process he'd put together that the tree he photographed some time prior to the bonfire, was the same tree he had stabbed. He had wondered why an air of repetition had been looming over him, however it wasn't enough to deter him, he'd

simply dismissed it as a new experience. He had put together that the Zavis were connected to him now, but he couldn't wrap his head around just how much, and to what extent.

If only he'd listened because the thoughts digging into his brain and appearing in his mind's eyes, truly were not pleasant. Some moments he'd feel his own vision fading and his gaze reigniting with an entirely different perspective, one that clearly needed glasses. Other times he'd hear whispers, words in a language he didn't comprehend, so he started writing it down. Noting any abnormality, starting with vision then lack of control over simple motor skills like lifting a cup. Until when he had been brushing his teeth and his vision fizzled out, when he had come back to from this particular instance his toothbrush was still on, buzzing in the sink. He remembered straightening, his hands clasping the sides of the sink while his gaze slowly trailed up to be met with the sight of himself, a scuff that was sure to become a bruise, on his forehead while his nose had a trail of dried blood. From what he could tell he had passed out, for how long was uncertain but the counter reflected how severe it was, there was a pool of blood, streaming down the side of the sink to meet his toothbrush, off now but still resting by the drain.

The outcome should have been clear even before he felt his insides being navigated by loss and his thoughts tainted by spite that he wouldn't make it to work safely. But with this, his luck was basically an empty glass claiming to be half full.

He'd rushed out the door this morning, forgetting to brush

his teeth, put on his coat, or even to grab food for the 30-minute lunch he'd receive in the middle of his shift. The car started up fine, but the window was glazed over, his scraper itching at the window, tearing up any remaining frost that wished to stay. What he didn't know was that his window needing to be scraped and defrosted was a warning. A warning he soon discovered was one that needed to be mentioned. He'd begun to back out, making it safely out of his driveway, but the second his car hit the open road he'd felt his stomach knotting up, something was off with his car. No, something was off with his body and the car. His tires screeched. There was a turn ahead, his vision was already splotching

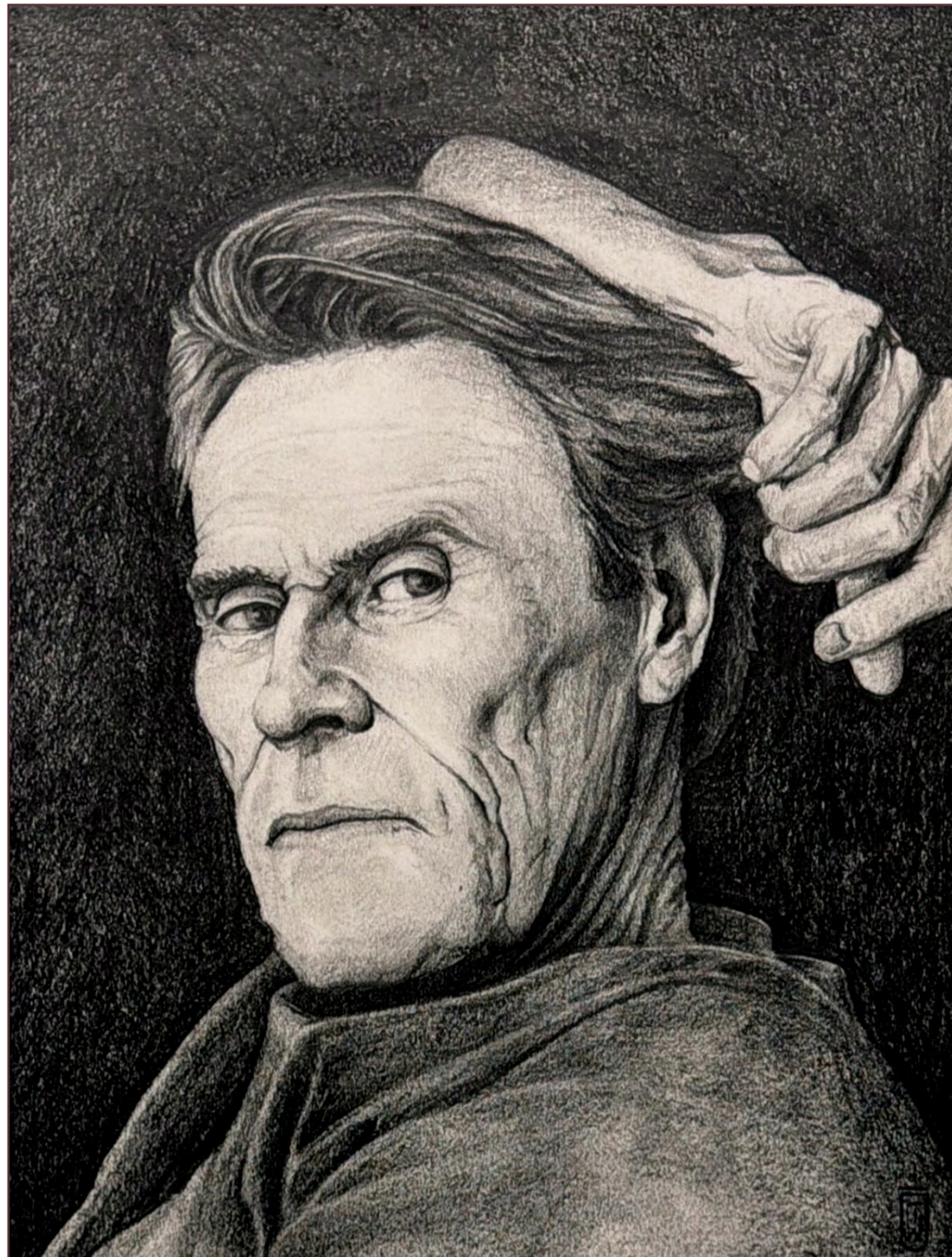
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with blood as multiple irises clouded his sight. The souls weren't trying to only take over; they were trying to teach him a lesson. His car lost its footing completely, refusing to bend at his will as the car instead began sliding out.

There was a moment of release as he left his seat before his seatbelt roughly pulled him back down. He hadn't had time to process. Branches dented the sides of the vehicle threatening to push in further as the

force eventually allowed them in. He'd crashed, off the road and into the arms of the same tree he'd so blindly punctured and harmed. The branches punched through, punching its arm effortlessly through the windshield and completely through his shoulder. Then another into his stomach. Blood left his lungs in the place of air. The Zavis people had their revenge, they'd harmed him how he'd harmed their grave.



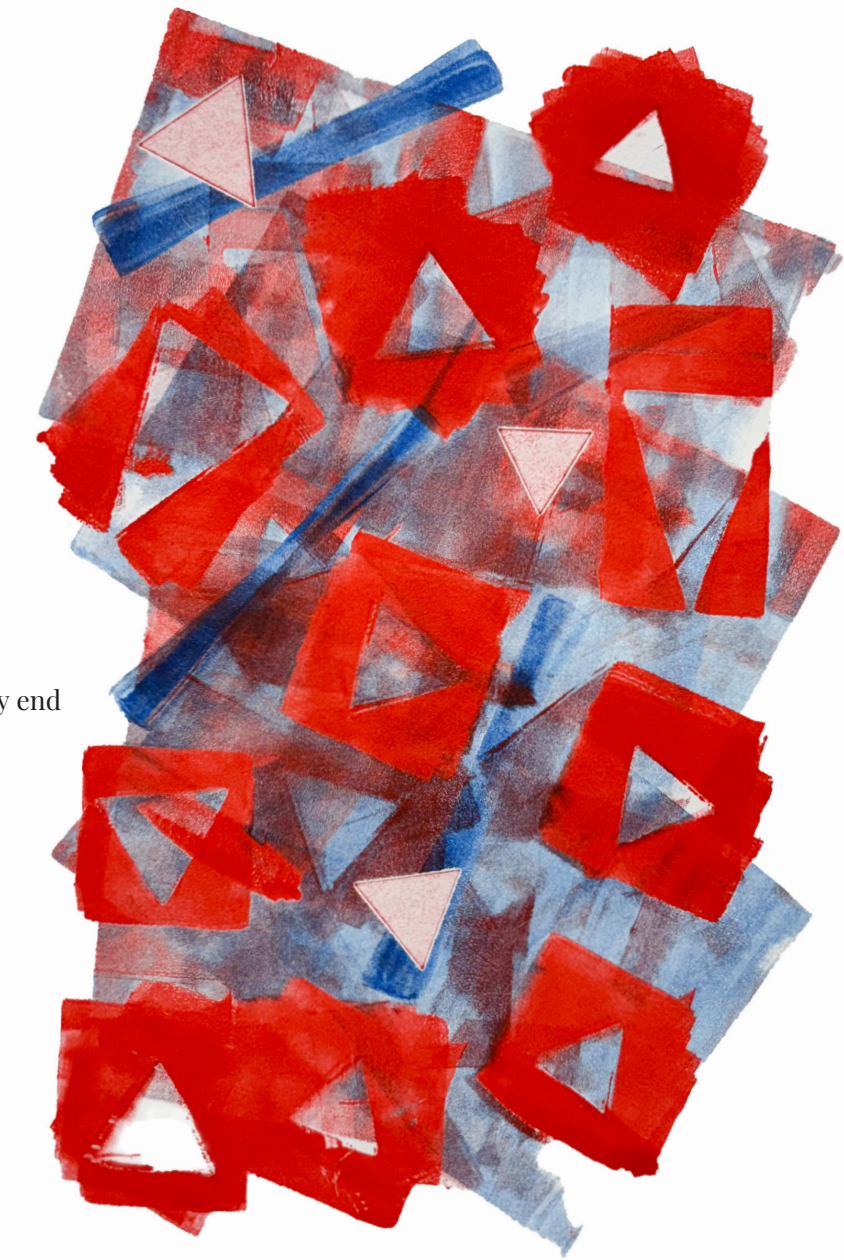
## Of Formaldehyde and Flesh

by Alisa Stelle

My heart is stained in sulphur  
A sickly bruise of twitching flesh  
festering by bone  
This rotten heart of mine beats  
for the mosquitos that cling to cerulean veins  
who thirst for the body as a product  
who stab through silken skin and stomach  
who slide their fingers against yellow teeth

My sinew that was sewn shut  
by the scent of oil and bloodied fists  
the machinery of a smoking gun  
the thorns that threaten to cut my esophagus  
and the call that I choked out  
abandon my hand in exchange for the rising sun

My carnality is carried by chemicals  
The clicking of the geiger calls for the beginning of my end  
my Chernobyl in a stagnant world of desire  
the birth of the wilted flower  
the key in the ignition  
the fetal pig's first breath of formaldehyde.



# Saudade

by Anne Carne

My hair isn't as blonde as it used to be. I don't know when exactly it decided to betray me. One day my ponytail was radiant – almost platinum – and the next I'd gotten glasses so I could read a W-2 without squinting, and my ponytail had turned a shade of what people who wear stick-on nails call “dirty dishwasher.” How come other breeds get tasty names like “auburn” and “chocolate,” but my kind get a slur? It wasn't our fault our hair lost its moxie. Not our fault it all dimmed.

Perhaps it didn't start with our hair. Perhaps it was our imagination that dimmed first. Perhaps our excitement, or our capacity to be vulnerable. Perhaps it had been the wildness of our smile that kept our hair bright back when life had been about flying the highest on the swings. Maybe it was never really the sun that we tried to touch with our dirt-stained toes which made our hair lighter, because there is a lot of me that isn't as blonde as it used to be.

“You could dye it,” my friend says.

But I shouldn't have to dye it. The almost-platinum is mine. I shouldn't have to pretend. It's an insult to myself to color my hair the color it is. An insult, also, to where I've gotten; like stepping back into the skin I've fought my entire life to shed. Might as well have put down the knitting needles and taken up the end of the sweater and tugged until you had the yarn back, eh? Because maybe you missed having the ball of yarn, kicking it against the couch, cutting lengths from it and fashioning necklaces for the stuffed animals on your bed.

Pulling yourself back to yarn would be so easy.

But you keep knitting, because a sweater is what everybody makes from their yarn. And just like all the other sweaters, yours will get old. It will grow stained with coffee and cooking grease, and wear down on the sleeves where you wipe your nose; and it will feed the moths that creep you out, and every day it will watch you sigh and say “I have nothing to wear” without lifting a finger to help you; and somewhere along the line you'll wonder if you should have knitted a scarf instead, but only briefly because then you'll remember that you don't

actually wear scarves. And the sweater will get too hot and insist on exhibiting your sweat like its own Picasso, and you'll eventually wish it wasn't the sweater it was, and the color will transfer to your socks and hide from you in the washer and grow weary of catching people's eyes. But even so, buying the sweater instead of making it with your yarn would make it less your sweater.

And dyeing my hair would make it less my hair.

So, you don't pull it back into yarn because you know the sweater wouldn't get a chance to do any of that if it stayed a ball of yarn. A ball of yarn is only that: a ball of yarn. It's only potential things, and a sweater is the thing everyone knew the yarn was supposed to be all along.

But when your bed gets too comfy, you'll wish you had the yarn back in a ball you could throw at the light switch, in an arc that, sure as Old Faithful, will miss. And you'll look with fond saudade on the sweater that knows, deep down, it's still that ball of yarn.

And when the sun isn't sunny enough I'll wish my hair was as blonde as it used to be; the way it knows, deep down, that it still is.

