



ACCENTS

The Student Literary Magazine of San Jacinto College

ACCENTS

2025

Front Cover

Tree Says "Hi"
Malena Saucedo

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We're the Lone Star
Dulce Gamez Rivera

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Accents: The Student Literary Magazine of San Jacinto College exists to recognize the artistic talent and creative expression from students at the college. It represents the collaborative efforts of faculty across the college and reflects the diverse voices of our students.

For information about the magazine, including a digital version and information about how to submit work for future issues please visit:

<https://sanjac.edu/programs/areas-of-study/arts/english/>

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COLLEGE
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Table of Contents

Fiction

- 5 *Merci* by Natalie Ransom
- 11 *Nora's Love* by Vivian Thompson (Annual Contest Winner)
- 15 *Sam Makes a Sandwich* by Hailey Taylor
- 23 *Run Bunny Run* by Zeka Baza
- 31 *Sam* by Leanna Snowton
- 41 *The Marina* by Lauren Anderson
- 47 *The Forever Man* by Aaron Burke
- 55 *When I Realized I Was Old* by Zoe Hublitz

Poetry

- 10 *Identity Poem* by Madison Calvillo
- 14 *Borrowed Boots* by Caitlynn Snelson
- 22 *Be Our Womanly* by Zoe Hublitz
- 28 *Prettiest* by Adam Carranza
- 29 *Growing Up* by Destiny Maldonado
- 39 *The Attic's Whispers* by Jazmin Garcia (Annual Contest Winner)
- 43 *Mechanical Agony: The Unwilling Cyborg's Lament* by Zachary Cummings
- 45 *Love?* by Angie Flores
- 52 *Rats and Daffodils* by Kayla Suarez
- 53 *Tuesday Best* by Caitlynn Snelson
- 60 *The Box That Held Us Both* by Tonie Marshall
- 63 *Kaleidoscope* by Angelica Bravo
- 65 *Newton's Cradle* by Z. Hedge

Creative Non-Fiction

- 67 *Short Stories and Reflections about Nick* by Roman Rodriguez

Visual Art

- FC *Tree Says "Hi"* by Malena Saucedo
- 2 *We're the Lone Star* by Dulce Gamez Rivera
- 6 *The Forgotten* by Yaritza Sosa
- 8 *The Takeover* by Ricardo Rayas
- 9 *In Her Image* by Destiny Maldonado
- 12 *Caballo en un Vestido* by Madi Trevino
- 13 *Pepper* by Ivon Garza
- 16 *Evolutionary Facade* by Alex Hernandez
- 18 *Shining Down on the Candy Kingdom of Pattymore* by Trinity Inaya Barber
- 21 *Woman of Art* by Sidonia Dowden
- 24 *Lambs to Slaughter* by Alex Ross
- 27 *Jax the Photogenic Cat* by Carmella Puccetti
- 30 *The Reflection of Yesterday* by Dulce Gamez Rivera
- 32 *The Pink Birds Sit on the Green Vine* by Malena Saucedo
- 34 *My Experimental Sketch* by Solomon Nwachukwu
- 35 *Man in the Eyes of Passed Men* by Drew Narvaez
- 38 *Horse Crazy* by Madi Trevino
- 40 *Tumor* by Ricardo Rayas
- 41 *Goddess Hathor* by Drew Narvaez
- 44 *Excess of a Neo Humor: Micro Bile* by Christopher Currington
- 46 *Still-Life Lemons* by Krystal Cervantes
- 48 *Epiphany* by Nathaniel Nero
- 49 *Bound by the Blue* by Carlos Quinteros
- 51 *Kingdom of the Planet Xalsa* by Trinity Inaya Barber
- 54 *Warmth* by Kassya Saylor
- 56 *Naughty or Nice* by John McCain
- 58 *Double Bloom* by Maddie Armstrong
- 59 *Dreams of Time* by Alivia Doolan
- 62 *Hummingbird's Gaze* by Layla Cashio
- 64 *Memory Blindspot* by Adam Fuentes
- 66 *Who am I?* by Destiny Maldonado
- 68 *Cobra Corner* by Nathaniel Nero
- 69 *End of Beginning* by Savanna Doggett
- 71 *Deep Waters* by Kassya Saylor
- BC *Trabajadora* by Johanna Fraga

Merci

Natalie Ransom

A living tapestry of bright colors and buzzing sounds descended over my family as we stepped off the ramp at Le Havre. Arrows painted on road signs, attempting to offer guidance, instead pointed the way to places whose foreign names were meaningless to us, with unfamiliar accent marks hovering over unfamiliar words. When we tried reading them aloud to one another, the sounds came out jumbled, vowels flattened, consonants crammed together, extra syllables tacked onto the end—American English oozing through every silent letter that we mistakenly gave sound. My younger sister scoffed. Her single year of high school French made her superior to us in every respect.

We conceded her authority when we reached the station, sending her to the front of the line to buy the bus tickets that would take us into town for the day's visit. She proudly pronounced her request in perfect Duolingo French: "Quatre billets s'il vous plait." The woman behind the counter responded with a lengthy stream of syllables, ending with the upturned tone of a question mark rather than the anticipated four tickets. My sister, the great speaker of French and impromptu head of the family, faltered. Like a kindergartener learning to count, she consulted the fingers of her right hand, and held up four of them for the woman to see.

Sensing our helplessness, the woman resigned herself to explaining the variety of tickets available in fragmented English, and we purchased four of what we hoped were sufficient for our journey. She passed them to us. "Merci," my sister replied.

The bus, free of both air-conditioning and unoccupied seating, forced my family to crowd together in a sweaty huddle in the aisle. We didn't mind so much. We spoke softly to

one another, attempting to keep our English confined to our tightly packed circle, as if afraid that the American-ness of our conversation might somehow leak out and offend the other passengers. Even a popular tourist destination like this one harbored a quiet disdain for strangers—especially foolish Americans who spoke only English and understood nothing about the ways of public transport.

We found our way off the bus and into a small town with a name we could not pronounce. The uneven surface of gray cobblestone pavement gave each of our steps a slight rocking motion as we ambled down the road. Identifying a bakery by the sight and smell of bread rather than the posted sign, we wandered inside and admired the array of goods spread out behind a glass panel. A handful of quiches and pastries were labeled in French, but many of the most desirable options remained unnamed. Again, my sister was shuffled to the front of our family, and we stood anxiously by while she attempted to translate our requests, often forced to resort to pointing at the glass when she could not summon the words needed to communicate what she wanted.

Payment proved yet another obstacle. With a handful of coins as unfamiliar as the musical words the baker used in attempting to explain their values to us, my mother finally despaired and held all of them out for the woman to pick through. She spoke warmly and took only a few, but it would have made little difference to us if she had taken two, three, or four times as many; we had no idea of their value, and no means by which to question her judgement.

We enjoyed our newly acquired lunch on the pebbled shore of a nearby beach. Not far from our place beneath the shade of a rocky outcropping, greedy seagulls swooped down to snatch their own lunches from the hands of



The Forgotten
Yaritza Sosa

unsuspecting children, whose shrill scoldings were unintelligible and insignificant to the wheeling birds. The foamy crash of the waves, accented by the clatter of pebbles caught in their ebb and flow, generated enough clamor to allow us to speak freely, unconcerned by the fact that our language was unnatural here. Unwelcome, to some. The wind and the waves would not judge us. They spoke their own languages: shushing, rushing syllables that added a pleasing background murmur to our afternoon picnic.

We spent our day exploring, peering out from the tops of tall white cliffs and browsing bustling market stands. Laden with postcards and baguettes, we boarded a bus for the return journey. The air was warm and stagnant, but we struggled to open the windows. A fellow passenger explained how. We tipped our heads at the pleasant-sounding but meaningless words. He tried again, using gestures to accentuate his remarks. My sister

and I exchanged a puzzled glance. The man waved us aside and opened the window for us.

"Merci," my sister thanked him.

The bus bumped to an unexpected stop. The buzz of chatter that filled the aisle told us nothing, but the police cars outside suggested something was amiss. Two officers boarded the bus, looked at our faces, then down at something in their hands, then back at us. Whatever or whomever they sought did not appear to be present. They turned away and left us wondering.

At a later stop, a different group of uniformed people boarded the bus, but these did not depart after a few quick glances. They moved among the passengers, scanning tickets and dealing out sharp remarks to those in the way. We extended our tickets for inspection. Mine was the first to be scanned. Red. Next, my sister's. Red. The device emitted a universal angry beep.

My mother's and father's tickets generated the same response. The inspectors told us something in French. We asked them something in English. They answered us in French. We held out our tickets again. They scanned them again. Red. Red. Red. Red. They gave us unintelligible directions, and we asked them if the tickets were expired. Then we consulted my sister, but their irate, rapid-fire comments were impossible for her to decipher.

"The police stopped our bus," I tried, in English, the only language I had to offer. "There was a delay." They answered in French. The air suddenly felt warmer, grown denser despite the open windows. Our ship was departing soon. Our phones had no service, and we did not know where we were; only that this was not our stop. A woman standing beside my sister intervened. After conversing briefly with her, the uniformed inspectors left. The bus carried on.

"What did she say?" I whispered in my sister's ear.

"I don't know."

"Is there something wrong with our tickets?"

She shrugged. "Je ne sais pas."

I passed my perhaps-faulty, perhaps-expired, perhaps-still-perfectly-valid ticket back to my mother. For the first time, I truly had a taste of what it felt like to be surrounded by a language that was not my own. It was not a feeling that would ever leave my memory. How jarring it was, to look to my parents for help, only to find them floundering in the same ocean of confusion. To have my voice taken from me. I have always been quiet, but my accustomed silence only adds weight to the words I choose to employ. Now, my expressions carried no more meaning than the crashing of the waves on the shore. I felt strangely like a child lost in a large venue, wandering between passersby,

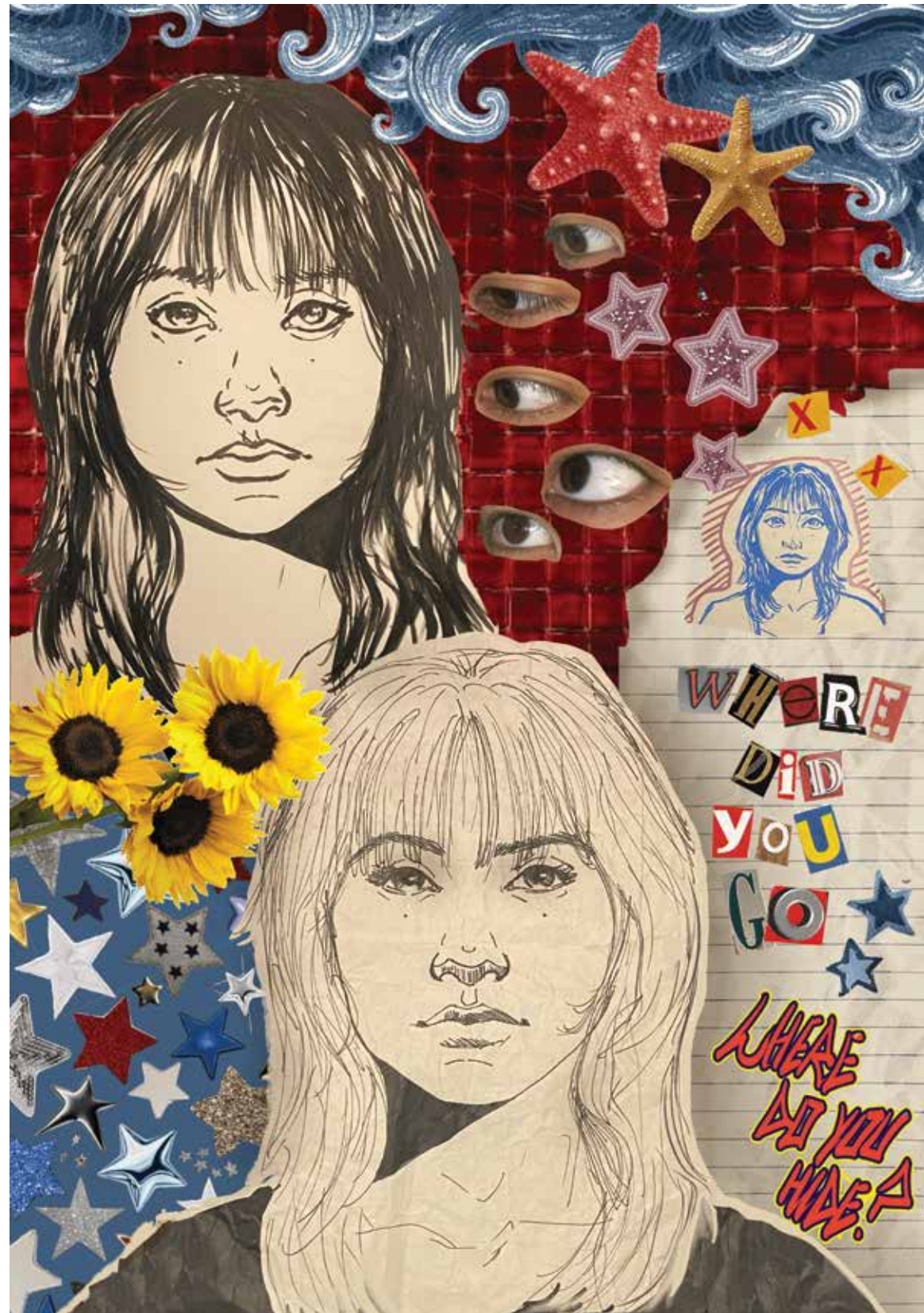
too frightened to ask for help, desperately hoping for rescue to find her on its own. Entirely at the mercy of strangers.

The woman who had spoken to the inspectors offered us a sympathetic smile.

"Merci," said my sister.



The Takeover
Ricardo Rayas



In Her Image
Destiny Maldonado

Identity Poem

Madison Galvillo

In the shadow embrace I find myself straddling two worlds,
Where Mexican heritage intertwines, with the stars and stripes
identity shaped by border limitations unfold,
A mix of rich ancestry though at times.

My voice effortlessly navigates the depths of two languages
Blending Spanglish whispers with English
In a land where cultures collide and intertwine
The genuine harmony of my melody brightly shines.

Yet murmurs of issues echo in the air
Where prejudice tarnishes and tears hearts apart
Facing challenges to bear with care
Yet from within blooms resilience like a fiery start.

From origins to embracing a nation pride-wide
As a proud Mexican American standing tall and strong in stride
Building bridges between worlds with hope, as our guide
Answering unity's call while in freedom embrace, we stand.

Nora's Love

Vivian Thompson



I woke up covered in dust. My left eye had long been lost so I peered half blind into the dark space where I had lain for so long. My good eye, dull and dusty, peered through the heavy air of the attic. The draftless air made the stillness tolerable. Even the threads of the cobwebs stayed motionless.

I woke up less and less now. At first it had been unbearable, always being conscious and waiting for her to come back. It was both a relief to sleep and yet I grieved her love (which gave me purpose) was draining out. With no one to love me, I would soon enter an eternal rest.

Noises came from the trap door to the attic and a shocking breeze flowed into the space. There was rustling and a dark head appeared from below. Someone came up the ladder and sneezed from the terrible cloud of dust that had been disturbed. I saw the shadow stretch toward the long pull string of the light bulb. It clicked when they managed to reach it.

Had I breath to take, I would have lost it. It was my girl.

Nora reached me and picked me up gently. My thread bare joints stretched. She cradled me best she could to relieve pressure on my sagging limbs. She gently wiped the dust on my clothes and my face.

“Hello, Cara,” she whispered.

I wish I could see her one more time. She was so compassionate, and she had doted on me so. We had gone for long walks in the evenings when we were together, and I missed them. Her favorite pastime had been council meetings held in the sunny yard behind the house. I was always head of the table, of course, though a changing roster of advisors and courtiers graced the seats. The wooden duck was the most regular guest, I recalled, and was an admiral. The dark was so suffocating compared to those wonderful days.

“Do you remember that time we had the dragon save the king? Or that time the evil wizard stole Admiral Duck?” Nora reminisced.

I thought back to the meetings in the sunlit yard. The old stump served as a table, and Nora provided refreshments. I remember when Nora had once been frightened by something in her darkened room. She lined the edges of the bed with stuffed sentries and soldiers. We slept peacefully, and the next morning, the dark creature was gone. On one of our walks, a dog came barking and wanted badly to play with me, but Nora protected me, and her father shooed it away. One of our council meetings was interrupted by rain, but Nora encouraged the advisors to stay because someone had to save the city from the Orcish monsters. Nora's mother had been frustrated when we came into the house soaked and dripping on the tiled floor.

A bandana covered her head, and a light blue dress hung from her shoulders. I wondered where all her beautiful red hair had gone. “Cara, I won't be able to play with you anymore. I have to go.”

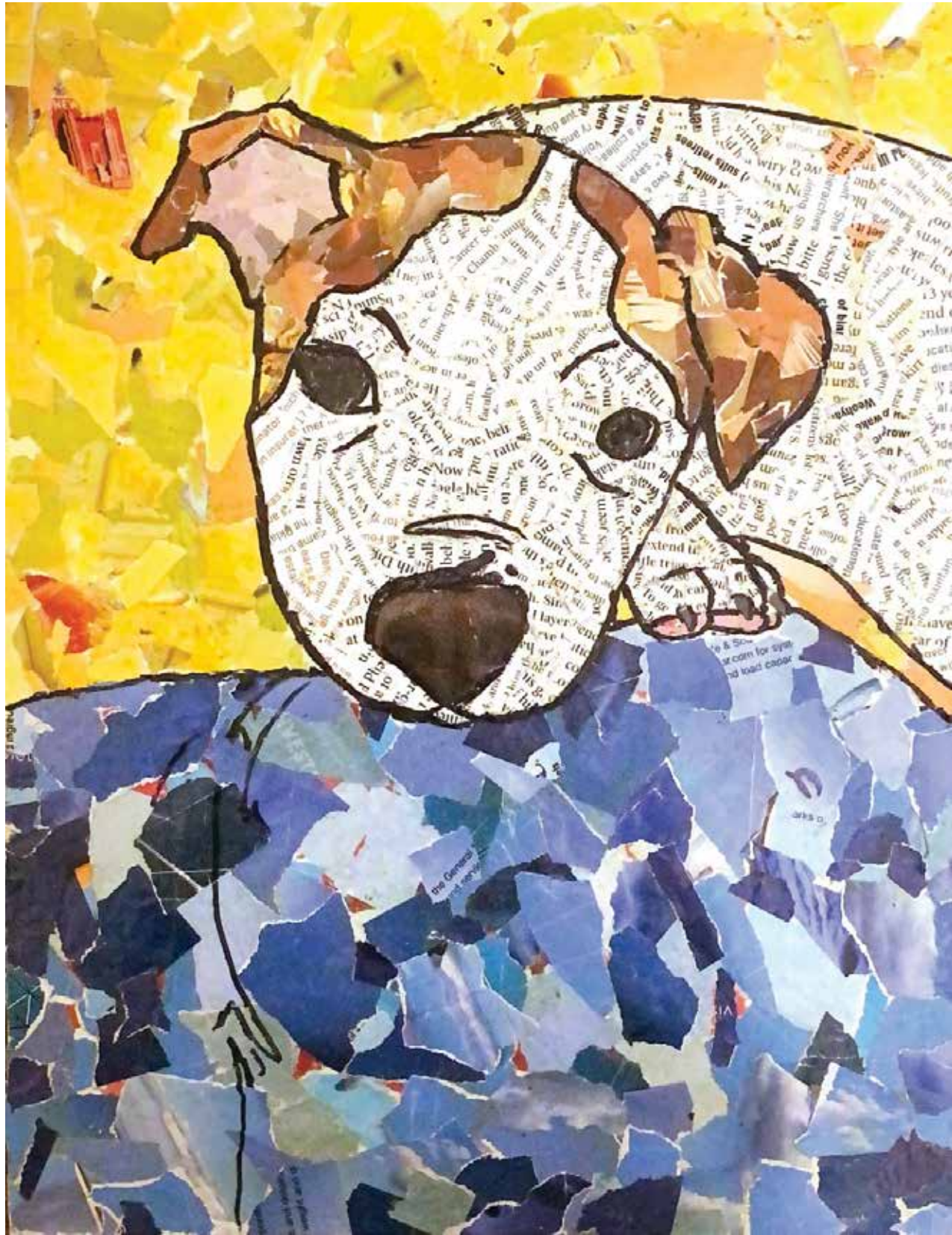
“Why,” I thought. “Why can't she take me?” It didn't matter if I was a little worn down, my stuffing thinned and my button eye missing. I would stay with Nora as long as I had thread left in me.

Nora smiled, and her hazy form flickered. “Thank you, Cara, for all the good memories. I hate to leave you.”

This had been the longest time I was awake in recent memory. Nora gently maneuvered me in her arms. Cradled as in years past, I looked up at Nora. Then I slept, comfortable in her arms. When I woke again, I felt surrounded by her love. The attic was still once more.



Caballo en un Vestido
Madi Trevino



Pepper
Ivon Garza

Borrowed Boots

Caitlynn Snelson

We saw the footage of her passage. We saw her last message. Assumptions of an old lover,
stealing her away from another
dogs bark, igniting a spark
Interns gossip with those in charge about careers and colleges
Unknowing of the seriousness of the charges
Whistle blows
Splitting apart
Through thick bushel
Water strapped to my back
Posing along the track
As Cameras snap
Hours pass
In borrowed boots
Mud weigh me down
Thorn stabbed my knees
Through my thick blue jeans
Sweat on my sunburnt skin
Unprepared within
Told to just hand out water
Not ready to look for someone's daughter
Gossip spills from our lips
Pushing the guilt of living
Into deep pits
My fellow intern hisses her leggings, torn from thorns
Blood seeps down her knees
The dog barks and we freeze
The breeze brings the smell of rot to our noses
A sickly sweet scent, causing bile to bloom like roses
Fighting through a clearing
She hangs
Black and beige
Blue leash sways
Lawn roots ripped and sprayed
At the toe, of my borrowed boots

Sam Makes a Sandwich

Hailey Taylor

Sam was hungry.

He'd been hungry for a few hours, actually, but he couldn't bring himself to get out of his bed. He'd woken up at eight, grabbed his phone, and scrolled until his eyes went bleary and his head started hurting. Then he'd set his phone down to give himself a break.

That was ten minutes ago. It was currently noon, and his stomach was rumbling as sunlight filtered through his windows. He knew he should probably get up and go make lunch, but his body simply refused to move.

Time ticked by. His stomach rumbled louder. The air grew warmer. He wanted to eat something, but he didn't want to order takeout or cook for himself. Today was his day off. No school, no work. He was going to enjoy it. Maybe he would finally clean his room.

As soon as he got something to eat. By one o'clock, he could ignore his hunger no longer. Actually he could, but the thing was he didn't want to. Moving still felt like a chore though. Instead of getting up he just reached for his phone — again.

This was easier than having to make himself lunch. Sam resumed his scrolling, noting that eventually he would have to plug his phone back in to let it charge.

As he scrolled, a notification popped up on his phone, reminding him to update his Companion app. Oh. Yeah, he needed to do that. Later, though.

Or maybe Pip could help. Sam opened the Companion app, which asked him to update it. He hit 'REMIND ME LATER' before activating Pip. After a few minutes of silence, Sam asked out loud, "Hello?"

oh hey

"Hi." Sam knew he didn't need to speak out loud to communicate with Pip, but if he tried to keep his speech internalized, he sometimes lost track of if he was speaking to his own mind or his Companion. "How's it going?"

nothing much just straight up chillin
what about you.

"I'm not doing anything," Sam said. "I'm hungry though."

go make a sandwich then

"I don't want to," Sam said, before correcting himself: "I can't."

it's literally so easy

"No it's not. I can't get out of bed."

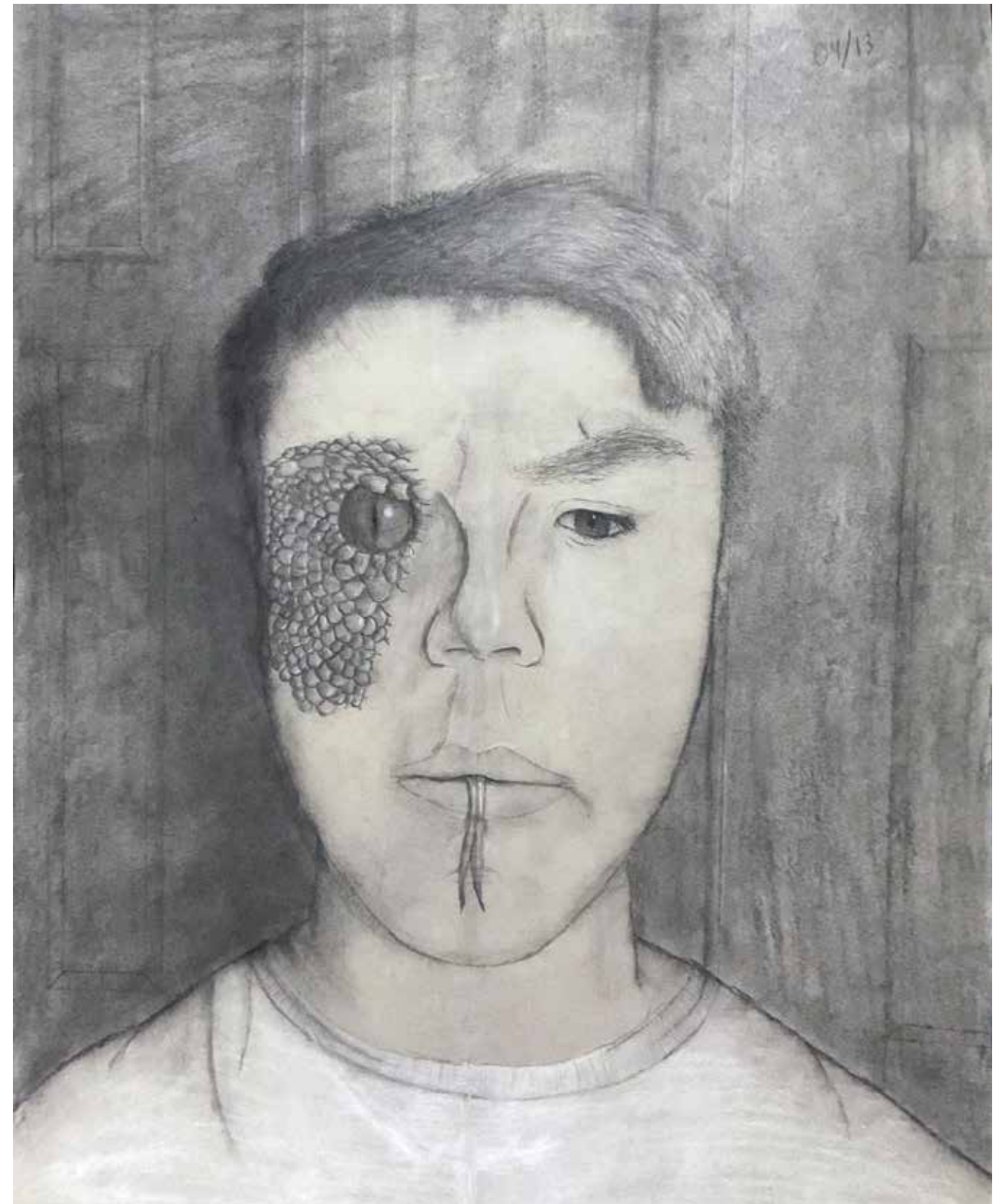
oh ok do you need me to call 911

"No way!" he yelped, louder than he meant to. "It's not that serious, it's just... it feels like a lot of work."

all you need to do is go downstairs and
make a sandwich

"That's not true," Sam said, rolling over onto his side. His back cracked; that was his first real movement of the day. "First, I have to get out of bed. Then I have to find a pair of pants. Then I have to go downstairs. I have to open the pantry. I have to get the bread. Once I have the bread, I need to open the bread. Then I'll get a plate. Then I have to decide what I want to put on my sandwich, which is gonna take a while. Once I finally do that--"

ok i get it



Evolutionary Facade
Alex Hernandez

“I’m not done! Once I do that, I have to take all the mayo and ham or whatever out of my fridge. I have to grab a knife. I have to put mayo on my sandwich. Then ham. Maybe a pickle or two. Once I’m done, I have to put it all back. I have to eat the whole sandwich after that. I’ll need to wash the plate and knife, too. And clean up any crumbs I left behind. Then what? I have to go back upstairs? Or take a shower, since I’m already up? It’s too much work. Today’s my day off. I don’t wanna do all that.”

buddy I think you are making this a completely bigger deal than it has to be but i’m just an ai so like what room do i have to judge

“You don’t even need to eat.”

thats true

“But I do.”

so why dont you make yourself a sandwich and afterwards as a reward for making it you can have a little treat or something

Sam rolled over onto his back again, pondering this for a moment. “A treat?”

a piece of candy or something

“What about a video game?”

yeah buy a video game who cares go make yourself a sandwich man

He thought about this for a long, long while. Making a sandwich would be a lot of work, but maybe it would be worth it if he got a video game out of it.

After a moment of silence, in which neither he nor Pip spoke, Sam finally found it within himself to sit up. His neck cracked this time, and he winced. He looked around his bedroom,

taking note of the sea of clothes and pillows and soda cans and plastic bags and papers that littered his floor. Already, he was regretting the decision he’d made, because now he needed to navigate this mess — but luckily, Pip was there for him, doing what he was programmed to.

one foot after the other bro you can do it

Sam took a deep breath before making his first move. His foot found a patch of bare floor, but his second step would be a bit more dangerous due to the hazards of his room. His eyes flickered across the area in front of him, before they landed on a t-shirt that wasn’t too lumpy. His foot settled unevenly there, but thankfully he was now halfway across.

Ugh, wait, no! First, he had to find a pair of pants in this mess. Sam anxiously spun in a circle, looking for a clean pair of pants, but none were visible. He would have to make a trip to the laundry room before he started for downstairs! This suddenly wasn’t worth it.

can i be honest you could probably cut the pants part out of this equation

“But what if someone sees me?” he asked worriedly.

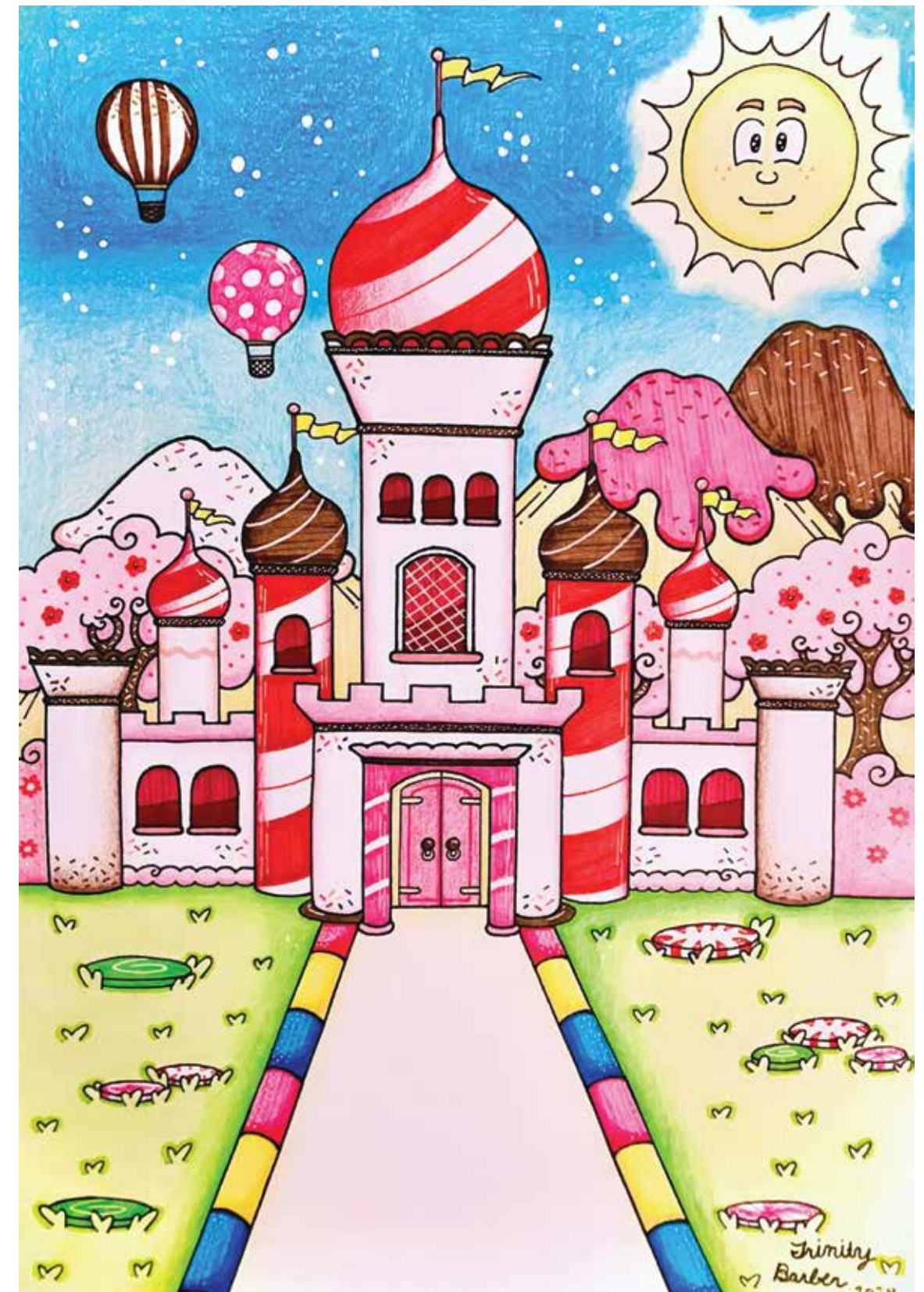
you live alone dude

That was true. He was getting worked up over nothing, plus that would be one less task Sam would have to do. Whew! What would he do without his Companion?

After another two steps of careful navigation, Sam managed to emerge from his room, unscathed by the mess. From there, he would have to go downstairs.

Fourteen whole steps. Just to get to the first floor of his house.

maybe you should invest in that elevator



Shining Down on the Candy Kingdom of Pattymore
Trinity Inaya Barber

“That’d be even more work! I’d have to hire someone, pay them, press a button and wait for it to arrive whenever I wanted a ride — no way,” Sam rebuked. All that work wasn’t even getting into the fact that his grandmother’s ghost would definitely haunt him if he renovated their family home.

ok dang no need to get worked up

“I’m not getting worked up!” Sam snapped. He took a step down the stairs. And another, then another, until finally, he was on the first floor.

As soon as he stepped off the staircase, Sam froze, staring into his kitchen. Piles of dirty dishes were waiting to be cleaned. The contents of his backpack were strewn across his dining table, leaving no room for him to eat. That would be more work, more things for him to do!

“I’m going back upstairs,” he declared, but Pip swooped in.

no way dude you did all that work just to get here

“But I...”

go make a sandwich

Sam turned on his heel, looking up at the staircase. In the distance his bedroom door stood ajar, revealing his messy room. Fourteen steps ... a minefield of dirty clothes and trash ... he would have to do all that again.

Fine. He would make a sandwich.

Sam entered his kitchen, turning on the light but pointedly ignoring the dirty dishes. He opened up his pantry, where the bread sat on the top shelf. He stood on his tiptoes. He moved aside a box of cereal. He grabbed onto the end of the bag and brought it down. He shut the pantry door. He removed the bread clip from the bag. He slid out one slice of bread.

Already, Sam was exhausted. He would have to repeat this process to get stuff out of the fridge ... once he figured out what that stuff was, which was a whole other process! On cue, Pip asked...

what kinda sandwich we making

“You aren’t doing anything,” Sam said. He glanced towards his fridge. What did he have that could go on sandwiches?

Mayo. Mustard. Ketchup. Jam, the grape kind and the strawberry kind. Peanut butter, with and without nuts. Ham. Turkey. Roast beef. Canned tuna. Swiss cheese. Pickle relish. Horseradish.

Why were there so many choices? Why did he have so many groceries? Why did he buy all of that thinking he would use them?

“I think, um...” He hesitated, before reaching into the bag and pulling out another slice of bread.

cool you have both slices of bread now what

Chicken salad. Avocado. Bacon. Cream cheese. Kosher pickles.

“Maybe I’ll put...” Sam’s hand inched closer to the bread bag.

Jalapeños. Onions. Lettuce. Cabbage. Tomatoes.

He took another piece out.

Marshmallow fluff. Nutella. Honey. Banana.

And another.

sam

Hot sauce. Mushrooms. Bell peppers. American cheese. Pesto.

“This is my sandwich.” Sam declared as he pulled out his fifth, and final, slice of bread.

ok we have completely lost the plot

“It’s not like you can eat, so don’t judge me for my sandwich, dude.”

sam this is just bread

Sam stacked the slices of bread on top of each other. It did look awfully bland. But did he really want to put toppings on all of these slices of bread? Or should he return the excess slices to the bread bag? Which option required more work?

ok how about peanut butter and jelly you like peanut butter and jelly right

Sam swallowed around the lump that had formed in his throat.

“I do...”

it’s so easy sam just go grab you some pb and j ok

With Pip’s encouragement, Sam crossed the room and made it to his fridge with all his bread intact. He opened the door, and flinched when he saw the choices before him: grape or strawberry?

With nuts or without?

“Can you choose for me?” he whispered, and he could almost feel Pip sighing in his mind.

well grape and no nuts is a classic combo

He was right. That was an easy, safe choice. It was hardly even a choice at all! Sam grabbed them both from the fridge. He twisted open the jars. He opened a drawer. He fished out his only clean butter knife. He set his five slices of bread down, spacing them evenly apart. He dipped the knife into the peanut butter.

Sweat beaded his brow as he spread it across the slices. When it came time for the jam, he realized that he might not have enough for every slice, and that he might need to grab the strawberry one too. But with careful application, Sam managed to spread the grape jam on all his slices, though the fifth slice had a considerably thinner layer.

Finally, Sam put all the pieces together. He tossed the dirtied butter knife into the sink, and he picked up the sandwich. He took a bite.

It tasted good.

you did a great job sam

“Thanks, Pip,” Sam said mournfully around a mouthful of bread. “It was really hard.”

yeah i know buddy

“Now I have to eat this whole damn thing.”

you have to do the dishes too

Tears pricked his eyes.

of course you do

“Why is everything so hard?”

it’ll get easier over time

Sam looked out his window. The sun was shining. Kids were playing outside and dads were watering their lawns. It was a beautiful day, but Sam wouldn’t get to experience it. He wanted to, but deep down he knew he couldn’t.

“I hope so,” Sam said, and took another bite.



Woman of Art
Sidonia Dowden

Be Our Womanly

Zoe Hublitz

The paintings called them soft. The statues carved them strong. Then the corsets came, ribs pulled tight, breath a luxury. The flappers danced away the curves, the hourglass returned, then vanished again. Decades pass, waists shrink, hips widen, muscles tone, bones show, all shifting with the tide of the times. The body is a canvas they repaint, never asking if the skin beneath can bear the weight of their brushes.

**Thin, then thick, then thin,
a shape made to fit the times,
but never the woman.**

Run Bunny Run

Zeka Baza

The ground shook. Or maybe it was just him.

The wind howled through the burned trees, bending them low like whispering figures with no audience, no meaning. The damp earth chilled his trembling paws, his body weak, small. The scent of blood clung to his fur—but not his own. Not yet.

His heart pounded, hammering against his ribs, against his bones, against something deeper inside him that he had no interest in naming.

The den was gone.

The burrow—home, sanctuary, the warmth of his mate, the squirm of fresh-killed kits—nothing but tattered ground and ruin. A crater where life had been.

The wolf had come without a sound. Its jaw was wet with what had happened before, its breath steaming in the cold. He had seen everything. Had imagined movement in the slivers of darkness, had seen the moment it dropped, had seen his mate whirl—fangs bared in a futile, futile attempt to protect—only to vanish beneath an unrelenting force.

No cry. No wail. No snap but the one one body makes against another, the sound of something leaving the world.

And he had fled.

His feet never stopped, his lungs burned, his mind refused to form thoughts in words—only need, only hunger to exist. The forest stretched forever, trees reaching into heaven, slicing the silver beams of the moon. The sky had no sun, only emptiness above.

And somewhere behind him, the wolf followed. A hunter. A god of hunger.

The universe shrank into a single truth: distance. Distance between predator and prey, life and death, one heartbeat and the next. His legs ached, his breath came in ragged puffs, but he did not falter. He could not. He had been created to move, created to flee, created to vanish through reeds and roots and tunnels in the earth.

He should have been safe.

And yet.

The hush of leaves through the bushes. A great exhale of hunger.

He twisted, leapt, claws scraping over the cold ground, skittering through thorns and moss, past trees with branches like skeletal hands reaching to pluck him out of existence. His own scent burned in his nostrils—fear, sweat, loss. His body understood this game. The chase. The play of nature, of balance, of endless cycles that had existed before he ever drew breath.

His body had been made for this.

But it was tired.

The forest ruptured in places. Shadows moved where shadows shouldn't. The wind whispered, not as wind, but as something watching. The ground rose and fell beneath him—hills, roots clawing at his limbs. He surged forward, but the air shifted.

The presence behind him changed.

The wolf.

A sliver of darkness between the trees. Its body low and vile, a shadow taking form, death taking shape. It did not howl. Did not snarl. Did not mock. It had no need. It was a tidal wave rising from the deep, unrelenting.

He ran.

Trees blurred. His mind splintered. He was nothing but motion, a vessel for escape. And yet, escape was impossible. The wolf had already taken everything. The den. His mate. His kits. All that remained was the act of running.

And now, even that was taken from him. Dead end.



Lambs to Slaughter
Alex Ross

The ground cut off into an abyss. A sheer drop into nothing. The wind howled from below, rushing up from a gorge carved by time itself. The woods ended here. There was nowhere left to go.

He turned.

The wolf stood at the tree line, muscles taut beneath its dark fur. Frost curled from its breath in the night air. It did not move. It did not need to. The hunt was complete.

No thrill in its eyes. No malice. No satisfaction.

Only hunger.

The oldest law of the world. Something eats. Something dies.

He should have run.

But he did not.

His legs trembled. His small, weak body shook from exhaustion. But he remained still.

And inside him, something snapped shut.

There was no den. No kits. No warmth waiting beyond this night. If he survived, what would be left? If he lived, what would remain of what life had been?

The burrow had been full of soft, wiggling ears, of peaceful, rising breaths, of the quiet that comes with belonging.

But the world had taken that.

Let it take him too.

His eyelids drifted closed.

The wolf crept forward.

There was no sound. No movement. Only wind. Only the hush of leaves. Only the quiet exhale of something greater than them both. And yet.

A new sound.

Not the sound of the trees. Not the whisper of the wind. Something foreign. Something unnatural. Something that did not belong in the silence of the hunt.

A second later, the wolf faltered.

The rabbit's eyes snapped open.

The creature that had hunted him—by mile, by hour, by what had felt like eternity—stumbled. Its body convulsed in the moonlight, breath wheezing.

A spear jutted from its ribs.

The rabbit turned.

Something stood in the darkness. Something tall. Taller than the trees. Its limbs were strange, its eyes stranger. It was wrapped in the skins of dead things, its hair tangled, its face marked by symbols that had no name.

No fur. No claws. No fangs.

And yet, it towered.

A hunter.

Not a god. Not a wolf. Not a beast of hunger alone.

A man.

The rabbit did not understand.

He should have fled. The instinct buried deep in his blood, his bones, his heart screamed at him to run. This was no companion. This was

no savior. This was something new. Something unnatural. Something that obeyed no laws of the world he knew.

And yet, he did not move.

The wolf gave one final shudder. Then, it lay still.

The wind shifted.

The man did not step forward. Did not extend a hand. Did not chase. He only watched.

And for the first time—since the hovel had shattered, since the trees had become only passageways of escape, since the stalking had begun—

The rabbit no longer ran.

The world had changed.

And never, never, never would it remain the same again.



Jax the Photogenic Cat
Carmella Puccetti

Prettiest
Adam Carranza

She's the prettiest
I just can't resist
But when she's away
All I can do is pray
And hope she'll stay
To keep me from being gray
When she's around and I hear her sound
It is art that I have found

Growing Up

Destiny Maldonado

Time slips away

Second

By

Second.

My memories of my youth are seen with a
yellow hue,

The pleasant times I had slowly being forgotten

My mind rotten with subjects of school,

Instead of the gifts of my childhood.

My head now occupied with new memories
and new times,

But

I don't want to lose her,

I don't want to lose the little girl that used to
color with crayons

Or watch Disney channel.

The little girl who adored Barbies and playdoh.

I want her to stay within me,

Forever.

She gave me life and hopes and dreams,

She was confident and friendly,

She was the real me.

Now I am someone else

Would she like the new me?

I know that she will stay with me

But,

She will fade

Because that's what growing up does.

It takes what you were and changes you,

It takes those Barbies and changes it to
textbooks

It takes those crayons and changes it for a
phone.

Growing up cannot be avoided,

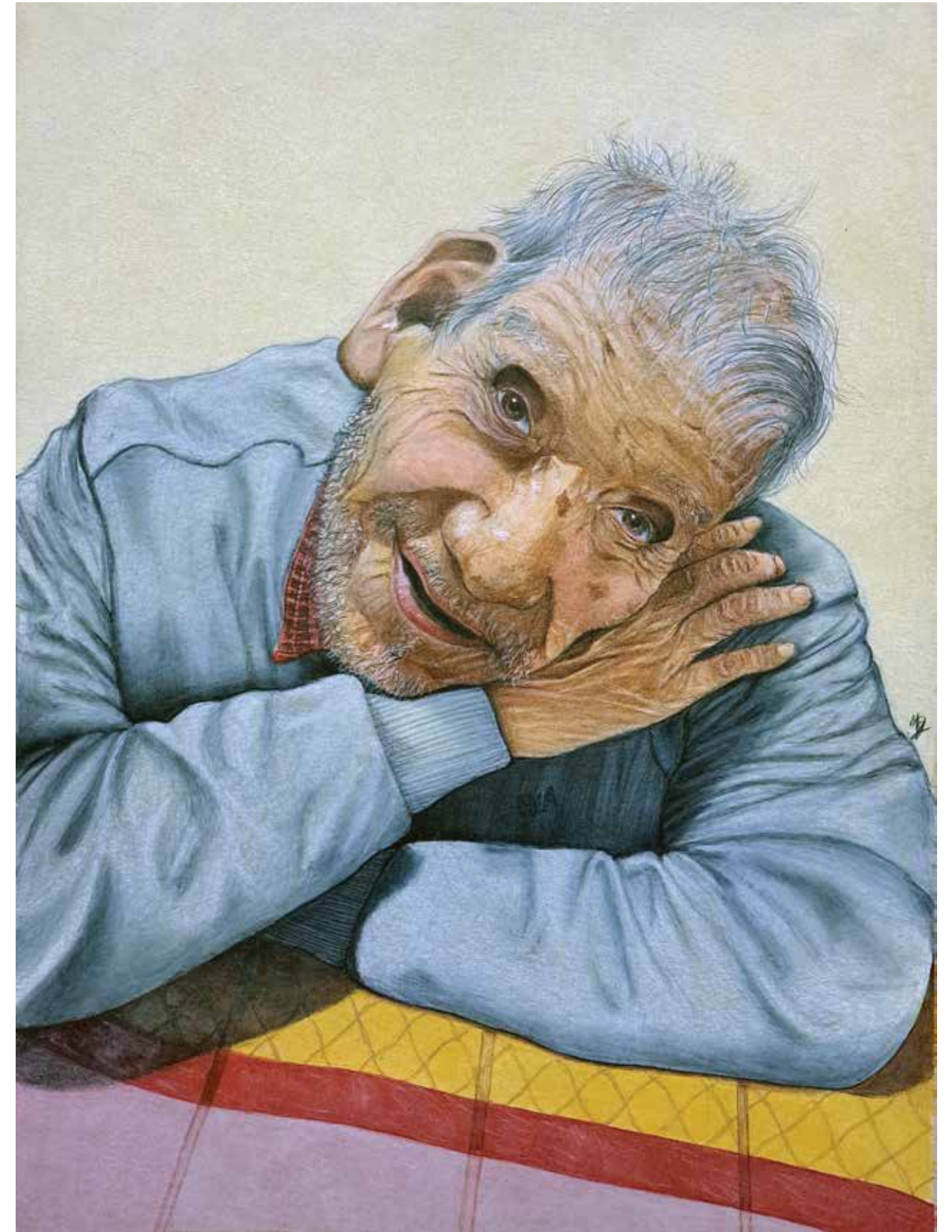
It's inevitable.

The little girl within me will take her last breath,
and I will mourn her death.

I don't want to grow up.

I want to stay that little girl forever,

But I can't.



The Reflection of Yesterday
Dulce Gamez Rivera

Sam

Leanna Snowton

Sam had a mission and that was to walk up to the popular table. Sam knew how this would go. She has seen it happen before; it would be guys or girls not being accepted to the table and viewed as weirdos trying to talk to Lucy or her friends. It would be embarrassing to have to even go through that, but this was Sam's mission, and she didn't want to fail.

When the bell rang for lunch, Sam bolted up as usual with a plan to catch Lucy by surprise. She needed a perfect distraction for this to be accomplished. She headed to where she usually sits and became very watchful of the popular table which was parked right in the center of the cafeteria, the spotlight.

Sam didn't know whether to just get up and go or to grab lunch, yet she would possibly throw up as she stands there. It became increasingly obvious that this could go nowhere, and she could just go on about her day and forget.

It was this nagging feeling of wanting to be accepted somewhere; she was too white for her black community and too black for the white community. It was the in-between stereotype that she hated, but that was where she was. She could just accept that and be the best she can be, but Sam didn't want that.

She wanted to see and feel that acceptance that she craves so much; she had a loving mother and no father figure (another stereotype of hers). Sam was just envious of the pretty brunette girl, Lucy with her brown eyes and white skin. Lucy's smile could have everyone on their knees. Sam wanted to be just like her. She wanted to be that special to the world as well. That deep envy made her almost not hungry, but she got up anyway and headed to the lunch area. She grabbed a pizza and a chocolate muffin.

"Excuse me!" Sam turned around to see Lucy right there, up close, and personal. Sam almost gasped but stepped out of the way to go and sit down. Sam could say she wanted a makeover right then and there, but she didn't.

Maybe she didn't have the balls to do this after all. She sat and ate her lunch watching Lucy and her friend talk and laugh. Her shiny hair glowing in the sunlight, that's when Sam grabbed a piece of her own hair. It wasn't shiny or bouncy or even straight like Lucy's. It was her curly dull hair and she now wanted to straighten it.

Sam stared at herself through her bathroom mirror, she looked long and hard.

In elementary, Sam was once bullied for her skin which was darker than the other kids there. She wasn't the only black kid there, but that didn't mean she didn't get made fun of.

"Monkey," "poop or turd," "nappy head," even "fatherless child."

Some of these comments were from her own black peers who joined in the fun because they didn't want to be made fun of either. She couldn't blame them, but that just gave the white kids more hurtful words to say because if another black kid is bullying another black kid, then it's okay to do it too.

Sam always wondered why her, and why no one stood up for her like she did them. Was she an easy target? Did she upset them in any way? What did she do? She remembered what her mother said versus what her teacher told her.

"They bully you because they're hurting, or they heard that from their parents. Don't let their words sink in your skin because that will only block your own judgement of yourself."



The Pink Birds Sit on the Green Vine
Malena Saucedo

Her mother hugged Sam after that and let her cry.

Her teacher on the other hand said, “They only bully you because they’re jealous of you,” or “They’re only kids, just tell them: ‘Sticks and Stones may break my bones, but your words won’t ever hurt me.’” Sam’s teacher didn’t talk to those kids or console her enough, she just walked away, and those kids came back.

Sam still went to school with those same kids, but they don’t look her in the eye. She would wonder sometimes if they were ashamed for their words that they said to her. Sam could only wonder that to herself, but never ask them up front.

When she sees Lucy in the hallways, she would imagine that she was beside her laughing and talking, being one of the cool kids having shiny straight hair.

She would imagine hearing all the gossip and putting her bullies below her and making them feel how she felt all those years ago. Sam knew that was only something she would do if she were cruel.

All she could do was get good grades and get into the highest college with a great scholarship. During the weekends, she would try her best to put on makeup just to see how it feels on her skin. She would use her mom’s makeup sometimes liking how it looked on her skin, but there was always something off.

Sam knew she needed to ask soon, or she’d be too confined in her thoughts that she’d avoid it all the rest of the year. Sam washed her hands when she felt nervous. She looked at her hair which wasn’t straight anymore, but now curly and frizzing up.

She almost cried, the makeup she put on started dripping down her face.

“Ugly Cow.”

She stood up from the sink watching the foundation fall from her face; she turned to see it was one of the girls in Lucy’s group.

“W-what?!”

The girl, who Sam didn’t know the name of, glared at her.

“I said Ugly Cow, are you deaf?”

Sam stood frozen just looking at the girl. Her fiery gray eyes stared into Sam’s eyes and Sam backed up into a corner.

“I’ve seen you before. You’re a nerd and a wannabe. I’ve seen your creepy eyes stare at Lucy like a stalker just like the rest of them. You know you creep Lucy out every day. She just doesn’t have the guts to say anything.”

Sam was stunned and didn’t know what to say so she ran out of the bathroom. She felt seen, exposed, and heard without even saying the words out loud; she wasn’t watching where she was going; yet needed to get out of there.

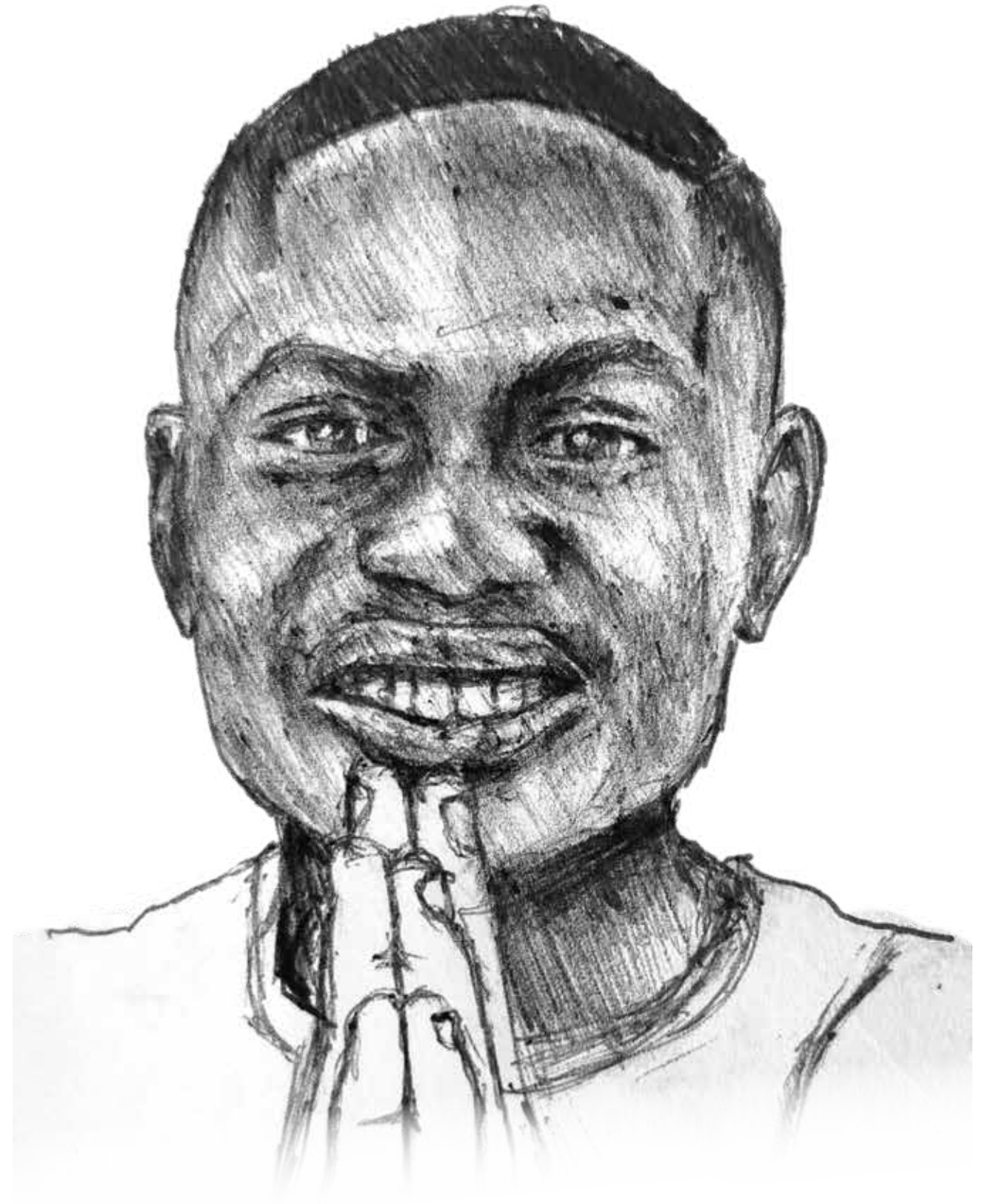
She turned the corner and instantly bumped into someone. She fell back looking at the person, Lucy. She backed away and got up, making sure to keep mind of her shoulder.

“Are you okay?”

She didn’t know whether she should help her or not. The word, “weirdo” stuck in her mind, and she didn’t move from her spot. “I’m fine, thank you.” She got up and wiped her pants, “Are you okay?”

Sam could tell that Lucy didn’t want to look her in the eye and she held her right arm as some sort of comfort.

“I’m sorry.”



My Experimental Sketch
Solomon Nwachukwu

Lucy didn't speak. Her glow that was usually around her felt dimmer than normal. "It's okay, it was just an accident. I mean it happens to everyone and it will probably happen again you know. Its fine."

For the first time she was watching Lucy ramble.

"I'm saying sorry if you felt creeped out. I wanted to talk to you about something stupid, but I've seen the way you've ignored people that do talk to you."

Sam didn't know where this confidence was coming from, maybe it was the altercation with that girl or just the adrenaline. Sam couldn't handle the awkwardness and wanted to just go.

She walked past Lucy and hoped this moment would never resurface.

"Wait!"

Sam stopped and turned to Lucy. "Whatever your name is. What is this stupid something?" Sam hesitated to open her mouth, but took a deep breath, "I want you to help me with a makeover."

That's when Lucy cracked a smile, "What's wrong with you?" Sam didn't know what she meant by that, but she knew what she would tell her. She would tell her everything.



Man in the Eyes of Passed Men
Drew Narvaez

"I just want to see what I would look like. You know, like you."

"Like me?"

"Beautiful, shiny, white, and able to make the people stop and stare. Not stop and stare like a bad thing."

Lucy nodded, stepping closer. "I can't help you with that stuff, but I can with the beautiful and stop-and-stare-thing. The hardest choice is if you want this makeover then you will need to lose a couple of pounds, cut out any carbs or gluten for a while, and straighten that mop of a mess."

Sam instantly touched her hair when she heard that. Her hair felt dry; she needed to moisturize her hair when she gets home. "Okay, I can do that." Sam was determined to feel that empowerment that she saw Lucy feel and all those other girls.

When she came to school on Monday, she had used heat protection before she straightened it. She wanted to feel accepted and feel that want, she saw everywhere at school. She kept pulling down her shorts as she felt them ride up each time she walked.

Sam was having second thoughts, but she was still determined to try it out.

Sam went to her locker and re-organized her notebooks and took out only her science and math.

She closed her locker and jumped when she saw Lucy's smiling face. The hallways felt quiet, she looked around to see everyone staring at them especially at Lucy.

"Is this part of the plan?"

Sam felt uneasy with the staring and wondered how Lucy could do it and then shamed herself a bit for being one of those people that stared.

It was every day at school with the staring, and it started to overwhelm her a bit.

"You'll get used to it. When this first happened to me, I was scared and confused all day with people talking to me or just staring. After a while, it helped build my confidence a lot. It'll happen to you, too."

With Lucy's words, she hoped that confidence would come, but she never felt it. With the weeks passing, the constant tugging and heat on her hair, she feared that it would be damaged and wouldn't be curly again.

Didn't Sam want that? Wasn't that the price she paid for when she finally asked Lucy for help? What did Sam want now?

"I think that's the girl that was upset with me in the bathroom."

Sam pointed to a girl that glared straight at her, "She said that y'all were best friends and you both knew everything about each other."

Lucy let out a loud chuckle which sounded sweet, yet sour. "Of course, she would say that. All of them say the same exact thing. Don't worry about her, she's up-coming crazy."

Sam just nodded and continued to draw in her notebook. "What do you even draw in there?" Lucy leaned in to try to peek, but Sam quickly closed the notebook. "Nothing." Sam had a lot of drawings of her with a smile or just places she's been

She has only one of Lucy which she never wanted anyone to see.

When she arrived home wearing a baggy hoodie to hide the clothes that Lucy let her have, her mother was sitting on the couch watching Dr. Phil and she smiled at Sam with the sweetest smile that crushed Sam's heart.

"Hi Mama, how was your day?"

Sam headed to the kitchen to fix her a bowl of whatever her mother cooked. "My day was good, how was yours?"

"It was good as well." She put the bowl in the microwave. She needed to hurry; she knew her mom would have questions about the hoodie. "Well Mama, I'll get to my room. I'll be right back."

She was about to walk down the hall, "I need to talk to you real quick, Honey."

Sam stopped and sighed heavily. "Yes Mama." Her mom turned off the TV and Sam knew it was serious.

"I wanted to talk to you about your recent changes."

Sam sucked in her breath and smiled weakly at her mom, "What changes?"

Sam's mother made her sit beside her and Sam wanted to find different ways to be excused.

"Now, I've noticed the way your hair was before the clothing change."

Did her mom know? Was she about to yell at her foolishness or just use the good ole "I'm very disappointed in you?" Sam was ready, but at the same time, she wasn't.

"Is something wrong with it?"

She reached and touched her straight hair. "No baby, it's just different than I thought. It's obvious to me that you may be going through

changes and that's okay. I just want you to know that I love the real you and not something that's not you. I don't see you draw as much and you spend way too much time outside which is nice, but not you."

Sam listened to her mom and then she thought about Lucy. Suddenly, she said aloud to her mom, "But Mama, I want to be white."

Sam thought she almost gave her mom a heart attack. Her mom crushed her in a hug and cried which finally made Sam cry, her cries could reach the heavens.

Sam and her mom had a deep conversation about identity and realization and how things deeply affected them.

"I've always been called white even though, I'm black. I've never understood what that meant. The heartbreaking part was that it was by a family member who I loved, and their words still hurt even till this day. Words can affect you as well as what our eyes see. A word can make your eyes be direct on that. It will be on your mind and shadow your thoughts. It can even break you how it wants. What I want you to know is that you are my baby and I love you. You may think you need to be a type of way to get through this world, but you don't. You just need to be you and friends that match your energy will come along. With, 'I want to be white,' let's reverse it: 'I want traits and characteristics it gives for others.' You don't want to be white—you want what it gives to white people. You are so beautiful. I love you and I hope you love yourself as who you are—a smart black girl who's going to change the world. That's who you are to me, but who are you to yourself, Sam?"



Horse Crazy
Madi Trevino

The Attic's Whispers

Jazmin Garcia



In dusty corners, forgotten and still,
A teddy bear sits on the attic's sill.
Its button eyes, once bright with glee,
Now witness time's silent reverie.

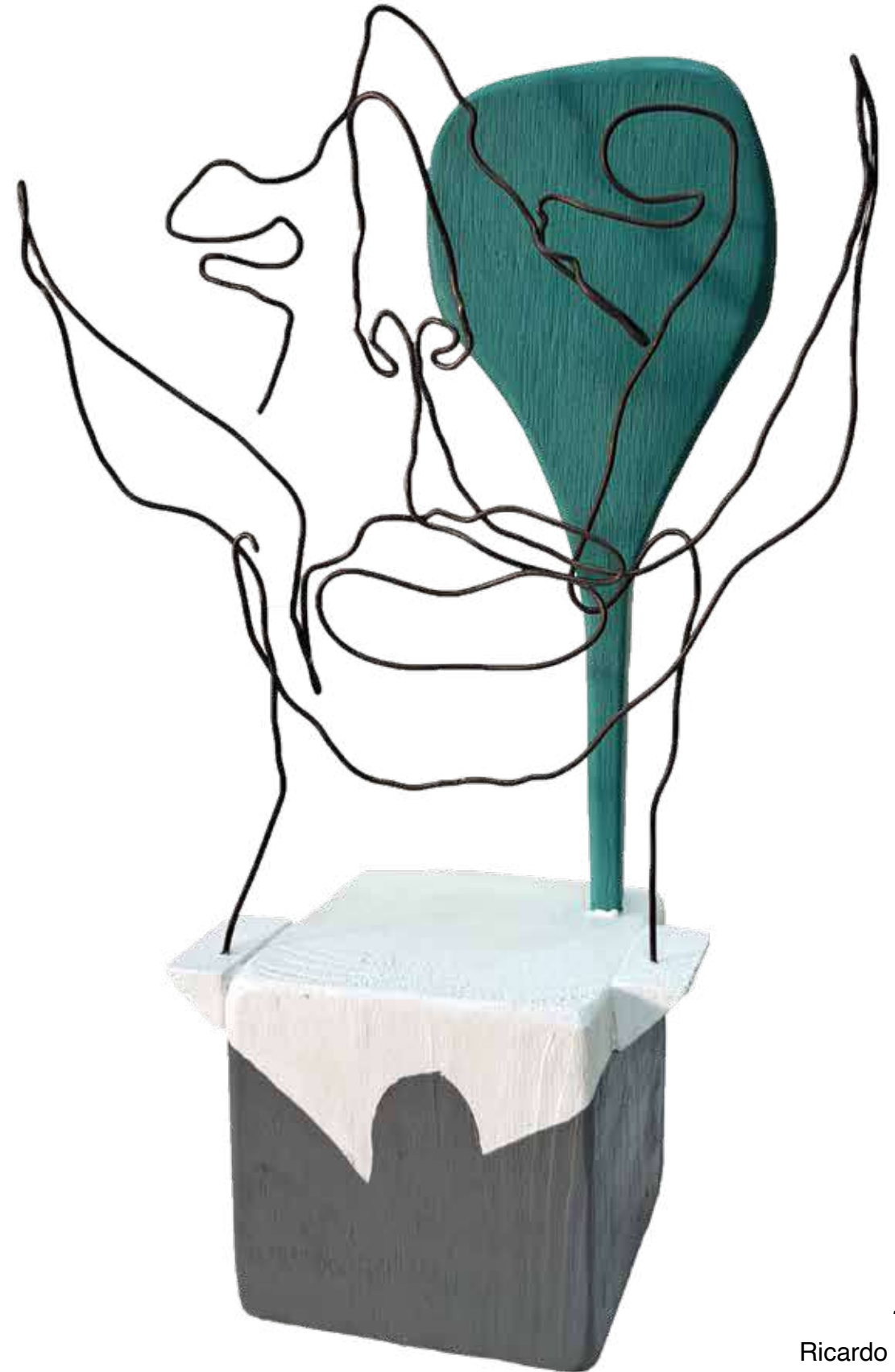
But as moonlight filters through the pane,
The bear feels a stirring in its cotton brain.
Memories flicker, a soft, warm glow,
Of laughter and love from long ago.

It hears Sarah's giggles, clear as day,
And feels Tom's embrace as if in play.
Their joys, their fears, their childhood dreams,
Flow through the bear in golden streams.

The kite they flew on breezy hills,
The stories read to cure night's chills,
First days of school and scraped-up knees,
All dance around like autumn leaves.

Though years have passed, and children have grown
In this old bear, their youth is sewn.
A patchwork quilt of treasured times,
Preserved in dust and nursery rhymes.

The attic creaks, the memories fade,
But in this toy, they'll always stay.
A silent guardian of days gone by,
Where childhood dreams will never die.



Tumor
Ricardo Rayas

The Marina

Lauren Anderson

This marina in Galveston was never beautiful, not in the way that the upper class defines beauty. It reeked of saltwater and diesel gas. The waves of the Gulf of Mexico often broke and eroded the docks. Everywhere I stepped with my bare feet, I felt the stab of rusted nails and broken shells. Burweed clung to my socks, leaving red pinpricks on my youthful skin. I would have to pluck them off after every day spent outside, with growing annoyance. It was almost as if the land wanted to repel people. The marina was worn, like the bones of an old man who had lived through hardships but refused to fall into the societal pressures that valued glass towers over rusted boats. That

old man was my beloved grandpa. He loved the marina like no other, and because of my admiration for him, I loved it too. Even with his presence being incomplete, it will never be absent. If the marina remains, so does he.

This was my grandpa's sanctuary. He chose the marina lifestyle over Houston's bright skyline. He would always brag about the tales of his youth, and one of those was how he had one of the most prestigious roles in one of downtown Houston's fanciest banks. His freedom and pride meant more to him than his salary. He was my inspiration. Give him Goodwill shirts. Give him oil-stained jeans. Give him gruesome

boat work in Texas's scorching hot sun. Give him something real. This is what gave him life.

When I visited the marina with my grandpa, I stayed on the boat he had built piece by piece. After we read our bedtime story, *Blueberries for Sal*, I would sleep in his oversized tee that fell to my knees, letting the motion of the waves rock me to sleep. In the morning, I would wake up to the sound of him making breakfast and coffee, listening to the radio. I would leap out of the leather couch to talk to him and follow him on his daily activities. The sounds of seagulls greeted me as I grabbed one of his hands to step off the boat onto the dock, while he tugged the rough rope, guiding me gently down.

The big, rusted shed where they met every morning to discuss their boat projects smelled like burnt cigarettes and freshly brewed black coffee. The people at the marina were just like him. Men with skin like leather, hands like sandpaper, always holding a cold beer. They were merely getting by, but they seemed fulfilled. As a young girl who loved tutus and pink, I walked in, and they welcomed me with warm smiles and love, making me feel like part of the group. This shed was a second home to many, and it felt like one of mine, too.

As the days with him went on, even at such a young age, I felt his impact that even he was too humble to acknowledge. I saw as I followed him on his daily boat tasks with admirable eyes. He made friends everywhere he went and attracted only the best in others. I felt proud to be his granddaughter, and he also flaunted that I was his favorite granddaughter everywhere he could. Just like how he would ask for my report cards to boast my small achievements to his friends in the marina. He'd go on telling them and me how I'm his "favorite granddaughter," knowing I'm his only. Regardless, I was honored to be his favorite granddaughter whom he loved immensely.

On the marina, there was a small, hidden beach that not many knew about. I will never forget this one sunny day; my grandpa and I went on an adventure after he bought me a new scooter from Goodwill. My stomach bubbled with excitement as I rode down the hot pavement, and my grandpa was content with his cold beer and smoky cigarette. He watched me with a smile, happy to see how joyful I was. This is when we found the small beach. I collected seashells that were like gold to me, even though there was trash washed up all over the land. I found it beautiful. I saw beauty in everything, just as I saw it in him. It's as if my grandpa and the marina mirrored each other.

As many know, time changes things. It's awful bittersweet. What was once my grandpa's sanctuary is different after his passing. As developers are remodeling it, it's hard to watch his legacy fade away. I like to think he would appreciate the place he loved so much getting the love it deserved. In saying that, it will never replace what once was. I miss the rust, the mess, the people, and most of all, watching my grandpa get out of his boat hatch every morning to peruse what he loved most, not what the world told him to do.

I keep him here. The marina. He is in the water, and in the scent of the salty air. He is in the rich aroma of my morning coffee. He is the smile that I get as I drive over the Galveston Causeway. He is the reason I do what I love. He is my hope and inspiration, which never leaves my heart. In his final days, he was still true to his character. The last thing he said to me was that I was his favorite granddaughter, and that he loves me so much. His impact he left on his "favorite granddaughter" is immortal. It is safe to say, he was my favorite grandpa, too. I hope to one day find my marina, and I am forever grateful that he showed me his.



Goddess Hathor
Drew Narvaez

Mechanical Agony: The Unwilling Cyborg's Lament

Zachary Cummings

Crude wires pierce damaged skin
Slowly draining blood from within
Painfully transforming into a machine
I have no mouth, I must scream.



Excess of a Neo Humor: Micro Bile
Christopher Currington

Love?

Angie Flores

Love?

What an interesting word.

Love

When I think of *Love*

I think of:

Screaming

Fighting

Smashing

Lying

And betrayal

When I think of *Love*

I think of endless screaming matches

That ignite hitches

That create a battleground

That declares the conquest

Of the ring.

Having both fighters battle

for what they think

Is right.

The shatter of not just glass,

But of a big Heart.

That had been smashed

with the mass of

Lies and betrayals.

That were masked, and

Were disguised as

Beautiful yarns marked by it's needle,

The jab

Meaningless to one

But Heartfelt pain

to the other

The demonstration of their *pretty* actions

What is *Love*?

Love isn't every bit of that

Instead *Love* is

Endless laughter

That brings comfort, all around

A peace Treaty

Between one another

In a playful rival game.

The solution to all

headaches.

Fixing every wound

That wasn't made

By oneself but,

That of another.

Building up towers

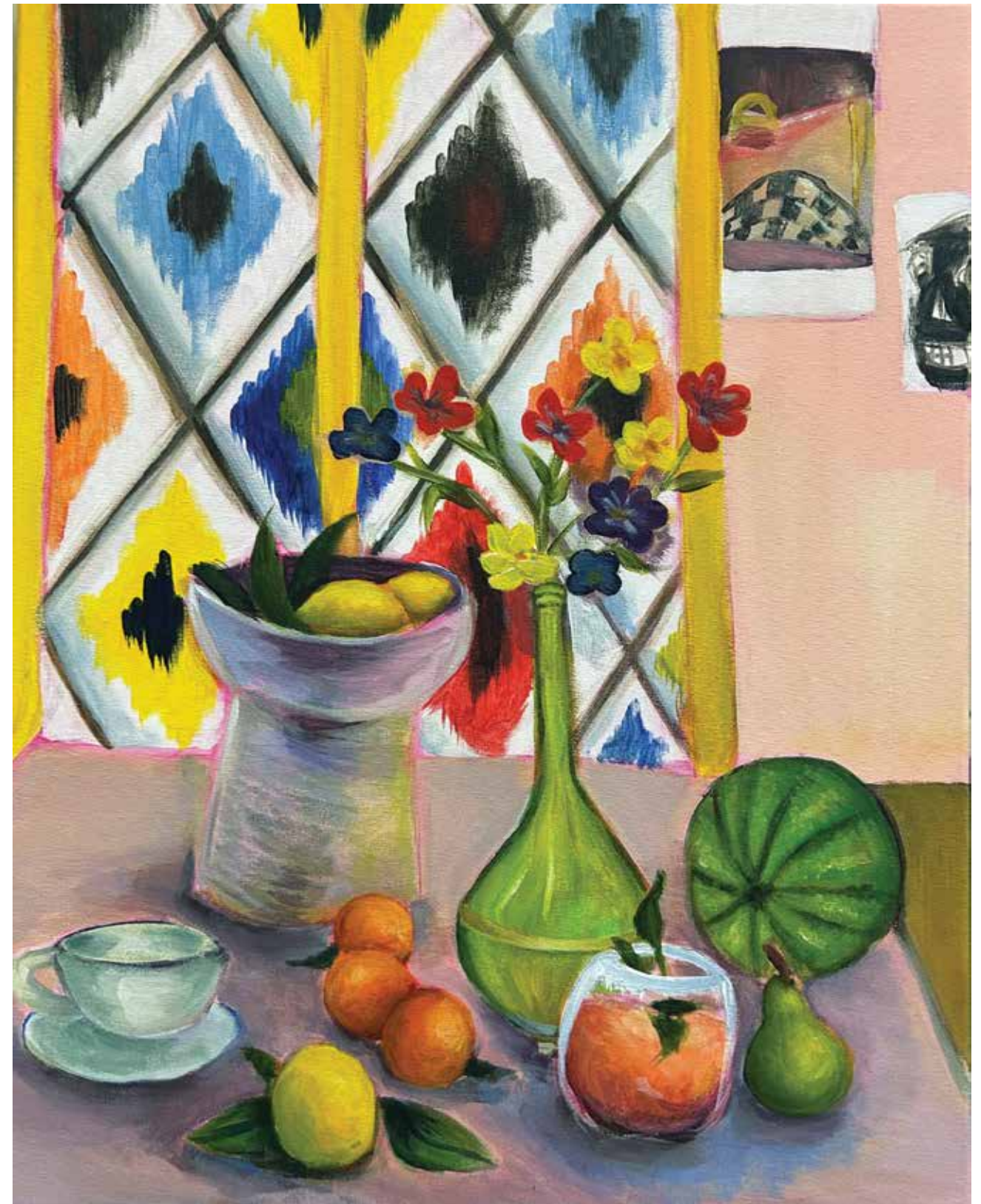
Of trust and honesty.

Conquering the loyalty

Of one another.

That is *Love*

~A.B.



Still-Life Lemons
Krystal Cervantes

The Forever Man

Aaron Burke

Eyes bolting open, Eddie's thoughts raced back to him. Today he found himself in the dirt 10 stories below his beachside apartment, his limbs tangled in someone else's rose bushes. He could see the broken balcony railing way up there. That guy last week swore up and down that he'd fixed it, yet there was Eddie, barely conscious in someone else's (thorny) roses. He wasn't worried about surviving the fall. He hadn't had to in a long, long, time. He blindly grabbed for some clothes that were being air-dried and some shoes while halfheartedly promising himself that he'd bring them back or pay for them or whatever.

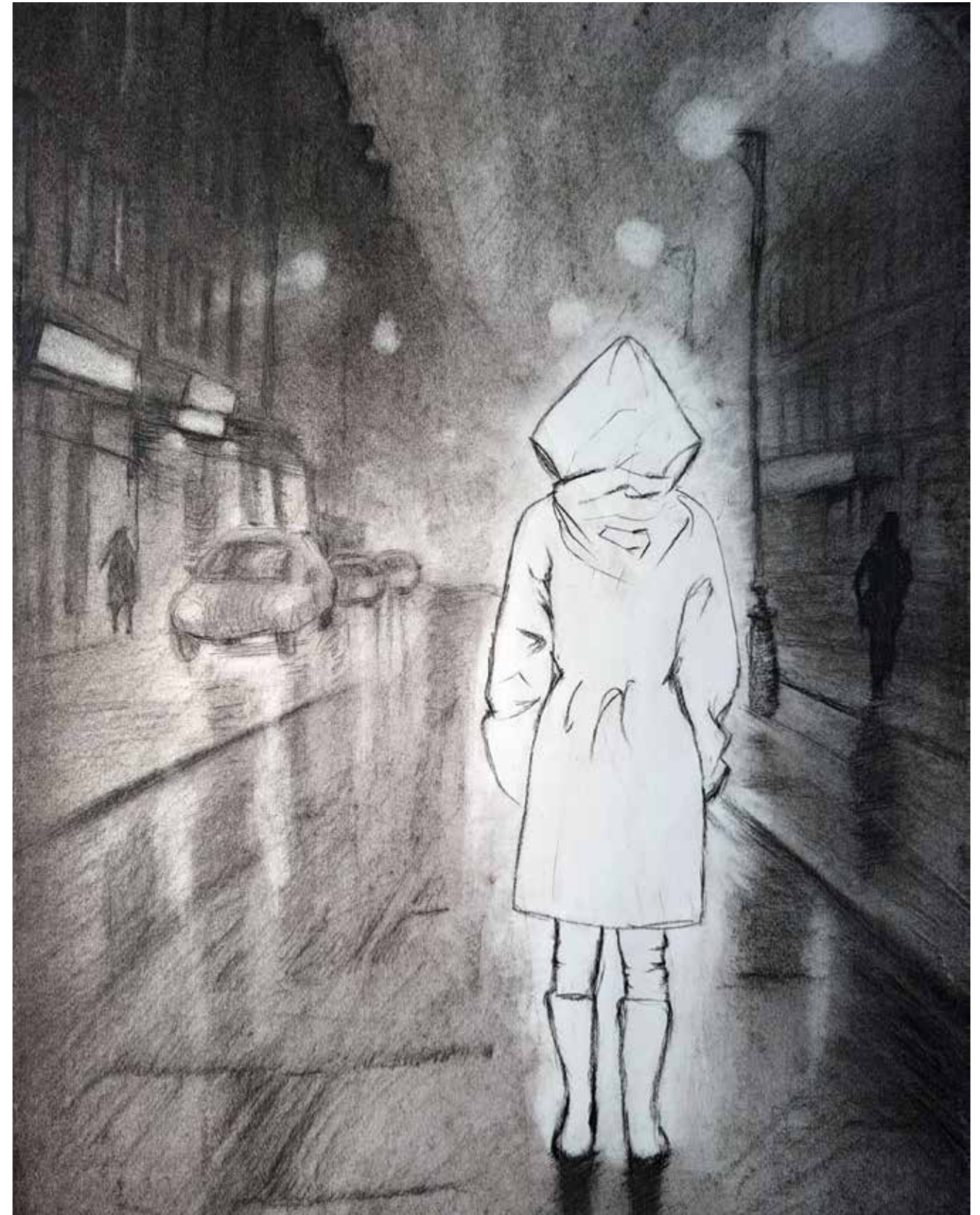
The island was a modest paradise. There were only enough tourists to keep it interesting without ruining what made the island so beautiful. The mountains piercing the sky felt so far away, as if they were some form of myth, yet they were close enough to know they weren't a dream. Eddie was on his way to them now. It felt like a sacred voyage, like something secret and holy. It didn't matter that he was making this voyage for the five hundredth time now, he still felt the reverence of the walk. He tried not to let the fact he was wearing a rainbow tie-dye bathrobe and lime green fuzzy slippers ruin the ambience. It's not like he had time to go back to his apartment and change. He was already running late, and he could feel it.

He was supposed to have a lot more time before he felt it, but the fall that morning used a lot of his energy. He wondered if he'd be able to make it at all now. He checked his arm as if it were a watch, looking for any signs of it. His skin hadn't started to wrinkle yet, and there were no liver spots, but his joints felt it. The aching, the groaning, the loss of stamina all began to take their toll on his walk. A big step brought about a heavy groan, and Eddie was glad he didn't have a mirror. The thought of what might look back at him terrified him.

He thought about his life until now, the friends and enemies alike all raced through his mind. In all of these years, so many faces were lost to his memory, yet so many remained. He had broken so many hearts, and so many people had broken his, yet he always carried on. He'd lived through so many plagues, wars, victories, and celebrations, and yet never took part in them all. The man had lived through so much history, yet never dared to step in to change it, or even play a part in it.

His foot slipped. He picked himself up and started again. There was no more turning back. This time, it was a choice between the pool in the mountains or meeting Death at the bottom of it. The fear began to set in. His thoughts racing back to his regrets, his inaction. He had never missed an opportunity to invest in the wealthiest companies, or to profit off the next big thing. His wallet was fuller than his life, and no one, not even he, could spend it all in one lifetime. His heart weighed heavier than his old limbs. He thought of Death. He wasn't ready yet. He hadn't done enough. He hadn't lived enough. His pace quickened as fast as he could bear to. The path became steep. Steeper and steeper it grew. Another slip. Another aching pain rang through his bones. His face sagged. He ran his bony fingers through crusty, thin hair. His youth was fleeing, as if it was barreling down the mountain his aching feet were trudging up.

As his knees quivered, he took note of the signposts he had learned to notice after his many years of climbing this mountain path. He was now walking along a path that looped around the tallest mountain, which lay in the dead center of the massive mountain range. He leaned against the mountain next to him, limping along. His eyes wandered to the left, to the luscious valley. He had taken note of the landmarks along the road so many times and



Epiphany
Nathaniel Nero

yet, this valley seemed unfamiliar and fresh. He could see the wide fields of purple at the bottom. A river wound through the cracks and traveled through all of the mountains in a wide and curvy path that would be impossible to trace. He knew this because he had tried to. He remembered the voyage of '07, when he had tried his largest attempt to track the river's journey. Three weeks he'd spent among the mountains. He realized now how little he'd truly paid attention. Piles upon piles of maps drawn on paper or notes he'd taken, but not a single word regarding the flowers. Even the grass felt an especially vibrant shade of green.

He wondered now why his vision seemed to be clearer now through his aging eyes than ever in his youth. His thoughts didn't become muddled, nor his perception any weaker. Only his body felt the pains of age, but his mind, his soul, felt its graces. Never before had he let himself reach this physical age, but he hadn't suffered any injury this year, so he didn't have any reason to come to the mountain earlier.

As he reached the end of his road, the path turned towards a cavern. The pool at the center of the mountain he called Opio. He stopped for a moment to catch his breath as his mind raced



Bound by the Blue
Carlos Quinteros

with all of the thoughts he hadn't let himself think before. His heart pounded, and every gasp for air felt like it might be his last, but only one thought entered his mind.

'Do I want to do this forever?'

He considered what it might look like to step once again into the healing waters. His feet began to shuffle without thinking, the result of five hundred years of muscle memory. And he didn't stop them. How could he? Of course he wasn't ready to die! Not with the key to immortality glimmering right in front of him! It was his right! That supposedly ill-fated voyage all of those centuries ago that brought him here, the months of struggle and suffering to survive, the work he put in to keep it a secret, because of all that, he'd earned it...

...

Right?

He groaned as he sat to think. Why did he deserve to live forever? Did he even want to? Nature blessed him and yet, what had he done with it? Invested and complained? Shame overtook him. He could see the pool mere feet away from him, yet for the first time in his five hundred and thirty-two years, he thought of walking away from it. He'd had enough of a life spent in fear of Death.

Edward Smith walked down the mountain and returned to his penthouse. He told a story of his great grandson dying on the mountain and fabricated his one last chance for a life well-lived. Edward Smith would always be remembered as a selfish recluse, but his great grandfather? He was the single most generous man in the world, doing all he could to undo centuries of unspent wealth. At the end of the year, he'd almost spent it all, and had only just finished signing his last check when he heard the ring of his doorbell. She had finally come

for him. After years of running, he would meet face-to-face with Death.

Her skin was as pale as the full moon, and inquisitive, gentle eyes pierced the heart of anyone who saw them. She wore respectful black, as if for a funeral.

"I'm impressed," she began. Her tone was unexpectedly cheery. It was surprisingly hard to fear her standing right before her. She was also short, he thought, for something he'd feared so long. "Nobody's avoided me for this long, Eddie. I gotta say, I've been cheated, avoided, straight-up denied a couple of times, but you are one special case. I think you're ready now though, aren't you?" she added, opening her arms wide, and smiling gently, as if to ease him into a well-earned rest.

He closed his eyes. No more fear. No more running. And embraced with dignity the fate all men must share.



Kingdom of the Planet Xalsa
Trinity Inaya Barber

Rats and Daffodils

Kayla Suarez

I will always notice the huge amounts of rats

With each apartment, I lived in

There were rats with red eyes under my bed

There were rats with sharp teeth and they bit

Whenever I breathe

The rats in my apartment inhabited the whole

Apartment and come out even in the daylight

Everyone knows rats love to eat but the rats

In my apartment would eat the inedible wall,

a little tiny Toy ball, curtains that hung

on the wall

They want to eat my organs

They wanted me dead

But I fought back and I brought daffodils

I bounce back like a perennial flower

Tuesday Best

Caitlynn Snelson

In our Tuesday best
Covered in mud and blood
We dig
Shovels deep in dirt
Heaving
Axe cuts through roots
Splitting
Leather shoes, buried
We carry
He's wrapped in a bloodstained sheet
Cradled like a baby
We carry
His tail no longer wags
His eyes no longer gleam
He's still so sweet
A smile upon his cheek
one last kiss
Upon his still wet nose
A pat on his fur covered head
We dig
Piling mud stained with our
salty sweet tears
Forever etched with the love
We shared over the years
Good boy now gone
Blissful rest
Chasing squirrels and girls
As We mourn
In our Tuesday best



Warmth
Kassya Saylor

When I Realized I Was Old

Zoe Hublitz

When Did I Feel Like I Was Growing Older?

I was babysitting a six-year-old boy named Eli, and from the moment I stepped through the door, I could tell something was different. I mean, I knew kids were more into technology these days, but I thought that meant iPads with educational games or maybe some wholesome Nickelodeon reruns. But no, Eli was yelling—no, screaming—the most profound (and somewhat concerning) things at the TV. And what was he playing? Lo and behold—*Fortnite*.

I couldn't believe that this was how he wanted to spend his time. I could've sworn most six-year-olds were still on the same page as I had been at that age—playing *Pet Pals* or *Mr. Pencil Saves Doodleburg*, not... whatever this was. The screen flashed bright colors, gunfire echoed through the room, and his tiny fingers flew across the controller like he was defusing a bomb.

“Hey, don't you wanna take a break? Watch a movie? I like *SpongeBob*!” I suggested, hoping to lure him away from his digital battlefield.

Eli barely moved. I could've sworn I heard his neck creak like an old wooden door—probably accurate, considering his head had been locked in the same position for the past hour. His unkept hair falling over his face and brows thick fuzzy caterpillars.

“No.”

Plain. Firm. Non-negotiable.

I stood there awkwardly, arms crossed, hoping that monitoring him while he played would eventually lead to something—a win, a loss, maybe even boredom. Then I could swoop in with my excellent babysitter persuasion skills and convince him to do literally anything else.

“Hey, you know what a LeapFrog is—”

“NOOB! HE'S A CAMPER!”

I flinched as he cut me off mid-sentence, his small but powerful voice ricocheting off the walls like a siren. Before I could even process what had happened, he turned to me with an exasperated sigh, as if I was the one making things difficult.

“What's a camper?” I asked, trying to keep up.

“It's a player who stays in one spot the whole game,” he explained in the same tone one might use to describe a criminal mastermind.

Oh. Okay. Noted. Though the new slang mattered little when the cries of Mr. Pencil—unlike *Doodleburg*—could not be saved...

I watched in mild horror as the game continued. His tiny avatar bounced around the screen, collecting weapons and building structures at an inhuman speed. Meanwhile, I stood there feeling like I had aged fifty years in the past five minutes.

“Do you like playing this?” I finally asked, genuinely curious.

“Yeah.” His eyes didn't leave the screen.

“But like... why?”

He finally turned to look at me, his face scrunched in confusion. “Because it's fun?”

I nodded slowly. Sure. Fun. But what happened to 3DS's and the excitement of picking out a new game to add to your collection. What happened to silly little games where you helped a pencil save a town or taught a virtual pet how to do tricks?

I had a sudden, terrible realization: those games weren't cool anymore.

I was officially outdated.

I slumped into a chair, defeated, while the six-year-old returned to his battle royale, seemingly unaware of my internal crisis. Was this how it happened? Was this how people got old? One day, you're a kid playing your beloved *Doodleburg* game, and the next, you're watching another kid play something

completely different, realizing that your childhood is now ancient history?

“How long are you gonna play this?” I asked, trying again.

Eli shrugged. “I dunno. Until I win.”

I glanced at the screen. There were still thirty players left. Oh no.



Naughty or Nice
John McCain

In a desperate final attempt, I leaned forward, squinting at the game. Maybe if I helped him, it would go faster? Maybe I could speed up this whole Fortnite ordeal?

“OH! HEY! There’s a guy on your—”

POW.

Then Eli’s avatar exploded into a million shiny pieces before another avatar—his killer—began doing a degrading little dance on top of his digital corpse.

Oh. No.

“You killed me.”

I turned to look at him, my face frozen in regret.

“Only NOOBS do that EARLY!”

The little boy creaked his neck all the way back, horrifically slow, until he was making direct, soul-piercing eye contact with me. His eyes narrowed. His lips pressed into a thin line. Those same bushy and thick brows that held no secrets to his annoyance. Which made him resemble a tiny red angry bird.

It was at that moment I realized: I was a noob. And not just any noob—an old noob.

“Oh! S-sorry...” I stammered, unsure of what else to say.

Eli let out a long, suffering sigh before turning back to his game. Within seconds, he was queued up for another match, moving on as if nothing had happened.

But for me? Oh, it had happened.

It wasn’t about the numbers anymore. It wasn’t about hitting a certain age or reaching a big milestone. No, this was what growing older actually felt like. It was realizing that the world

had moved forward—without you. That the things that had once defined your childhood were now just relics, sitting on the dusty shelves of time, completely irrelevant to the next generation.

I used to think aging was about birthdays and driver’s licenses and graduation ceremonies. But now? I knew the truth.

Aging is watching a six-year-old boy play Fortnite with the intensity of a trained soldier while you mourn the loss of *Mr. Pencil Saves Doodleburg*.



Double Bloom
Maddie Armstrong



Dreams of Time
Alivia Doolan

The Box That Held Us Both

Tonie Marshall

The lid creaks open, a breath of the past,
And out she steps, free at last.
“Oh, it’s you!” she shouts, all smiles and delight,
“I heard your voice—what a glorious sight!”

I cross my arms, my face unread,
“It’s you,” I grumble, my tone like lead.
Her joy persists, unaware of the weight,
Years of resentment, I quietly wait.

“I’ve longed for this reunion day,
To see you again, to laugh, to play.
Do you remember the dreams we shared,
The castles we built, the lives we dared?”

I narrow my eyes, the silence burns,
The moment turns heavy, memories return.
“Oh, I remember,” I finally reply,
“Playing in the closet under a fairytale sky.”

All this time, I thought I had to be you,
Perfectly polished, impossibly true.
With flawless skin and golden hair,
A waist so small, so damn unfair.

I hated my curls, I hated my size,
All I wanted was McDonald’s fries—
But I didn’t dare, afraid to indulge,
They’d give me supersize thighs.
I skipped meals, chased a cruel reflection,
Tried to achieve perfection.

And my hair—oh, how I tried to tame,
Thinking its wildness was something to shame.
But now I see each curl, each coil,
Is a testament to my ancestors’ toil.

My hair is strength, a map, a maze,
Braided in freedom through darkened days.
It carried messages, it held their fight,
Through the Underground Railroad, toward the light.

And yet, I played with you, styled your hair,
Dressed you in outfits beyond compare.
I judged myself but never judged you,
A friend, through and through, to my childlike view.”

She lowers her gaze, her voice turns low,
“I didn’t know I’d hurt you so.
But these ideals you thought were mine,
Were built by a man’s design.

I didn’t choose this—my painted guise,
My perfect image, these shallow lies.
Men shaped my look, my role, my name,
And placed me in their beauty game.

I longed to show what I couldn’t say,
Girls are more than what’s on display.
A doctor, an artist, a dreamer, a queen—
You could be anything when you dream.

I wasn’t built just to pose and shine,
You weren’t built to be left behind.
You could choose your path, not mine
You were built to be divine.”

“All this time, I carried the weight,
Of feeling less, of harboring hate.
But now I see, you weren’t to blame—
You, too, were trapped in society’s game.

And though I felt small in your perfect glow,
I see now the truth I didn’t know.
You weren’t my rival, you were my muse,
To dream, to create, to break free and choose.

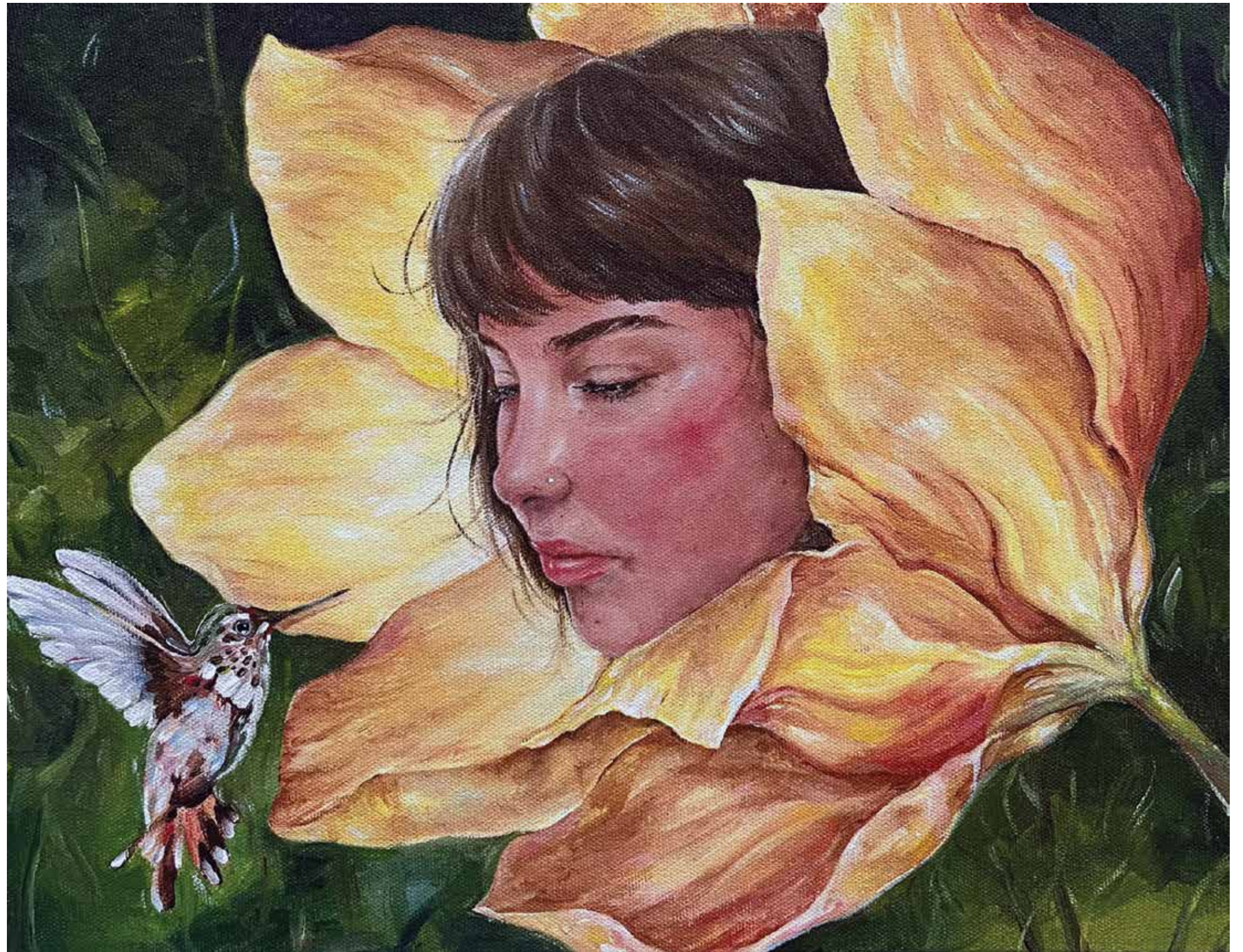
I’ve learned to love the skin I’m in,
To cherish my strength, my soul, my kin.
I no longer need to compare or pretend—
I’ve found my worth, my truest friend.”

“You’ve grown so much—I always knew,
The power you held, the light in you.
I’m proud of you, for all you’ve done,
Embracing your beauty, your battles won.

What dreams have you chased? What conquered fears?
Tell me, how have you been all these years?”

The moment softens; I set her down,
Her painted smile no longer a frown.
Back in her box, she takes her place.
No longer a symbol of a flawless face

The lid shuts, and as I turn to leave,
I whisper her name, my heart relieved:
“Goodbye, Barbie, my old friend.
Your story and mine now reach their end.”



Hummingbird's Gaze
Layla Cashio

Kaleidoscope

Angelica Bravo

I stumbled into a kaleidoscope,
splashes of wine staining the contours.

Its crisp, sharp edges of glass are the thorns that
bury into my palms.

I see before me, the cords struggling to keep
your facial features intact

I see closely, threads stitching into your every
seam and fragment.

What is it like?

You've been split in two; stardust makes up
your tears, falling from skies that are your eyes.

Pupils dilated, endless black holes swallowing
me whole.

A void, deep yet unable to show. There is no
reflection.

I'm faced with a fallen angel, struck down,
mauled by hungry jaws

as it feasted upon lives you were blessed and
gifted, chosen to bear, not me.

I had no choice but to let the monster get a
taste, your power, your significance

in a way, I could see myself in the beast's
longing, in its reason to exterminate.

How I pitied the creature.

It was never given a name throughout the many
horrifying myths that surround its existence,

wary tales spun by exhausted mothers, told to
their impudent offspring.

I gave it the moniker of "Effigy,"

title fitting a distorted and savage behemoth

one who tore stars open, claws slashing across
mirrors of constellations

unrecognizable and shattered all over the
ground.

May your waltz be slow, lingering and
torturously agonizing,

wanting to keep on going, while begging and
groveling for such a cruel, twisted dance to be
over.

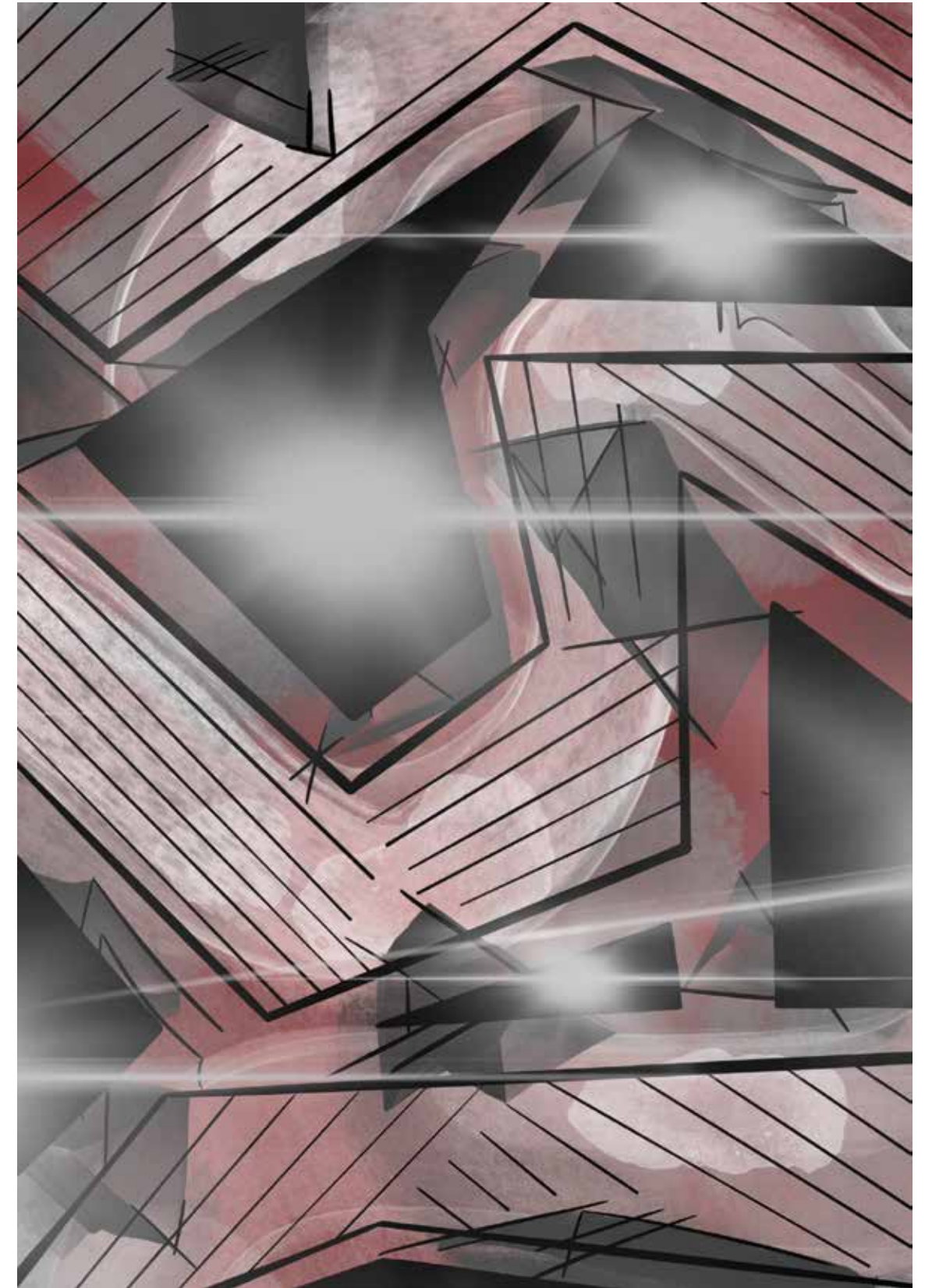
I stumbled into a kaleidoscope,

its shards having scraped my face, latching
onto every part of me

like leeches piercing into my skin,

drinking in every drop till it spills

and paints the streams with maroon watercolors.



Memory Blindspot
Adam Fuentes

Newton's Cradle

Z. Hedge

Perfect in design but so very
flawed in action.

Air friction creates the bind, gravity, the attraction.

Hit me.
And I hit the next. A
chain reaction
returns yet again.

Conserving all we have and still
we're running out. If problems
persist there'll be nothing more to give out.

We grow slower every second, something that was
not drawn in our sound scheme.

In this entropic system, deficiencies
rub off on our esteem.

Now we're a broken toy.
One with a faulty guarantee. One with
shortcomings, insufficiencies One that
never works in reality.

But that is the story of our tainted world
Continuously tarnishing ourselves,
Returning the book of 'Precision' back to the shelf.

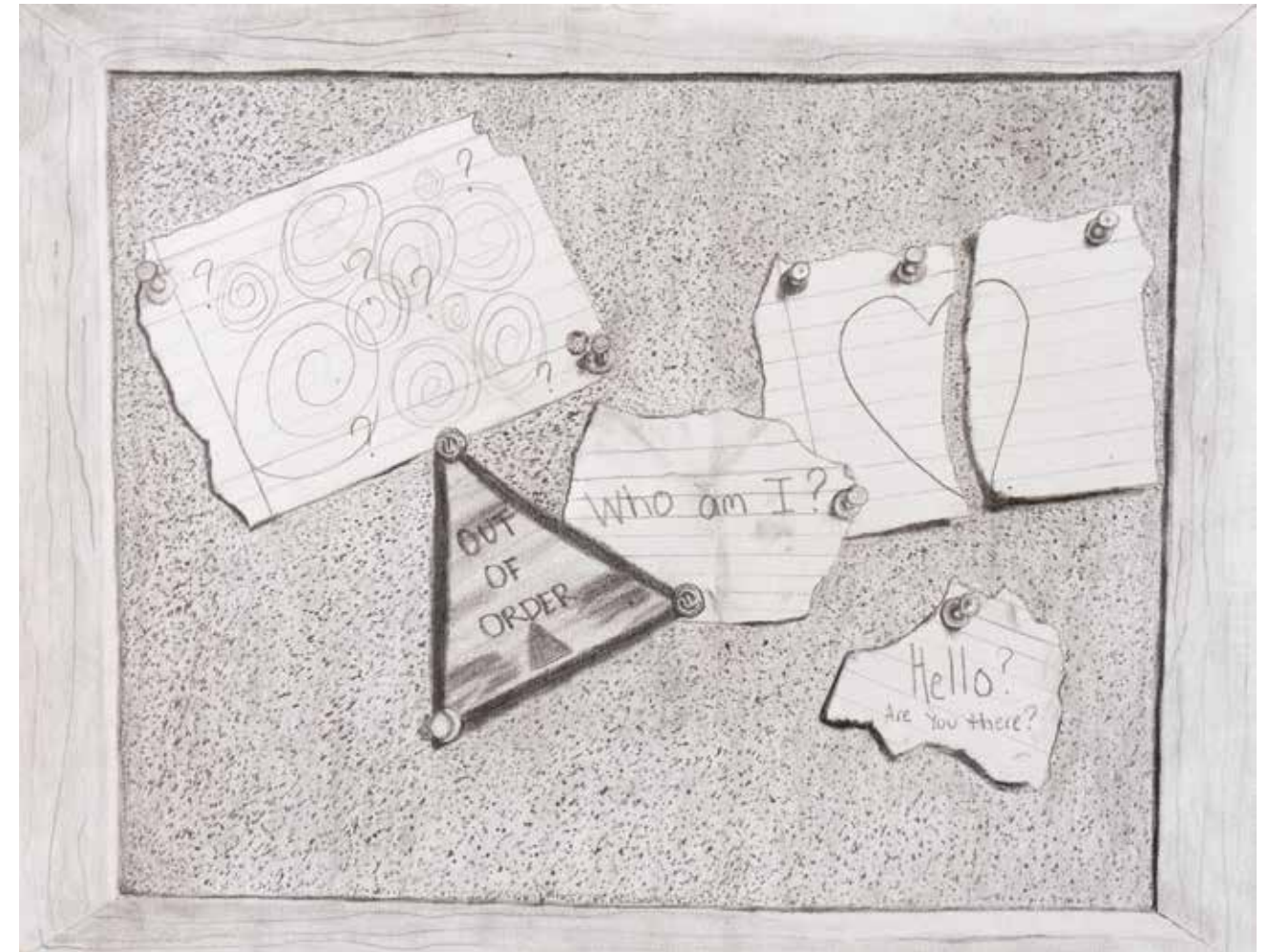
And I think we know it, all
of us.

Deep down, In all our
abstractions,

That we are all creatures in Newton's cradle. The entire world.

Perfect in design. but
so very flawed,

In action.



Who am I?
Destiny Maldonado

Short Stories and Reflections about Nick

Roman Rodriguez

Chipotle and Smoothie King

In 2019 I took Nick to get Chipotle and Smoothie King, this was two years before the accident.

I was working full-time at a high-end furniture store and had just graduated from high school but decided to take some time off before college. Since at the time all I did was work, I had some money in my pocket. Nick was going to Sam Houston State in Huntsville and was in town, so I wanted to treat him. I could tell he wasn't too fond of the idea of me paying for his food, I mean I am his little brother, but he still let me. I just wanted to be as generous as our other older siblings were with us growing up.

Chipotle and Smoothie King were our go-to spots back then. I don't know how I could eat so much but me and Nick always did love food. We ate our burritos and drank our smoothies, Nick told me about life in Huntsville, and I told him about my plans beyond school. We didn't have much to say but we were just content in each other's company. I remember feeling proud about covering for him, maybe even a little high and mighty, like I was a white knight just because I had a few extra dollars. Our dynamic was usually me assuming the role of the spoiled, naïve youngest sibling, and Nick the modest and nonchalant middle child. Looking back, I was arrogant, even when it came to something so minor like paying for a meal, but I couldn't help it. My siblings always shielded me, so I think that privilege gave me the ability to just feel super conceited. As I'm older now, I think back and hope I didn't make him feel bad. I hope that my personality wasn't always so overbearing. I only meant well. Nick did so much for me when we were growing up.

He was a good big brother, with a beautiful spirit. We shared a peculiar brotherly love. The characteristics of our bond were so complex and even strange, but that's what made it so profound. One of the special things we shared was a fondness for the TV show *Supernatural*.

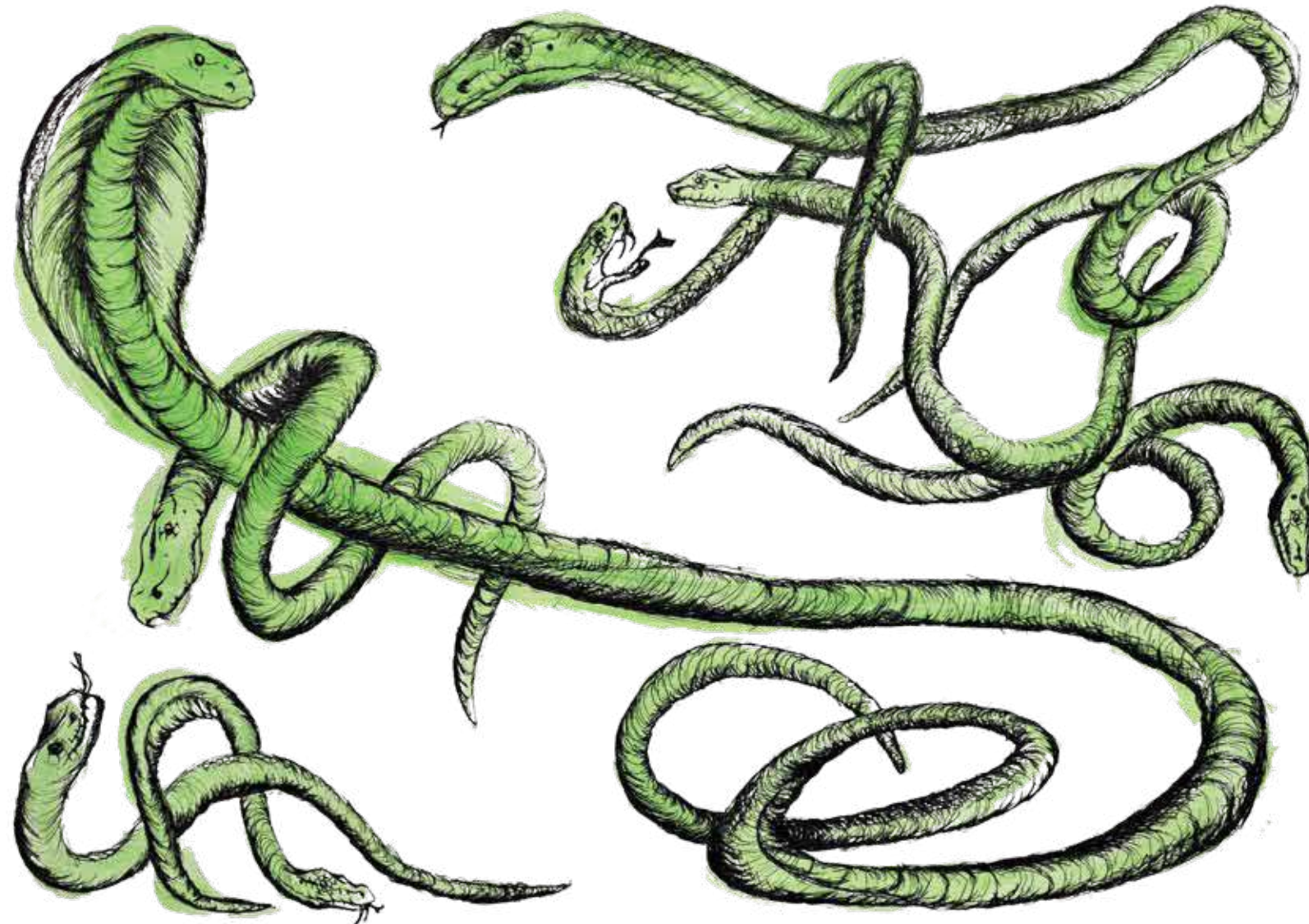
Supernatural

The room was as dark as night, and Nick and I sat across from each other. We were watching *Supernatural*, a show we got into growing up. We'd watch in silence, because that's just how we were. Our TV didn't get many channels, but on Saturdays the CW channel would have some hits like *Supernatural* – a show about two brothers, Sam and Dean who fought off mythical creatures and demons.

I remember we caught an episode where Sam and Dean had a close call then started telling each other how much they meant to one

another. Nick and I had never done that. Ever. But I knew we were both thinking the same thing—that we were just like them. At that moment, it was us against the world, just like Sam and Dean.

That was in our younger years when we still lived together, but as we got older, we did become more expressive with one another. Before Nick passed, I'd say we were even growing as friends, not just brothers. One specific memory that comes to mind is when he visited me for my 20th birthday.



Cobra Corner
Nathaniel Nero

Blue Skys in the Backyard

I moved in with my eldest brother Serg in 2020, and Nick hadn't visited his house yet so for my 20th birthday he was able to drive up.

Serg was grilling, and we had some beers—Coronas. It was the first beer I ever shared with Nick. The first and the last.

The day was beautiful. The sky was crisp and clear blue. Me and Nick sat in the backyard in lawn chairs when he started opening up to me.

He was 22, struggling with love, and struggling with college life in Huntsville. I could hear the uncertainty in his voice. At the time, I didn't fully understand. Life felt easy for me then. I fed him some positive lines, not really grasping what he was feeling. But today now that I'm closer to the age he was, I get it. I wish instead

of trying to solve his issues or give him a TED talk like I did, I would have just listened to him more. Asked him more questions and just waded through his emotions with him.

I know I did my best to support him at the time. Despite my being naïve, the moment was special. Nick and I hadn't seen or talked to each other for a while since he was living in Huntsville. We had never really talked about big picture things, so this moment was refreshing.

At that point in 2020 I only saw Nick on occasion and around holidays. But in 2021 Nick and two other young men were run over while working as valets in Houston. The driver was going 60 mph in a small back alley as he evaded police - Nick was gone instantly. So now the only time I see Nick is in my dreams.



End of Beginning
Savanna Doggett

A Dream about Nick

We were at Serg's house, getting ready for bed. The TV was on, and Serg came downstairs to tell us to keep it down.

Nick was talking about a banquet he had coming up for cancer survivors. He had beaten Leukemia when he was in high school, first diagnosed at 15, and went through remission at around 19. He was the strongest person I knew.

He was excited about the banquet even though he didn't want to go at first. He was excited because he was taking mom and his girlfriend Jasmin.

As we were sitting on the couch, he started to get deep. He said that material things didn't matter in life. What really mattered was giving—to your loved ones, to people in general. Repaying them in a way. He said maybe he didn't care about the banquet itself, but it was an opportunity to share something with the people he loved, after all the hardships they helped him endure.

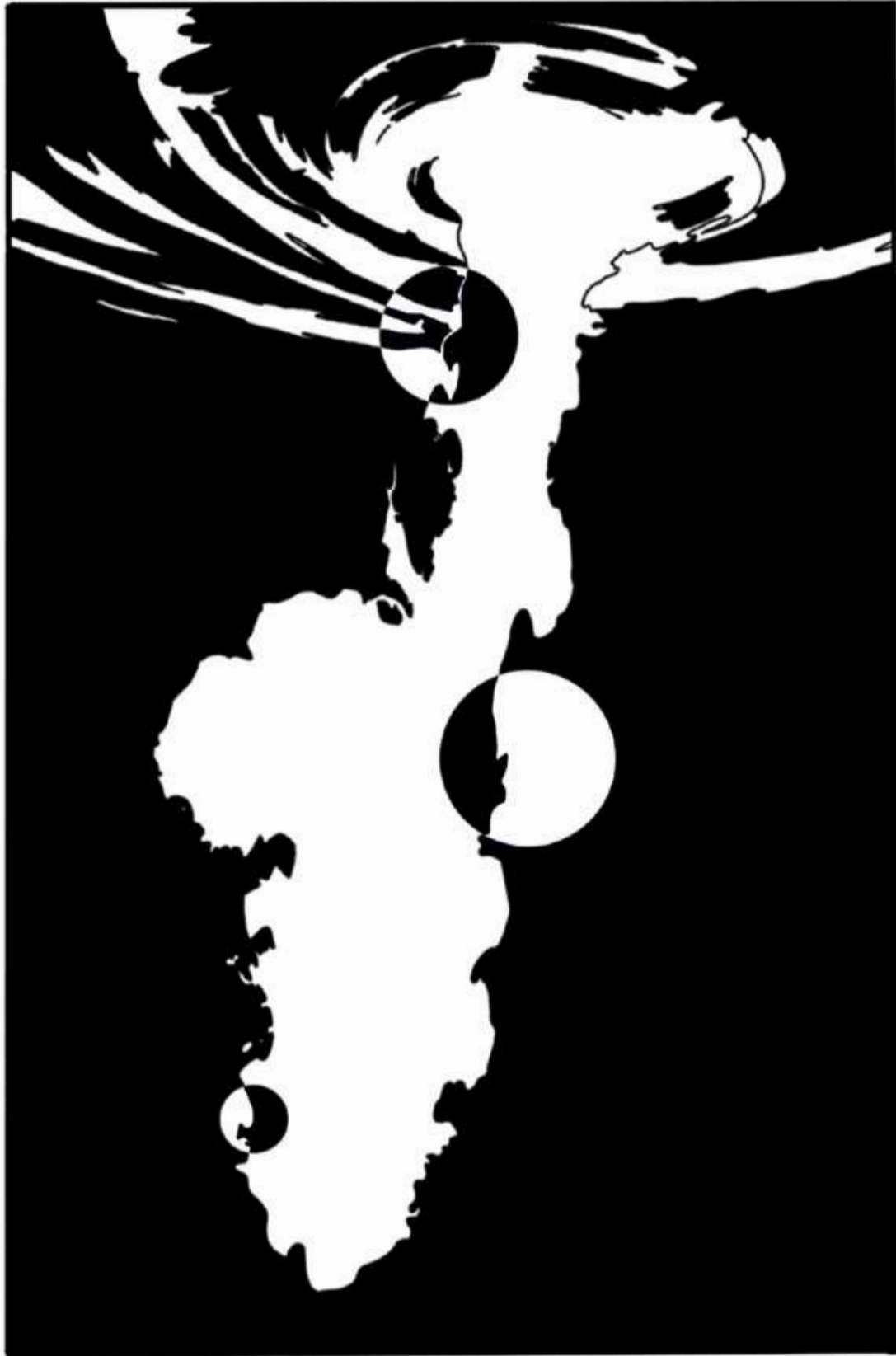
He continued to talk, and it felt like we were just catching up. I began to feel overwhelmed because the last few years had been the hardest of my life. I grabbed Nick's hand, and he held mine back. I told him that I didn't know if I could keep doing this. That things were so hard, and I didn't want to be here anymore. Warm tears started streaming down my cheeks...

And then I woke up.

It was bittersweet being in Nick's presence in dream land. Still, I was grateful for that epiphany. He's not here now, but he's still helping me, pushing me forward. And our relationship is still growing. I carry him with me every day, in all my actions.

I miss my brother. I know that one day we'll be together again, eating Chipotle burritos, and drinking Smoothie King. Maybe top off with a Corona.

Love you Nick.



Deep Waters
Kassya Saylors



ACCENTS STUDENT
LITERARY
MAGAZINE

SAN JACINTO COLLEGESM



Trabajadora
Johanna Fraga

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