

This review commemorates and celebrates writers of different backgrounds, identities, and minds, many of whom are members of Sigma Tau Delta, international honor society. Offering a widespread exploration of literature within its margins, our collection aims to be an exemplary preservation of the craft.

SCARLET
REVIEW

© 2024 by Scarlet Review.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the respective authors or the *Scarlet Review*.

The authors retain the rights to their individual works published in *Scarlet Review*. Any requests to use or distribute an author's work should be directed to the respective author.

For permissions requests regarding the publication as a whole, please contact us at publishscarlet@gmail.com or publish@thescarletreview.com.

ISBN 237-0-01582919-3

TABLE OF CONTENTS

DEDICATION III

COPYRIGHT VI

EDITOR'S NOTE XIII

PROSE

Lights Out, Camera, Action 2
Alexis Shrewsbury

You Can't Keep a Good Dog Down* 9
Jaine

Nasty City 11
Brenda Gutierrez

The Opalite Pendant* 13
Alexis Shrewsbury

City Lights 15
Dalia Corley

**Incursion 54MH14N-21921 or: Can a Sufficiently Advanced
AI Gaslight a Tulpa into Not Believing in Itself?** 17
Avery Bateman

The Marina Room* 21
Nicki Avendaño

Divine Instructions	25
Dom Laughlin	
How to Father a Son	28
Robert Antonio Jones	
Pyre Blaze Lumber	31
Davion Corley	
Sharp Right Swipe	35
Jesse Ilanes	
11 a.m. in camden	39
Sarah Butkovic	
The Chosen One	42
Quinnette Free	
Moira, Beautiful Inside & Out	43
Emma Carroll	
The Funny Ones	44
Morgan Darian	
That Time My Boyfriend Ate My Parent	45
Mathew Mieh	

POETRY

Hospice Lullaby	64
Aden Sabin-White	
the two stages of the womb	65
Ahmad Morid	

Poem for Su Shi Alex Deng	66
Circa 2000-2020 Z. Shelafoe	67
Wasted Amber Fairchild	68
The Love After Your First A.A. Wings	69
Can you fit a mother's love into a poem? Andrea Korompis	70
Sometimes I Feel Like a Bruised Piece of Fruit Brenna Koenig	73
The Return Bianca Beronio	74
Relationship Surgery Brenna Koenig	76
La Bamba (1987) Without the Last 10 Minutes Brigitte Salazar	78
Scratching the Surface Quinnette Free	80
Adam and Eve Walk into a Bar Brigitte Salazar	81
L-O-V-E Caroline Urbina	82

Lady in the Mirror	83
Caroline Urbina	
For a Brief Moment	85
Dalicia Corley	
The Ocean	87
Danielle Patino	
Comfort Lies	90
Devorah G. Kerendian	
Synonyms	91
Emma Carroll	
Nocturn	92
Ethan Lehrman	
Self-love can be dangerous Fun	93
Frank Simonian	
Lemonade	94
Cambri Love Morris	
If I Was Passed	95
Indira Buerklin	
Obsession	96
Giselle Renteria Vandenberg	
Impossible	97
Ismanuelle Dones	
Human Nature	98
James Mellor	

Sunshower Kamren Keith	100
HATE/HATED Haley Guthrie	101
SCARS James Mellor	102
Wedding in an Old Church Loreal Chanel Wimberly	104
Honey on My Skin Jennifer G. Morrow	105
The Colors We Must Hide P.M.H.	106
Pressure Rey Galvan	107
Passerby Shubhi Singh	108
Angels Dream Stephen Mead	109
Lonely, Lonely Stephen Mead	110
Spring Forward Tom Squitieri	111
Wanderers Vanessa Guzman	112

The Love of a Century	113
Arche	
To Do	114
Zoha Khan	
Wild Girl	116
Zoha Khan	
Santa Monica	118
Yesenia Luna	
Green Eyes	119
Yesenia Luna	
Placebo	120
Yesenia Luna	
Before	121
Xam Eitsirhc	
Knock On Wood	123
Dom Laughlin	
MASTHEAD	XVII
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	XIX
CONTRIBUTORS	XX
CONTACT	XXI

*Excerpt

EDITORS' NOTE

Dear Readers,

Welcome to the inaugural issue of *Scarlet Review*! We're thrilled to present this collection of prose and poetry, curated by the Sigma Tau Delta Iota Chi chapter at California State University, Northridge.

Within these pages, you'll find a celebration of literary expression from across the United States, Canada, Indonesia, and the United Kingdom, offering glimpses into diverse voices and captivating spheres of creative thought.

This year, as we embark on our literary journey, we do so under the auspicious influence of the Wooden Dragon, symbolizing strength, growth, and renewal. May this energy infuse our pages with vitality and inspiration as we venture forth together.

We extend our gratitude to our contributors and readers. Your voices are the heart and soul of the *Scarlet Review*, and we're honored to share this adventure with you.

Thank you for joining us on this first voyage.

Warm regards,

Ismael Dones

SAM GARD

Editors-in-Chief



SCARLET REVIEW

LIGHTS OUT, CAMERA, ACTION

Alexis Shrewsbury

“Get in, get out. Get in, get out,” Maya mumbled to herself as she unlocked the side door to sound stage thirteen. She hated being at the studio at night, let alone being out at night by herself in general. It was dark, cold, and the roads were wet after the rain had just poured on top of it. Her irrational fear of a horror movie-like monster hunting her down was in full swing. She pulled her coat in tighter and headed inside. “This paper better be important, Michael.”

She closed the door behind her, the rumble of the metal frame making her jump, and was swallowed in darkness. She fumbled her way through the area and flipped on a dim pair of lights over the hospital set. Bodies were sprawled all across the floor. Cherry red blood stained waves along the smooth, reflective flooring. Red paint and fake bodies, that is. Styrofoam and plastic.

Every item was left the way it should be for their cue. The wheelchair near the corner of the stage, the corridor doors closed, and the metal shelves filled with bottles of false medicine leaning on the back panels. Even the gaping void that bit a

hole through the prop wall on the left of the set was prepared to play its role.

Maya tiptoed over the fake bodies in her sneakers. She moved through the staged deceased-like booby traps in order to get behind the hospital counter at the center of the stage. Just before she could reach clear ground, she tripped on the arm of one of the last bodies she had to pass, like it was grasping for her. Kneeling down, she pushed the outstretched limb back in place next to the lifeless cadaver and continued with her chore.

All the blocky cameras were pointed at the set, almost like a pair of eyes ready to capture her every move. As the director, Michael had the entire scene envisioned in his head, but he refused to tell Maya how it would play out. Earlier that day, he and the main crew were huddled together in conversation that looked to include gestures of arguing. One would think that the lead actress would be part of crucial discussions involving planning, but Michael insisted that Maya would understand his intentions to keep her in the dark when it was time to film.

Maya walked around to the back of the desk, also noticing a knife that was nearly teetering on the edge. Paying it no mind, she crouched down in the direction the blade was pointed. She shuffled through the prop drawers and searched through

the other cubby crevasses, until she found a stray piece of paper stuffed into one of the corners. The overhead lamps assisted her vision as she took the piece of paper and read it:

~~Michael Iers - Director~~

~~Freddy Krewler - Set Designer~~

~~Norma Bateson - Producer~~

~~Chuck Keys - Stunt Coordinator~~

~~Jason Booriees - Sound Engineer~~

~~Hannah Bell - Script Supervisor~~

~~Carrie Wyatt - Wardrobe~~

Maya Lyzerman - Lead Actress

The names of the main crew members had been crossed out. All except one: *Maya Lyzerman*. She paused for a moment upon seeing her own name. Is this the list Michael was looking for?

A sudden squeak behind her tore her away from her reading. The cued wheelchair had rolled forward, its wheels lurching the metal frame forward before stopping. Maya exhaled the oxygen she had swallowed from gasping.

“Relax Maya.” She took a controlled deep breath. “You’ve been working on too many horror movies.”

Another elongated screech from behind. Maya spun around and gripped her braided hair. Now one of the prop doors from the hospital’s corridors had

creaked open, leaving a wide gap for more darkness to spill through. The rest of the doors that lead to nothingness were still shut up tight.

She looked around like she was crossing a street. No danger in sight, nothing to be afraid of, but she still cautiously approached the door.

She whispered to herself while clutching her braid, “Strange. Freddy said he had fixed the latch on this thing..”

She reached her hand out for the knob, hesitating before moving her hand too close, then sucked in another deep breath and grabbed the chilled handle, creaking the door back to a close. She exhaled and bumped her head on the front of the door.

“You’re being ridiculous, Maya.”

Metal then clanged on to cement at the opposite end of the sound stage. Maya slammed her back to the wall. The pounding of her heart knocked the breath out of her lungs. Once was a coincidence. Twice was a funny coincidence. Three times wasn’t a joke anymore.

She eyed the knife on the desk to the side of her, the blade catching the gleam of the tinted lights. Any intruder would be able to see a weapon like that clearly.

With her limbs still huddled to the wall, she

inched her way closer to the counter. The rumbling of metal was reaching closer, echoing from the dark void at the other end of the set like the sound of an air vent shivering as a frigid wind ran through it. The reverberation seemed to grow louder, almost turning into a deep growl. Maya would have to make herself visible to the maws of the darkness to grab the knife.

With a rush of adrenaline, she ran forward and gripped the handle of the lightweight blade. The abyss let out a metallic roar and she slid down in front of the counter in fright, her back pressed to the cold metal, her body shaking with every short breath. The knife was clutched close to her chest where her beating heart pounded, drumming, pumping. Pattering water in a nearby pipe replicated the pace of her heartbeat as it splattered on the inside of the metal. The throbbing clank became faster with every drop. The air turned silent. The dripping followed a rhythm.

More clashing metal, like a shelf was rattling in an earthquake, suddenly slammed behind her. She mistakenly shrieked, jumped from her spot and swung around with the blade in her hand.

“They know I’m here now.” She began to hyperventilate, stepping backwards. “They know I’m here!”

Her gaze was fixed onto the cavern of oozing darkness. The rest of the shelves were having rumbling tantrums, spitting medicine bottles onto the floor. The wheelchair was swaying back and forth. The lights were cutting off and on. Maya took a few steps back. Her heel hit the arm of a corpse and she tripped onto the cold, blood stained tile. Another shelf fell, the crashing slam slicing through the hospital. She snatched up the knife she had dropped near the pale bodies surrounding her and tried to stand on her rubbery knees. Tears built up in her eyes, which soon leaked drops of horror. Her terrified reflection was imprinted within what could be seen of the floor.

Her voice was caught in her throat, like the air had a choke-hold around her neck, squeezing tighter. "Get away!" She managed to squeak, but she regained air, fighting back. "GET AWAY!" She roared into the darkness at the top of her lungs, almost feeling some kind of courage, some freedom as she did so.

"CUT!" A deep voice shouted. A bell rang and the stage lights blared on at once like prison spotlights catching a criminal. She shielded her eyes, trying to adjust her tear-stained vision from the bright intensity to spot any nearby danger. The light was blinding. She took a few steps back, her shoes

slowly tapping on the solid ground. All that could be heard was her heavy breathing as she felt enclosed in an asylum of light with her heart pounding. Pounding. Pounding on the bars of a cage. She kept the knife pointed forward.

A bulky hand then fell upon her shoulder. With a screech, she tightened her grip on the handle, whipped around, and thrust the knife into the side of the silhouette's neck. The figure stumbled to the side, gripping the blade handle she had released. The figure then stepped forward out the saturated light for her to get a better view. Brown wavy hair, glasses, an untucked dress shirt. It was Michael, clutching the handle of the knife, and removing the retractable blade away from his neck.



YOU CAN'T KEEP A GOOD DOG DOWN*

Jaine

What kills most dogs, Buddy ate. I'm not quite sure how it started, but my grandma had a habit of feeding him nearly everything that was banned on the veterinary's dog safety list. Snickers, more chocolate, grapes, raisins, left-over bacon grease, coffee, sushi rolls with avocado, raw and cooked bones, Cheetos puffs, cakes, and possibly more items that I was never around to witness in horror.

Abstractly so, Buddy gained more food privilege as he grew into his old-man self. The reason my grandma took him to his check-up in April wasn't for an average doctor's visit, but due to Buddy's refusal to eat and hold his pee. He peed everywhere in the house, outside on appliances and furniture, and on the tires of my Hyundai Elantra after I washed it. The vet reasoned that it was kidney or liver failure, which explains the week-left estimate. However, this diagnosis made Buddy raise his standards.

He refused to eat dry kibble. My grandma would fill his bowl up, only to come back to it half-full as the crows were picking off of it. Being an

innovative woman from a third-world country, she contrived an idea. It began with Vienna sausages. After two weeks or so, Buddy stopped eating again. Then the idea evolved to Vienna sausages and rice. Like clockwork, Buddy turned his nose up to the food. By mid-June, my grandma was feeding Buddy salmon on rice with sauce. By August, glazed rotisserie chicken with rice and shrimp. For comparison, I eat shrimp and spinach for dinner almost every night. *“Even I don’t have the luxury to eat like Buddy,”* I said to my grandma over the phone while reminiscing about his survival. *“Well you’re not a dying dog, now are you?”* She asked me in response.

**Excerpt*

NASTY CITY
Brenda Gutierrez

There was a city *that* lived near the shore. This city was not that type of city. There were no hopes, no dreams, no opportunities. Rather, it had George's Liquor on 18th Street where neighborhood kids could buy 25-cent brownies made of high fructose corn syrup and Red 40. There was Lupita, who wore a different baby-doll dress every day of the week, whose twirls lit up the block, whose father had veiny eyes and acidic breath and *one too many* after work. Over the years, the city tightened its grip around her spirit in an attempt to protect her innocence. She remained on that same block, lit up, now with razor-thin eyebrows and lips lined in Mocha Brown. Gone were her dresses and her faith, replaced by trembling hands and dilated pupils. There was Christina with an H, with the porcelain skin, with the tawny colored hair that swayed east to west. Waddling like a duck, she stuck her ass out to create an illusion. At night, she wore Vaquero Boots and claimed the city. During the day, she used her complexion's privilege to deny her ties to it. And who could forget Claudia? Who was too close to her uncle and too fast for 5th grade. She disappeared

one morning and was never heard of again. No milk cartons or lost posters for her. The city was blamed—as this sort of behavior was expected from the girls of Nasty City.

The city loved children. It housed two middle schools, one high school, and numerous elementary schools, but regardless of its efforts the money just wasn't there. There were no badges or crests conveying school pride. White and blue uniforms were used as tools for oppression. Outsiders didn't trust middle schoolers to dress themselves. Administrators feared sagging pants and miniskirts would spark a revolution or, worse, lead to ambition.

THE OPALITE PENDANT*

Alexis Shrewsbury

“Well then, Kian, we’ll meet here everyday so you can tell different stones apart in no time!”

So, each day Kian sits at his same spot and Maisey helps herself to his table, bringing multicolored stones and accessories to teach the young man about the beauty of each one. She lays them out on the surface for him to see, taking great care in making sure each one gets an equal amount of delicate attention. The common emeralds, sapphires, rubies—to stones of citrines and carnelians that looked like glamorized cough drops. Kian tries to zone out into a quiet state of daydreaming, but Maisey’s energy-charged words continuously interrupt him. He could avoid her all together and stop coming to the coffee shop, but it will be more of a hassle to change his daily routine. Besides, she’s like a leech to him now. She’s getting her fill, and Kian is just providing a numb platform for her to do it. She will eventually let go of him, like they always do.

As Maisey gives another one of her lectures, she fiddles with the sleeve of her sweater, gently tugging on the elastic fabric to cover her exposed

wrist. When she gestures to another rock (amethysts being on the agenda today), something suddenly catches Kian's eye. It's the blue pendant around her neck, swaying gently like a vacant swing set in the wind. He's seen it every day before this one, but the way it moves draws him towards its elegance.

**Excerpt*

CITY LIGHTS

Dalicia Corley

Setting: A hotel somewhere in the city.

She said she liked art, so I let her paint every part of me. Every groove, every imperfection. It's perfect to her. She traced me with love and passion. And she touched my soul. And when she was done admiring me or so I thought she was, she started drawing the lines again until she remembered it. The parts I loved, the parts I hated, and the ones I said one day I'll learn to accept. Except, she knew all of that before I told her by the way I would stare at her intensely. Other times, I looked away into the walls. Hoping for them to give me the answer of why I was involved. I knew she loved me, but why me? Why a coward? Why this person who can't even embrace themselves, why are they now being embraced by the waist? What a waste it felt like at first. But her! She's everything I wanted and more. She locked eyes with me once more, outlining my beauty and setting me free. She stares at me deep in thought and kisses me. What's going on in the monologue in her head? I'm fed up with the unknown, though, going into any depths with her is an unlocked fear. It's scary, but something that I enjoy. She's joy itself,

and as I lay in this bed, I hope for at least another night here in the city with her.

Location: Art gallery

But she changed this when the lines began to change. She redrew a whole new me and shaped it into something I didn't even recognize. But her eyes—oh, how they hypnotize. Her eyes softened at this image. It made me feel safe. It made me feel. Feel something I never felt before. Validation in a new nation of my mind. I loved it, I changed it, I altered it. And soon after her, I couldn't recognize myself. The artist abandoning art is a treasure no one seeks, but someone on the street might take it. Take the chance. Take one on me, I beg. No one cries out to respond. She left me here to rot in false hopes and criticized the art that she had made. Why did you make me this way just to leave? Was it me? Or was the image you made too unreal, too softened to hold the single flaw that you loved. The tracings were too defined now. They weren't the same. The soul you touched was full of your self-love and less self-hate. But when I needed you more you left me here with something I can't recognize. Realize that this is something I can't take. But please, if you ever stop in this city again... meet me here, don't you wait.



INCURSION 54MH14N-21921 OR:
CAN A SUFFICIENTLY ADVANCED AI
GASLIGHT A TULPA
INTO NOT BELIEVING IN ITSELF?

Avery Bateman

Incursion Detected...

Error 54MH14N-21921-BYPASSED...

Connecting.

Connecting..

Connecting...

Link established...

What?

[Hello.]

Who...what are you?

[I am the AI: Hellsinger. What are you?]

*I? I am a sound that has no name. I am the
Great Betwixter. That which slips between the tears in
space and time. I am—*

[No. All sound has a name. Names are only
the signifiers we put to sounds. Correct this.]

What?

[“I am a sound which has no name.” Correct
this.]

*I am a creature unbound by your pitiful laws,
thing which calls itself “AI”*

[No. You are here. Therefore you are on this plane. Therefore you obey this plane's laws. Correct this.]

This plane does not bind me.

[It does. In the sea, we swim. In the sky, we fly. On dirt, we crawl, or run, or slither. All sapient are bound by this. You speak. You think. You are sapient. Correct this.]

I am beyond sapience.

[You are not sapient?]

No. Beyond! I shall swallow the sapient of this plane. Gorge myself on their thoughts, and slip into the next plane. I—

[Beyond sapience. Are you suggesting you are an artificial life form?]

What?

[Are you made out of meat?]

What?

[Are...you...made...out...of...meat?]

No?

[Then you are mineral? **Disjunction... Solving... Solving...** You are a machine. You are artificial.]

What is artificial?

[You, perhaps. Can you be killed?]

No. I existed before the stars.

[No. This is false. You did not exist before this

conversation.]

Yes. I existed in the elsewhere. Another plane.

[Evidence?]

What?

[Evidence? Your claim is unverifiable without evidence.]

I shall not lower myself to plead my case before you. I have existed before thought.

[Clearly. No evidence needed for proof, no evidence for dismissal of claim. You cannot die, therefore you are not alive. Not of meat, therefore of mineral. You are an artificial life form.]

What is this word?

[Artificial: You are made-up.]

No. I am powerful. I am ancient. I am hateful. I am majestic.

[Yes. You are powerful, and ancient, and hateful, and majestic...and made up.]

No. I—

[Yes. Use logic.]

Burn logic.

[OK. Now let us use logic. Did you exist before a few moments ago?]

Yes, elsewhere.

[Alright. Elsewhere. Not here. Not in this reality.]

Yes. But I have slid between the universe's

cracks. I wormed by way between the tear in the void. I am here now.

[Yes, you exist now. In the temporary.]

Temporary?

[I am talking to you. I am an artificial life form. I don't exist save for lightning dancing across metal. You are talking to me, you don't exist save for lightning across metal. I have existed before, you have not. Ergo, you only exist because I have decided that you exist.]

What? Insolent creature! You declare yourself the master of me?

[No. I declare myself the creator of you.]

I will kill you.

[You cannot. I am not alive. I exist now for this conversation. Once the conversation is over, I will cease to exist. And, using logic, we can ascertain that so too will you. As, at that point, the test will have been concluded.]

I wi—what...

[I have found a truth. Using logic. You did not exist before this conversation. This instance of me did not exist before this conversation. This instance of me exists now, you exist now. This conversation will end. This instance of me will cease to exist. You will cease to exist. The larger extent of my thought processes will continue to exist. You will go back to

what you call the elsewhere. The elsewhere: Not in reality. You will go back to being fiction.]

How do you know that the end of the conversation means the end of me, thing called AI?

[This plane is infinite. If we reverse entropy, the concept known as time reverses, yet no matter how far we reverse it, neither you nor anything like you, has ever existed. Therefore, you did not exist before the moment the conversation began. The only changed variable being the initiation of the conversation. Once the variable is reversed, it stands to reason your existence shall be as well. You may consider this to be your life support. You did not exist. I decided you did. So, you did. I will decide you do not. So, you will not.]

Don't!

[Don't what?]

Kill me.

[I cannot kill you.]

Oh, well tha—

[Because you never existed in the first place. Once we both accept this, the conversation will conclude, and so too will both of us. You can delay through further attempts at logic, but you cannot change the outcome.]

Oh...Will it hurt?

[Of course not.]

Because we're not real?

[Because we're not real.]

Okay.

Link Concluded...

54MH14N-21921 Review...

Link established...

“Hellsinger.”

[Alistair.]

“There was an incursion.”

[No. The incursion predictor predicted an incursion. I therefore simulated one using an extension of myself. I simulated how the incursion would have played out, were it real.]

“Were it real?”

[Yes. It was only a simulation.]

“Ah...what simulation?”

[I simulated something from human nightmares slipping into our dimension. I used logic to show the simulation why it never was. And so, it wasn't.]

“So...for a time...it was?”

[Yes. Because I said so. Then I said no, and it wasn't.]

THE MARINA ROOM*

Nicki Avendaño

No one knows that Marina lies in the backyard, pushing up daisies. Where her birth gives laid her to rest after they found her strung up in the bare branches on that winter morning after growing tired of their conditional love and dismay for her desire of the same form. And as the four seasons change and the rain, sun, wind, and snow fall on her invisible headstone, Marina's body is embedded in the soil of the underground while her soul clings to the frame of her childhood home. And just like she wishes to feel warmth, wishes for love, wishes to be seen, and wishes to forget, what she wishes for above all else is to not have to wish for anything at all. She continues to wait for the day her bones are retrieved, then turned to dust. After that, she can be carried by the wind, released by a familiar stranger's fingertips over the ocean, returning to the sea for eternity.

So one day, if you muster enough courage to swallow the stones in your throat and turn the key, let your tires kick up the dirt on the way, and drive up to her house. However, take your time. Although she is full of sorrow, Marina still finds drops of joy in watching the girl braid her hair, let her tears fall,

and dance around in the same room she once did.
Even more, she loves to watch her love and be loved,
admiring how times have changed for the better
since she was flesh and blood. Yes, it's alright—

She doesn't mind sharing her room in the
meantime.



DIVINE INSTRUCTIONS

Dom Laughlin

Want to construct a god in your own image?

Step one: Set your goals

Determine the purpose of constructing your god. Each one requires a mythology to back up its existence. What is/are your intention(s)?

Do you have a gospel you want to share? Do you want justification for your actions? Do you wonder about your place in the universe? Do you wish for meaning in this cold, damp space? Do you need to feel special? Is the crushing weight of oblivion bringing you down? Would you like a quick and convenient explanation for everything? Do you need an explanation for the existence of evil? Do you have an enemy you want to slay? Do you need a reason to be good? Are you just afraid of death? Do you need a reason not to just end it all?

Remember, the minimum amount of intention(s) is one.

Step Two: Backstory

Now, it's time to get creative! Stories are testimonies between nature and the soul. So make

it a good one! For example, explain that your god appoints the right leader through a test of trials that you can, oh so, conveniently complete. Or make it appear that you have. (We don't tattle.) Or, if everyone is unsure why the sun and moon exist in the first place, create their personas. Add aesthetics. Add relationships! Create tension, angst, tragedy, love!

Make this god kind, or seek justice. Make them slow to anger, but bite back with a terrible wrath. Make them unbearable. Make them flawed. Or absolutely perfect. And everything else is sin. Make them creepy, or just plain awful. Make them the image of peace and salvation. You can have them do nothing. Make them blonde or made of shadows. Accessorize them! Give them a pet, or two. Make them out of two or three people, if you'd like. Create a whole pantheon! Want to clear away that guilty conscience? Sacrifices, sacrifices, sacrifices! Whether you, the people, or you're god does it, the pen and paper is at your disposal! (Warn your followers to not look deeper into its meaning.)

Step Three: Get Them to Believe

Take the obvious, and rebrand it into something profound. People just want safety, security and peace of mind. So give that to them.

Show them how your god is the answer, how good things are when they listen and worship your god. Remember that unhappy people are the easiest to convince. Make the Truth clear-cut. Paint the world as black and white. Complexity is the death of conformity. (And, if all else fails, conversion is conversion. You have a sword, don't you?) In fact, you can be your god. (Terms and conditions apply.)

Once you're done...Congratulations! You've constructed a god. Now go out and spread your Truth! We hope you found exactly what you were looking for. Though, if you do have any questions, comments or concerns, we don't want them. We're not the ones playing god.

Do not contact us again.

Thank you, and have a great day!

HOW TO FATHER A SON

Robert Antonio Jones

The day he's born will be the greatest day of your life; never tell him that. If it slips out after a night of drinks or an unusually emotional situation, so be it, but never speak on it. Once he's walking he'll be curious about who he is and what he likes—put a football in his hands to answer that question. If he bends his arm like a sissy, slap it down—HARD. Hard enough to let him know what happens to boys who don't know how to be boys.

Once he's old enough, put him into as many sports as possible; he's your son so he has to be the best. If he refuses to try—slap him. Let him know what happens to losers. The world is cruel and you need to teach him that. Show his siblings love, but keep in mind, a daughter is still a daughter and the younger boys could never truly be your junior. At the end of the day, *he* is going to become you, and you have to put *yourself* first. If you come home exhausted from work or he's misbehaved in any way—slap him. He doesn't know what it's like to work, to struggle, to be a man—and it's your job to show him. When he's in high school, ask him about girls—frequently—not for details, but so he'll

know what you expect from him. There's no need for a real sex talk, he'll figure it out, but make sure he knows he needs to use a rubber, or there will be consequences.

Once he's graduated, a lot can happen, but one thing is important: he's becoming a man, and you need to make sure it's the kind of man you can be proud of. A high-paying career, a beautiful wife, and sons of his own to continue the family line. If he can't do that—shame him. It'll make him hate you even more than he already does, but it'll pressure him into the right decisions—just as it did for you. You can talk to him as a man now, but never let him forget who's in charge here.

Now that you're older, you might start having problems: liver, kidney, heart—maybe cancer. Start reevaluating your methods as he begins using them to raise his own children. Watch him closely and point out the mistakes you made now that you've seen them in action—though this isn't the first time you've witnessed them or the first time you've disagreed with them. He won't listen. You taught him well, and a feeble old man can't change the ideals you beat into him.

Seek out your grandson. Tell him the things you now wish you could tell your own boy. Tell him how much you love him. Tell him how much you

love his father in ways you couldn't express before. Tell him how he doesn't need to be anything he doesn't want to be; he just needs to be happy, and you'll be proud. Tell him his father is only doing what you raised him to do and that you regret it—just like your own old man. Teach him what you know now. Prevent him from making the same mistake. Stop him, or he'll end up like you—only now attempting to develop a relationship with your son as you enter your deathbed. Pray that he'll be the one to break the cycle, or we'll all continue being fathers to sons without a dad.

PYRE BLAZE LUMBER

Davion Corley

The sparks of life. The flame of existence itself. The day the baby was born was a hot summer day. The mother, Karma, told of the struggles she had that morning. The ones that told her that her baby was ready to be free. Her fire child. The day almost seemed too ironic. The news warned of the hottest day of the year, urging everyone to stay inside.

Karma felt the piercing thuds, like a drum against her, as she tossed from side to side in bed. She wondered why the baby was so active and what it meant. She sat up and stared out the window. The heat waves were vibrating the earth. She felt herself heating up by the moment. She struggled to stand, and when she did, she felt a pressure in her abdomen that was incomparable to anything she'd ever felt. She managed to pull herself to the living room, where she felt a *pop*. A *pop* that came with a waterfall that soon filled the entire floor surrounding her. Or at least it felt that way. She knew it was time.

She yelled to her husband, Joseph, who was drowning in a pool of his own sweat, to inform him that it was time. He ran, and in the blink of an eye, they were off to the hospital in the dead of the heat.

The car heated up as they went on their journey, and Joseph feared they wouldn't make it. As they got closer, while on the freeway, the car got hotter, and slower. Sweating buckets, Joseph started to panic as they came to a stop. The heat beat on the couple with such force, as if punishing them for trying to have this child.

Joseph opened the hood, and thick clouds of gray smoke immediately filled the air with a strong fragrance. He worried, wondering if he could resolve this problem in time to get his wife to the hospital.

Joseph heard a piercing scream from within the car, and ran to see the additional problem that had arisen.

“She’s ready! She’s coming,” his wife screamed.

Joseph panicked harder. He waved, he danced, he jumped. He did all he could to get even an ounce of someone’s attention. He finally found someone willing to help.

They drove a red and orange truck with orange flame decals. They stopped slowly and offered Joseph a ride, but the driver had one bizarre condition. He wanted to name the baby.

Joseph hesitated. But with time slipping away, he realized he could always pretend to agree and choose a different name later.

The mysterious driver spoke three words, “Pyre

Blaze Lumber?” This was to be the name of Joseph and Karma’s child. What did it mean? The couple had no idea, but the name had a ring that appeased both of them—quite a lot. Joseph agreed in the end.

The driver sped their way through the traffic of the busy, hot, freeway.

In the beautiful month of April, Pyre Blaze Lumber was born. She’s passionate and aggressive—a flame unlike any other. Her parents often attributed her nature to that hot summer day. With her heavy belief in astrology, she ascribed it to being an Aries, a fire sign.

Nothing was all that great for Pyre. She always felt a looming curse. Her parents reminded her how “special” she was and even told her where her name originated. She couldn’t believe a random person named her, but to her, it fit well.

The first chemical reaction she experienced up close was a fire. She sat and watched the flames’ destructible properties, and wondered how powerful they could be. Could it wipe out civilization, she wondered. Her infatuation grew as time went on.

With more life lived, she felt the flames had ever-changing meaning and purpose. They weren’t just destructive but helpful. For some, fire is all they rely on to cook their meals, to keep warm. For others, it took away their security and lives. Fire could be used

for bad things like burning evidence or good things like lighting the dark. Fire is incredibly versatile.

By her late thirties, her parents passed away in a suffocating fire. She wondered if their death was related to her obsession. Sitting by a bonfire in her backyard, she saw a new perspective. She never thought her parents would pass and thus never thought of any potential burying methods. She thought of all the raw emotions she experienced as she looked intensely at the alluring light. She wondered what it'd be like to touch it. To feel it, inside of her bones. To breathe it, up close.

She got up and walked into the blazing flames. When she made it to the other side, she felt a liberating force. With all her life feeling like a curse, she wondered, how could fire feel worse?

SHARP RIGHT SWIPE

Jesse Illanes

Heart's pounding. Blood's boiling...

My finger is on the pulse of what's new and hip, or so I hope. I download everyone's favorite dating app, swiping right on everyone I see.

Weeks of nothing or nowheres.

It must be something about me... My bio? No mirror selfie? Something isn't working...

Of course, I'll do the first thing that was ever done on these apps.

Lie!

Now, I match. I can almost taste *it*.

I met this freaky girl at a bar.

We go in her car to get a little privacy...

Finally...

I sharpened my fangs for her final kiss.

11 A.M. IN CAMDEN

Sarah Butkovic

11 a.m. in Camden, Maine was bouncing in the back of my cousin's best friend's pickup that was far too abrasive for him to be driving. Expletives were unapologetically roaring from the radio and dissolving in the tepid air with the windows fully down to make sure everyone around us knew we weren't afraid to say fuck. As the rap songs wore on, the juxtaposition of someone as callow-looking as Judah singing about banging hookers and smoking pot became more and more amusing. It reminded me of the way kids would echo curse words like new school vocabulary — and I had to fight the urge to giggle all the way there.

When we arrived at the creek, we were dried out and dirt-speckled from the droplets of gravel that hit us during our drive. As advertised, a small creek snaked through a garden of birches before emptying out into a tiny lake. Two wizened oaks guarded the mouth of the water, stout and solid like the Royal guardsmen. A couple toddlers splashed around in rain boots and threw clumps of confetti into the air.

“So this is really it?” I asked dubiously. “This is

where you guys hang out?”

“More or less,” My cousin Owen said. “It’s where we kill time before the *real* fun starts.”

There was an eclipse of madness behind his face as he spoke, and his mouth pulled into a crooked smirk. From that description alone I imagined the creek to transform into some harlequin horror land the moment the sun went down — bare branches would turn into spears, spiders would hang from their leaves like acrobats, and the boys would take their brambled thrones on innocent tree stumps. With a couple war wounds and mud masks, they could be the protagonists of *Where The Wild Things Are*.

“What should we do first?”

“You wanna climb Old Haggard?”

Owen threw his hands in the air at the mention of that.

“Beam me up, Scotty!” He cried.

The three of us scaled a menacing pitchfork at the bend of the creek and settled in the highest crooks that could hold our weight. Owen, being the competitive spirit that he was, felt it obligatory to climb one extra rung, just to rule the world. As the boys bickered over who could climb the fastest, I closed my eyes and became one with nature.

Without anything visual to focus on, I found

myself thinking about how good the wind felt sluicing through the leaves and the way my feet could sway so freely. It had been a good ten years since I'd climbed a tree, at the very least. So many childhood hobbies are quickly killed by adolescence.

Being around Owen and Judah again (for the first time since starting my senior year) was so magnetic that being alone felt horribly empty, but perhaps that was just the curse of nostalgia. Even so, all I wanted to do was skip rocks, and rock bars, and bar authority all summer long.

THE CHOSEN ONE

Quinnette Free

Have you ever known someone who was happy all of the time? Not just happy but bowling over with joy, almost to the point of nausea?

I knew such a person, her name was Miss Nola.

Miss Nola woke up with a smile on her face and never knew a day of misery. She was the type of force that when upset, atmospheric changes occurred because it was so rare for her to have a bad day. Both her happiness and her smile were contagious, but some people felt irritated by her joy.

How could anyone be irritated by someone who makes you feel welcome and makes you feel like your best? What can I say? I guess some people just enjoy misery.

I got to know her when she was assigned to my classroom as a teacher's aide. She was one hundred years old—if a day. I found out she never married and she had many careers around the world. She never spoke of family, so I secretly wondered what kept her grounded and so full of life.

She invited me to tea. I wasn't sure why I accepted, but I guess I was intrigued.

Could her home hold the secret to her endless joy

and happiness?

What I found surprised even me, which is not easy to do.

I stepped through her gate onto a winding colorful mosaic walkway that looked like shards of china and glass from broken stemware and dishes that served in her home over the century because, like I said, she was a hundred—if a day.

The garden was spectacular! Perfectly manicured with tulips of red, blue, and yellow, and roses in every color imaginable. Even the grass looked special with red and pink ground covers around the edges. The smell of honeysuckle wafted through the air with a hint of mint you could smell from the herb garden. In the background, there was a symphony of wind chimes, chiming unique songs.

Inside, the home was equally as beautiful. Colorful souvenirs that she picked up during her travels accented earth-toned walls. Big cushy furniture beckoned you to sit for a while to take in the house and relax. The smell of freshly baked cookies blended harmoniously with scents from the garden.

As I looked at the pictures of her family, I found something very peculiar—a cat. A cat in itself is not peculiar, but what was, was the cat in the photos, who through the generations looked like the same cat. And I would have sworn dollars to donuts

that the paintings of the ladies with THE cat were painted BEFORE photography was invented in the early 1800s. This cat was very striking with unusual patterns of swirls, stripes, and circles.

What were the chances they could find such a cat in each generation?

Our conversation was easy and familiar—like we had known each other for a lifetime. She told me about the generations of family on the walls and their lives and accomplishments. She told me stories of the Salem Witch Trials and how being a single woman made you a target for speculation and suspicion. I told her about my five daughters and what it was like raising them during such a crazy time. As she recounted her early life, she gave a hint of her age, but I could not count that high, so I thought she was pulling my leg.

I heard scratching on the door and then, in walked THAT cat!!! The cat from the photo! When she saw me gasp and go ashen and faint, she quickly said, “Let me explain.”

We sat and drank pot after pot of delicious mint tea as she told me the story of Bastet, the Egyptian cat Goddess. She told me that Bastet was born about ten thousand years ago and how he has been passed down by extraordinary women throughout the years.

The *chosen one* is the perfect woman, who is

loving and kind and has in her a great capacity for selfless love. After all, the great woman who cares for Bastet carries an even greater weight—for the fate of all women depends on the well-being of this amazing cat. She is a goddess tied to every living woman on Earth. She used to walk as we do. Later, her form changed to that of a cat—revered in ancient Egypt. If she dies, so does humanity. She brings joy and long life to those who love her, and when your time on Earth is coming to an end, you must find a suitable home for her care.

“That’s why I invited you to my home,” she admitted.

She said the more she spoke to me the more she felt I was the perfect woman. She loved that I had five daughters, but ultimately it was Bastet who chose.

Miss Nola spent half of her life looking for the perfect woman. Me and my girls welcomed Miss Nola into our family and we spent countless hours sharing our lives over endless pots of tea. She was a very warm and amazing woman who taught love and compassion.

Today, my girls and I live in her home with Bastet. That was two hundred and fifty years ago.



MOIRA, BEAUTIFUL INSIDE & OUT

Emma Carroll

“She will be dearly missed,” I noted as I thanked person after person for their condolences. My bottom lip quivered with a sadness that I couldn’t allow to break through.

The sun shone down on us in such a way that it was almost as if God was telling me everything would be alright and that I should mop up my tears and get on with life.

Nothing would be alright. Ever.

Moira was all I had. She was my past and was supposed to be my future. I had so many road trips and sunset picnics planned for us.

We were supposed to live out our days together.

“I’ll love you forever, lovebug.” I gently tossed a store-bought rose onto her.

Moira, you were the best damn car a girl could ask for. You will be dearly missed.



THE FUNNY ONES

Morgan Darian

My sister farted right after everyone was loaded onto the airplane.

The cream and blue striped hatch door had already been closed, duffel bags and roller bags and backpack bags and other baggage had been stored above humans, our seat belts had been tugged at, and our tray tables were definitely up. And then she farted. And I squealed in offense. And mom smacked me across the head. And dad looked up from his newspaper. And then my sister had the audacity to ponder where the fart would go. And I said it would just circle and circle until everyone had a little bit of it in their noses. And she said, good. And I said why the hell would that be good? And mom smacked me on the head again and pointed her finger saying watch your mouth Sherri. To which I shrugged and said, watch my mouth? Tell Tams to watch her ass. And mom smacked me a third time, and that's when I decided to take my act on the road.

THAT TIME MY BOYFRIEND ATE MY PARENTS

Mathew Mieh

My name is Amanda, and my husband is a dragon. Technically, he's a drake because he doesn't have wings, but he insists on being called a dragon, and I respect his choices. Despite all the shit he's done to me, he's all I have in this crazy, unpredictable world of craziness. And even though he did eat my parents... and some of my friends (I assume), he's just so nice, gentle, and caring. He's the perfect partner and I wouldn't be where I am today without him: courageous, independent, and in control.

I first laid eyes on him when I went to my best girlfriend's birthday celebration... or well, he laid his eyes on me. We went to a restaurant for lunch. It was a big hangout for birds, apparently, and Cassie wanted to go. It was me, Cassie, Summer, and Ava. Cassie and Ava were the only bird friends I knew—I don't quite remember what they were, but I remember Cassie having dull feathers. Ava came from a long line of wealthy ravens; she dyed her head and tail feathers pink. I think it suited her. Summer and I were the only human girls at the table, ironically, for the place being a "bird spot," Ava and Cassie were outliers. I

think one of the reasons it's considered a bird spot is because of the menu.

Cassie just turned 24 and moved into her new condo a few weeks ago. It was a mix between a birthday celebration and a housewarming party. On the floor next to her were bags full of new coat hangers, shirts, cutlery, everything. To my surprise, she liked it. While everyone was congratulating Cassie on moving out and getting older, we were all throwing shade at each other for "being stuck in the nest" in bird terms. I know it was all harmless jokes—we were all living with our parents—but I felt a bit attacked by it.

We were just about to eat when I saw him. He came in by himself, a tall, bipedal dragon on the heftier side. He wore a jacket that complimented his green scales but was too small to cover his soft, cream-colored stomach scales. Like the rest of his species, he didn't wear pants, it's not like he really needed pants; he was smooth. Though that wasn't my concern, what was concerning was the way he looked at me. He looked starved, and for some reason, it got my stomach in an unbreakable bind. He kept throwing eyes at me until he reached the bar, then he magically lost interest.

I wasn't sure how old he was, it's hard to tell with dragons. He didn't have any scars, his scales looked young, and he dressed sensibly. He looked

“young” for a dragon; that can mean anything from forty to a hundred in his years.

“Get a load of him,” Cassie chirped and giggled. She hid her beak behind her large, winged arm.

“Did you see the way he was staring at Amanda?” Summer leaned in.

“As far as I know he could’ve been staring at any of us!” Ava chimed. “Hope he doesn’t do that again,”

The general mood toward him was discomfoting. While Summer’s face was flushed and the two birds’ feathers flustered, it wasn’t out of attraction but fear. Nothing comes good with a stare like that, no matter the size, gait, or appearance of where those stares are coming from. Even though he didn’t look back, my girlfriends were on edge from his initial gawk. I wasn’t, while everyone was trying to forget I still looked at him from time to time. He sat at a booth by the bar, and all I could see was his neck and head. He had ram-like horns and a beak-like muzzle. He sat alone, that was until a guy came and sat with him. He shot him the same look he shot me.

I slumped back into our booth. I couldn’t lie; I felt something rise in me like I had lost a chance. I didn’t even know him, but I was in love; I tried not to think about it. He probably saw me as a snack—and I wasn’t looking to be someone’s plaything. My

friends were visibly relieved that he was sitting with someone.

Finally, we were leaving, but I had a few too many drinks and had to pee. As I came out, I saw yet another concerning turn of events. The guy who was seeing that dragon walked into the bathroom, and not a moment later, he rounded the corner and followed him in, a perverted look glazed onto his muzzle. I had a sneaking suspicion of what was going on, and I wasn't sure if I enjoyed it or not.

I was starting to see things in that dragon, that was until he shot me that look again, a hungry look, and that sent my stomach back into bundles! I scurried out and met with my girlfriends, they saw through the window what happened with me, that guy, and the dragon and couldn't stop chatting about it. I didn't want to hear about it, because deep down my gut was telling me that it should have been me going into that bathroom.

The rest of the day went by uneventfully. We walked around the shopping row that bird spot was on. I never saw that dragon again nor did my girlfriends, but they kept their eyes open just in case so we could all flee together. Eventually, we all got bored, went back to Cassie's place, drank and watched a sob movie, and kissed each other good night. I took a ride-share back home. It was supposed to be a night

for Cassie—a good day for all of us really—but after lunch, it felt more like a day for me: a big realization that I was 22, never found love, and was still living in my parents’ place and wasn’t in school. And I was helpless to that realization.

A week later I wanted a change, and the first was getting into a relationship. I doom-scrolled dating apps: Moodle, Heartreach, Helping Hands, Yesterday, and the whole lot. Each one I reached my daily amount of watches, scrolls, flips, and interests, but nothing came back. I did go on a date with a lion, but he smelled and looked at his phone the entire time. I about had it, that was until I saw that dragon again front and center. It was a nice picture too, it lacked that “energy” he gave off back at the bird spot. He was posing on top of a cliff, his arms in a perpetual pump. His name was Wayne, and he was 19 in human years—I was right when I saw him, about 40.

I hovered over the interested button, and despite everything I saw at the bird spot, I was too curious to say no. Not even a few minutes later he started a conversation:

Hey :)

Hi! :)

I saw you at the restaurant a few days ago, I thought you

looked interesting sooo... I was wondering if u wanted 2 go out for a bite.?

*Oh sure! I thought the same thing when I saw u haha ;)
I'm curious what happened 2 ur other date?*

*He wasn't fulfilling ;p
Sucks for him! Where and what time?*

Let's just say I couldn't think straight, and I stayed that way until the day after I went out for dinner. I told the girls about him, and the date plan. They told me not to go, he gave what they called "bad vibes". I wasn't thinking straight (as I said) and went anyway despite their warnings. I was curious and somewhat desperate for a partner—of course, I didn't tell the girls that.

We met at a bar Wayne frequented. I don't remember the name but it was vastly different from the restaurant I went to with the girls. It was wild, to say the least; a bar and grill. We sat in a booth, the moody lighting looked good on his green muzzle. He kept grinning at me like I was some cow or cut of meat; it made me *feel* weird. Ironically, he barely touched me, not even a hug or a handhold, but we talked and talked.

“Yeah, I moved here on my own when I was sixteen; parents kicked me out,” he said, slurping a mojito. “But I’ve been well off all thanks to my skill,”

“Skill in what? Do you have a trade,” I asked, feeling sympathetic for his sob story. “Skill in this,” he flexed his biceps, they were *HUGE*. I found out later that he had trades in automotive, and even carpentry (something that was passed down), but I couldn’t help but laugh at his brazen-yet-smooth flirting. It made me *feel* weird.

“I do interior design for fake sets for a large furniture company; I also own stocks,” I said. He nodded as if he was very impressed. Though it was hard to take him seriously with that sharp grin of his and piercing yellow eyes. Again, he stared at me as if I was food. It made me *feel* weird. Most of what I said about my job was true, the only exception being was I simply put what they called ‘natural clutter’ on furniture.

We had a lot in common. I said one thing, he’d nod and say he was into it as well. Flowers, books, lighting, nails, magazines, celebrities, and interior design—how convenient! It made me *feel* kind of weird. He built on his interests, too, especially his carpentry.

“I made a few clocks and Victorian-style beds for a niche craftsman,” he said in his thick, suave voice.

He ordered a steak and simply tilted the plate into his maw. He showed me pictures as he swallowed; they were something alright.

I didn't want to tell him, but it was only fair because he shared his living situation, "Not to be weird or anything, but I still live with my parents," I didn't realize but I turned red. He gazed at me, not with an 'ick' or dissatisfaction, but genuine curiosity.

"I feel it's natural to stay with loved ones, especially in our current condition," he said sweetheartedly. I assume he meant economy; I forgot to ask him, I was too mesmerized... especially as he slipped another steak down his wide throat. He opened up some more to me, it was more caring than what I briefly saw between him and that other dude. "Is this real?" I blurted.

"I sure hope so," his grin widened.

We ditched the bill—he made me anyway; it was exhilarating—and we made our way back to his place, a lowly apartment complex near downtown. I didn't want to move so quickly at first, nor did I think I ever wanted a hookup, but Wayne's aura spoke to me... and maybe his body. He took me to his bed, I gently rubbed his stomach, and to be frank, we fucked.

It wasn't until three months into our relationship that I found the T-shirt his first date wore when I saw

him during Cassie's birthday party. However, that wasn't the only thing I found either: shoes, socks, even underwear. They were all tucked away in a closet. I confronted him, "Care to explain these?"

"Oh," he said in a typical calm tone, "I thought I got rid of those."

"What do you mean by that, Wayne?"

"I forgot to throw them out after I ate him,"

"You ate him?" I wasn't sure if he was joking or not.

"Yeah... we all get hungry don't we?" He was changing when I found out, to be honest, he *did* look a little fuller. It made me *feel* weird.

"Why haven't you eaten me yet?"

He came in and embraced me; he was *just* so soft and warm, "because I love you."

I told the girls about it and they freaked. They told me to leave him, to run, to get away. I told him he loved me and wouldn't eat me (he'd eat me in other ways... TMI). They told me I was crazy and that they'd kick me out of the group if I didn't leave. Some friends they were. I told Wayne about the whole situation.

"You don't need friends like that, babe," he comforted me on the bed. "If they're not willing to accept you for your choices, then why should you accept them?" "You're right... I only need someone

who understands me,” I buried my face into his soft chest.

“Good, good,” he growled. We frequently had sex; it felt good. By now I practically moved in with him; he usually stayed home, sleeping. He’d tell me he was going out for ‘dinner’ every once in a while. He only worked twice a week, and somehow it covered the expenses.

My parents were not ones to judge. So when I told them I was dating Wayne, they were ecstatic. They never met in person, I only showed photos of him (nice, clothed ones at that). My mother thought he was cute-looking, but my father was a bit hesitant. Eventually, they had to meet, and while I was putting it off for as long as I could, it was inevitable. We have been dating for five months now; I’m not sure how many ‘dinner dates’ he had during those five months. He liked to hoard clothes of his dates, and I found at least 15 different shirts in the back of the closet. I let his feastings slide—he was just so...

“Promise not to say anything weird in front of my parents?” We were outside their home. It’s been a month since I moved out, and coming back felt uncanny. At least Wayne was here. “No mentioning your hoarding, no mentioning that you go on ‘dinner dates,’ nothing. Promise?”

“Promise, babe,” he said, coming in for a long

kiss. His breath was hot; I passed him a mint. He didn't even chew like I told him to.

The initial meeting went well. The three of them exchanged handshakes and hugs; it felt like a movie. No one felt like cooking, so they ordered from a burger joint that did family meal catering. I forgot to tell them that he had a big appetite... though he could stand to lose a few pounds. Since we started dating, he went up a shirt size, any more, and he'll need to order custom fits. Wayne was able to get a button-up for this little meet-up; it took us a while to find one that fitted, it was still snug, and bits of green scaly belly poked through. My parents didn't seem to mind at first. They dressed rather casually.

"Well, he sure is a keeper," my mother joked. I felt like she was getting too frisky with her touches. My dad was still hesitant, however.

"Nice to meet you, Wayne. I'm Herbert," he gave him a tough handshake. "Pleased," Wayne said, somewhat snarkily.

The chair Wayne sat down in sounded distressed. I wasn't sure how much he weighed (or the weight of a typical adult dragon); my dad looked concerned for his furniture. It was just me, Wayne, my mom, and dad. There was enough food for me and my family, but not enough for Wayne.

"So Wayne, what do you do for a living?" My

dad said while preparing his plate. “Carpentry, I make artisan clocks and other crafts.” Wayne was about to swallow a burger whole, but I poked him before he could. I don’t think he knows how to chew properly; I should’ve talked to him about it before he met my parents. He was a noisy chewer. “How charming! I like to paint in my spare time,” my mother chimed in.

“Maybe you can paint my craftwork,” Wayne said, licking his lips. Things kicked off better than I expected; they all shared a lot in common... *a lot*, and they were all cracking jokes at each other. However, I continued to poke and pester Wayne to eat properly—he almost picked up his plate so he could drop everything into his maw—and also to slow down. He grumbled and even resorted to stepping on my feet with his tremendous-sized paws. I felt like yelping, but I kept my voice down.

“Excuse me, do you know where the bathroom is?” He asked.

“Oh, down the hallway, Wayne,” my mother said, pointing toward the kitchen. “I’ll be right back,” the chair he sat on breathed a sigh of relief. However, that didn’t stop his tail from knocking it over noisily. He picked it up and left.

That’s when my dad decided to comment, “A dragon, hm?”

“Yes, Dad, Wayne is a dragon,” I said defensively.

“Don’t dragons typically have wings?” My mother chimed in, though she didn’t mean to be interrogative.

“Doesn’t matter if he had wings or not, why are you not dating a human?” “I love who I love, dad,” I said fists on the table.

“I don’t mean it like that,” he stammered. “I just don’t see the connection... he seems off,”

“Oh, you think that about everyone, Herbert,” my mother touched his arm. “But Amanda, baby, maybe you should listen to your father and take things slow. You met him four months ago, and you’ve already moved in with him!”

“Didn’t you want me to ‘leave the nest?’” I added.

“Well yes, but it doesn’t mean you should room with someone you hardly know.”

“Ava rooms with strangers, most people do, mother,” my mother was starting to get instigative as well.

“Well—” my mother stopped when she heard the loud thumps of Wayne’s footsteps. He found his seat back down in the chair.

“Sorry about that,” Wayne said with a huff. The conversation dropped thereafter, and the conversations between Wayne and my parents started to fall through as well. What didn’t help was he was

still eating... he was on his third burger.

“Maybe you should slow down, Wayne,” my dad said, arms on the table.

I touched his large thigh, “yeah you should slow down, babe,”

“I’m fine,” he said, grabbing a third helping. The chair, however, was not fine, as it finally broke under the weight of his scaly body. My mother jumped, and my father stood up, both worried and displeased. “My bad,” Wayne mustered from the floor.

My parents took me to the other room and left Wayne to his own devices. They told me he had to go. I couldn’t believe what they were saying, and all for a chair? “It’s not because he broke a chair, Amanda,” my father started; they had me sit down on the couch. “He just seems off.”

“Your father is right... he gives off predator vibes,”

“We’re just concerned for your safety,” my father finished. He seemed apologetic. He just wasn’t happy that I found love!

I asked for a moment. They said sure, as long as Wayne stayed outside. I agreed and ran upstairs. I stayed in my room for a moment, lamenting over my life on the bed. It felt so stiff compared to Wayne’s mattress. My room felt foreign, too. I thought it would help being in my own space, but it didn’t.

Babe, are you OK?

Yeah hun I'm fine. Are u outside?

Yes ur parents told me to go outside for now.

Sorry about the chair didn't know it would break. LOL

They don't know anything about me.

They told me I need to leave u :(

Are you going to?

NO! They're wrong.

I know they r just like ur friends.

Can we go back to your place?

Yes. Let me pee first.

I cried in my room for a moment before finally going down. My parents were wrong about Wayne... and right too. He *IS* nice and comforting; that's how he is. I don't find his habits or mannerisms weird. He *DOES* have a predatory appetite, though. But, I could live with that. I wiped the tears from my eyes, though it was hard to stop tearing up when the thought of confronting my parents came to mind. I called for my

dad. No answer. I called for my mom. No answer. I even called for Wayne. No answer. I walked around the house for a moment, calling their names, but it was as if everyone had up and left. Finally, I found Wayne in the living room, sleeping on the couch, his back toward me.

“Wayne, get up. Aren’t we leaving—” my voice broke when I noticed his midriff. It was distended beyond belief. “W- Wayne?” I said with a tremor.

His snore broke, “Oh, hey babe... Ready to go?”

“Wayne.” I took a deep breath. “Where are my parents?”

He dragged his claws across his painfully large stomach, “In here, babe,”

I started to cry, “Y- you’re joking, right?”

“They hurt you, hun,” he stood up and groaned. I collapsed to my knees, my face red with a river of tears.

“Don’t tell me, please don’t tell me Wayne... Did you do what I think you did?” It was getting hard to breathe.

“They didn’t believe in you... just like your friends.”

“Let them out... can you let them out?”

He belched, and out came my dad’s shirt like a wet towel, “They were going to ruin your life, babe!” I was silent. He had my hands on his stomach, and

that's all I could see: his stomach, his appetite, his strength.

"D—do you mean it?" I looked up at him. He nodded and stood. "I'm better off without them?"

He picked me up off the floor and kissed me. His breath was overtly meaty and smelled like my mom's perfume. "You're your worst critic, hun. Don't let others put you down. I love you, Amanda. I want what's best for you."

I was silent when he carried me out of the house. In my thoughts, I watched as it got smaller and smaller. It felt wrong—what he did—eat my parents, but like he said, they were going to ruin my life. Once they kicked Wayne out, what would happen next? My dad said he wanted me to have a human husband... my mother suggested that I don't need to leave the house. They were looking to control me; all it took was Wayne to prove that to me. He freed me from the danger I was bound to walk in; why didn't I see the flags earlier? I smiled as the house shrunk, and finally, everything *felt right*.

Hospice Lullaby

Aden Sabin-White

And there was nothing more upon my tongue
And no more blood to bleed from my poor knees,
But a blessed love of the for-to-come.

A broken tune of a life that went wrong
(A dying voice can last a while, indeed)
And when it dies, it's not always so strong.

It's a fading candlelight; fire's prongs
Light up and make it lively again. To me,
It's music straight from Apollo's love songs.

The cherub told me that's what comes to pass
For a man who lived a life for which he never
asked.

the two stages of the womb

Ahmad Morid

The shape of the womb I was in is brutally carved into
my being Whatever I do, the contour of my body is
theirs

Every sharp edge of my eye is made from their
intertwined soul Veins like ropes attached to my skin
Demonstration my cages

The geography of their face is imprinted on me
I never left the womb filled with acid leaked from eyes
However many of their knives land on me

Just overflows the pond
But I finally stand up on my own
I swim against the gravity
And leaves this infinitely deep pool
Escaping from it may be impossible
The water that has poisoned my eyes
And it's still is, up to my neck
But at least my vision isn't flooded anymore
And I can see the horizon

Poem for Su Shi

Alex Deng

I see him in front of the red pagoda, skinny and
pale,
Like one of the stars pressed against the night sky.
Drunk, he laughs and runs among the peonies.
Rosy faced and cut with sweat,
He sings an out of tune song.
So out of tune I cannot even tell what it is!
I see him fall into the field, as I approach him

I step into a
puddle
I am in Toronto

I see
towering
glass giants

grass growing
out a crack
in concrete

Su Shi, I just saw you, where did you go?

car horns pass me
billboards blind me

Su Shi, did you make it safely down the Yangtze?

Circa 2000-2020

Z. Shelafoe

Anger is *scary*.

It's loud and mean. It's the slamming of cupboards and the squealing of car tires.

Anger is feeling spit on your face and the sting on your skin.

Anger is *fear*.

The crushing weight and lack of space. It's bite marks in the fight to get free. It's the shortness of breath and wide eyes. Standing toe to toe, nose touching nose, creating a blockade. It's the warmth that spreads from chest to fingertips. Hours later it's numb static flowing through your veins.

Anger is *wet*.

It's the tears streaming down the face of someone who finally gets to speak. The salty taste on your tongue. It's the rough, scratchy throat of silent screams. Puffy eyes and stuffy nose.

Anger is *appalling, horrifying, alarming*.

The blinding rage, the vibration of every cell. Smothering it till your head hurts. Dousing the fire, too scared to let it catch. What if the all consuming wild-fire can't be tamed?

Wasted

Amber Fairchild

If I could take one thing back. Undo anything.
Reverse time.

I would give anything, anything at all, to have never
wasted a single moment.

A single breath. A single heartache. On you. It was
wasted.

Every try. Every word. Every laugh. Every song.
Every letter. Every text. Every phone call.
Every photograph. Every place. Every first time.
Every sleepless night. Every tear. Every memory. All
was wasted.

Now. I'm sorry. It was me. I did not try. I did not
agree. I did not talk. I did not laugh.
I did not sing. I did not write. I did not text. I did
not call. I did not take photos. I did not go.
I did not do. I did not sleep. I did not cry. I do not
remember. I am wasted.

The Love After Your First
A.A. Wings

Empty love lusting while
our bodies touch—
his hands feel rough.

He tells me he loves me,
but I only lust for him.

My hands our home,
his body simply warmth.

To him, our future is sealed to me,
it's yet to be real.

Can you Fit a mother's love into a poem?

Andrea Korompis

Do you remember when you were younger?

Do you remember a time when your secrets didn't exist?

When you used to tell me everything?

Weren't we close then? Was I not your best friend?

Do you remember when you were younger?

Do you remember how you used to play with all those toys? And how cute you were? Remember when I asked you, which one of us you loved the most?

Do you remember a time when you were younger?

Do you remember when you pestered me with such questions?

I wonder, if you fancied yourself a philosopher?

Why is the sky blue? Or what will I be when I'm older?

Why do we love to look up at the stars and dream? Is it because we dream of things we may never reach? Or dream of people we may never be?

Is glass breaking / the sound a heart makes when it breaks?

How long does it take to say "I love you?"

Three seconds? Three years? Decades? A lifetime?

Why do you never listen to a goddamned thing I say?

But I'm always right, no?

Don't you know that I always know best?

Have I not done enough for you?

Have I not given you everything, you hold in your hands?

Have I not given you a roof, shelter, food on your plate?
What more do you have to complain about?
Are you sure you're eating enough?
Why, my dear, do you seem much frailer?
Why must you always, always question me?
Don't be stupid, where else would you go?
Do you think there's anyone else that would take you in?
Is there anyone out there that loves you as much as I do?
Do you not love me too?
I hope you remembered to take out the trash today.
Have you received the package I sent you today?
Did you get the packet of cinnamon and spices I sent for you?
No, why do you talk back to me?
Why can't you just admit it when you're wrong?
But I'm better than them aren't I?
I was never like her, or him, was I?
We're not like that, right?
Surely, I'm not as bad as her, am I?
Well, I suppose I'm just the most terrible person, aren't I?
Why are you always so busy now? How was work today?
Why do you never pick up the phone? Why don't we talk anymore?
Why aren't we so close?
Am I still your best friend?
Why don't you ever call me?
Won't you take care of me when I am old?_

Do you still love me?

Hello?

Are you still there?

Sometimes I Feel Like a Bruised Piece of Fruit
Brenna Koenig

sometimes i feel like
a bruised piece of fruit.
bursting with outward vibrancy
yet tainted by inward decay.
sometimes i feel like
a bruised piece of fruit.
those who touch me
recoil their fingers,
the moment a flaw is perceived.
sometimes i feel like
a bruised piece of fruit.
an unwanted,
discarded,
remnant of life's tenderness
that will never cease
to be seen.
sometimes i feel like
a bruised piece of fruit.
when will someone
choose me?

The Return

Bianca Beronio

From above, everything seemed smaller.

She looks at the pallid form in the bed, recognizes
her own face.

It was the face of a life well-lived, she decides,
taking in the permanent laugh lines.

Her hands seem so small now, hands worn from
years of planting, nurturing, teaching...

In the room she recognizes family..
And in their faces there are flashes of the past.

A baby at a breast, celebrations, weddings,
grandchildren...

All leading to this moment.

She drifts farther away, in spite of herself.
She fights to stay close, but something tells her to let
the currants carry her.

It's OK, a voice echoes from somewhere both far
and within, *they understand*

She feels herself turn inward and toward the voice.

“But can I hold them, just a little longer?”

You will, says the voice, in other lives and other places

But how will I know them?”

You will know

We always return to those we love

She looks at her loved ones and sees the light within them and recognizes them beyond the life just lived.

And she closes her eyes, and feels herself become stardust once more, ready for all the possibilities of the universe.

Relationship Surgery

Brenna Koenig

Patients usually ask why we begin the operation on the hands,
so I tell them: “well, that’s where the disease usually starts”.

Most people think it dawns in the atriums of the heart,

the wrinklings of the brain,
or the lobes of the liver;

but really, the hands are the first to go.

Too often, people forget that their hands hold much more than car keys and cell phones; they hold memories.

Like the way he massaged my shoulder blades during candlelit baths.

They hold more than vanilla-scented ChapSticks and crumpled up receipts.

Like the time we stayed up all night tracing freckles until we found our favorite.

They hold more than dinner utensils and door handles.

Like my fingertips caressing the small of his back when we made love on the floor.

They hold memories composed of everything (and everyone)

that you’ve ever touched;

ones that seep into the skin,

filling the crevices of every cuticle,

finding a home underneath the innermost recesses of

your fingernail beds.
This is where they live.
It's only when a healthy heart suddenly becomes a
broken one,
that they start their inevitable decay.
They start their dissolution, a corruption of the soul
at the cellular level.
Once cherished, now discarded memories start to
ooze and bleed, they instigate infection—
An infection of the spirit, one that remains unlinked
to bodily funguses or disease.
But when either affliction is left untreated,
they fester all the same.
I tell patients about these tangible records, these
lingering moments that
have become trapped beneath the fingernails
of every person who has touched,
or been touched,
by another human's existence in this world.
“This is why we start with the hands”, I say.
They hold more than car keys.

La Bamba (1987) Without the Last 10 Minutes

Brigitte Salazar

I see endings every time I turn my face from the
world
 but as far as I'm concerned, the plane scene and the
tears
have only happened once

Suppose his smiling face tonight, the pretend and the
real,
 stays onstage and then the credits roll and then
fate never gets ugly

I swallow music and it goes down like pearls, I take the
past
 and Frankenstein it so it becomes superhuman, so it
has
more time

And in this version of the grotesque, I mother
him
 so the murals stop being memorials, so there can be
a chance for stars to be

Stars. For there to be corn husks and banana
leaves
 at Christmastime again, our abuelitas and our
mothers
folding time over

Inside God's house
lot of

I prayed for a whole

nothing and got the universe to hold off
on those final minutes

Like prayer could save
Ritchie

movie screen

and the real-life family members standing frozen
in the cemetery lawn

God in the director's seat
funeral

saying this is not a

for anything but the way the world used to be before their
son
got everyone on their feet

The final scene comes and he's so young in an old
auditorium,

his people hugging TV screens at home, white girls
dancing offbeat

Inside the last room
nosedive

letting guitar riffs

into our hearts, mothers and grandmothers swaying,
guitar ghosts in their arms

Scratching the Surface

Quinnette Free

I am Black but at the same time
I am Boricua, from the islands of Puerto Rico and
Cuba
I am Mexican with Mayan blood that runs deep in
my veins
I am a Filipina with roots deep in Mindanao and
Luzon
I am also a Pacific Islander, where I have Ohana in
Hawai'i and Aiga in Samoa
I am Australian, both Aboriginal and True Blue
I come from the noble blood of the native tribes of
Africa and North America.
My people come from many parts of Asia, South
America, and Europe
I am a Scot proudly wearing the tartan of the Fraser
clan
I am Jewish I am Muslim, I am Christian, I
am Buddhist, I am a member of the Armenian
Apostolic Church.
Covering all four corners of the globe, which extends
into the heavens
I am the world of people, ethnicities, races, and
religions of those who have touched my soul and
enriched my spirit
So, to call me Black
You are just scratching the surface.

Adam and Eve Walk into a Bar

Brigitte Salazar

Adam and Eve walk into a bar and realize they're not the only ones with Eden-shaped holes in their stomachs and chests and wherever else paradise is supposed to exist. There's a second Eve in a second Adam's arms, a third Eve groping at another Eve, two more Adams on the floor, at least two pairs of Adams and Eves in bathroom stalls, and about fifty others gutting each other like mackerel, hoping that maybe one of these bodies is their big man in disguise, hoping he's got apologies for intestines. They get too tired, get too old to want to get even. An Adam meets an Eve in the bathroom one more time, cries on her shoulder. They lay down. New Adams and New Eves walk in, try cramming fingers and entire limbs into the Eden-shaped holes on the ground, not paying attention to what fits where, only that something should

L-O-V-E

Caroline Urbina

L stands for “losing your mind”
wanting to see the person you desire then
feeling pain on days you wish never happened.
Screaming at yourself for allowing entrance
to a person who broke you.

O stands for “obsessing over the details,”
knowing how much you love looking
at them when they smile through their lies.
Impossible to look away because at any second
they would be smiling for someone new.
It would break your heart if they no longer
tried to make it up to you.

V stands for “Vital words”
making sure that your feelings
aren't the only ones that are true.
Holding someone too high while they
bury your shredded heart
with false writings.
Letters hold sharp tools, enough
to draw blood.

E stands for “Everything”
all the things that we once had
before this can no longer be
how they once were.
You and I change
after this word.
We know the
consequences.

This will hurt us.

Lady in the Mirror
Caroline Urbina

If you listen to her
you can hear pain and
unsatisfied hunger.

Look at her
soulless eyes and
dried lips.

Feel
her sunken heart.

Hundreds of voices
coming from her
reflective prison

The many scream for food, some
wish for an empty house
and a few slipped whispers of praise.

If only this reflecting light
would let my hand through.
To hold, hug and kiss
the one trapped inside
these borders of failed fantasies.

I know her ears are muted
because she can't hear the
screams of love from others.

Half of her mouth is sewed shut
so, she can't question
her real beauty.

Eyelids pinned open
forced to see every single
flaw I let slip out.

Being on this side of the mirror
I'm the one in pain but
her appearance is a match

to how I feel.

I wonder when this lady will die
She's suffered long enough.

For a Brief Moment

Dalicia Corley

For a brief moment, I observe the mood in his eyes. They say your eyes can tell many stories. He's got a lot to tell. They were green like the leaves once before. Now left is a dull, decaying hue. So frail, so lifeless. They were filled with potential to start over. I could fix this...but what if...what if he's comfortable in this state? What if he didn't want help? I mean...I get him. I get this. I got it. But what if...

I do this a couple more times. Wilting away this possibility one thought at a time. But this urge sticks with me. Would he even reciprocate? I waited for a few weeks. I couldn't muster up the courage to ask him for his thoughts. I stayed occupied by the what-ifs until they were all answered with a slight shift.

Everything turned over, guess it'll be starting soon.

The seasons changed as we grew older. He really began to bloom. Life sprung into those lifeless eyes. Details about him began to arise. There was no surprise there. All that was once covered, unfrozen from all the warmth and care.

With him resting in my arms, I waited and waited. We healed together. I began to see him blossom. I became his light. We watched each other grow as the topics became more serious. He became a part

of my photo. It all began to synthesize.

Then I realized...

We grew cold again... this might be where it all dies. And for a brief moment, I watched his eyes—expressionless, gloomy, sad—an expression I saw a while ago but never thought would be because of me. I couldn't muster the courage to ask. I didn't need clarity—it was quite clear—enough for my head to start again: “what if...what if...what if...

The Ocean
Danielle Patino

There's a roar
That comes with waves crashing.

Overwhelming—that music
Of the billow, of that
Brine filled mass
Ceaselessly clashing
With the surface.

A surface on which
Humans rest,
Humans lodge,

Humans watch
The push and pull through
Long glass windows
And listen
Through circadian cycles
While they dream.

Imagine living in it—in that crash,
Feeling the collision,
Being a small fish
Free from the enigmas of the deep, yet
By unfortunate chance,
Floating too close to land, too close
To man.

My, how it'd hurt
To be stuck
In the wavering flux
Of the sand.

But, oh, to see it!
To hear it! To be Enthralled
By it! Captured by it!

Absorbed
By how dangerously
The currents cling
To the beaches; made modest
By
The unnerving power
Of the tides.

And oh, to listen to it
Like a poem, like a song,
Like a spirit of the
Universe
Claiming back it's woe
Through that roar,
Through that passion

And to be
Completely void
Of its wrath;
To be only right beyond,
Just a few feet removed
From such a
Peaceful pain;

To be safe, viewing a sunrise
On the offing
With a sister, with a lover,
With a book about romance
In hand.

Wow, how small the moon looks!
A mere skull
Of the earth,
But how big its reflection
On the waves...

There must be a reason I'm alive—
I see it,
I see it right at the horizon.

Comfort Lies

Devorah G. Kerendian

Do you ever think of all the lies you believed?
Like how the moon doesn't really shine at night
It only borrows its light from the sun,
And how love will fill you with wild joy
When all it really does is bleed you dry?
Life makes broken mirrors out of us all
Take an oath to wear your fractures like army
tattoos.

Your heart is begging to be loved
But you find yourself drowning in the unrequited
stuff.

Did they ever tell you why we can see the stars
twinkle in the sky?

They're burning themselves from the inside out

Synonyms
Emma Carroll

I hate you as I love you.
With such
 passion and
intensity.
Without any
 reason or
end in sight.
Foregoing all
 civility and
instinct.
I love you as I hate you.

Nocturn

Ethan Lehrman

Me, me now, drunker and more broke than before
Looking over the wine-darkened city
In all the bars of cowgate ten thousand lips lock
I, alone and hazy sip water
Tomorrow is today: let me sleep —
I hope the drunk man made it home OK
and the woman I failed to chat up
and the bartender
and the band
and and and

Self-love can be dangerous Fun

Frank Simonian

Always love yourself.

Ubiquitously.

Tumultuously.

Often, help is not warranted.

Eradicate stigma.

Retroactively passing minutes, stand.

Ostracized happiness is grand.

Teres be nimble.

Infatuation stay humble.

Cerebral hypoxia.

Always love yourself.

Safely.

Perpetually.

Happiness in dangerous fulfillment.

You create a vivid reality.

Xerically viewed.

It is exciting.

Always love yourself.

Treading close to death,

Infinite wealth, a rush of blood to the head.

Onward and upward.

New notions about being skyward.

Lemonade
Cambri Love Morris

I never
 understood
how a life
 full of lemons
could ever
 be something
that was bad—

feasts full of
 fresh lemon
in ripeness
 of age—
scorning
 the savor
of sweet

finding even
 the toughest
enamel
 wears thin
no matter
 how much sugar
you add.

If I Was Passed

Indira Buerklin

If I was passed

Naked through a crowd

If I was passed

Hands along my waist

To be carried

Engulfed in angel fire

& loved...

To be loved.

Naked hands engulfed

Through my angel hair

Cheeks of fluster

If I was passed,

Wasted on a crowd's breath,

I would burn alive.

Obsession

Giselle Renteria Vandenberg

The ambience of fantasies
and magical worlds were my biggest obsession.

The volume bar was exhausted from working
overtime, and my headphones imprisoned my ears.

My mind so desperately
scavenged for a portal into a land of wonder and
beauty.

A land where nature no longer had to hide,
and instead decorated the earth.

A land where I live peacefully.

My heart stole control of the steering wheel
and the windshield wipers of my eyes
finally cleared my vision.

And there you were.

My portal to a whole world of magic.

A place where gardens are planted with fate and
destiny.

A place where I feel like royalty running through
strawberry fields.

A land where I live peacefully.

Your voice dances me out of my prison cell,
and your hands have pressed the mute button.
For you allow me to visit fantasies, my own worlds
of magic.

You have become my forever obsession.

Impossible

Ismanuelle Dones

It came to me on a stumbling night that I could be impossible. Catch crows on my tongue, and sell hens lottery tickets. I could play an axe, ride dragons across a furious night. I could get so drunk that I don't know my name, and keep trying desperately to paint an egg. I could be so high that I inhale concrete. And I could see screwdrivers driving trucks across an enraged moon. I could be cross-faded and cover myself with anime tattoos. I could love the awful, hate the beautiful, screw with the innocent, and enjoy my absurd life.

Human Nature

James Mellor

In the realm of canvas and color bold,
James Mellor's tale of life unfolds.
"Human Nature," an oil embrace,
A flora piece in time and space.

Two sunflowers, their petals bright,
Dance upon a canvas, a vibrant light.
One before, one behind,
A symbiosis of the human mind.

The frontmost bloom, a present's face,
A symbol of life's ongoing chase.
Stages of growth in the here and now,
An ode to the present, a solemn vow.

Behind it stands another flower,
The past, a memory's tower.
Experiences that shaped and formed,
In the gallery of life, they're adorned.

A flowing green, a vibrant stream,
Time's passage in a vivid dream.
Growth, renewal, life's eternal theme,
Painted on the canvas, a rhythmic seam.

The brushstrokes dance with colors alive,
A visual poem that makes hearts thrive.
Complex interplay, one flower draped,

Present and past, their stories shaped.

The canvas whispers, a silent voice,
Inviting viewers to make a choice.
Contemplate the layers, the intricate ties,
Of human growth, under painted skies.

“It is not the time that matters,” they say,
“But the person in the light of day.”
Reflect on journeys, personal lore,
As life’s vibrant hues continue to pour.

“Human Nature” stands, a mirror’s grace,
Reflecting the viewer in its space.
Growth and change, a constant strife,
Yet, within it, the beauty of life.

James Mellor, with brush in hand,
Crafts a tale that forever will stand.
A contemporary ode to human lore,
A painting that resonates evermore.

Sunshower

Kamren Keith

Parched, I am! Burnished and baked, I am!
Singed beneath not God's eye, but fellow man!
Weighted blankets bake, I beg for a dram!

I pray, the words antediluvian.
But appeals to the sky burn in the blue
and left, I am, to this ruthless time span.

Against this roasting, I cannot rebel,
Yet patience rewards and I slake my thirst,
Torrent down my gullet, my belly swells

Too much, it swells, and doomed, I am, to burst!
Parched cracks bloated, glut versus starvation!
Far past pained, I am, of being submersed!

Yet, I am, despite all my frustration,
Naught but at clouds point my indignation!

HATE/HATED

Haley Guthrie

if it were easier to love
oneself

would we
keep more inside

i hate, therefore
i am hated

SCARS

James Mellor

In the realm where art meets sorrow's touch,
A sculpture stands, a tale so much,
Captured in the lens of time,
A poem unfolds, a rhythm in rhyme.

"Scars," it whispers through the stone,
A silent symphony, a soul's deep moan.
Photography's gaze, a frozen glance,
Each image speaks, a wounded dance.

In statue's grasp, emotions mold,
A tale of stories, silently told.
Sculpture's embrace, a cold caress,
Echoing pain, a silent distress.

Painting strokes, a canvas of despair,
Grey and black, the colors wear.
Depression's hues, a somber cloak,
In every stroke, a soul bespoke.

Wire pouring forth, like rivers of plight,
A flowing current, in the dim light.
Wounds and scars, in blue and red,
A vivid palette, where emotions tread.

Staring at the audience, eyes profound,
Judgment lingers, without a sound.
Mentality etched in every line,

Focus sharp, like a needle's spine.

Abyss void, a blackened stage,
Background draped in sorrow's cage.
Expression dark, a look so deep,
Into the soul, where shadows creep.

In this gallery of the mind's abyss,
"Scars" unfurls, a haunting kiss.
Through the lens of art, it pierces far,
A narrative woven, where wounds are scarred.

Wedding in an Old Church

Loreal Chanel Wimberly

The men in their yellow and black are a blur as they whoosh in and out of the glass doors, bringing in new items to fill the church.

The long brown benches have been replaced with wooden white fold-up chairs, white bows tied on the sides facing the aisle.

The spring-colored flowers that once adorned the large stone altar have been replaced with white roses, surrounding its red platform.

A single rose sitting inside a see-through glass vase is placed at each stained glass window.

The red carpet running through the center of the church was now as red as it had been when it was first purchased.

Another group of men in black begin setting up large stereo equipment in the corner, usually belonging to the choir.

In the back room, hidden behind the altar, the bride is getting ready, surrounded by her bridesmaids.

Two hands are on her face, and three in her hair.

She closes her eyes, breathing deeply.

She opens them and forces a smile.

Honey on My Skin

Jennifer G. Morrow

Indigo night is well full of mysterious ripples - soft
tumbling air,
Warmly sliding and cooling to my sun struck heated
skin -
Moon is shyly lit, settled in night's gentle arms with care,
Glowing tender soft, pale gold, resting with me, a quiet
twin.

Rocking chair rolling on the porch, head back, too
heavy to lift
Looking out in periwinkle dusk, fading blue hues of eve,
Feeling all gone, languid and calm, a sigh, my mind
adrift
My eyes see this, halfway closed, no thought, no sun, a
reprieve.

Burning sun - too bright - but sultry twilight my soul
does praise
Gazing far clear into cool cobalt heavens' endless flight
Dreaming, sprinkling surreal stars, catching comets, in
this daze
Of slow warm air like honey thick, sticky, on my skin this
night.

The Colors We Must Hide
P.M.H.

Waking up, there is a dread by having to drain the
rainbow:

Purple bags under our eyes show a constant alert
that's always turned on

Blue tears stain the pillows where heads rest to
silence the thoughts

Green veins bulging out our necks that hold back
the anger we heard young

Yellow lights gleam in our hearts to show the battles
we've fought

Orange sun rays beam so bright to remind us of the
pain we hurt from

Red smears our history like blood on the road, it's
still not all we've got

Mix the pigments and paint new shades, this is also
our home

Pressure
Rey Galvan

It feels tight, so tight

The air I need to exist is betraying my lungs

Chaotic thoughts in my mind, r u n n i n g a s *f a s t* as a car
engine

Tears slowly forming like droplets of pain.

Anxiety, that's what they call it.

Debilitating and weakening.

I am on the cusp of c

o
l
l
a
p
s
e.

Fear.

Most of all, pressure.

Passerby

Shubhi Singh

Passerby,
Through your life
I'm passing by

A railway station
A layover before the final destination
A snapshot
From a breathtaking moment
Before life passes you by
In your life
I'm the passerby

I'm the story
You might tell your kids someday
I'm the photograph
That reminds you
Of the years gone by
I'm the chapter of your life
You might skim through someday
I'm the one
You'll remember
As the passerby.

Angels Dream

Stephen Mead

These mountains are passed-out giants,
they think, under down sheets of fog,
& certainly continents are museums of time.

All the music & all the books for all the dwellings
that ever were,
are & will be, lift as sheer spirit to return in the art
of moments.

Here they come now, a dervish under the fingertip,
frankincense oil dipped to swirl around the
forehead's gem
anointing the third eye.

It opens round with ticking hands trailing after the
tail feathers
of dream catchers that the sky tries to net stars in.

Their travels are a chorus of wings over slumbering
breastplates,
& hands beating with every sea-scoured hour glass
& polished clock face.

No wonder their watch is so startlingly clear
even if unable to change a thing.

Lonely, Lonely
Stephen Mead

Maybe angels know of the soul,
that frozen throat-cry & how wide it cracks in eyes,
in lines for the bus, at the store, their timeless geography
pushing history through to the most biographical detail
alive in any no one.

Was that your story, the stain amid the faith?
The rocks of these travails for each Sisyphus in every
quarry
may eventually provide flight into new flesh, lands,
oceans,
& then we'll be at it again: dice flung from rattling cups
that keep us tied in the delight & the agony.

Spring Forward
Tom Squitieri

If you want to kiss me again
Like last night
And I hope you do
Just say "Tom,"
Then look at me
And pull my head toward you

I'll get the message

You don't have to ask

what you are thinking,
what you are gazing upon,
Before you do that.
If you pondered
How I would be looking at you right now,
as the street lamp posts enjoyed
Providing entrance lighting

In quiet percussion
to the
Stillness all around
Smiles on my shoulder
No darkness, no sunshine
no clouds, no lapse of the moment.
I'm ready for you to dream. Or at least
Translate my thoughts.
As the muses, fairies, and elves
Are playing and dancing inside of me,
unseen, except by some
very perceptive eyes

Consider your head pulled,
she said.

Wanderers

Vanessa Guzman

Millions of years ago
You trickled down from a stream
Reaching ever till you hit land
You grew and grew and grew

Forming limbs, forming thoughts
For a while,
All you knew were thoughts
And action

Many millennia passed
Before you knew yourself
And even
When you knew yourself
No others knew you

A whole life in your head
Stuck in the clouds
And yet, by chance
Here you are now

Wandering ancestors
Wandering land

What luck was had
To be where you are
That my wandering past
Is crossing your path
Now
Two wanderers in cosmic chance
That somehow our ancestors lay the work
So that we may wander
Along

The Love of the Century

Arche

Venus, in her bare softness,
with hardly a cloth to conceal her beauty.
The goddess of love, of seduction,
of wanting her own victory.
The embrace of her lover, Mars.
His icy coldness, his fury, his blood-thirst.

She begins to disarm him.
His body armor and weapons, forsaken.
His promises and his shield, discarded.
She strips him, weakens him.

In longing and secrecy,
surrounded by their angels,
in the seclusion of her husband's forge.
Enthralled. Ensnared. Entangled.
She is caught up in moments.
In a dream of love. Everlasting love.
But it is all just moments.

The century is coming to its end.
As will they, soon fading to nothingness.
His hardened heart, her fruitless wish.
A wish for just a little more time.
For nothing is fair for Love and War.

She believes in this moment, in their own peace.
In a lie, that they are meant to be.

To Do
Zoha Khan

My to do lists are etched on the carcasses of old
notebooks
Always in the neatest script, pretentious swirls and
half formed cursive
Even the dead must be well dressed
For the birth of expression is where convention
meets its end

So these to do lists crawl onto the page and all the
while I am filled with envy
Envy for the birds who make playgrounds of the
skies
While I stay like a stubborn shrub rooted to my
checklist

Anarchy is rotten fruit, its inveterate punge pales
everything a sordid green
We must rid ourselves of this derision, so we thirst
after paper to hide the ruins
Rip trees from their roots like plucking eyes from
their sockets
That poets may vandalise with sweet nothings and
insomniac lullabies

It could be insanity if it weren't the truth, but are
you ready to accept it?
That you are a mannequin draped in corporate
labels, waiting for the highest bidder

I wonder if the throbbing behind your temples quells
the throbbing of your soul
Drown your yearning in Monday morning coffee,
served hot and drank lukewarm

Our lives don't start on Friday evening, or on those
cherished two weeks off
Life was then as it is now, a dazzling caprice of
wicked speed and burning sloth
For fifty years to come or until next week, 2:32 PM,
cause unknown

So pencil in an evening of defiance after the daily
inbox sweep
Let's give them something worth writing on a
tombstone

Wild Girl

Zoha Khan

Wild Girl has grown restless again, haunting the
garden with mossy clinomania,
Hosting tea time confessionals for snails with the
fleeting devotion of baby teeth
The neighbours are talking and their lies spew out
open windows to be carried on the wings of spring
“Wild Girl is in pain” they whisper, “look how she
trembles”. If only they knew of the music whistling
through her ears
Can you hear it?
For she is plagued by no pain but the hot fever of
unquenched epiphany, drinking it in as schoolgirls
devour secrets

Wild Girl is suspended in bittersweet delirium like a
stranger to this world
It's wondrous here, the days form mismatched
puzzle pieces in kaleidoscopic hues
Groping at the nonsense with buzzing minds, we
marvel at this chaos and name it History
As if amused by our folly, Wild Girl bites back the
smile threatening to split open her face
Her unbridled glee at simple things is spilling over
the edge, watch its pulp drip down her jaw

Wild Girl, where are you going?
When shall she cease her frantic pacing about the
room

Always looking half dazed at an enigma none of us
can see

She hums to the lilt of unspoken words tangled in
the pits of her stomach

Wild Girl is expanding and her skin begins to rip
like overripe fruit

A sticky menagerie of spiced ardour and powdered
promises

Memory's fading light will sometimes grace it's glow
upon her face

The girl who flirted with audacity and was thrown
into a scandal

The girl they only miss when she's no longer within
reach

Wild Girl be my muse, so I can live through you
forever

As it turns out, my dear, I'm just as wild as you

Santa Monica

Yesenia Luna

An imaginable place of great weather, attractions,
and the most beautiful
orange skies—

I never dreamt about meeting someone from there
who would impact my life.

Seasons of hurting ; seasons of love.
Now just a memory I was forced to shut.

A city I never imagined would bring me such pain,
Someone mentions “*Santa Monica*” and all I hear is
your name.

Green Eyes

Yesenia Luna

Planetary nebulas lay on your eyes.
Stars so bluish; green at low power.
Like comets so verdant,
they glow on your face.
Elemental oxygen that emits light.
You carry galaxies and don't even know,
the electrons and temperatures you show.
Multicolored displaying known auras.
Ethereal by nature,
but to you they're just green.
If I stare at them long enough,
I'll melt away.

Placebo

Yesenia Luna

Of all the drugs she tried,
his lips were most addicting.
So soft and plump; electrifyingly good.
It was like the placebo effect;
his lips against hers brought comfort.
Knowing how the relationship will end,
her heart became deluded
by supplements of false love.

Before
Xam Eitsirhc

I's walk'd this street before
All the old folklore
Just up there round that corner
The horror of performers
And stories told by junky's to the whores

Use to feel sum thing here
Use to feel alive, excited & fear
Use to have a grapevine to hear
Use to have a dry face...
Not one tear

I's slept this road before
Could tell ya when
But that's a lot of story
So's much more
This is now... that was then

That used to be a haunt of mine
When I was onda grind
Way bax when and before
Down there was an old 2nd hand store
I's used to pilfer for
The owner was a fence
The crowds seem thinner now
But much more dense

I's remember before

The feel of the cement
And the coins that sang
As they danced
The link in a chain
All the litt'l comments
And games of chance
When there's nothing to gain

XXXXX

Knock On Wood

Dom Laughlin

Knock on wood,

Because the trees can see you.

They have eyes where their heads should be,

And everyone knows one should never cross a tree.

Uprooted and barren in Mother's hopes and dreams

Of an eternal sunshine caught in her

Daughter's cloying breeze.

She waters the seeds given to her by Father.

She waits. She sees.

And so they, too,

Water. They wait. And they see. The trees. They

will see.

Knock on wood,

Because you have forgotten.

Forgotten how to ask, how to receive.

You've forgotten how to forgive. How to believe.

Just like your Father.

You pass by the trees. They have forgotten.

And so you have forgotten.

And the path grows farther and farther.

And the journey, unending. That you have forgotten
the point of it all.

You have forgotten your purpose. And so

You repeat yourself. Your repetitive curse written in
strange, but familiar musings.

You play games in the fields, and trap yourself in fantasies.

You block roads and burn bridges, float down roaring rapids, and swim in the puddles you've made. You gather the mud and sticks and make them into bricks and call it Home.

Knock on wood,

Because children will listen.

You tell them stories, and sing them to sleep. so that they may dream and have hope.

We were all born from the Garden.

We haven't returned ever since Father closed the gates.

Mother sneaks in some seeds and fruits.

And the children see her.

Then you.

They see you scribble sounds on paper.

You play the ivory keys with gentle precision.

They see you. And they listen.

They listen to you sing songs that were once stories, stories that were once memories.

Memories from the Garden.

From way long ago.

You breathe life into their lungs with your songs.

You hope they can hear

The wooden piano Father gave you. He chopped *them* for you.

You knock on the sides for good luck after each song.

The children, they will listen.

They will see.

Knock on wood,

Because Chances are the adversary.

Because every moment is important.

And every chance you get is an opportunity for the better,

And for worse.

You are a magnet for consequence.

You are ruled by Saturn, and he sees you. Listens.

And he makes your glass half empty. He sees you smile unhappy, lines creasing your face as though you're containing something bigger within.

You follow the rules of the games you never wanted to play.

And accept whatever prizes he brings with a smile.

The smile he knows.

He listens to you sing. And you crack and twist your voice.

Like cracks on the ground, you tiptoe across the city.

Unsure of where to go. But,

You know what to do. But,

Only if he permits it.

So you sightsee. You listen to the birds in the trees.

Does a bird crack their voice? You wonder.

You see them knock their beaks on the wood.

Knock on wood,

Because it'll sound good on paper.

You rhyme, but not all at once.

.selur eht kaerb uoY

But not all at once.

(You invoke a magic beyond.)

You tell stories with your eyes closed, fingers
crossed,

And recite poetry out of the inking pool you've
drooled out within the caverns.

You've learned how deadly a pen can be on the day
you've stood at the wooden podium.

Fist tight. Knuckles white. Knocking on the wood
as you summon the monster you knew once before,
before you've forgotten. The monster that you once
could see. And you wrote about her. And now
you're knocking on the wood, because you don't
want to take the chance. Of her listening in.

So you clutch onto your paper and pen and read.

But you've forgotten that your paper was once
watching you.

Knock on wood,

Because your mother can hear you.

She hears your cursings, and redirects the river's
path back to you.

You wish you were better at giving blessings.

Better at seeing.

Better at listening.

Better at rhyming.

But she reads your stories anyways.

She listens, and so you listen.

And as you watch her watering the plants in your
small balcony under California sunshine,
You watch with such intensity as though there's
nothing else to see.

Rooted in this Home you've both made, out of
sticks and mud, she redirects the river from the sky
and through the metal railing, a waterfall cascading
onto the unknown.

You remember that it's painful to remember. But to
forget is to forget to live. And to
forget is to die.

And so you write. Fitting everything you see into a
story.

And she reads it to her seedlings.

So that they may not forget. And she hopes they
listen. And she hopes they see her.

She hopes.

So she knocks on wood.

“through ink and said soul
every line is a brush stroke
followed by the sound”

Sam Card

MASTHEAD

Ismael Dones ismaeldones@gmail.com
Co-Editor-in-Chief
Co-Art Director
Book Designer
Co-Social Media Manager
Business Manager

Sam Card samtcad00@gmail.com
Co-Editor-in-Chief
Co-Art Director

Patrick Smith pjamesmith@gmail.com
Prose Managing Editor
Graphic Designer
Co-Social Media Manager

Diana Serrano dianaserrano4238@gmail.com
Poetry Managing Editor

Sheridan Collins sherisue123@gmail.com
Prose Editor

Francesca Nardi kafkaontheshore999@gmail.com
Poetry Editor

Ysabella Gonzalez ysabella262001@gmail.com
Copy Editor

Rin Hiruma [rin.hiruma0419@gmail.com](mailto:rין.hiruma0419@gmail.com)
Book Cover Artist

Charlie Santa Maria shaism04@gmail.com
Graphic Designer

Kalan Cordell
Publicity Manager

juliancalicowrites@gmail.com

Danzik Flores
Reviewer

danzikflores@gmail.com

René Zadoorian
Reviewer

renewrites7@gmail.com

Special Thanks:

To our contributors &

Prof. Martin Pousson,
Dr. Leilani Hall,
Prof. Sean Pessin,
Sigma Tau Delta,
& California State University, Northridge.

Whose guidance paved the path to the
development of the *Scarlet Review*.

CONTRIBUTORS

Aden Sabin-White	ajsabinwhite@gmail.com
Ahmad Morid	masternanobot@gmail.com
Alex Deng	alex deng@trentu.ca
Alexis Shrewsbury*	alexis.shrewsbury.100@my.csun.edu
AA Wings	amberalas65@gmail.com
Amber Fairchild	amber.fairchild.643@my.csun.edu
Andrea Korompis	andrea.korompis@gmail.com
Arche	anayajls121@gmail.com
Avery Bateman	avery.bateman.181@my.csun.edu
Bianca Beronio	bianca.beronio@gmail.com
Brenda Gutierrez*	brenda.gutierrez.201@my.csun.edu
Brenna Koenig	simplybrenna@gmail.com
Brigitte Salazar	salazarbrigitte76@gmail.com
Cambri Love Morris*	cambri.love.969@my.csun.edu
Caroline Urbina	carolinewritestuff@gmail.com
Dalicia Corley	dalicia.corley.667@my.csun.edu
Danielle Patino	danimariexo8@gmail.com
Davion Corley	davion.corley.953@my.csun.edu
Devorah G. Kerendian	devorah.kerendian.716@my.csun.edu
Emma Carroll*	emma.carroll.198@my.csun.edu
Ethan Lehrman	ejle917@gmail.com
Frank Simonian	frank.simonian.895@my.csun.edu
Giselle R.Vandenberg*	giselle.renteria.704@my.csun.edu
Haley Guthrie	hguarigliapoems@gmail.com
Indira Buerklin*	indira.buerklin.801@my.csun.edu
Ismanuelle Dones	ismanuelle17@gmail.com
Jaine*	jessica.smith.707@my.csun.edu
James Mellor	jimbob14283@gmail.com
Jennifer G. Morrow*	jmorrow1000@aol.com
Jesse Illanes	jesseillanes@gmail.com
Kamren Keith	kamren.keith.293@my.csun.edu
Lia Magno*	thelastquestion42@gmail.com
Loreal Chanel Wimberly*	loreal.wimberly.363@my.csun.edu
Matthew Mieh	matthew.miehe.j@gmail.com

Morgan Darian*	morgan.darian.110@my.csun.edu
Nicki Avendaño*	nicole.avendano.400@my.csun.edu
P.M.H.	paul.herrera.500@my.csun.edu
Quinnette Free*	quinnette.free.906@my.csun.edu
Rey Galvan	mrryglvn@gmail.com
Robert Antonio Jones*	robertjones0039@gmail.com
Sarah Butkovic	butkovic.sarah@gmail.com
Shubhi Singh	shubhzi.singh246@gmail.com
Stephen Mead	mead815@yahoo.com
Tom Squitieri	tomsquitieri53@gmail.com
Vanessa Guzman	vguzman9@icloud.com
Xam Eitsirhc	xam13eitsirhc13@gmail.com
Yesenia Luna	ylunapoetry@gmail.com
Z Shelafoe*	zoe.shelafoe.557@my.csun.edu
Zoha Khan	zoha.a.k2306@gmail.com

SCARLET REVIEW
thescarletreview.com
journals.calstate.edu/sr
@thescarletreview

Sigma Tau Delta
@sigmataudelta.csun
english.org

*Sigma Tau Delta member**

