

Tidepools



20
21

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EDITORIAL INTERN BIO

Amanda Bucci is an award-winning artist with a lifelong passion for reading, writing, and drawing. She is currently working towards her Associate's for transfer at MiraCosta College. When she's not editing, she can be found daydreaming impossible scenarios, going on adventures with friends, or talking to her many indoor plants.

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MAT 230 CLASS BIO

The MAT 230 Advanced Publishing class is honored to be the first class to design *Tidepools* remotely. Although the pandemic kept us off campus, we were brought together by our shared passion for print design. With this volume, we'd like to acknowledge this life-changing year and pay tribute to thirty-five years of *Tidepools* at MiraCosta College.

AWARDS

FICTION

NO'ÁA'ALVISH KÚT: MY FIRE STORY

SUMMER HERRERA

ESSAY

IT'S THE MOST WONDERFUL TIME OF THE YEAR

MITZI ISHIOKA

POETRY

CALENDAR COVID

HELEN LEINANI HIGHLAND-COSLOW

MORNING QUARANTINE

JOHN SIEBELINK

ART

CRISIS

SUMMER HERRERA

I AM YOU, YOU ARE ME

ESTHER RODRIGUEZ

EDITOR'S NOTE

Dear MiraCostans,

Over the past year, we have been quarantined by a virus and divided by racial violence. The depths of the impacts have been largely ineffable. However, we have seen rise to power the stories and voices of survivors and those who fight in the name of our generation's movements: Black Lives Matter, Stop AAPI Hate, Hate is a Virus . . . Therein lies the power of storytelling to spread awareness, understanding, and acceptance in order to, ideally, break down the walls that have separated us. In that spirit, take care of the stories that our contributors have shared with you, in words and images, as a means of capturing the darkness and light of our lives during a pandemic.

Thank you for reading,
Jade Hidle, Editor-in-Chief

EDITORIAL INTERN'S NOTE

In this issue, *Tidepools* hopes to provide the level of comfort that comes with escapism, while simultaneously remaining cognizant of the world around us and shedding light of the plights at hand. By focusing our theme on the COVID-19 pandemic, we hope to add a level of thoughtfulness and possibility to a seemingly bleak situation. With respect to the loved ones we've lost and the essential workers who continue to risk their lives to keep society both safe and functional, this issue intends to provide an insightful reflection on the state of humanity when encountering such life-altering situations.

Amanda Bucci, Editorial Intern

CONTENTS

10

AMERICAN APOCALYPSE
SHELBY ROSSMAN

12

ALONENESS
NATALIE ABBOTT

13

CRUISING BY
LAUREN ADAMS

14

RUTH
LAUREN ADAMS

59

**SNAPPY DRAGON
SERVES UP SAFETY
AND A MEAN MU SHU**
ROBIN KILRAIN

60

HARLEQUIN
ANNE FLEMING

63

SOCIETY'S DIFFERENCES
ANDREW GARAY

66

COVID MIGRATION
SYDNEY ROSSMAN

15

TIGER STRIPES
ANONYMOUS

19

SONYA
GUITI RAVANBAKSH

20

Q IS FOR QUARANTINE
LORI I. AUSTIN

24

WHERE I'M FROM
MADISYN BRILLO

68

THE LIE
HILLARY G

73

THE SELF PORTRAIT
JENNIFER GLASSFORD

74

**THE PILGRIM'S GUIDE:
HOW TO WALK 500
MILES IN A MONTH**
CAMERON GROGAN

77

LOVE IN QUARANTINE
ESTHER RODRIGUEZ

26

OUR TIME, SEDONA
M. CLAUDIO PEREZ

28

**STRANGERS TO
THEMSELVES**
DANIELLE BUFORD

29

**SOMETIMES IT
TAKES A LOT**
CHRISTOPHER
BURROUGHS

33

**I SHOULD'VE
BEEN A BOY**
TATIANNA CADET-HAYNES

78

**NO'ÁA'ALVISH KÚT:
MY FIRE STORY**
SUMMER HERRERA

84

LOOK AT ME
TATUM SMITH

86

CALENDAR COVID
HELEN LEINANI
HIGHLAND-COSLOW

88

HERE WE GO
HELEN LEINANI
HIGHLAND-COSLOW

36

**DANCE AROUND
THE FIRE**
YEYA MILLAN

37

THE PEDESTAL
GRANT CLOVER

44

**THAT DAY WE PICKED
FLOWERS**
CHRISTINE AMES

45

**WHEN LOOKING IN A
MIRROR HURTS**
SABRINA DUNN

89

SELF PORTRAIT
TATUM PERRY

90

TO THE DECORATIONS
BRENNA HUGHBANKS

92

**REGRETFULLY,
I STILL [XXXX] SO**
ALEXANDRIA HUNT

94

SOLITUDE
SYDNEY ROSSMAN

46

**DADDY BRUSHES
BY ME NOW**
DEBORAH EDWARDS

48

HOME
EMILY MAZZA

50

10,000 HOURS
BROOKE ESPOSITO

51

**SHARING FACES
WITH MY USO**
ABSALOM FESILI

96

A NURSE'S TALE
CHRISTINA INZUNZA

98

AFTERLIFE IS CLOSED
CHRISTINA INZUNZA

101

MINDFUL
YEYA MILLAN

102

**IT'S THE MOST WONDERFUL
TIME OF THE YEAR**
MITZI ISHIOKA

106

IN THE DARK
M. CLAUDIO PEREZ

108

VOLADO
OSCAR JIMINEZ

114

MIA
DAWN LAGMAY

115

**DEATH, MORTALITY,
AND IMMORTALITY**
JENNIFER LEDFORS

146

CRISIS
SUMMER HERRERA

148

THE RIGHT TO KILL
C.J. VANDERLIPE

153

CITY DECONSTRUCTED
CHRISTINE AMES

154

**HOW TO TACKLE LIFE WHEN
YOU ARE WIGGIN' OUT**
SKYLAR VERMAAK

116

**DON'T CALL ME
CHING CHONG**
AMANDA LEE

120

OF FISH AND CONFETTI
SHERRY MANDE

121

SOLITUDE
LEXIZ MANZANO

122

CZECH BOOT
SARAH NOVAK

158

DISSOCIATION
EMILY MAZZA

159

NO ONE GETS OUT ALIVE
ERICA WINTERS

164

DEATH VALLEY DAZE
HELENA WESTRA

124

NOVEMBER RAINS
DANICA MORRIS

126

**I WANT TO BE A
WOMAN WITH YOU**
KYLIE NECOCHEA

129

SPRITE IN KOSSUTH
KYLIE NECOCHEA

130

EXTREME ANGST
JENNIFER LEDFORS

131

**A NEW PATH TO
FOLLOW**
ZAYNE RANDEL

134

FUN TOWN
BRIDGETTE ROBERSON

135

**I GOT MY COVID PROOF
SNEAKERS ON**
BRIDGETTE ROBERSON

136

BUENA VISTA LAGOON
CHRISTINE AMES

137

**IMMIGRATION
CONSTERNATION**
ANI RODRIGUEZ

140

I AM YOU, YOU ARE ME
ESTHER RODRIGUEZ

141

**THE DAY THE GRIM
REAPER WEPT**
JOHN SIEBELINK

145

MORNING QUARANTINE
JOHN SIEBELINK



American Apocalypse

SHELBY ROSSMAN

Shelby Rossman is a recent graduate of MiraCosta pursuing higher education in graphic design. She created this piece after a widely disseminated photograph of a White House worker disinfecting the grounds after the President's brush with the coronavirus. This piece immortalizes the public's distrust of government control of the virus.

aloneness

NATALIE ABBOTT

Natalie Abbott is studying Literature and Writing at Cal State University San Marcos and pursuing a 200-hour Yoga Instructor Certificate from MiraCosta Community College.

She writes with an emphasis on spirituality, trauma, and the human experience. Her first poetry collection, *Rotting Peach*, will be released in April 2021.

Sometimes, I wish there was no tomorrow.
The negative thoughts, I can't keep at bay.
My mind tells me I should just run away,
In my heart lives a fountain of sorrow.
Sometimes I feel I have nowhere to go.
Sometimes I feel I have nowhere to stay.
I must learn to approach life day by day.
Each moment is all that there is, I know.

It's apparent now, what I need to do;
With clarity, I can finally see.
Fill my heart with love and understanding,
In every moment, find gratitude,
Find happiness wherever I may be.
Then, finally, my mind will be set free.

Cruising By

LAUREN ADAMS

Lauren Adams fervently believes that poetry will outlive us all. She hopes to use written language to foster creative and compassionate solutions for modern problems. She is a Literature and Writing Major at California State University, San Marcos.

On an Alaskan coast everything is blue as a subclavian vein.
We tour these waters in our Royal Caribbean,
hoping to glimpse a polar bear between our oyster shucking and champagne flutes.
We see the great white cliffs walling the waters, a mammoth diminished by distance.

A whip rings across the ice, through the panoramic dual paned windows we see the glacier collapse into the ossified water like an ancient Greek statue losing an arm.

I view the carpeted room: the dining hall marks no change, the plinking crab forks Unaffected.

Ruth

LAUREN ADAMS

Lauren Adams fervently believes that poetry will outlive us all. She hopes to use written language to foster creative and compassionate solutions for modern problems. She is a Literature and Writing Major at California State University, San Marcos.

I never met my mother's mother, but
I am told I look like her, feel like her

We leak thick tears, permafrost abscesses
We are fire steppers, We dance sunrises

I know I have her eyes because the way
my wounds heal: tender, strong, liquid solder

gleaming like silky moonlight. I fear I
will die like her: bald and forty, martyr

of femininity: my breasts scraped off like chewing gum on a gym floor

“If you just lost twenty pounds, you'd be so much prettier,” Jolene, my yoga student of two years, mindlessly called as she walked out the hot yoga studio door.

This was my safe space, my haven, my source of comfort, the place that I could most be myself. The beige walls of the warm hot yoga studio embraced me despite my flaws. I called this beautiful sanctuary home since I taught my first hot yoga class at fifteen. These walls raised me and knew my scars. They were a place where I healed by serving others, where I thought I had dealt with my past trauma. But with just three simple words—“so much prettier”—Jolene torched my sense of comfort, and brought back so many painful memories.

When I was a child, my parents didn't understand the full burden and weight of my body issues and would say, “It's just a phase, Mija, you'll get over it.” They weren't trying to be dismissive; they just had a lot going on.

I distinctly remember my mom looking in the mirror, saying to herself, “If only these pants fit,” and “Someday I'll lose the weight . . . then, just then, I'll be beautiful.”

My mom would call her stretch marks her tiger stripes, but not in an empowering way. She would poke and prod them, squeeze

herself into constricting spandex, and hide them anytime we went out. She tried everything to get rid of them, diminish them, erasing the evidence of her stretched belly and thighs that had endured the work of bringing four humans to this Earth. But her body had always been, as she would say, “plagued with tiger stripes.”

I remember nights when it got horrible; my mom would cry and mourn her lost beauty and youth. No amount of coaxing from my father could lure her out from her self-loathing and hatred. But self-loathing isn't innate; it's taught and learned.

Before my mom hated her tiger stripes, my grandma hated her tiger stripes. From age eighteen to fifty, my grandma suffered from bulimia. Instead of constricting her tiger stripes in spandex, like her daughter, she would purge herself—puking to perfect her body. My grandma would say to me and my sister, “Stop eating, chicas, you've already had enough! Don't you want to find a handsome husband?” And she would say to me, “Go lighten your hair up, mi amorcita.” She craved to be validated by external forces. She craved to conform to western beauty.

That's why Jolene's comments stung me to my core.

Jolene was the epitome of western beauty. Her long straight golden hair fell

Tiger Stripes

ANONYMOUS

perfectly past her shoulders. Her body was free of tiger stripes. Even in a hot yoga class where most people sweat buckets, Jolene glistened—shining and radiant—as if she were a protagonist in a romance novel.

She walked with grace, poise, and ease. Jolene could be on the cover of *Vogue* or *Cosmopolitan*, magazines filled with women my mom envied. If she were in a magazine, my mom would casually flip through and call out, “Mujer Hermosa,” as she flipped past her picture.

So, when she took one look at my tiger stripes and told me I would be a goddess without them, my mental resolve began to shatter. Childhood memories of self-loathing became painfully poignant, and like a snake sneaking up on its prey, generational trauma and body shame reared its ugly head.

I remembered everything. The time I canceled on my fifth-grade friends because I thought they wouldn’t want to be my friend if they saw my disgusting stripes in sage a swimsuit. The time I locked myself in my room for three days straight because I didn’t want to show my acne-striped face to anyone. The time I savagely scratched at my

skin out of hatred, until I painted my back with even more stripes. And the countless other acts of retaliation against my stripes, the imperfections that I loathed endlessly.

Even though her comment was mindless, it served as a wakeup call for me—a realization that there was so much work that still needed to happen. Not only to heal me, but to heal the generational trauma and hate for my mom’s, my grandmother’s, and my own tiger stripes.

As if the universe had heard me and sent an angel in disguise, at sixteen, I met Amanda. She was beautiful—but not the socially constructed version of outward beauty—Amanda was so much more than that.

She exuded true inner beauty, the kind that comes from unconditionally loving everything about yourself; from stepping into your own grace and power; from not needing external validation; from being genuine and authentic; most importantly, from being uniquely you. She carried the kind of beauty that my mom, my grandma, and I should have been trying to embrace and find within.

Amanda and I met through yoga message boards, and, like me, she was a hot yoga

“ ‘I’m here for you,’ she assured. With those four simple words, the flood gates opened, and tears poured down my cheeks.

teacher, but she specialized in trauma and yoga therapy. From the moment we met, Amanda took me under her wing as a mother figure. And—after some hesitancy—at seventeen, I stepped foot into her therapy office.

Before meeting her, I was so scared to go to a “shrink’s” office. In my head, I envisioned therapy to be precisely like the quintessential depiction in television shows—a cold, grey, and dull room with an unhelpful, uncaring, and snobby therapist.

But, when I walked into Amanda’s office for the first time, I was greeted by a radically different picture.

The walls were a soft, light yellow color, decorated with beautiful blue ocean paintings. The ceiling had chakras painted in a perfect line, from the root to crown chakra, representing openness and healing. Her bookshelf was color-coded in a rainbow pattern and was so aesthetically pleasing to look at, that my fears and worries washed away with each breath I took.

In the first session, we just talked.

Her smile was as inviting and radiant as the sunshine on a warm beach day. I opened up about worries and emotions I

never expressed to anyone. I told her my fear of getting old and being devalued because I am a woman. I told her my fear of waking up one morning and regretting that I hated my body for so long. I told her my fear of not being beautiful because I don’t portray valued western beauty standards. I told her my fear of demonstrating and inadvertently passing my self-loathing onto my future children, the way that my grandma had to my mom, and my mom to me.

“I’m here for you,” she assured. With those four simple words, the flood gates opened, and tears poured down my cheeks. Never in my life had I felt as supported as I did at that moment. When we were done, I felt as though a heavyweight had been lifted off of my chest.

We had many more healing sessions filled with tears, laughter, joy, and anger. She taught me a phrase that will forever resonate with me, “Let go of expectations and judgments, and there will be no limits to what you can achieve and who you can become.”

There is nothing I can ever do to repay her for all of the joy and healing she brought into my life.

With the beauty and kindness she's shown me, I now want to take my newfound self-love and acceptance and help others. My mission is to help other young women who, like me, must heal from self-loathing and embrace their stripes as a symbol of love and resilience. That's why it's my intent and mission to become a trauma yoga teacher with an emphasis on body positivity.

Recently, I attended one of Amanda's workshops on female empowerment, and we

did the most amazing act of self-love: painting our stripes with glitter and paint.

It was the perfect representation of my journey.

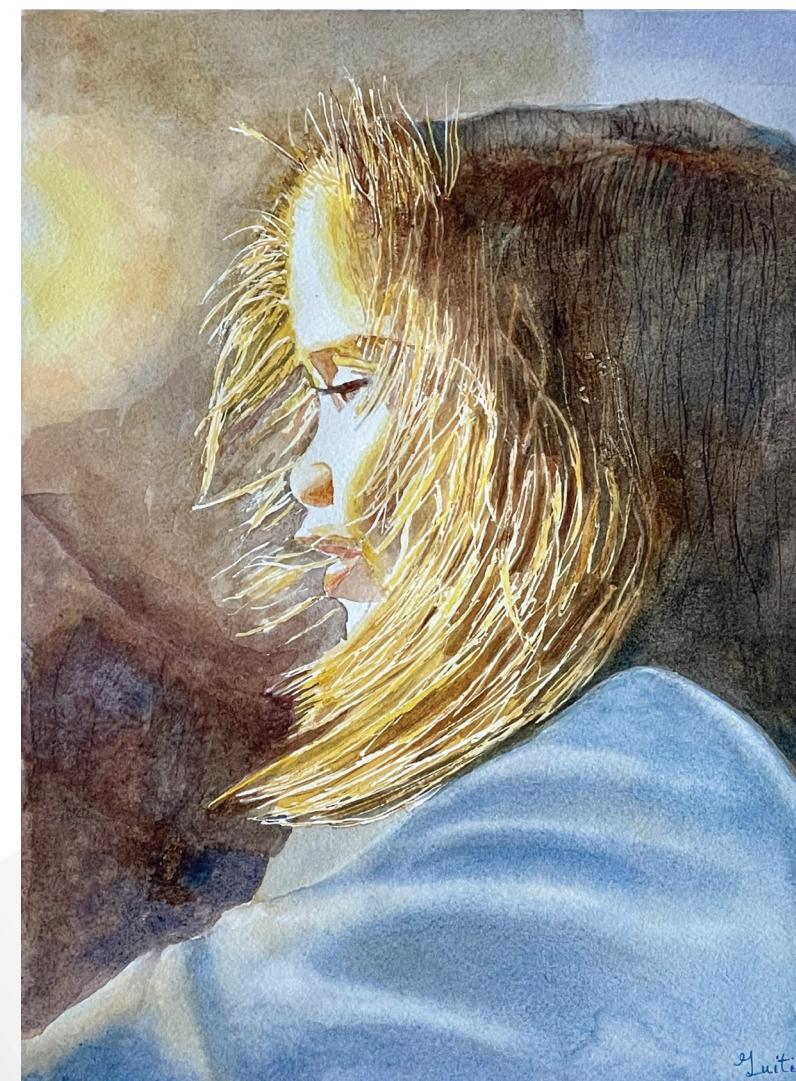
No longer are my stripes a burden to bear or a source of insecurity. To me, they symbolize the generational growth and healing journey that I'm on and the radical self-love that this journey requires.

I am unapologetically myself, and my stripes are beautiful. 🍀

Sonya

GUITI RAVANBAKSH

Guiti was born in Iran and immigrated to the US in 1979. She continued her education in visual arts at SLU. Two of her works were exhibited at Loyola University in New Orleans. Her primary focus is watercolor, and she loves doing portraits, especially those of her granddaughters.



Q Is for Quarantine

LORI I. AUSTIN

Lori I. Austin is a librarian, writer, traveler, and food bank volunteer.

She recently moved back to her hometown of San Diego to live near her ninety-nine-year-old mother.

She thinks the COVID pandemic has been the most impactful global event in her lifetime, just like it has been for her and her customers.

The phone conversation with my patron began like many others I'd had over the last few weeks, since our governor had put "shelter-in-place" rules into effect. But by the end of it, I was in tears. Library school hadn't prepared me for responding to COVID-19 quarantine orders. "I'd like to order an e-book," the soft, hesitant voice began.

"I'd be happy to help you," I replied. "What type of device will you be reading your e-book on?" I heard an ominous silence on her end of the line. "Will you be reading it on a computer, a tablet, a Kindle or a smart phone?" I asked.

"I don't have any of those things," she replied.

Another pause followed her remark, but this time it was me trying to figure out how to respond.

"I'm sorry, but you need an electronic device to read an e-book," I said.

"Oh, no!" Her voice cracked. "I just want a book I can hold in my hands and read. Can't you find one for me?"

That's what I wanted to do more than anything else, but I couldn't help her. As I hung up the phone, tears pricked my eyelids. I had failed in my mission to provide her with something to read. We were in quar-

antine prison, just as were all the books in the library.

Those early days of the Coronavirus crisis were some of the most difficult of my librarian career. We hadn't yet figured out how to get books to our patrons and follow safety guidelines at the same time, so we and our readers were extremely frustrated. I heard the same questions on every shift and I had no answers to them, an uncomfortable situation for a reference librarian.

"What am I going to do? I have nothing to read!" or, "I don't have a computer or internet access. How can I apply for unemployment benefits?" and finally, "When will you re-open?"

Until the quarantine order, all library staff reported to work onsite. My fellow staff and I dodged each other as best we could in the library's cramped back room. Its centerpiece was a big machine, through which returned books rode down a conveyor belt, and were sorted by their barcodes into the appropriate bin (fiction, nonfiction, children's, special handling, DVDs). Carts lined the walls, waiting to be loaded. There's a natural choreography to moving the books from bins to carts and then off to the main room of the library. But as we performed our awkward social distancing dance, we could

see our normal way of doing business was no longer working.

One of my supervisors, Karen, borrowed a box of face masks from the maintenance workers' cart and placed it by the reference desk, for those who wanted to wear one. "Do you think we need these?" I asked. "We have plenty of hand sanitizer and gloves already."

I was reminded of the early days of the AIDS epidemic when people didn't know how the disease was transmitted, and whether it was okay to touch a person who might be infected. I wondered if I'd ever be able to shake hands with a stranger or to give a friend a hug again.

After the quarantine order was declared in March, the circulation workers and most of the supervisors were sent home to telecommute. Only one reference librarian per shift was left in the library to answer phone and computer questions—two days a week it was me. Usually I was the only person on the main floor, sitting alone at the reference desk. I tried to ignore the spooky noises emanating from the dark corners of the stacks. The library was empty of people, but the need for human contact didn't go away. If anything, it grew stronger. I spent hours on the phone talking to patrons. They asked all sorts of questions, but I could tell

that some of them didn't care about the answers I provided, as much as they did about speaking with a real person on the other end of the line.

"I'm so glad you answered the phone!" I heard over and over. "I haven't talked to anyone for days."

My patrons asked the usual questions: what is the address or phone number for a certain business, the ZIP code for a friend, where to find products ranging from barbecue covers to essential lavender oil, and whether we had a specific book or DVD in our collection. If the answer was yes, I was able to put a hold on the item, but I had no way of getting it to them.

Of course, many questions were different: "When can I get a physical book instead of an e-book?" "Where can I use a computer, or a printer, or get access to your Wi-Fi system?" "What is the latest news on the Coronavirus?" "Where is a bank open near me, or a store that has toilet paper and Clorox wipes?" And then that all-important question, "What do I do if I can't, or don't want, to read a book electronically?"

Besides requiring human beings to quarantine, the COVID pandemic required most of the contents of libraries to quarantine, too. And people were suffering, especially older people and those without com-

“We were in quarantine prison, just as were all the books in the library.”

puters or smart phones. I was worried for some of my regulars. There was Susan. She lived in a senior apartment building up the street. Susan loved to keep in touch with her grandchildren by email, and occasionally I'd help her format her messages. And there was José, who used the library computers to search for temporary jobs. “I've found eight jobs so far,” he boasted. Neither of them had computers of their own—they were victims of the digital divide.

And then there were Patty and Gary, the couple I was most concerned about. They lived out of their car and spent all day in the library. While they had laptops and cell phones, they didn't have Wi-Fi or a place they could use their devices. Patty and Gary would camp out at a table in the back of the reading area, set out their snacks and beverages (covered containers were permitted in the library), and spend the day watching movies or playing video games—anything to pass the time while waiting for permanent housing to come through. I hoped they had found a place in one of the hotels the County was setting aside for people without homes—given the contagious nature of COVID, it was too dangerous to sleep in group shelters anymore.

As time went on, library staff figured out how to get books back in patrons' hands,

and eventually, how to provide access to computers. In June, over two months after the initial order to quarantine, libraries began to check out books that had been placed on hold and allowed patrons to pick them up curbside or door side, just like other retail establishments were doing. Some libraries actually dropped off materials at customers' homes, which was essential for homebound customers. The relief pouring through the phone was palpable.

“Thank you for making books available again,” a patron told me. “I've read all the ones I had three times, and I couldn't face a fourth.”

Of course, the strain of dealing with COVID occasionally peeked through the joy of getting back to a state of near-normalcy. Some customers refused to wear a mask when picking up their books. They were required to roll down their rear car windows or pop their trunks so that library staff could place their books inside. Others snapped at me over the phone when they didn't get the answers they wanted, or didn't get them fast enough. Several even hung up on me. I tried not to take their frustration personally, but it still stung. When libraries were finally able to open for limited in-person service in September, some patrons complained about the amount of time they had on the computer.

“What do you mean, I can only use the computer for an hour? Why can't I stay on longer if no one else is waiting?”

I didn't have a good answer to that question, except that we were taking baby steps to getting back to our regular service model. Some people still needed computer help, but it was difficult, if not impossible, to provide it from a six-foot social distance. And those darn face masks kept slipping down under people's noses. After a third warning, the customer had to leave the library for the day. The threat of losing their library privileges incited most folks to follow the rules, whether or not they agreed with them, but they weren't happy about it.

“Don't you people know these things don't do any good?” I heard on more than one occasion. It didn't matter whether it was a complaint about wearing a mask or using plastic keyboard and mouse covers. I wondered why patrons didn't believe in

the science of disease transfer, but I didn't respond, except to point to the code of conduct and smile.

And I guess that's one of the many lessons I've learned during this unusual period of COVID and quarantine—to treat others with understanding and compassion. I try to put myself in the other person's shoes and ask what I would do if I hadn't spoken to another person in a week, if I didn't know how to read or listen to an e-book, or if I couldn't find the information I needed because I didn't have a smart phone or a computer.

“Thanks so much,” a patron told me the other day after I put some books on hold for her to pick up. “I don't know what I would do without the library.”

The title of my piece is in homage to, and in memory of, one of my favorite mystery writers, Sue Grafton, whose book titles begin with a letter of the alphabet. In her case, Q is for Quarry. ●

Where I'm From

MADISYN BRILLO

When meeting someone new, a simple question always seems to get asked: “Where are you from?” The words ring in my head as the short “interrogation” begins.

If I were to tell you that I lived where the sea meets the sand, would you believe me? Where water dogs play and seagulls sing their songs, there I walk pondering on. The waves crash against the shore one after another, seafoam acting like a cloud taking on water. The sand covering my feet, its warmth enveloping me. It's my safe space, my muse, my escape from reality.

However, when I wake up I'm shaken from my dream. This imaginary world slips away, dropping me on my feet where I'm sup-

posed to be. The beach is my dream home which I fantasize about every night. I yearn for its warmth, comfort, and bright shining lights.

When reality settles in, my physical home is one that I am still immensely grateful for. Five occupants and a plethora of pets, I am never alone no matter where I turn. Winning the award for the loudest house in the world, beats from the drums and toots from the horns echo throughout the hallways of this house. I guess this is what I get for having band kids as my brothers. Additionally, my father, a handy man and my mother, a nurse: chitter chatter escapes as conversing with clients constantly occurs.

Of course, how could I blame them when I cause damage as well? My tap shoes

clitter clatter against the grain of the wood. Like a construction man at work my moves drill into the ground.

As I cover my ears to muffle the sound, I wish I could have one day with silence. If you ask me again “Where are you from?” I would honestly give you two answers.

Where I'm from, my mind drifts along the cool streams of the waves, while my body resonates from the waves of the sound. My mind is refreshed like a cold shower in the morning, preparing my body for the hard work and sweat.

Where I'm from, the sun beats down on my sleeping skin, while the moon glows bright when I'm awake. Shining bright like a diamond, the sun gives me energy, but the

moon makes me restless, almost turning me to stone.

Where I'm from, I can breathe underwater, only returning to the surface if I miss the fresh air. In the dark blue depths I am comforted by the creatures of the sea. They offer me advice that I keep with me when I ascend.

Where I'm from, these two places seem different, but what they have in common is the feeling of contentment they leave behind. My mind and body lay separate, though I am trying my best to reconnect. But I guess this is what I deserve when I consider myself an introvert. Now I wonder if there's anyone else out there who lives where I'm from. ●



Our Time, Sedona

M. CLAUDIO PEREZ

M. Claudio Perez is a Filipino-American artist, currently taking Studio Art classes at MiraCosta College. She holds a Masters in Library and Information Science from San Jose State University. Prior to becoming an artist, she worked as a public librarian in California for over thirty years and was the Youth and Family Services Program Manager of San Diego Public Library until her retirement in 2017.

Strangers to Themselves

DANIELLE BUFORD

Throughout my poem I go deep into what it feels like to have depression. Depression can take a toll on someone and ultimately be the source of their unhappiness. During this pandemic it has affected my mental health and I wanted to share how I felt. You aren't alone and you matter.

The salty tears
were cascading down
her beautiful porcelain skin
begging to be wiped away.

her beautiful ocean eyes
were full of darkness
so sad and shapeless
no one noticed her pain,

but one boy
he was in pain too
secret cries of help
were written in his eyes.

No one noticed their
pain, the hurt and the
constant lonely nights sat
alone in their rooms

wishing to be saved
from their demons
that threaten to
swallow them
whole

they must defeat
the darkness,
but how could they
when they didn't know how

the wicked thoughts
Of not feeling good enough
To be alive
never stopped clouding their
once happy minds, making them
strangers to themselves.

Sometimes It Takes a Lot

CHRISTOPHER BURROUGHS

Christopher Burroughs is a formerly incarcerated student working towards an Environmental Sustainability degree focused on agriculture. As the founder of Garden 31, he works with marginalized populations teaching them life skills and providing training in organic farming. Today he lives a truly transformational life of service to his community.

This essay is dedicated to Nicole Leanne Giglio, my best friend, and partner who is as much responsible for my transformation as anyone. Though she is no longer with us physically, her love and kindness live on through me in all that I do. Coleslaw, you are missed.

It's dark, and hell is hot. So, they say. Well, this must not be hell because it's cold and bright in here. I don't know how to measure the lumens of light, but these are not your typical soft-white bulbs. These bulbs are long, and the light they emit is the kind of piercing white glare that illuminates all four corners of a room, like the overhead lights in a Walmart Superstore or a laboratory. Sometimes it takes a lot of light to get rid of the darkness.

At four every morning, these lights come on in prelude to breakfast. There's no use trying to hide underneath the covers for a few more minutes of half-sleep. The incandescence reaches through the thin wool blanket and beyond my eyelids. "Damn another day." Besides, if I miss breakfast, I'll also miss the sack lunch that is delivered each morning in a thin brown paper bag.

Soon I'll hear movement through the thick steel door. I've learned to discern what each sound means. A woman's voice denotes the nurse is here to distribute medication to

those in need. The clinking of jangling keys implies the C.O.'s correctional officers are walking the tiers. The rhythmic thud of footsteps indicates they are on the stairs going from tier to tier. Door slots open with the clatter of a four-inch key being inserted in the locking mechanism followed by a slide and clang, shhhhclunk. This suggests that the C.O.'s are either delivering something or picking something up, usually paperwork. But, when those sounds are accompanied by the rolling wheels of a cart at 4:15 a.m. and again at 5:00 p.m. it can only mean one thing, "chow time."

Though I've concluded that this is not the hell they speak of in religious gatherings, it has become my own personal hell. I imagine it to be the same for the hundred or so other convicts residing in Palm Hall at Chino State Prison. This is the Administrative Segregation unit, Ad-Seg for short, better known as the place they call "the hole." The worst of the worst are sent here. Those who cannot play nice with others in the prison general population. How in the fuck did I go to jail inside of jail? What's worse is this isn't my first rodeo. I've been to "the hole" four times in three different prisons. My longest stretch was ninety days for being involved in a riot. That time I was almost innocent. At least I thought I was. It was a race riot and

the blacks were attacked by two other races. I did fight back, but we were outnumbered and under attack. I was fighting for my life! A lot of men, more so young boys that were quick to fight you if you told them they weren't men, were hurt badly in that incident. I was lucky to come away with a black and blue shiner and ninety days in the hole.

That was seven years ago.

Why am I here in this cold damp place now? It's like my father used to say, "Boy, you ain't learnt yo lesson yet." In fact, I hadn't learned my lesson. I still thought I was half-way slick. I was guilty this time. Not guilty for the charge I was in here for but guilty for numerous infractions that would have gotten me in the hole all the same.

I was in prison living the same hustle that got me fourteen years behind bars. The game had changed but the hustle hadn't. Instead of carrying weapons and selling drugs I was smuggling cell phones and selling drugs and tobacco. Anything that was in high demand. I didn't get caught for that, but someone dropped a kite on me. A kite is a written note or message used to secretly communicate information to the authorities. It's a way of tattle telling; it's a snitch move.

I remember the morning I was called to the unit office. A C.O. came into my building his words loud and direct, "Burroughs

C136, the lieutenant wants to see you." I walked to the lieutenant's office in front of the officer, hands behind my back but uncuffed. The lieutenant was a black man with a bald head and handsome features. He had a relaxed demeanor, as if maybe we were there to play a game of chess or talk about the state of the union. I sat across the desk from him. In front of him and between us on the desk was the kite. It was written on yellow legal paper, the long kind. He was looking it over, which made it upside down to me, but I was trying to make out the words and organize them right side up in my mind. He looked at me attentively and asked, "Are you planning to attack your counselor?"

"What?"

He said, "I have information here that says you're planning to attack your counselor."

"Are you serious?"

I knew he was. I also knew that this type of shit happens all the time. He probably didn't half believe it himself. Still, this was no time to play.

"No, sir, absolutely not. Is that what that paper says?"

He responded, "Yes it does."

Then, surprisingly he picked the paper up and passed it over to me so that I could read it.

“ Though I’ve concluded that this is not the hell they speak of in religious gatherings, it has become my own personal hell.

The scraggly writing on the paper was done in pencil. It said my name, prison number, and even my housing unit. It said that I was angry and planning an attack on my counselor. I stared at the yellow sheet dumbfounded. I knew this was serious. It was unbelievable that this was happening to me. Was I angry with my counselor? Undoubtedly. My father was dying from cancer, and over the past couple of weeks I had been working with my counselor to get a correctional escorted visit with my father before his passing. I submitted all the correct documents, found a C.O. that was willing to take the overtime to transport me from Norco to San Diego, and even had my girlfriend pay \$800 (of the drug money I'd sent her) to make this happen. In the end my counselor denied me. Not only did she deny the visit, she also raised my points, making me ineligible for fire camp, and put me up for transfer to one of the worst prisons in the state. I thought she was a complete bitch and I was pissed, but I'm not crazy. Assaulting correctional staff can get you a whole lot of time behind bars. A lot longer than I was willing to do. After twelve years I had two more to go before my release, and there was no way I would have considered doing anything like that. I hadn't even thought of it, but obvious-

ly whoever dropped the kite knew of the animosity between my counselor and me.

As I handed the paper back to the lieutenant, I measured my words carefully, knowing that they would make me or break me.

"This is completely untrue, and I have no knowledge of anything written on that paper." He asked me to sit outside of his office on the small wooden chair. A few minutes later, a C.O. came. He searched me and cuffed me. He told me that I was being transferred to the hole pending an investigation. It was my word versus a piece of paper written anonymously. What kind of investigation was this going to be? There was no evidence.

The must in this place is pungent and the sounds are becoming too familiar. It's quiet for the most part until someone "cracks." I say cracks, meaning they can't take it. The solitude, the constant bright lights, the hunger, or their own personal demons drive them mad. You can always tell when a guy cracks because they scream like banshees. Sometimes they call for help or maybe for their mama. I always wonder if the "crack" is a temporary state or permanent. I never learned the answer to that because when a guy cracks they come and get him and take him to somewhere I've never been. I imagine each case is different.

Twenty-five days after entering the hole I was transferred to the prison my counselor suggested. The investigation came up empty of course, and there were no disciplinary charges filed. I had gotten right with God while in the hole. My plan was to let all my misguided dealings go and become a new man. I just needed to use a cellphone one more time to check on my family. I knew they wouldn't allow me to use the pay phone for a period of time at the new place.

My neighbor at the new joint happened to have a cell phone. My second day there he allowed me to use it. At first, I couldn't get a hold of anybody, so I searched Facebook for any news. I saw on my daugh-

ter's page a day-old post about the life of my father. I thought to myself, maybe he had passed yesterday. People don't normally answer numbers they don't know, so I kept calling until I reached my girlfriend. She was happy that I was out of the hole, but when I told her about my daughter's post she paused. It was quiet for a moment then she said, "You don't know? They didn't tell you?" "Tell me what?"

"Your dad passed away two weeks ago. We called up there and they said they would tell you."

Tears came to my eyes and I knew that this would be my last time in prison.

Sometimes it takes a lot. ●

I Should've Been a Boy

TATIANNA CADET-HAYNES

Tatianna Cadet-Haynes uses her childhood experiences to tackle how parents play a huge role in children's development. Tatianna is extremely thankful to be included and hopes this piece makes parents aware of how words of wisdom and encouragement affect children, and just how important our role is.

Much love, and light.

If you were looking for my dad in the crowd, you would know exactly who he was. The tall, scrawny African American yelling at the top of his lungs. Many would've thought this was a football game from the screaming and intense clapping that came from only him; the sport was high school women's soccer.

It all started back when I was seven years old: the bruises and scratches on my legs and sprained ankles. I wasn't allowed to cry about them, I just recall James yelling, "You better stop that crying on the field! Get up!" I was the only seven-year-old who wasn't comforted at half-time; no water jug was being passed, nor the snacks because I was being pulled to the side to be coached by my personal coach. I asked my father one time if I could have a snack; when he responded was when I officially caught on that to him I was not a young girl, but the son he never had: "Snacks at halftime are for girls, Tatianna."

At times I believed him. Who was I to question my father and his credibility about who I was at such a young age? So, I never argued. I was never the child drawing or painting with other girls, never attended girl sleepovers with classmates; I never was even considered to be invited because of the way I dressed. I wore beige cargo shorts low

to my knees, long-sleeved shirts or sweaters when it was cold; I was invited to play on the playgrounds or soccer between the two posts at school with all the other boys. I wasn't allowed to have a crush on boys, let alone look at a boy. This is who I was made to be: a scrawny, tall girl with uncombed hair always thrown back in a tight bun with a long braid or twist.

As for my mother, she was beyond gorgeous. My mother's hair was curly and lengthy; sometimes it was dyed burgundy, but my favorite was the lighter blonde. It was her favorite too. She was heavier set, struggled from time to time with weight loss, but overall a gorgeous soul. I found her trying to please my father more than herself at times; with a smile on her face, she would ask "What do you think of my hair, James?" As she awaited the response of my father, she and I both analyzed the look on his face which appeared as if he was searching for an actual change. He then said, "It looks like it always does. What did you change?"

I knew then I wasn't the only one being mentally abused to conform to my dad and his thoughts. My mom was a victim too. We bonded over pain.

I had two siblings: an older sister, and a younger sister. Both of them were tight with my mom because they were the "girly

girls” of the family. The oldest Kiarra, was a cheerleader with a boyfriend. She wore the cutest sandals and shoes to school. I would find myself taking them from time to time and trying them on in the bathroom while my dad was working. As for my youngest sister, she was a pageant princess throughout the years that I was coming home with arm slings and pain everywhere. Savannah was the one with perfect curls, hair moisturized, always down so the curls would blow in the wind. The difference between it was not only mental but physical too. Daddy’s princess could not be a sports player, she was too pretty.

I overheard the conversation between my parents as my dad was washing the boat outside. The conversation grew so loud that we all could hear: “She’ll play sports to learn to be tough! That is not your decision to make, it has already been made!” I knew the topic was about me because none of my sisters played sports.

“She is a girl, James!”

“She is the boy I will never have.”

I knew his intentions weren’t to degrade me as a woman, but to make me into the son my father never had. I was the only one willing to work hard and prove him capable.

To please my father, I stuck to his coaching, the daily runs all the way to high

school. As for coaching, I now had four coaches: three old men, all with beards, and the fourth was the same coach that had been coaching me my entire life. All coaches were opinionated, but none of their “advice” and skills compared to my father. He was coaching me from the sidelines, bleachers, and his favorite place of all, behind the soccer goal net.

To please my mother, we did more feminine outings—nail appointments, and from time to time we would go shopping for outfits that didn’t involve shorts that went past my knees or long-sleeved shirts. It felt great to have some femininity added to my life, even if it was for a short period of time. I felt in control of who I was for a second. What a great second it was. She came into my room one day, sat to my left, and placed her right hand on my left shoulder. I knew this was going to be deep. She sighed. She proceeded to tell me, “You know, it’s okay if you want to dress like a young woman.” Well that was a great point but, “I don’t really know how to” was my response. My father had taken away my identity for so long, how would I readjust?

It was what she said next that comforts me to this day: “It isn’t about knowing how to do something, it is about the effort to try.”

I was finally going to do it. Years had gone by, many things changed. From my

“The conversation grew so loud that we all could hear: ‘She’ll play sports to learn to be tough! . . .’

first ever secret relationship, to wearing girly clothes on the weekends I didn’t have to spend at my father’s due to the custody agreement my parents made, my life was finally changing. I was officially a junior in high school. I took the words of advice my mother gave me, and the little courage I had and decided to finally talk to my dad.

“Dad, can I talk to you?” hesitantly approaching my father to finally have this conversation.

“What’s up, kid?”

This was it. I finally felt the pressure of the conversation, the replays of all the moments in my life, where I had been a “male” coming to an end— “I don’t have all day, I have to get to work.”

It simply wasn’t important to him, so I made it!

“THIS is important,” I shouted. His eyes jumped wide as if he were ready to yell at me, “Who the hell are you talking to!” But instead, he sat down. I proceeded to tell him that my entire life I was judged. I, Tatianna, was perceived to be this young boy who was lesbian and who wanted to show up with bruising and scrapes to school, and it just wasn’t fair. I began to cry, but quickly went to wipe my eyes so he wouldn’t think of me as “soft.” He stopped me.

“Showing your emotion does not make you incapable,” he reached his hand to my face, hesitating. “It shows you care about something, and that something needs to be fixed.”

I let it out.

“I am a girl, Dad.” I knew this conversation would never go away, and like my mom had said to me, the effort is what mattered. This is what stuck to me: “You are my daughter, kid. No one will ever take that; you are also the strongest in our family: you are capable of more than you allow yourself. I raised you the way I did because you have the strongest mind, heart, and drive. No other child, boy or girl, ever carried the potential that you do. I saw that in you. I hope you do.” I now realize that my dad was my biggest supporter. He wanted me to reach every capability possible without the slightest chance of someone saying I was unable to just because I was a girl. I am a woman now. I wear heels, I play sports, I birthed children, and I am an at-heart competition junky. I am capable of more than I would allow myself before over fear that society was not accepting me; I should’ve been a boy, but at heart, I am so much stronger than one. ●

Dance Around the Fire

YEYA MILLAN

Dance Around the Fire is about self-love and its struggles.

I am a flawed human

Loved by many

But when the mirror reflects

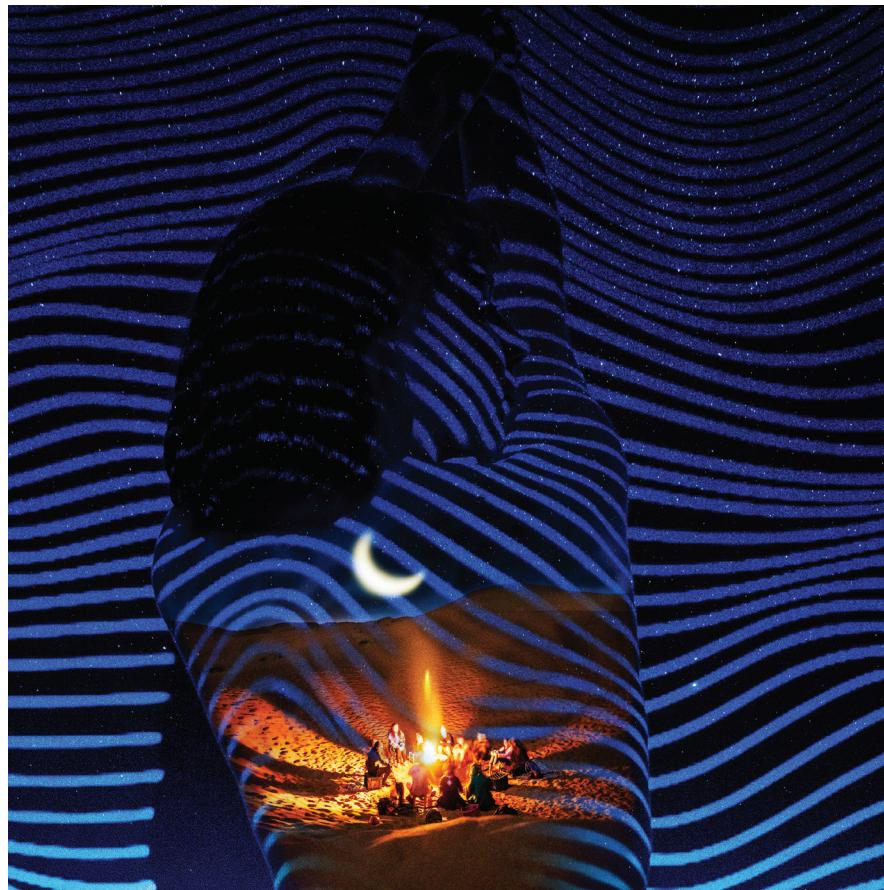
I shed a tear

I stare and see a glowing light

Poorly kept

Ashes flower the ground below

I start to ignite the fire once more.



The Pedestal

GRANT CLOVER

Grant Clover is best friends with words. Naturally, because of this, he became an English major to continue this meaningful bromance.

His goal is to one day create literary experiences for others that they may witness the potential beauty of such a relationship. His favorite word right now is “ubiquitous.”

It stood in the corner of his room, white and marble. His grandma had gotten it for him when he was six, though no one understood the gift. As a young boy, he had stared at it after unwrapping the curiously tall package. The wrapping itself had seemed to have barely survived a hurricane, pasted to the box in pieces and shreds like some barely resurrected form of mutilated confetti on the life support of tape and birthday colors. But that was grandma—wild, obscure, and fanciful. He had touched it out of curiosity, its surprising coldness chilling his fingers. It didn’t make sense. Everyone knew it was expensive, which made it all the more peculiar. Out of all the things for a six-year-old boy, why that?

It was a marble pedestal as tall as he was at four feet. It was plain and supported no object or statue to add anything to its effect. The pedestal merely stood and existed where it was without point or meaning. He remembered his grandma nodding and smiling and winking in her way, repeating, “You’ll understand, Chuckie. Don’t worry, you’ll understand.”

Later that night, as his family was still puzzling and conjecturing over the meaning of the random gift, he had been in his room. The men had recently lugged the thing upstairs and put it in the corner by his bed. He

had stared at it, its significance not emerging anywhere in his young mind. Maybe he could put his alarm clock on it or something. That was when his grandma had marched into his room, barging in without knocking.

“You’re probably wondering what it’s for, eh?” his grandma had said.

He had nodded, trying to be polite yet being more curious than anything.

“It’s for your mind, Chuckie. You’ll see things on it. Funny things, extraordinary things, terrifying things,” she laughed, her head tossed back, silver curls bobbing. “Look closely. C’mon now, look at it. Think. Imagine.”

The young boy didn’t know what to expect, but he did as he was told. He looked at the pedestal closely, narrowing his eyes, giving it a good hard look. And that’s when shapes formed—clouds. They grew, floating and drifting, amassing in formations and shapes, right above the support. He gasped.

“It’s what’s in your mind, Chuckie,” his grandma laughed again.

The clouds spread, filling his room until he could hardly see through them. There were balloons and birds, and it was as if he was in the sky. He could hear the distant plane, the roar of the turbines. He felt like he was soaring.

It had been two years since that day and the boy was eight now. His parents weren't home, but there was nothing unusual in that. They both worked full-time jobs and were gone more often than not, so he carried on by himself.

His headphones blared in his ears as he scribbled out answers for his math homework. When he wasn't writing, he tapped his pencil's eraser on the table to the rhythm of the song. The rap was so fast that not all the lyrics stuck in his head, but it was catchy. He let himself go with the flow, as if caught in some breeze, carried by the stream of words and beat. Every part of the song brawled for his attention, smashing its bass, spitting its chorus. He put his pencil down.

He padded upstairs to his room. His parents didn't know what his grades were, and he wondered if they cared. They never asked, so he never had to tell them he was barely making it through his classes. Sometimes he would rather explore the depths and heights of his own fantasies than learn about how many apples you would have left if you began with six hundred then gave away three hundred of them. He doubted he would ever have that many apples anyway.

Sinking back onto the mattress of his bed, his eyes wandered the ceiling. "A.D.H.D." by Kendrick Lamar crowded his thoughts,

filling the empty spaces: "Eight doobies to the face . . . twelve bottles in the case . . . two pills and a half weight . . . Got a high tolerance when your age don't exist . . ." the rapper crooned in his ears. He didn't know what it meant, just that it sounded good with a beat behind it.

To his left stood the pedestal, bland and unmoving. Then, unexpectedly, he saw lights blink from somewhere above its undecorated mold. Some floating glowing source flickered, then seized, shot light like beams. It reminded him of party lights. Slowly, he heard the music leave the mere frame of his headphones and expand into all nooks and crannies of the room, shaking and wobbling the structure of the house. Amidst the pound of the song, he took his headphones off, looking around him. It was dark now. Around him, there were silhouettes moving to the music, smoke puffing from where their mouths would be. He pressed into the dark masses.

The TV rang with gunshots and explosions, and the boy watched with rapt attention while squeezing the life out of a pillow. Another two years had passed, which put him at ten years old. Due to his sensitivities and still rather young age, his parents had outlawed that particular movie for him, but everyone at school was watching it and one

of his friends was able to smuggle the DVD to him. Besides, his parents weren't there, so who were they to say what he should or shouldn't do? Or so he told himself.

The main character of the film was heading into the middle of the fray, gun out and firing at every enemy in his way. With every collision of body and bullet, the foe would burst with gore. If the boy's pillow had been alive before, it would have been thoroughly and utterly suffocated and strangled by the time the character made it through the waves of his adversaries. The character entered a building where his partner was supposed to be, but found only his partner—also his best friend—lying face-up and cold, his features disarranged and bloodied. The boy started, every fiber of his body leapt at the sight.

He shot to his feet, gasping. Then he ran up to his room as fast as his feet would allow. His hands were shaking, and so were his knees, so he sat down on his bed to steady himself. The pedestal was there still, the same as always. Yet, he noticed a red stain on it. Looking closer, he saw that the stain was moving, dripping. It was blood running down its side. He shook his head in horror realizing, the pedestal was revealing his thoughts. Suddenly, he was standing in a patch of grass. There were animals, his fa-

vorites: bunnies, lions, cows. Their eyes were rolled back in their heads, and he noticed the same red ooze emerging from their chests. He stepped backwards to get away, but he tripped over something. It was the body of the partner in the movie, the dead eyes stared into his. His heart raced, but not as fast because he had already seen it once before.

There was a girl now. There was always a girl at that age. At twelve years old, focuses start to shift and the world becomes a different place. The place it becomes is what you make it to be; this happens through experience.

"So, Charles, what's your strategy?" his friend, Remy, asked.

Two of his friends gathered in his bedroom. He'd just told them on the way home from school about his newly developed crush.

"My strategy?" he repeated, confused.

"Yeah, everybody's got a strategy," his other friend, Lenny, piped in. "You've gotta flirt or somethin'. You know, like James Bond or somebody. The way they do it in the movies."

"Oh," Charles replied cluelessly. "Didn't know that."

"Yeah, yeah," Remy said. "Everybody's got one. You better make one up if you want a chance."

“Slowly, he heard the music leave the mere frame of his headphones and expand into all nooks and crannies of the room . . .

“I’ll have to do that then, I guess” Charles said, hustled down a road he didn’t understand.

“You just gotta, it’s what everybody does, you know,” Lenny repeated. “Like James Bond, you know.”

Charles looked between his confident friends. They seemed to know more about this than him. And, he thought about it, James Bond never had trouble when he played his part as the debonaire womanizer.

It was then that he heard the clink of glasses from somewhere far away. His eyes shot to the pedestal and he saw that it now looked like a bar counter. The room faded and filled with smoke, men taking long, casual drags on their cigarettes. Conversations meandered through the fumes at murmurs—a monotonous chatter. In the back corner, he spotted the girl he liked, dressed in a fancy dress reminiscent of the 60s. Talking to her was a man dressed like James Bond, slicked hair and suit. Except it wasn’t Sean Connery, it was himself.

Shortly after he turned fifteen, his grandma died. Nothing prepares you for the death of someone you love. Nothing. Even the rest of his family who found it difficult to reconcile her nature were sad, tears were shed and tissue boxes depleted. The teenage boy couldn’t forget the way her hand felt cold

in his at the mortuary. He wished he could forget and just remember the crazy way she smiled and winked and nodded and would tell him that “we’re riding the nutso roller-coaster of life, but everyone’s got to press on until that spiritual Disneyland ride-operator tells you to unbuckle your seatbelt.” She was weird and wonderful like that.

His parents weren’t home because of some business trip that they apparently couldn’t “afford to cancel” even after their loss. So instead of grieving alone, he invited friends over. One of them was the girl he liked.

His best friend handed him two six-packs of beer at the door. “For the pain,” he said simply. Another friend clapped him on the shoulder with a funny expression on his face. The girl smiled at him as she entered, and it warmed a little part of the coldness of the week.

They drank that evening until none of them felt anything, and they weren’t limited to the six-packs after they broke into the boy’s parent’s wine cabinet. A joint was passed around and they took turns smoking it. One of them had stolen it from their mother’s supply.

Someone played music, though no one would remember who started it the next day. Amidst the craze, Charles could hear old lyrics: “Eight doobies to the face . . . twelve

bottles in the case . . . two pills and a half weight . . . Got a high tolerance when your age don’t exist . . .” And he smiled.

Things ended in his bedroom. He couldn’t recall any of the steps to getting there, just that when he woke up he was sprawled in his sheets. Piecing back the shards of his memory, he couldn’t determine if the girl was involved, or if the party had ended and he had simply and drunkenly stumbled into his bed.

His head hurt, the world echoing and quaking in his brain with the quiet creak of his bed. He held onto the pedestal to help himself up, leaning on it with his bodyweight. The pedestal reminded him of his grandma, and his throat choked with emotion. He noticed that his wall was gray. He reached out to touch it, at first weighing the absurd possibility that he had somehow repainted it last night. But on contact, it decomposed into ash, swept away by a hot breeze. He searched around himself for an explanation, but his room had deserted him. Everything was black and white, the sky shades made by hasty pencils, the clouds blotches of erasure. But it was all scattered, as if the picture was glass and had been battered into fragments. He lost sense of direction, gravity losing its hold on him. Or maybe it was the sky falling that brought him so near to infinite dark

space—a smudged Sharpie. But there was an abrupt color. A spot of red bleached the scenery, the girl’s smile spreading through his memory. There were roses, redder than red, in a colorless upside-down world.

He messed up. Oh, he had messed up big time. Only sixteen and he had gotten the girl pregnant. The text had just come in. It was a picture of the pregnancy test, in which the red test line was clearly visible. He was the only possibility of such a result.

His breathing was heavy as he was forced to absorb this information. He stood from the couch and tried to grasp the bits of reality that were unraveling in his mind. His hands clenched unconsciously. His friend who was with him looked up at him, still seated. “Are you okay, man?”

Shaking his head, he bumbled forward. The TV was playing the adult film they had stolen from a dirty store downtown. With a sudden surge of rage, a burst of madness and despair and disbelief, he punched the screen. It shattered and cracked around his hand, pieces of glass tearing and snagging his skin. He yelled in pain and fury.

Jolted from his seat, his friend rushed to him. “What in the freaking world is wrong with you?”

“It’s all a lie! It’s all a freaking lie!” he shouted now, glaring at the TV and his

hand. “It’s fake, that’s what it is.” He yanked the TV from its stand and threw it to the floor, a trail of wires tearing and more glass breaking. Stomping on it, he yelled: “It’s . . . it’s not true!”

“Calm down,” his friend shook him, freaked out. “What’s wrong? Your parents are gonna freak. Can you even get the DVD out of the player anymore?”

Charles didn’t know. He felt like self-destructing. Stumbling his way from the wreck, he carried himself to his room. He collapsed on the bed and shook, feeling like a child again—just a scared little kid.

His friend was there shortly, but he couldn’t see what Charles saw. The pedestal held shattered glass on its smooth marble surface, more of it materializing until it was filling the room like a pool. He would be swimming in it soon. The pieces of glass spoke and then he saw them reflecting images, which began to flicker and reshape until they were rolling like videotape. Consumed by the tide of glass held like knives to his throat, he fell into a room of mirrors.

There were two of him looking back into his own eyes. One of them was clean and flawless—a more ideal version of himself—but pixelated as if he was only a projection from a movie screen; the other was dirty and ragged, seemingly tired and worn from what Charles knew deep down was real life. After that, the mirrors melted. In the ensuing darkness, there were children running. He could see them through some dream paradox of sight. They ran through a giant machine with a huge, open doorway. Once inside, it whispered to them and showed them visions and he saw them run out the other end and into the mouths of a pack of waiting wolves. Blinking, he found himself inside the machine. Speakers whispered to him of fun and unimaginable delight, telling him of lupine teeth that, if played with, could make him smile and live life to the fullest. And it did it with a beat. There were large, terrifying animal eyes that it displayed to him, and it made him watch them for hours, again and again. Each time was easier because he had already seen it before. The machine con-

structed an assembly line of men and women who were people that he would want to be, and they marched single file into a wide mouth where a screen revealed the treasures in the stomach. Those people were successful. And that was when the doors opened, and Charles realized he had already run into the mouths of the wolves.

He was seventeen now. Ten months had passed since the text. Because of it, two suitcases and some packed boxes now waited for him by his bedroom door—all his stuff.

He looked around for the last time, nostalgia so heavy that he felt like he was wading through it.

When his eyes locked on the pedestal, his gaze lingered, half-hesitant and half-expectant. On its immortal marble support, there appeared a baby diaper. It lay open and waiting, as if meant to be picked up and used shortly. A bottle half-filled with milk was beside it. Then a pacifier. Then a blanket. But above all else, he heard it: a newborn cry, the sound of new life and second chances. ●

That Day We Picked Flowers

CHRISTINE AMES

After a career in pharmaceuticals, Christine Ames is currently pursuing her passion as a Mixed Media Abstract artist. Her work is a process-oriented journey, and her inspiration comes from nature, architecture, and science. She hopes the viewer's eye will speculate the aesthetics and compositional balance of the overall painting.



When Looking in a Mirror Hurts

SABRINA DUNN

Sabrina Dunn is a twenty-year-old student at MiraCosta College who has always loved to write, but was recently introduced to poetry. She finds that writing poetry helps her explore insecurity, creatively, and interpret hardships in her life.

Face your problems
Head on, they say,
But I can't

To look in a mirror
And see nothing
Of worth to anyone,
Pointless hurt
Impossible to handle

Write a letter
Someone else has these problems,
They aren't mine

My pen
Inks their struggles
Into existence,
Not their solution

The paper starts to look like a mirror
A reflection
I hate mirrors.

I'm writing a letter
To myself
No,
To my character

This will be a good one.
They're so unsure
So lost
Hurt

They have so many problems
Good thing they aren't
Mine

Daddy Brushes By Me Now

DEBORAH EDWARDS

Deborah Edwards inherited a thirst for learning from her family of educators. She earned a Masters of Marriage and Family Therapy at the University of San Diego. From the age of fifteen, she experienced her father's twelve-year battle with ALS (Lou Gehrig's Disease). She gratefully resides in Cardiff, California.

His arms embrace me
as in days past, both keeping time to contentment.

His soul gives my spirit rustle
as my organza pinafore was puffed by reams of petticoats.

His love quiets my fettered mind
as my vintage bedtime books soothed me into dreamland.

His hands clap cheering me on
as the child's tutu body danced with pointed-toes.

His ears harken joyful tunes
as my sweet innocent song filled his heart.

His gossamer wings float over me
as my teenage angel blouse fluffed in gentle wind.

My imaginary mind crowning him King.

Daddy plunging into a twilight zone of death
Twelve years withering slowly into void.

My heart bleeding as he passed into nothing
Pain banishing him to nowhere, fading him to dust.

My foggy mind lifting... gradually remembering his tender face.

Mystically, curiously he brushes by me now
gifting a gentle, "I am here."

His enduring love felt in abundance
My soul no longer in contorted pain.

He touches my heart gently
holding my head as in baby sleep.

His whisper caresses my ear
bringing vitality to my engagement of living.

He soars above me while beach walking
gliding majestic Pelican wings opening me.

His omniscient eyes bathe my heart in courage
as he motivates me to be free.

My restored mind feels his tender and enduring mercy.

Perhaps he never left my side,
masterfully painting away the sadness of years with his
Forever Brush.



Home

EMILY MAZZA

Emily Mazza is a student majoring in illustration. Her work often reveals catharsis through color and detail, sometimes with comedic flair. She's worked in many art facets including: drawing, printmaking, sculpture, installation, painting, and (her favorite) doodling. She's honored to be included in *Tidepools* and can't wait to do more!

10,000 Hours

BROOKE ESPOSITO

Rumor has it, it takes 10,000 hours to master something.
 I think about it as I reach my hand into the flour jar.
 I grab a handful of the white, soft powder-
 10,000 hours is a long time.
 I reach in the jar again-and again-and again.
 Every handful of flour I place onto the counter,
 I sprinkle salt on the mound of flour and I form a basin-
 Grandma probably did this at least a million times.
 I crack an egg.
 I feel the tough exterior break in my hand,
 I crack another-and another-and another.
 I remember standing with Grandma and her showing me how to do this,
 It's become second nature to me-just like it was with her.
 I grab a fork and I whisk the eggs, bringing in the flour,
 slowly incorporating everything together.
 I lightly coat my hands in olive oil,
 And shove my hands into the dough.
 I knead-knead-knead.
 The ball of dough forms and a sense of accomplishment waves over me-
 This was the first batch of pasta I had made since Grandma passed,
 She would've been proud of me.

Sharing Faces with My Uso

ABSALOM FESILI

Absalom Fesili is a first-generation Samoan American who grew up in Oceanside, California. He currently works as an Architectural Engineering Manager and attends MiraCosta College in pursuit of his Civil Engineering Degree. He is happily married with six beautiful children. This story was inspired by the special bond he shares with his twin brother Amnon.

Walking into a familiar classroom with no assigned seats, we all gravitate to our usual areas, as students start to drop their bags near desks claiming them for the class period. We all start to take our seats. Fred runs into the class just as the bell rings, out of breath as usual, but this raises no alarms because Fred is usually late, but for some odd reason we both make eye contact, and his eyes widen as if he were trying to communicate with me while trying to be respectful to our teacher as Mr. Finn, our Spanish teacher, starts the class. "Hola clase por favor tomen sus asientos," Mr. Finn only speaks Spanish in his class asking us to take our seats. Fred keeps eye contact with me as if he has something to say, and confirms it with an upward nod of his head while keeping laser focus on my eyes with a worried look on his face, which compels me to rise from my seat. "Que estan haciendo?" Mr. Finn asks us what we are doing, and as Fred is approaching my desk I quickly respond, "Nada, Professor." I focus my attention back to Fred. His face is dripping with sweat, and his forehead starts to wrinkle. As his eyebrows raise the volume of the room drops to dead silent, as if they understood the importance of what Fred was about to say. Little did I know that the words that would come out of Fred's mouth that day would change my life.

Growing up I'd always had someone by my side to share every waking moment. A person with whom I not only shared toys, and clothes with growing up, but who I also shared ideas, goals, and aspirations. The one unique thing that we shared was our face. We looked exactly alike, at least according to everyone else, because we were not even aware we were twins until we got to kindergarten, and everyone started to ask us who is who, or who can run faster, or who is stronger? Being identical twins, we encountered many different situations together, from fights between each other, to standing united against our class bullies. Although we would fight with each other, we always managed to put our differences aside when one of us was in a confrontation with a third party. We always had each other's backs, especially going head-to-head with our older siblings. We were as tight as any two human beings could be. We knew each other's thoughts. We could finish each other's sentences, and we even talked for each other knowing exactly how the other one felt on any subject. We never left each other's side. If Amnon was going to the dentist, we both were going, or if I had a doctor's appointment, Amnon had one as well, or going for a ride to the store, or to a friend's house. You name it, we went together, and after watching a scary movie, we ac-

tually went to the bathroom together until the fear of Freddy Kruger, Michael Meyers, or Jason hiding behind the toilet, or in the shower, went away.

In the late '90s living in Oceanside, California, our house was always filled with R&B music blasting, kids running around laughing, some arguing, and a few kids playing instruments, and singing trying to harmonize the latest R&B song that hit the top ten. The smell of grilled onions and thin steaks being fried on the stove, and sweet coconut buns with Samoan Palosami filled the air as we all enjoy each other's company.

Our mother would always drop nuggets of knowledge on us, as if we were going to prepare for life on our own tomorrow. She would always hit us with, "What are you going to do when I'm gone?" She would often say or remind us to keep God in our lives, and don't ever give up on our dreams. She was a beautiful Samoan woman with very strong morals, and would always have time for each and every one of us, after coming home from a long day at work. She was also a Sunday school teacher, and her students loved her. I used to get jealous of their relationship at times, but she would always give me a great big warm hug, letting me know I have a special place in her life.

Our front lawn was always green and clean with the edges cut, and the planters had many different beautiful flowers because my father, a big Samoan man who bench presses over 400 pounds, with arms the size of a bodybuilder, always took great care of it. My father was a Marine, and took great pride in it. He not only took great care of our lawn, but he was also a great cook and was always filling our house with great aromas of fried steaks covered in gravy or grilled teriyaki chicken on his famous almond pineapple coleslaw.

Our house was filled with seven kids, and Amnon and I were the youngest. Sheila was the oldest, and she was very strict. She always made sure we did our chores. Alisi was the next in line. Alisi played every sport from basketball and volleyball to softball. She was always compassionate and caring, and I would always sit in her lap as a young child. Yolanda was our funny sister, and she was always cracking jokes, making us laugh. Yolanda also had a voice like Whitney Houston, and when she sang we all loved to hear it ringing through the house. My older brother Jacob would always play the piano and was always taking things apart and putting them back together. He was always tinkering with computers before the windows era, and writing code in DOS, which looked way too boring for us. Our next older sibling, fifth

in line, was our sister Fale, and man was she mean. Fale would beat us up just if we looked at her wrong, or pick a fight with us because she was having a bad day. We made sure to stay out of her way.

Our mother was in a battle for her life, and we didn't even know it. She always walked with such confidence and pride. She was always telling us to take pride in who we are, and where we come from. She taught us many things in the short time we had together. She managed to give me enough wisdom, and faith to withstand many different obstacles that are still relevant in my life today. She left us when Amnon and I were only eleven years old, without much warning, losing a battle to cancer, but her spirit, words, and teachings will always live on through me.

Everything changed after our mother passed away. My older sisters moved out, Jacob went off to college in San Francisco, and Fale went to live with Alisi in San Marcos. The house was empty, with no loud noises, or sibling fights, and no radios playing R&B music or laughing, or random conversations, and no one singing, or playing instruments, nor the sound of a television playing in the background, because we didn't have cable anymore. The grass was dead and filled with weeds, and the flowers in the planters looked as if someone smashed them. It was only me

and Amnon at this point, as my father had started to go missing for a few days at a time throughout the week with no set schedule. Although Amnon had started to get more violent and irritable, and started to come home late at night drunk and high, smelling of beer and cigarettes, I still wanted to be near him and talk to him about anything. After our mother passed away we both processed our pain differently, and we started to have different opinions on things and approached situations with totally different points of view. As the days went on Amnon started to get into a lot of fistfights over minor things. He drank more and hung out with a neighborhood gang.

A few more months went by, and I was playing for the freshman football team for my high school. As I was getting home from practice, I noticed my father's car in the driveway next to the dead brown lawn and the shriveled up flower bed, as I exhaled loudly with disgust. I had my dirty sour-smelling cleats, and practice jersey, smelling of warm sweat, hanging over my shoulder as I walked in the front door. I closed the door to find my father sitting in his recliner, with his eyes bloodshot red, as if he had been crying all night. "Hey, son did you just come home from football practice?" my father asked me. "Yeah, dad," I replied standing at attention,

knowing more questions were going to follow. “Why didn’t Amnon go?” Trying not to get my brother into trouble, I thought to tell him a lie, so I replied with a confident voice to try and convince him that my brother was at practice. “Oh, he is just getting a ride home from someone else on the football team, he should be home later.” My father sat up in his recliner and my heart dropped, as I knew this position my father has transitioned to. He sat in this ready position so he could reach about ten feet in front of him in any direction in a millisecond. I forgot to mention that my father was old school and would hand out old-school beat downs for any show of disrespect. This was the way he was raised in Samoa. Discipline is no joke in Samoan households. Any form of disrespect would end in a beat down. Although I was the big bad linebacker on the football field, I was just a little scared mouse at home, especially when my father was about to pounce. “Amnon!” my father yelled, “Amnon get over here right now”, and right then I just realized that I was screwed. Not only did I get caught lying, but I just blew Amnon’s cover. By this time Amnon had already been caught ditching and skipping football practice. My father also caught him smoking cigarettes, and grabbed him by his neck and slammed him up against the wall for it. So when I lied

and said he was at football practice, my father knew he didn’t go to football practice all week. I did not know Amnon was home because he had never beat me home from school before, but the night before he’d come home so drunk that he slept the whole day and never left the house.

Amnon entered the room as if he had just woken up, with a faint smell of alcohol that still surrounded him from the night before, with a yawn, and a squinted look on his face, as if he had a headache. Amnon turned to me, hiding his face from my father, and gave me a look that translated to, “what the hell are you doing,” as his eyebrows bend to the middle of his eyes, and he grinded his teeth at me, growling like a rabid rottweiler for a quick second. Then he turned back towards our father and his face bent back to a helpless sick little puppy. “I told you dad I was home sick all day,” Amnon said in a sickly manner. My father leaped off his chair and grabbed Amnon by the back of his shirt and his pants and threw him against the wall. He slipped off his belt in one quick motion and started to whip Amnon with it. Amnon calmly got up and walked over to the couch, making sure to look me in the eyes, as if to tell me, “this is entirely your fault,” while my father was whipping him. Amnon had grown thick skin, and these beatings no

“Although we would fight with each other, we always managed to put our differences aside . . .

longer have the same effect on him. Amnon was able to stay calm and not shed a tear, which angered my father even more. He grabbed a two-by-four thinking the belt was not enough, and raised his knee forcing the two-by-four down on both sides snapping it into two pieces, as he gave out a loud grunt that sounded like a bear’s roar. Just before he started in on Amnon again, my brother got one more look at me, but this time it was a look of fear, as if he was saying, “help me.” I yelled out to my dad, “Dad, please stop.” Right then my father turned his attention to me, and Amnon got up and ran out the door. I was now left alone with my father who, knowing I had lied to him, raised the two-by-four looking like a bear standing on its two hind legs to strike me, and I braced myself, covering my head with my arms. I fell to the ground squeezing my eyes shut, and clutching my teeth preparing for the first blow, but to my relief, I heard both of the two-by-fours drop, as they rattled on the tile floor. I opened my eyes to see my father’s back. He yelled at me, “Go get your brother!” He continued to walk down the hallway to his room, and slammed the door.

Later on that night Amnon didn’t say a word to me. The next morning we both got up early, and rushed out to the bus stop, with nothing to eat. Ever since my mother

passed, my father had not cooked for us, and the refrigerator was consistently empty. The aroma of my father’s mouthwatering, flavorful cooking was a distant memory and was replaced with a stale, moldy, mildew smell from the piling up laundry in the laundry room. We did have an old box of cornflakes, but it was starting to collect dust because we never had milk to eat it with. On the bus ride to school, early that morning, I watched Amnon as I tried to keep from touching my skin to the cold pleather seats on the bus. I rubbed my hands together and blew my warm breath into them trying to keep warm. Amnon got into two fights that morning. He got into a fight with a girl who chose to wear a little too much perfume for my brother’s taste, and with another kid he started to pick on for no reason. As the bus’s loud squeaking brakes came to a complete stop, throwing everyone forward a few inches, I jumped out of my seat. I tried to push my way through the other students in the aisle, hoping to catch up to my brother to say something to him or get some kind of acknowledgment that everything was going to be alright before we hurried to our first-period class. To my disappointment, before I could get off the bus, I caught a quick glimpse of him, just a blur, sprinting across the street, and off-campus, while evading our campus security to ditch.

Later on that day, the bell rings, and I head to my third-period Spanish class with Mr. Finn. Fred, a close Samoan friend I'd known since middle school, rushes in to whisper to me the words that would change my life. He leans towards me, as the class volume starts to quiet down, and whispers "Hey, Amnon just got arrested for assault and battery, and armed robbery. The cops are on campus right now, and they have Amnon in the main office." Fred tries to whisper, but the whole class seems to have heard, as they all respond with an outburst of conversation, and a couple of "oohs" and "OMGs." Even Mr. Finn overhears the conversation, and responds with, "Ve a ver a tu hermano," telling me to go and check on Amnon in the office, but before I get there they had already put Amnon into handcuffs and had started walking him to the police car. I try to yell out to Amnon, but they were too far. By the time I run to where they were, they had already turned the corner and headed to the freeway on-ramp. This would be the last time I would see Amnon for a few years.

The years go by slow, and I try to write to him, but I only get money for stamps by asking my father who is rarely home these days. We don't have a phone for him to call so we don't get to talk to each other at all. During these three years, I have no one to

hang out with because my closest friend has been taken away, and all of my older siblings are off living their own lives. I try my best to stay focused on going to school and getting good grades while playing any sport I can to stay busy and keep my mind from wondering back to the day leading to his arrest. I never told him, but I feel responsible for him getting locked up that day. I feel if I never lied or tried to cover for him, he would not have gotten arrested. He would have been in a different frame of mind, with a better attitude, and would have probably gone to class instead of ditching with his friends. We could have been together right now, cracking jokes or training for the next football season. Eventually, I would make it on the Honor Roll, and become an MVP on a CIF championship football team, but I still missed my brother very much. I would pretend to talk to him as if he can hear me at times, and I would make up my own responses as if I were in conversation with him. I have even caught myself laughing at a joke I told myself pretending to be him.

The summer of my senior year rolls around, and we go to pick up Amnon at the airport because he is flying in from the desert area near Las Vegas. I sit in the airport with my father not knowing what to expect. He enters the hallway, and right away I notice

him. He has lost about thirty pounds and looks very fit, and I have gained about thirty pounds of muscle since he has last seen me. I am eager to give him a hug, as he walks down the hallway, but he seems too cool for me to give him a hug, and his demeanor seems as if he has been hardened by the experiences of being locked up. Another inmate he was locked up with comes walking down the hallway and looks at me with a stunned look on his face, and it reminds me of the look we got when we were in kindergarten when we first realized we were twins. "What the hell, bro? He looks just like you, man." He yells to my brother, "Who can beat up who?" he jokingly asks laughing. "I put my money and Fesili," he says, walking backwards towards the baggage claim. They called Amnon by his last name in the desert where he was locked up, but the funny thing was we were both Fesili, which he realizes shortly after making the comment. He laughs to himself, as his eyes kept going back and forth between my brother and me. I have been lifting weights and training all summer for the upcoming football season, and I was bigger than I have ever been, but Amnon was ripped and shredded with veins popping out of his biceps. I have not been in a real fistfight before, but Amnon has been in more than I can count at this point, so to be totally honest, although I outweighed him by

about sixty pounds, I think his friend is right, he probably could take me in a fistfight right then. We both look at each other and square up as if we were going to fight playfully, but our father yells at us. "Hey, you two knuckleheads, stop messing around, and get the bags fa'avave," our father yells at us, telling us to hurry because he parked on the front curb of the airport where you are not supposed to leave your car unattended.

Pulling up to the house he notices the lawn was green again, and the flowers in the planter have been revived with the vibrant colors that they used to have. I see his eyes light up, and for a second, I almost see him smile, but it quickly fades as he punches me in the shoulder, and says "Hey, you had nothing to do with it, uso." That name he called me, "uso," is an endearing name meaning "brother" in Samoan. He is able to read me like a book, knowing the hurt and pain I have been holding in. After I heard those words, it was like a burden had been lifted off of my shoulders. In that one sentence, I knew everything was going to be alright.

That night our father cooked us one of his famous cheeseburger omelets, and Amnon and I stayed up all night catching up with each other. He sees my MVP trophy up on the trophy shelf, and he reaches in his bag and pulls out his own MVP trophy. In

the desert where he was locked up, they had a boxing program, and Amnon was voted the boxing club's most valuable boxer by all of his peers and coaches. I was so proud of him and excited to hear all of his stories. It was like old times, and I was so happy to have my brother back in my life.

Having my brother back feels as if I could take a deeper breath than normal. Colors seemed brighter, and my sense of smell

and taste were more apparent. Although we would fight amongst each other here and there, we always knew that deep down inside we loved each other very much, although we never said the actual words. No matter how far apart we were, or how long we would be separated for, we would always be there for one another. To the one I share the same face with, although I may not tell you out loud, at least you know that I love you my us! 🍀

Snappy Dragon Serves Up Safety and a Mean Mu Shu

ROBIN KILRAIN



Robin Kilrain, a library staff member when she submitted this piece, is now a retiree. As such, she is finally writing a memoir about the life and times of her dearly departed drama bookstore. Kilrain dedicates this photo art to her mother, Maze, who loved Chinese food—and her Dragon.

Harlequin

ANNE FLEMING

Anne Fleming is a writing coach at the MiraCosta Writing Center. Anne wrote this literacy narrative last summer during quarantine while enrolled in an online Narrative Inquiry course for her PhD. She hopes readers will chuckle a bit and feel nostalgic for those secretive, secluded moments from their own adolescence.

The smell of something burning draws my eyes away from the page where Lord Cavendish is just about to thoroughly ravish a very willing Lady Isabella. Sitting up in my bed, I see a thin ribbon of smoke wafting up above my bedside lamp, and I watch in horror as the knit blanket draped over the bulb of my lamp to dim the glow of my reading light slowly catches fire. The building flame has a peculiar feel of slow motion. The portion of the blanket first turns brown, then black, then a lick of yellow flame as the pink fibers of cotton curl with the elegance of burning paper. I have been reading a new Harlequin romance novel into the wee hours of the morning. I am not allowed to be up this late, but I can't stop reading. It's the kind of novel with the buxom Regency heroine and the Fabio look alike on the cover sporting bulging arms, a bare chest, and a wavy mullet. I am pretty sure my parents don't know I read these types of books. I am even more certain they would not approve. They are a secret pleasure, one my prim mother would not want her young daughter reading. She hasn't embarrassed me with the sex talk yet, but the novels are pretty instructive, so it might render her future talk moot.

My attempt to hide the tell-tale light emanating from my lamp in order to keep

reading late into the night has resulted in charring a large hole on the hand-knit baby blanket my godmother gifted me as a young child. *Jesus, mom will never forgive me.* I quickly extinguish the flame by rolling the blanket up in a tight ball. I open my windows and use Lord Cavendish and Lady Isabella to frantically fan fresh air into my room. A sigh of relief that my dad hasn't smelled the whiffs of smoke and come running. He has warned me several times that I may *not* cover my light. *Where to hide the blanket?* I roll it up tight and place it at the bottom of my dance bag under pointe shoes and a wad of musty leotards. *She will never look in here.* I furtively shove the bag under my bed and tug down the dust ruffle.

My room, with its floor to ceiling Laura Ashley lace curtains and floral bedspread and pillows, has the feel of another era. It might be 1989, but the room, with its four-poster bed, tall Chippendale furniture of mahogany, and floral still life pictures looks more like a room from last century. I based my own room décor on a favorite passage describing Anne Shirley's room at *Green Gables Farm*. I have a special affinity for Anne. We have the same name after all. Like me, she loves to read, she is also adopted, and she often feels misunderstood and like she doesn't fully fit in. A gaze around my

room reveals books are everywhere. Work books from the previous school year, Laura Ingalls Wilder's *Little House* series, *Sweet Valley High*, the entire collection of Carolyn Keene's *Nancy Drew* series. A large mound of wholesome classics is stacked neatly in a corner. *Calvin and Hobbes* comics, drawings, poetry, scrapbooks, and other childhood notebooks are neatly stacked on my dresser. However, I hide my secret stash of romance novels in a cardboard box filled with old Barbie dolls. Buxom women on the page and buxom women in perfectly molded, plastic form all crowded together in the dark recess of my teenage closet. I have a couple of history books from the library too. They reflect a newer interest of British history first fanned to life because of my desire to research the references to people and places in the historical Harlequin romance novels, but now I just read them because I find the history interesting.

I see in the morning that the light bulb has a tell-tale black scorch on top. *Not sure how I am going to get that one past Dad.* I sneak through the house looking for a replacement bulb but can't find one without asking the parents. The book that caused the blanket fire was purchased a week earlier at Crown Books. Because it is summer, I beg my dad pretty regularly to drive me to the

nearby strip mall, so I can buy a few novels to read. I think he is simultaneously pleased and annoyed with the request. Pleased that I read but annoyed by the cost. I can read four books quickly over the course of only a few days, and I know my dad is realizing the summer is going to be expensive with weekly trips to feed my reading appetite.

The morning after burning up my heirloom blanket, my dad asks if I want to tag along with him while he picks up a new set of wiper blades at the automotive store. I jump at the chance because the bookstore is just a few shops down. While I am perusing the shelves, I see my dad across the store thoughtfully watching a group of girls my age flipping through fashion magazines and chattering animatedly. They all have frosted pink lips and electric blue eyeliner chalked around their eyes. I find them annoying as they chatter and yell in that way that purposefully draws attention. He tilts his head in a way that signals he is contemplating something. I see him look over at me and then back at the girls a few times, and it dawns on me that the expression on my dad's face as he watches these girls reveals that he doesn't think I am a typical thirteen-year-old. I can see his mind puzzling through the oddity of how I don't ask for clothes, make-up, money, or ask to go on dates. I don't giggle and gossip. I ask for

“ I can see his mind puzzling through the oddity of how I don’t ask for clothes, make-up, money, or ask to go on dates.

dance lessons and novels, I read plays and, at thirteen, I still dress up on Halloween like characters from my favorite books. I don’t sneak out to meet boys; I sneak books and secretly read late into the night.

Watching him, I realize that I am not sure where he stands regarding my oddness, as he is a tough man to read, but something about the subtle set of his mouth as he turns away tells me he’s relieved that I don’t chase boys and that I’m not yet wearing what mother calls “hard” eyeliner. After dad pays for my books, we get in the car to drive home. With some impatience, I start to dig

through the plastic bag looking for what I will read first. My hand touches something that feels less like a book and more like a box. Confused, I pull out the box and see it is a battery-operated Itty-Bitty Book Light—the kind you can clip onto the top of your book while you read in bed. Looking over at my dad, I hold up the boxed light about to ask why he bought it. Eyes forward on the road, Dad flashes the faintest of smiles and without missing a beat says, “If you’re going to read late into the night, at least you won’t burn the house down.” ●

Society’s Differences

ANDREW GARAY

Andrew Garay, twenty-five, is working towards an Associate Degree in Physical Therapy to aid people with injuries and/or disabilities, and improve their quality of life. With injuries derived from serving the country, he decided to pursue a career that correlates with kinesthetic improvement and promotes optimal human health.

All of a sudden, you felt underappreciated, leaving hanging questions inside your head, as if you are unsettled and dumbfounded. Every time this happens, you ask her, “What’s wrong with me?” and she answers, “Don’t worry, nothing is wrong with you, it’s them.” But it did not help. You were overthinking about the “chopsticks, soy sauce, fried rice, fake Mexican” stereotypes that you heard earlier while trying to play basketball with those flashy tall guys this afternoon. Not even that, you still think about the time that your colleague hand-picked you last for the soccer team because you were the most insignificant person in the group. You asked yourself, “Why is that?” he responded, “I don’t know, man. You’re probably thinking way too much. Don’t worry about it, you’ll get used to it.” After several games, being picked last was considered the norm. Anger, frustration, and insecurity are your friends, but hey, it makes you emotionally stronger, right? It is not the first time it happened, right? Well, guess what? Your mind and heart have to be tougher than steel, though. Being offended does not fit you. It is just words that comes out of their babbly mouths. As long as they do not break your limbs or poke your chinky eyes, it is fine, but whenever they do, fight for yourself. Do not let them call you “chingchong” just because

your accent and language is neither Spanish nor English. You often hear your friends say, “But, man, it’s funny!” Yeah, they are right, you guess it is.

But it should not hurt you. It has been unfair ever since you were a kid, even with your own race, friends, and family. You are too dark and you have curly hair; you look like an indigenous person, like those who live in the mountains. Your classmates in fourth grade find it amusing to use stereotypes and burst into a vigorous laughter. You said “No! I’m not.” and they said, “Not sorry, but you really are!”

During middle childhood days, it did not hurt you because you were that innocent and you probably believed those privileged kids, but while growing up and meeting a lot of people, you realized that judging people based on an idea is not right. People who suffer from depression and anxiety take their own life. The fear, anger, desire to give up, and/or to be free of the voices inside their head gives them the determination to end their suffering. This is the brutal truth behind the facade. But your laidback uncle said, “It’s just what your generation does, they end their lives because they were bullied, and it’s their fault anyway. So do not let them get on you, you have to understand them.” And you answered, “Uhm, yes, tito.” You nodded

and agreed with him, but at the back of your mind you thought, “You get bullied because it’s your fault?” It does not seem right.

High school came by fast, and your former classmates and friends in your school still make fun of how dark your skin color is. She said, “You look like a black person.” And it is funny for them. Really? Black person? Do you get really offended by that? Well, not really because they are people too. She added, “But they are too dark and you are Filipino. You should be lighter than them.” Oh yeah, because you believe these whitening soap advertisements that you see between those koreanovela series you are watching on your television. Discrimination with your own kind is extremely common here in this country. You are labeled based on your appearance and how much you earn. But hey, you are used to it, right? You are mature compared to others at your age. You have seen and heard the judgments passed onto you. It has been a norm for as long as you can recall. Summer classes started, and your concerned sister gave you papaya soap to make your skin lighter. You have been using the whitening soap for a few weeks now and your skin feels tight. It makes your skin feel as if it is burning and thin. And she said,

“You shouldn’t be walking around under the sun whenever you use it! That’s why it burns.” But you never had a choice. Commuting via jeepneys and tricycles, relying on the wind outside for cooler air, while breathing in the thick smoke, two to three hours a day, six days a week, just to get to school. It is not realistic to totally avoid the sunlight.

College days, you have blockmates in university, cooler than your high school classmates, but they treat you the same. It never changed. They really think low of you because of where you grew up. They actually never heard of the city you are from, and that is why they do not care; you are not from these big cities like Manila. Being trendy is a necessity in order to be “in” and prove yourself to be accepted by your peers. There is no other way around. But making fun of your appearance and antics is alright. It makes them happy and it makes you more acceptable by the time, fair, right?

Mom forced you to move to the USA to have a better future, and she said, “When you stay in the Philippines, you have no future. Look at your cousins and friends, they have to go through needle holes just to have a convenient living.” She is partly right, but it is unnecessary to say that, isn’t it? “With

“You have seen and heard the judgments passed onto you. It has been a norm for as long as you can recall.

a little sacrifice, this is the best place to live. You may swallow your pride at times, but you can be whatever you want.” she added. Who does not want to live a better and more convenient life, right?

It is a complete culture shock. You have met a lot of people in California from different ethnicities, ways of living, and perspectives in life. People are more friendly. Strangers smile at you even though you have never met them, unlike in Manila, where it feels like everyone cringes at you because of your appearance. You worked three jobs simultaneously just to help your family from the other side of the world. You give them these fancy J’s, Louis Vuitton’s, and Apple products they ask from you so they could validate themselves to their friends and neighbors. Why would you not give them what they want? You care for them, while you cannot even take care of your body against colds and fevers. Well, it is no biggie, you are here now. Make friends and start a new way of living. Forget those who mocked your skin color, actions, and accent in the

past. The past is long gone. You do not feel anything from the past. Your sentient mindset is immune to those funny words.

The treatment never changed, though. You are a minority here in the Sunkist State. They still make fun of you because of your accent and your facial shape. You are not worried, though, because the past was worse than today. People assume that you eat horse or dogs because you are that kind of Asian, or Asian people who were raised here saying that you are too dark and unacceptable as an Asian. The cycle never ends.

So if you were to ask me how I got through it? That would be a silly question for me. It really never hurt me, but does it frustrate me? Yes, it does. It is not about me having these issues, but about how some people treat others unfairly based on who they are, what they are, or how they are. Something needs to change. Who knows, leadership? Education? Advertisements? Mindset? Religion? Anything you can probably think of. It has been society’s issue, but the problem is, how do we avoid or stop it? ●



COVID Migration

SYDNEY ROSSMAN

Sydney Rossman is a scientist studying biotechnology who graduated from MiraCosta's biomanufacturing baccalaureate program in 2020.

Though she keeps busy with work and graduate school projects, she always finds time for photography. These photos represent her escape from the quarantined world and the solitude she finds when on an adventure.

The Lie

HILLARY G

I could no longer live with someone else's guilt. I found myself staring at Belle, a beautiful six-year-old girl who was more precious to me than my fear was great. It was time I made amends with my past and proceeded with what I felt was right.

Six years prior, my life had changed forever. I fell victim to someone I thought I knew and had trusted. I fought for my life then and it was time to fight for hers. I had nothing but a vivid memory and my voice, but I was ready.

I found myself spilling the truth to anyone who would listen: my partner, my mother, my best friends, my brother. The shock manifested in support. I had phone numbers of only female representatives who may be willing to take on my case. I had saved about two thousand dollars, and my parents offered the rest. I knew who I needed. I needed someone who was going to believe me who was not obligated to. Someone who I did not need to convince. I found her. Jill Lane. A fifty-something in a power suit. The scent of perfume in her office. My \$2,000 would not have even paid for her shoes. She was a shadow behind a window-facing desk.

I entered the courtroom feeling a sense of empowerment. Lucky did not own me anymore. He still consumed my thoughts, and I had to suppress my hatred to be able to

see him as he walked up to the witness stand to recount the evening for the courtroom.

"Do you solemnly swear that you will tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth so help you God?"

His hand had to have signed the Bible held in front of him the same way I can feel the phantom pain of his palm pressing into my lower back even after six years.

"I do."

Perjury. As if rape was not sufficient enough for him to feel his power over me, he had to make me feel like I was the one who was lying under oath. Nothing that came out of his mouth was the truth. He could have said his first and last name and it would have felt like a lie. Words slid out of his mouth as if he practiced and rehearsed a performance. He was waiting for this day. What more does a courtroom need to determine his guilt? He had been preparing for this for six years.

The story begins to play back and I can no longer hold back my tears. I remember the way I felt before and after. It was the during that was blurred.

There I was, reliving the day six years prior that brought me into this courtroom.

"I will be in Oceanside on the 8th. If you can make it, come chill with us." Lucky, a combat veteran with a knack for drawing crowds, mostly due to his affiliation to the common-

ly visited social networking sites that berate other servicemembers. Lucky was sick. He found pleasure in the shame and humiliation of young Marines who wore their uniform wrong or, God forbid, posted something they should not have online. I knew him only from a fake Facebook account. We spoke often, and I developed an affinity.

"Legit! Just let me know where and when and I will be there. Drinks on me." He saved this message from me. This message paid for his freedom. I am the reason he is aimlessly wandering the country free from restraint. This is what he wanted me to feel. That after all this time everything that happened was still my fault.

"Ms. Ginter at any point did you say no to JL?"

"I can't remember."

"You can't remember because maybe you had too much to drink?" I had one drink.

"I can't remember because it is my belief that I was drugged." My palm slid off the desk in front of me. The wind screen on the microphone began to get bigger, and the look on my mother's face showed me that she was gripping my father's hand as tight as she possibly could.

"You BELIEVE a drug was slipped into your drink? Did you go to the hospital or report this to the police?" He was taunting me.

His crooked smile led me to believe he was not only defending someone who committed this crime, but that at some point he was guilty of the same. His eyes proved to me he knew he and his client were going to be celebrating their victory. He was excellent.

The defense attorney's glare is familiar. It's the same haunting stare I saw when Lucky was attempting to walk away from his own transgression.

When I came to, I was in unfamiliar surroundings with a heavy pressure on my back. I had a t-shirt on that didn't belong to me, lying on a twin-sized mattress and a mixing bowl next to my head. There was a hand on my lower back and I turned to find it was Lucky's. Lucky promptly got up and squeezed through a crack in the door when he realized I was awake. I stopped him.

"Lucky?" Confused and paralyzed from the rush onset of anxiety.

"Hey, you good?" There was that look. Crooked smile, demeaning stare.

"Dude, seriously what the fuck is going on. Where are we?" The feeling of paranoia is unmatched to any emotion I have felt before. Panic sets in and I realize I am still high and very confused. The room is darkening. I walk out into the living room and there are boys I have never seen before sitting around a

glass bong looking at me. I can tell they knew something was wrong.

“Chill, Hillary, you can’t drive right now, but we drove your car back here. It’s in the parking lot.” I look out the window and saw my car in a spot. The parking lot is surrounded by a chain link fence, and I recognize my keys on the table.

“Seriously, what is going on? I need to get out of here.” I can feel the sweat pooling at my lower back where I felt Lucky’s hand.

“Hillary, seriously you can’t . . .”

“STAY AWAY FROM ME! DONT FUCKING TOUCH ME!” I was going to die if I stayed there. I find a kitchen knife and walk out of the apartment. I hear laughing from the inside as Lucky closes out his one-man act.

“Shit man, I know I’m not an all-star but no one has ever tried to stab me after.” There it was. Confirmation. If only Lucky’s audience that night was sitting in the courtroom before us today.

I could feel the stares. I could sense people really did not know how to feel. I was digging up a case that was six years old because the feeling of me hiding was penetrating my soul. I am shamefully allowing someone to do this again and putting the lives of so many other women at risk. Who has he hurt in six years? Who has he hurt

prior to me? It was time I dealt with this head on. I felt empowered until I was asked to take the stand. If I was not already a shell of myself, I felt smaller and less relevant as I listened to this night be played again, but with more clarity.

“Hi. My name is Hillary. I am 21, and I don’t know where I am.” I looked at my mother from the witness stand while the 911 call played back for the judge, an older, greying gentleman who appeared to be close to retirement and, quite frankly, over this shit.

“Hillary, are you in a safe place?”

“I am in Oceanside. I think I’m in Oceanside. I am 21, and I don’t know what’s going on.” The feeling of fear was coming back to me. My hand that was originally on the desk was creating a puddle on my slacks. My foot was slipping out of my pointed heel. I could not hold back the tears any longer. I remember being in this moment and thinking I was speaking perfectly clearly and wondering why no one was coming to help. The sense of empowerment rapidly dwindled. I became the same weak, shaken, and scared.

“I have a knife in case they come outside.”

I remember the dispatcher’s comments and I read the report she wrote and provided to the court. In quotations was the initial call to dispatch police. “Female 21 years of age, unable to describe whereabouts and is armed.”

“Without evidence I had no case. Without witnesses I was only telling a story.”

“Hillary, I am sending officers to your location. Stay on the phone with me, and when they arrive you will need to place your weapon on the ground in front you.” Weapon. As if a kitchen knife was more dangerous than Lucky’s own two hands proved to be.

“You guys, I think she’s calling the cops.”

I watched as three guys ran out of the apartment and down an alley. I don’t care and can not find my balance to chase them anyway. I am lost and just need the cross streets to tell the dispatcher. The letters on the street signs blur into the glow of the street lights and my frustration for not being able to walk lead me to sit down on a corner, helpless. I hear a jingle and a sharp pain to my lower back.

“Fine, fuck you, here’s your keys, leave!”

I laid out on the sidewalk. Someone, walking their dog, finds me and calls the police. The initial call from me did not designate an urgent response. With a muffled speaker I had to hear the second call again.

“My name is (redacted) I live at the corner of (redacted) I am standing with a young girl who is distressed and only in a t-shirt. She is laying on the sidewalk. No, she does not appear to be injured.” I remember the passerby asking me if I was hurt and not waiting for a response. I am hurt. I start to feel my pelvis was on fire and just had a set of keys lobbed at me from behind. I begin vomiting profusely.

“She’s throwing up.” I was wrapped in a blanket and shivering uncontrollably when paramedics arrived. The passerby left. He could be sitting right in front of me, and I would not know who he was. Would not even recognize him.

I refused to go to the hospital. Reason number two Lucky is free. Lack of sufficient evidence. When I was laying on the sidewalk I remember the only thought in my head was my parents could not find out about this. Police arrived after the paramedics and asked me a series of questions.

“Have you had anything to drink today?” I nodded. They asked me where I was coming from. Flashlights began burning my eyes.

“I don’t know. Let me go home.” I was not interested in the barrage of questioning. I could not understand their concern for me. This is the moment I started to blame myself.

I made it home. I was awake for what felt like six years. The thought of reporting Lucky never came to fruition. I was so afraid of him. I was afraid of the repercussions from the veteran community and I was afraid I would be looked at the way I was looked at in the courtroom when the case was dismissed: bored and attention-seeking. I suffered this trauma alone for six years. Only Lucky knew what happened that night and he lied

through his teeth. I only knew what I felt. I watched his every move. I was not going to look away. I wanted to see if he really could deny what he did.

Lucky referred to me as “confused.” He said, underoath, that it was not him leaving the room. My knuckles tightened in the same form I gripped the kitchen knife and the way I have ever since. He said we had drinks, and that I paid for them and I drove my car back to the apartment and participated in illicit drug use. That I was left alone in the bedroom and that no one touched me. Without evidence I had no case. Without witnesses I was only telling a story.

“She started to hallucinate and started swinging a knife at us and we all ran out.” His attorney trained him well. He was calm, composed, and spoke with conviction. He gave a more detailed account of the evening as he was, according to his story, sober. Lucky was the victim in his story and Lucky was more convincing. Lucky gave such a compelling performance that I began to question my own thoughts.

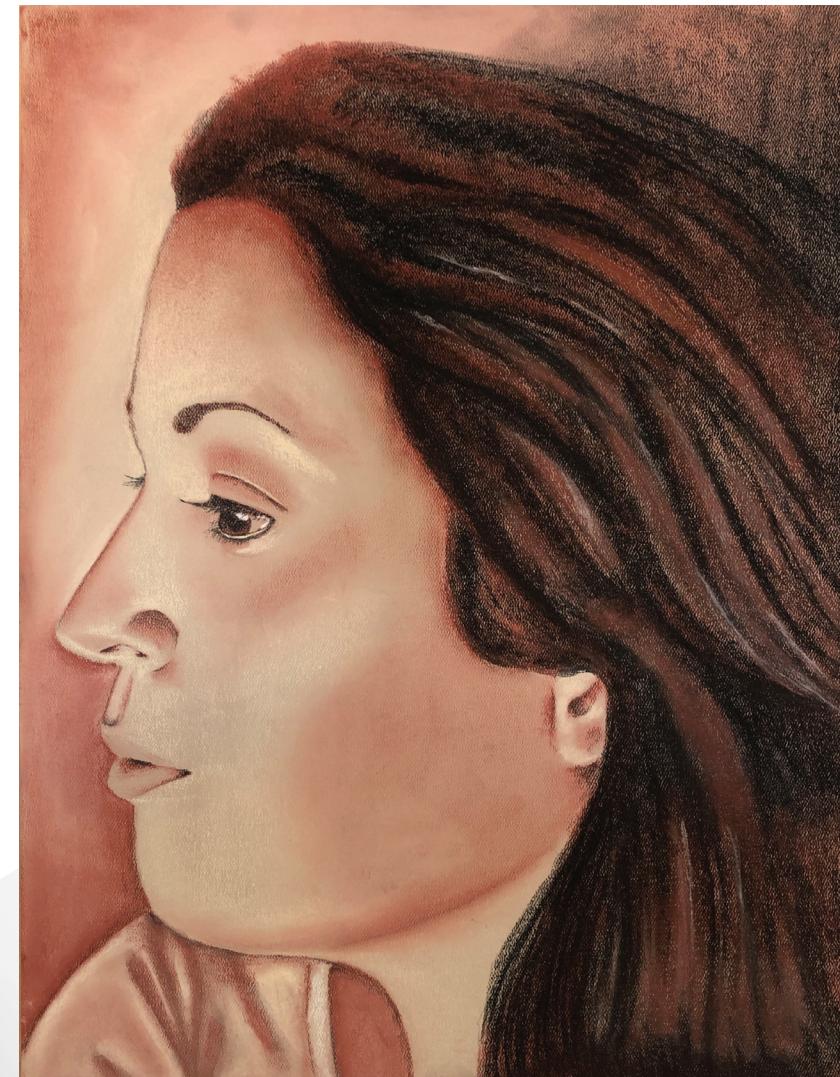
I squirmed in my chair and finally worked up the courage to stare at him. There was that chilling glare. Did anyone else fucking see it? If they saw what I saw, they would know he was lying. They couldn’t; they were captivated by the assailant and felt sorry that his life was put on pause for these proceedings where his morals and character were questioned unjustly. According to his narrative, he was scared for his own life and bringing it up now triggers his PTSD. After all, being a combat veteran and fighting for our freedom, he deserves better treatment than what he received in this courtroom.

My mother’s eyes widened with pure anger. The woman would slap my hand for using the word “hate,” but I saw no other emotion in her eyes and I had no other feeling in my heart.

“I hate you,” I mouthed to him. These are the words I left him with. My father gripped my arm and walked me out to the parking lot. I saw him cry for the first time. I looked back, and Lucky was hugging his attorney. As expected. ●

The Self Portrait

JENNIFER GLASSFORD



Jennifer Glassford is a Landscape Design student at MiraCosta College. For as long as she can remember, she has been fond of creating art. When she is not drawing, Jennifer spends her time caring for her two young children, getting them out into nature where she feels most inspired.

The Pilgrim's Guide: How to Walk 500 Miles in a Month

CAMERON GROGAN

Cameron Grogan is a twenty-one-year-old student pursuing a double major in English and Sustainability with a minor in Spanish. Grogan moved to Granada, Spain upon graduating high school. Having hiked the Camino de Santiago last spring, this piece recounts her journey and what she learned along the way.

W*hy are you walking?* As you trudge uphill through a downflow of mud armed with twigs who have waged war against the skin on your ankles, you can't help but ask yourself the same thing strangers have been asking you all month. *Why are you walking?* The rain's renovations to the hill you are on makes you feel as though you are climbing up a downward escalator, destined to go nowhere. *Why are you walking?* The elements are against you, you aren't so much climbing now as you are sinking into the mud. *Why are you walking?* You are practically knee deep in mud now, and are sour about it because you know that tomorrow morning you will wake up with blisters from wet socks. *Why are you walking?* If you could just ditch this bloody backpack, then you would surely make it to town in time to dry those socks . . . but then what would you wear for the next thirty-three days? Thirty-three days, hiking between twenty to forty kilometers (twelve to twenty-four miles) a day, from sunrise to sunset, rain or shine, what the hell did you sign yourself up for? Suddenly, your formulated response to an anticipated question does not seem so appropriate. *I am walking the Camino de Santiago because it has always been a dream of mine.* The further away you get from Saint Jean Pied de Port, the more apparent it will

become that this is not the only reason you are here.

Coincidence is God speaking anonymously. Or at least that is what your new friends will tell you after they save you from a man with skewed intentions who had been following you for the past two towns. You will question your decision to hike eight hundred kilometers (five hundred miles) solo, but the amount of information that you will learn about yourself along the way will help you to realize that this is something you had to do alone. You will also question your beliefs. Regardless of your atheist denomination, there is no way to walk a traditional pilgrimage route, lined with cathedrals, and not feel compelled to question the existence of God. With nothing but time on your hands, you will think, and think, and think some more until your mind is as tired as your body is physically. Exhaustion will take advantage of you. It will drain you of every ounce of energy in your body and leave you with just enough strength to climb onto the bunk bed in your hostel. If she is really cruel to you (as she was to me), then she will only let you sleep for a few hours before waking you up in a puddle of your own piss while she laughs as you try to clean it up before it seeps through the mattress and drips on your bunk mate. As for the physical pain, it will

subside. When investigating the throbbing coming from your foot, you will discover that you have your first blister of the Camino de Santiago. This will be the first and last time that you are excited to see one. You will learn to live in a constant state of discomfort, be it blisters or sores, and you will wonder why seemingly every path to enlightenment entails suffering and pain.

The suffering and pain will persist until it becomes unbearable, but right when you think you cannot continue . . . everything will go numb. The suddenly fleeting pain will only bother you for the first and last hour of everyday, as if in sync with the initial reluctance you experience at the beginning of each day and with the anticipation of the end of another long day. This is no coincidence, your whole body is conspiring in helping you to achieve your goal. Even your backpack will begin to feel lighter the longer you carry it, just like the burdens that you carry with you.

You will walk the Camino de Santiago expecting to get something out of it. Consciously having made this assumption makes you more susceptible to the lessons the Camino offers along the way. You won't realize that life can teach you just as much as the Camino, if not more, if you were only so eager to listen. You will learn to apply ev-

erything you are learning on the trail to your own life. You will experience the joy of living in the present, as any thought of the future and how many kilometers (miles) until Santiago will overwhelm you. You will learn not to dwell in the past, as you look back every once in a while to see how far you have come. You will learn to check in with yourself, as you constantly check to make sure you are on the right path. You will learn to keep your head up, as not to miss what is right in front of you. You will learn not to do anything half-heartedly, as dragging your feet will only hurt you in the long run. You will learn to set your own pace, as neither the Camino nor life are a race. Last, but certainly not least, you will learn that you are always capable of more than you think.

That last part will not really sink in until you are standing in front of Santiago de Compostela. The church's spires looming overhead, piercing the clouds that dare to cross their paths. You will not be overcome with a flood of emotions, as you may have expected you would, when you realize that the walk is over. You probably won't even cry, but you will feel at peace. Your heart and mind will be quiet, as if they are giving you the clarity to remember this moment for the rest of your life. You may feel as though you should be happier at having accomplished

“You will be unable to resist feeling a sense of melancholy towards having to go back to ‘the real world.’”

this dream but you will realize that ultimately it was all about the journey, not the destination. You will be unable to resist feeling a sense of melancholy towards having to go back to “the real world.” In the real world, everyone will ask you about your experience on the Camino de Santiago and the only adjective that will do it any justice is “indescribable.” You will tell people that you cannot explain it to them, but that they must go and walk it for themselves. For how can you describe the community of the Camino or how you were able to open up to complete strangers within a matter of minutes, taking comfort in the more than likely chance that you may never meet again. How can you describe how you forged a lifelong bond with a group of people who you have only known over the course of four days. How can you describe how you ended up in Germany almost a year later at the wedding of two of those people who met and fell in love along the way. How can you describe how desperately you long to go back, but how terrified you are of depre-

ciating what can only be described as magic that the Camino gifted you with.

The first thing you will do when you get home is frame your Camino certificate, a futile attempt at making a temporary sheet of paper permanent. You will also preserve your pilgrim’s passport, which you got stamped at every hostel and restaurant along the way, in a waterproof bag. Protecting your scallop shell will cause you the biggest headache, and you will recognize the irony that the most significant artifact from your walk is also the most fragile. Initially, it was this symbol of a scallop shell that guided you along the way, but by the time you reached Santiago you learned to listen to and confide in an alternative guide, who you now know is so much more than a muscular organ whose sole purpose is to pump blood. Your true guide will aid you in organizing your feelings and thoughts about the Camino, for what good is wisdom or happiness if not shared? And share you will, with everyone you meet, in the spirit of the Camino. ●



Love in Quarantine

ESTHER RODRIGUEZ

As a fine artist, Esther Rodriguez majors in studio art and pursuing a career in Visual Art and Design. Her watercolor and illustration pieces represent a medium to tell a story of everyday life. Also, her works depict how humans are resilient, trying to see the best side in life.

No'áa'alvish kút: My Fire Story

SUMMER HERRERA

Woman. Student. Sister. Daughter.
Partner. Indigenous and privileged.

Summer Herrera holds many
roles that influence her own story.

Inspired by education, family,
history, and culture, she never
considered herself a writer, only a
practitioner of her oral tradition on
a piece of paper.

Back Story

Pablo Api\$ (Apish), my Great-Great-Great-Great-Grandfather, was the chief of the Luiseño Indians. He was an intelligent man. He spoke Luiseño, English, and Spanish, and was literate. During the Mexican American War in 1847, the Mexican Army ordered the Cahuilla people to kill Luiseños. They say more than a hundred Luiseño people died that day. Who knows. When my mother took me to school, I would ask her about my grandfather. She would tell me that he tricked a man into giving him his gun to then win the battle, which would be known today as the Temecula Massacre. A historic battle that never really ended for Natives. “How did he trick him?” my naive seven-year-old self would ask.

“He told those bad guys, you have the most beautiful gun I have ever seen. May I see it?” she responded in the best stoic imitation she could do for her type, a natural ginger. And so I learned from my grandfather that I never met the power of brains over bronze.

Juana Api\$ was one of Pablo Api\$’s daughters. She had five children, one of which was out of wedlock with a man named Thomas Despierto. This child would ultimately be the start of our family misfortunes.

Maria Manuella, the product of Juana’s affair, was given up as a twelve-year-old

to marry a Spanish settler, Jose Miranda. In 1920 she applied for a homestead patent which allotted her 160 acres in San Jacinto. At 103 years old she was burning brush in her backyard when her skirt caught fire, and she burned to death. She was buried on her property with our other relatives: a ten-by-ten-foot cemetery, which is now considered the Miranda Reservation, the smallest reservation in the world. You’ll see how this comes to bite us in the ass later.

Domingo Miranda, a son of Maria, died choking on a piece of steak. My mother always said it was in our genes, so now I chew everything slow.

Emma Miranda, was my Great-Great grandmother. She went to Sherman Boarding school in Riverside, where they hoped to beat the Indian out of her and the rest of those kids. Maybe they didn’t beat her enough or maybe her Indian was strong enough to withstand their hate fire. I met her, but I don’t remember much except her love for elephants, the ones with their trunks up for good luck.

Grandma Jessie, or Jessie Miranda, a daughter of Emma’s, married a man named Louis, who I met once at a funeral. He tapped me on the shoulder from behind and said, “I’m your grandpa.” I didn’t say a word. Her real name is Juesita, the girl version for

Jesus. Emma wanted to name her “Jesus” so she could become a savior for her brother who had just left for war. My grandma Jessie, though, is one of the craziest ladies I’ve ever met; raised four boys on her own with no more than an eighth grade education and a degree in cursing. She used to take me and my neighbor cousins to school on a golf cart, and buckled us in with actual belts from her closet. Maybe she is a savior.

My father is the youngest of four boys. Married his white high school sweetheart and had three daughters and a son. They divorced my senior year of high school. Now he has a girlfriend who’s more Native than us all combined. He loves anything Indian: stories, softball, birdsongs, frybread, drinking, smoking, learning new things about our culture, etc. He’s always scared me. In a stoic, don’t-let-him-be-disappointed-that-you-fucked-up kind of way, but I know he loves me.

Part I

The fire started at the end of the road. My dad said that it was on purpose. I wouldn’t know, I was merely two halves, an egg and a tadpole floating around in two separate bodies without a thought to think. The fire jumped the road and picked its victims like a hawk soaring through the sky, not

stopping once to consider anyone’s backstory, not stopping to hear each family’s prayers as they screamed to their gods not to let the fire take their things. Over 2,000 acres, the Temecula Anza fire of 1996 would swallow my grandma Jessie and my Great grandma Emma’s houses whole, leaving nothing but ash and dust. No evidence, no pictures, no walls, no home, no hope. What is one to do when the universe takes control and ignites everything you have to burn and die, to settle in ashes, to be reborn in the dirt?

Part II

In 2004 my family was disenrolled from the Pechanga Tribe for lack of proof of our family lineage. My father went to the archives in Washington to trace our families’ descent. Apparently, we were being punished for my Great-Great-Great grandmother Maria’s acceptance of her land grant in San Jacinto. The land that she got after being outcast and sold by her family at twelve years old for being the offspring of an affair. Basically, in the late 1800s Natives could accept allotments of land if they disavowed themselves as Native; just another way to weed us out. Even though my grandmother accepted the land after this law was banned, there wasn’t much she could say to defend herself from beyond the grave. And that Miranda Reservation, the

smallest reservation in the world, was supposed to be our new home.

The disenrollment took a toll on our family along with the other 206 people they kicked off during that round, but we fought like hell. Made it all the way to the Federal Supreme court for them to tell us that it was a sovereign issue they wanted nothing to do with. So much for “For the people.” We sold our house in town for a mobile home on my grandma Jessie’s land at the end of Pechanga. She bought the land with my Great grandma Emma in 1989, so they couldn’t take that away from us.

So here we are, stuck on a four-acre lot on a reservation that disowned us. It sucks when I think about all my friends from Indian school I was forbidden to talk to. When I think about the language and culture I was excelling in, and how it’s now nearly forgotten, left to shrivel up and smother into a pile of ash. It sucks when I think about the \$10,000 check we now weren’t getting a month; maybe it’s for the better though, looking back at all those grown kids now, with all the money in the world but never enough to buy answers to their problems. It sucks when I think about my dad’s first cousins who are still enrolled. Did they sabotage their own family for another couple bucks to burn a hole through their pockets?

It only sucks when we go into town and try to explain to people that we live on the rez but are not from the rez, not anymore. It sucks when they look at you and expect you to be filthy rich as you wait in line at the store to pay with a food stamp check, or run into the gas station with nine dollars in change to fill up your white mom’s tank because she is too ashamed to run in herself. It sucks when we pass by the guard shack and the tribal office everytime we leave for town, which is all the time. The looks that they give us. The stare of disgust. As if we were a plague burning their land with our every step and every look we give back. As if we had wanted this. As if we had done this to ourselves. Maybe we did. Maybe Juana did. Maybe she could smell the bitterness in their hearts from a hundred years before and was protecting us from becoming engulfed in their selfish flame. Anyways, it pretty much always sucked.

Part III

Post disenrollment, we enrolled in public school. We traded in our feathers and moccasins for headbands and Vans. But life went on.

In first grade, everyone dressed up in paper hats and belts for Columbus Day. I refused. I waited in the bathroom until my

““ The fire jumped the road and picked its victims like a hawk soaring through the sky . . .

mom could drop off my Disney Pocahontas dress that I wore for Halloween the year before. My cousin, who was also in my class, asked me what I was doing.

“I’m dressing Native because we weren’t pilgrims.” I explained, jumping down from the monkey bars.

“But it’s about pilgrims. Why can’t you just dress like everyone else?”

Even I couldn’t understand why I had this burning desire to wear a cheap costume of a stereotypical Indigenous women in a public elementary school where kids had no concept of the complexity of the issue erasure and colonialism. But I wore it anyway. That year I won a class award for originality.

As the years went on, I would constantly get questioned from kids at school about living on the reservation. Do you live in a teepee? If we go to your house are we gonna get shot? My fourth grade teacher started a lesson one time by shouting “Indians still exist!” and pointed to me while the other kids glared wide-eyed like I was going to pull a bow-n-arrow out of my back pocket and shoot the stupid looks off their faces, which I imagined myself doing in that moment. Some kid even wrote in my yearbook: “Hey Native. Sorry we took your land. Have a great summer. Oy! Oy! Oy!”. I thought to myself, it’s bad enough your grandfathers

took our land. You had to take up my whole yearbook page, too!

Eventually I grew accustomed to blending into town. It wasn’t hard to do. My mom is white. Like really white. She has fiery red hair and looks like she could disappear into a pile of snow, despite the hair. My mom’s genes began to take over as I grew. My hair sprouted flakes of red and my skin lost its olive glow from lack of sunlight. Though the color of my mom’s skin makes you think, *privilege*, her side of the family didn’t have it all that great either. Her grandpa, on her dad’s side, was the only one from his family to survive the Holocaust. He watched his family burn, not for being Jewish, but for not having blond hair and blue eyes. My mother’s other grandpa, from her mom’s side, was Sicilian and fought in WWII. They both migrated to America for a better life. My mother’s father left when my mother was little to start a new family, whom we see on occasion, but I never enjoy. Her mother, my other grandma, never remarried and was left alone to raise the three crazy girls my grandpa had abandoned for new ones.

Even though we spent most of our time in town, my dad still played ball, but he switched to the Pala Braves team, the next reservation over. We would spend almost every weekend there watching him play. My

dad calls himself a “Rez-lebrity” because everyone knows him for being good at playing ball. It was always hard going back and forth between the rez and town. Always too white for the rez and too Native for town. My dad started working full time after the disenrollment; apparently people don’t just give you money for the color of your skin, unless you’re enrolled in a tribe. He’s a Native American Monitor now. Basically, he’s an archaeologist without a degree because of the Native in his blood (maybe people do still pay you for the color of your skin). He learned everything there is to know about our ancestors and what they left behind while keeping busy all day in the desert. One time he even found a burial site on the side of a hill where they told him there was nothing to be found. But there was something alright: a 9,000-year-old pile of bones and a piece of pottery with an elephant painted on its side, perfectly preserved with its trunk up. Maybe this would be the turn of our luck.

Part IV

I was eighteen and, like most naive teenagers, I thought I could go off and make it on my own in this great big world. Leave behind the broken road that got me to this point and pave something new. Being broke ended up paying off; I got my first year of col-

lege and books paid for by the government. I just had to work to live. I had been working full time since my senior year of high school, so it was nothing new to me. I remember attending a mandatory workshop for freshmen about the fundamentals of our first year of college. They talked about time management, school-work-life balance, sexual harassment, consent, and support systems both on campus and at home. All I could think about was the bottle of fireball I had hidden under my bed back at my dorm. I should have been listening; then maybe things wouldn’t have happened the way they did.

I made my first white “friend” in college. She was a cool girl, lots of friends, all the boys loved her, and she always got free alcohol. I took my bottle of fireball, and we headed out one weekend to go camping. When we got there it was already late, most of the kids were already hammered, and I had no reception on my phone: a few of the many signs that I should have just stayed home.

All I remember is the fire. The radiant red and orange, dancing in the wind while kids swayed around, fumbling on top of one another. A sea of strangers. The burning of that first drink. The glow of his devilish eyes across the way, watching me fall into the arms of intoxication, poisoning myself with

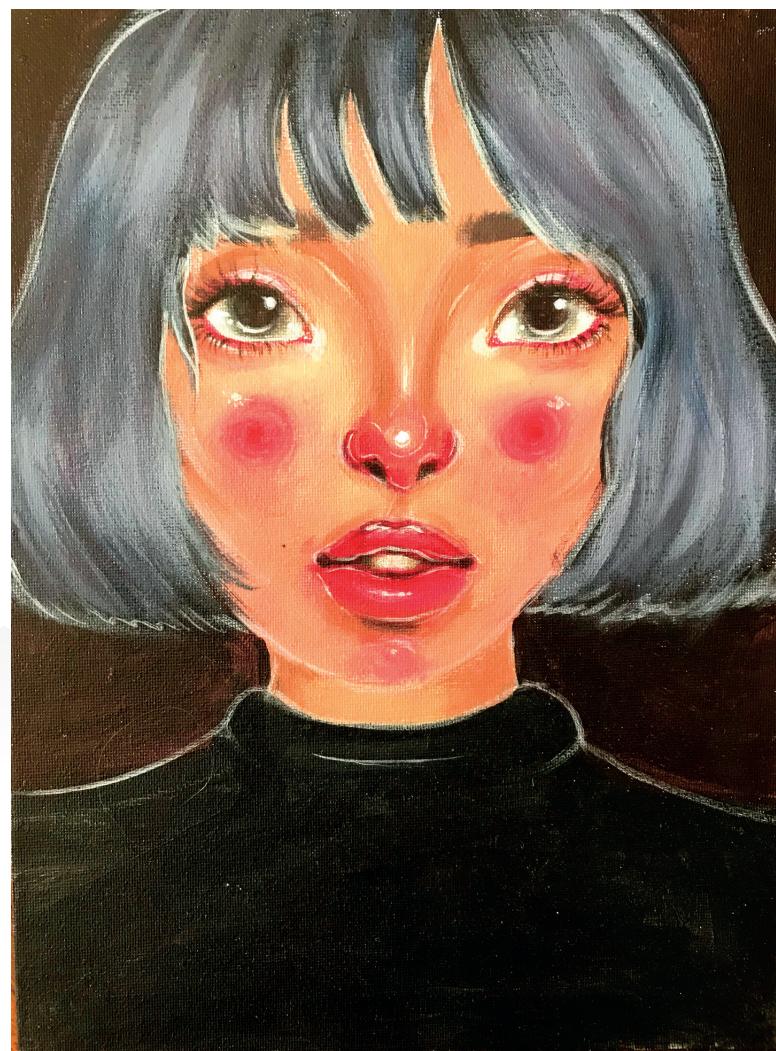
the fire, making it easy for him. And then there was nothing.

The next morning I woke up alone in a tent. I could taste the ashes of unfamiliarity, the burn of certainty. Still too drunk to drive, I sat in the passenger seat as my so-called “friend” drove us back to our dorms. Black and blue bruises lay there silently like cold coal, whispering the secret of the night my mind was keeping a slur of nothingness. So there I sat, all the way back, replaying the fire, unraveling the truth, crumbling alone from the terrible company of the night.

I remembered my grandma Juana. Did she also drink the fire and become someone else’s easy prey or did she willingly have an affair? Was her daughter sold or escaping the wrath of punishment from which she was born into. Control. Who has it? Is it written in our history, played out again and again like a broken record. Are we defined by the ones who define us? The manipulators or abusers, the strong over the weak. Was I weak? Did I ask for help; did I scream for someone or something to save me? Did

Juana? Did Maria, as she burned in her backyard, or did she figure it was her time to go, embraced by the flames? Did Domingo swallow a piece too big to chew because he was hungry or because life is sometimes too much to swallow? Did my father ask for help, as he watched a tribe turn their backs when he needed them the most, or when he watched the fire engulf his home, his mother’s home, or her mother’s home? Did my mother when her dad found someone new? Where was my savior? Where were the elephants, with the strength of their trunks to run through the fire, spit water at the flames and make them vanish, to cool the burns of life? Fire water. How do you put out a fire that is in water? That burns you from within. Didn’t my Great grandfather teach me I was more, how I could outsmart the wicked; that I could outsmart the fire?

The burning never really ends. The fire jumps from you to your daughter or son, and then to your granddaughter or grandson, and forever burns the smoke of the ones before us. ●



Look at Me

TATUM SMITH

Tatum Smith, a freshman at MiraCosta College, plans to continue her education in biology and/or psychology while pursuing her interest in art. From an early age, Tatum has always loved to study and paint faces. She uses exaggerated colors and expressions in her work to convey feelings and emotions.

Calendar Covid

HELEN LEINANI HIGHLAND-COSLOW

Helen LeiNani Highland-Coslow resides on a small family farm in Vista, California. She is a forty-six-year-old wife and mother of four. She is working to get her PhD in English/Literature. One of her many goals is to become an English professor.

March- Here we go Marching into this pandemic.
Time off from school and work.
Much needed break if you ask me.

April- Not so much April rain, even though we need it.
Still it's nice to be home, school is different.
Zoom is how we educate, separately.

May- Well May I please go outside? A resounding "No" is heard throughout the cosmos. Don't worry it'll be over soon. But it wasn't, stay inside some more.

June- No June Bugs this year. I haven't seen even one.
Is it summer yet? Honestly I can't tell any more.
Where has all the toilet paper gone? I kinda need it.

July- Really? No 4th of July celebration? No cookouts, no barbecues, no fireworks at home? I haven't seen my family in months. I miss everyone. I'm getting lonely.

August- Where is my August sun? I'm getting stir crazy.
Who is allowed to go outside, anyone? Everyone's getting sick. I just want to be with somebody, anybody.

September- Schools about to start, it's September. How on earth is education going to happen? Will we never be together again? I miss in person school. PJs are fun to wear all day.

October- My October autumn sky, it's almost time for Halloween. What do you mean you're canceling Halloween? No trick-or-treating, no costumes. Only scary Netflix movies at home. I miss my family.

November- Election madnesses November 4th. No Thanksgiving holiday family time this year. Stay 6 feet apart, wear your mask, stay home, save lives. Instead we learn about the indigenous people and what really happened.

December- Finally it's cold, December weather. People are getting so sick. I have lost many friends to COVID-19. The Christmas holiday weighs heavy on my heart. So many people are failing in school. Many won't graduate, Zoom isn't that cool.

Here We Go

HELEN LEINANI HIGHLAND-COSLOW

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She's forty-five years old.
She has four kids.
She's been married three times.
She's too fat.
She's on welfare.
She's dyslexic.
She's mixed.
She can't start college now.

Her life is too busy.
Her family will suffer.
Her goals are too high.
Her work will be outdated.
Her husband will leave her.
Her health is bad.
Her experiences won't be useful.
Her life will change.

My choices are my own.
My life is limitless.
My struggles are real.
My God lives in me.
My childhood won't define me.
My bruises have healed.
My bones have mended.
My hands can create.

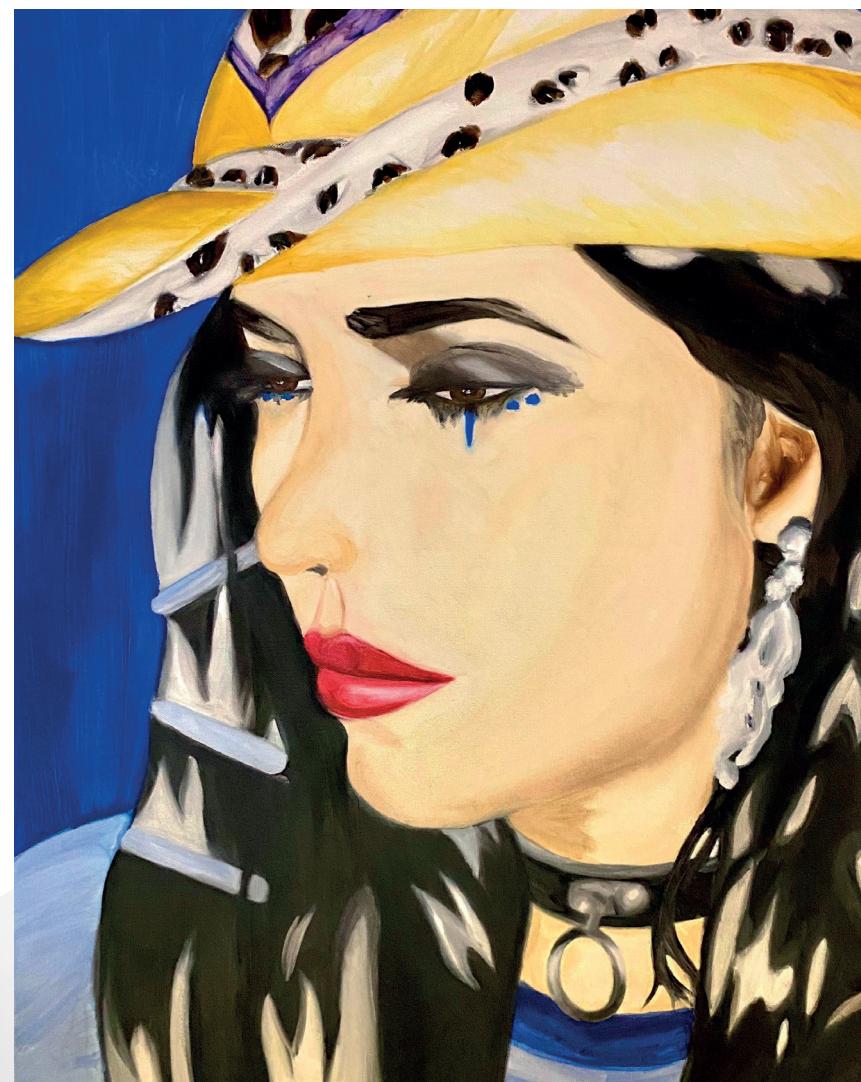
I am the future.
I am so strong.
I shall forge ahead.
I have unmeasurable grit.
I will get my PhD.
I will win a Nobel.
I can transcend.
I am doing it all.

Even in this pandemic
Here we go.

Self Portrait

TATUM PERRY

Tatum Perry is a conceptual artist born and raised in Southern California. Now having an Associate's Degree from MiraCosta College, Perry plans on getting their Bachelor's and Master's degree in Fine Arts. Perry focuses on themes of contradictions and conflicts throughout their artwork.



To the Decorations

BRENNA HUGHBANKS

Brenna Hughbanks is a Theatre Education major here at MiraCosta College. She is the Gender and Sexuality Alliance president for this year. In May of 2021, she will be graduating with an Associate's Degree in Theatre Arts. "To the Decorations" is inspired by feelings of helplessness and lost time.

To the decorations we don't hang anymore,
 I'm sorry
 That you sit in some shitty Walmart box
 With dust collecting on top of it.
 I'm sorry
 That you have to stare through the clear plastic siding
 To all of the other decorations
 In their own shitty boxes
 For holidays not even in the same season as you.
 I'm sorry.
 Your vibrant colors will never fade,
 Worn away from the sunlight
 That only hits one side.
 I swear
 Your presence is dearly missed.
 I swear
 You brought such light into the house.

I swear
 I'll see you next year,
 Or the year after that,
 Even if it's only through shitty clear plastic.
 I can't hang you up
 Not by myself.
 I can't hang you up
 Because I don't know where you go.
 I can't hang you up
 Because Mom can't help me anymore.
 So I'm sorry.
 That you sit there.
 Nestled in shitty Walmart boxes.
 I miss you.
 And I'm sure Mom does, too.

Regretfully, I Still [XXXX] So

ALEXANDRIA HUNT

If only I could have told you,
oh rotten seed, of how
your triumphs will be mere
insignificant worms. And
if only I could have told you,
oh mangy rat, of how
your failures will laugh loudly
with serrated teeth.

But would you believe me? “Why, yes,”
you would say; why else
would time be wasted on you?
Time, who’s disappointed.
But would you believe me? “No. No!”
you would also say, because
thinking of the future hurts
worse than knives.

But even so,
I wish I could say
that tomorrow is clear and
that Earth’s gravity doesn’t weigh so heavily.
But even so,
I wish I could smile.
Say, “You will be fine.
Cross my heart and hope to die.”

If we could
talk, as hummingbirds instead of
as parasites and leeches, you
would hold your breath out of habit.
If we could
laugh, like carnivorous spotted hyenas,
then I would teach you
to be loud and how to wail.

But what would I say?
I could lie, tell you
that the lions aren’t frothing
at the mouth, anymore. Or
I could lie and say, “It’s
better, now. Promise.” But I
won’t; hyenas we may be,
yet we still deserve happiness.
Vermin we may be, but
we still deserve some reality.

It is uncontested, this truth,
but so is the answer
you so wish for and
fear of hearing. Rot spills
off our flesh, carrion is
torn into shreds, and vultures
screech out their condemnation. It
is, thus, embedded into bone—
dirty and red until forcefully
bleached and dried—even if,
in reality, it’s terribly uncertain.

“Not yet. But, I think,
slowly, that it’s starting to.”
Not yet. Not yet. Not
yet, yet that light in
the distance casts such an
attractive and bold glow, the
likes of which we crave
without realizing and without abandon.



Solitude

SYDNEY ROSSMAN

Sydney Rossman is a scientist studying biotechnology who graduated from MiraCosta's biomanufacturing baccalaureate program in 2020.

Though she keeps busy with work and graduate school projects, she always finds time for photography. These photos represent her escape from the quarantined world and the solitude she finds when on an adventure.

A Nurse's Tale

CHRISTINA INZUNZA

Christina is a graduate of the MiraCosta Social & Behavioral Sciences AA degree program. She continues as a student to strengthen her twenty-year career in Human Relations. "A Nurse's Tale" is an observer's perspective of a beloved nurse's decompression phase, after a three-day rotation during the pandemic.

How calm the waters of numbness flow,
as she drifts on her back,
the only way to survive

becoming more alive when the mask peels off
just long enough for her dented face
to hit a dry, cool pillow.

Morning comes in the afternoon
eyes never white,
red tints of incoherency,
blurs the date on her wrist watch

TV, iphones, videos
presumed assumptions
trapped in her mind
summon her to go outside.

The sun refreshes her body
like a cool pair of powder free gloves
fresh and new,
though her patients stick to her like sweaty latex fingers

unable to wash off the compassion,
or scrub the fear and anger
that stains the mirror,

but sleep offers
desperate relief
like a long awaited call from a missing husband.

The free days are lovely
but the night before
dangles anxiety.

The terror of the contagious
is greater than
the fear of an injurious mistake.

A prayer of strength to prop up the givers
who stand in the gap of science and miracles

pulling each wonder towards each other until both are
set free from the pain that brought them together.

Afterlife Is Closed

CHRISTINA INZUNZA

Christina is a graduate of the MiraCosta Social & Behavioral Sciences AA degree program—earned during her twenty-year career as a Human Resources manager. This story touches the issue of hidden depression.

Christina encourages us to engage with the broader world around us as it can bring pleasant surprises.

She steps up onto the curb in front of the storefront windows that are covered in doomsday insurance ads. She finds her reflection in a small gap between posters and adjusts her mask before ringing the doorbell. The receptionist swings the glass door open and greets her with unnecessary delight, “Good morning, Maggie! Let’s take your temperature.”

During the brief wait, Maggie reviews her lazy brown ponytail in the window and realizes it matches the effort of her scuffed black Payless pumps. When she hears, “You’re good to go,” she enters a large room that’s sectioned off by cubicles with new taller plexiglass dividers. The sound of morning greetings and acrylic nails tapping on computer keys seem to do a duet with the smell of bitter coffee and recently applied musky perfume. Maggie settles into her cubicle and rips off her mask even though she’s not supposed to. Every day the same. Trapped in a sort of déjà vu loop.

One day, the routine is interrupted by a low-grade fever. After a trip to the drive-through testing site, it’s confirmed she has contracted the same virus that has forced her to be more alone than ever. Unimpressed, Maggie welcomes the excuse to not have to go into the office. What she doesn’t expect is for this sickness to progress violently, se-

ducing her thoughts to sink deeper into the cavity of her loneliness.

She starts to weaken and fade like the final kissing scene of a Hollywood classic. Her last breath, heavily wrapped in a painful veil of darkness, travels back up her throat while passing a field of spikes. She exhales into unconsciousness.

In an instant, a blaring white light cuts through the darkness exposing a place that looks a lot like her childhood backyard. The smell of freshly cut grass fills her soul with memories of inflatable pools and fruit bowls with sugar. A familiar pair of old metal swings rock back-and-forth in opposite directions, two indivisible children gleefully pushing them. Oddly enough, what seems like heaven’s majestic pearly white gates stands only a few feet away from the swings. The blinding light races to Maggie from the other side, only to come to a dead halt at the gate’s touch. She cautiously approaches the gates with great wonder. She can almost feel the light responding to all her fears of being unqualified for her earthly life. She reaches the front gates and finds a small yellow sticky note containing a message written in purple gel ink, “Afterlife is closed, come back later.”

Maggie hears the creaking sound of the old swing and as she turns towards that direction, she sees a well-groomed thirty-

something-year-old man dressed in a sharp white, fitted suit, sitting on one of the swings. He pats the adjacent swing with his manicured hand, motioning her to come take a seat.

As she cautiously complies she asks, “Am I dead?”

He responds, “First, let me take your temperature.”

He pulls out a contactless thermometer and shoots it at her forehead.

“I’m sorry, but I can’t let you in. You have a fever,” he says. “It seems this little coronavirus has a transcendental effect.”

Not certain what to do, Maggie remains still. The man proceeds in a slightly flamboyant manner, “You’re always only one choice away from changing your life. You have more control than you think, honey.”

He then invites her to forget about everything for a moment and just swing. So, she does. She kicks her legs up into the air as the swing flies higher and higher, until she disappears into the blue heaven above.

Instead of finding heaven, however, she finds herself balancing on the ledge of a bridge overlooking an angry riverbed. Big rain drops smack her forehead. Confused about these recent events, and saddened that she is somehow back in the real world, she decides to make a choice that will change

her life forever. After a pause of numbness, she lunges confidently forward into the mysterious dark waters in hopes to start over in another life. This life, after all, has been a complete failure in her mind.

As she falls to her (second?) death, she catches a quick glance of the beautiful dark waters sparkling against the light from the street lamps above. Just before her body slams against the rolling current of her fatal bath, she notices two tiny white paws struggling to break through the surface nearby.

The stinging pain of the impact knocks her unconscious for a few seconds. When Maggie realizes she’s not dead, she remembers the helpless pup and resolves to battle her way back up to try and rescue him.

When she finally breaks through the violent waves, she finds herself sitting on her couch, drenched in dirty water, holding this little Jack Russel mix tight in her arms. She gently pets the little heart-shaped spot on his hip. Her heart begins to pull apart as it makes room for another living creature. The buckets of gratitude and unconditional love she feels are beyond anything she ever felt she deserved. Exhausted, she lays down on the couch next to her new friend and falls into a deep sleep.

The next morning, the clatter of the morning dumpster truck rouses her from her

“ Instead of finding heaven, however, she finds herself balancing on the ledge of a bridge overlooking an angry riverbed.

slumber. The same soft PJ's she wore when she was diagnosed cling to her form—dry and clean—as she lies safe in her bed. She remembers every recent moment as if it truly happened but wonders if it did. She then remembers her little champ and gets up quickly, only for her body to force her back down. She remembers she doesn't feel well. Carefully, she walks to the living room and stares at the dry couch that shows her no evidence of a wet dog ever having been there. She sits on that couch and breaks down in tears, mourning the end of what she felt was a new beginning.

A few days pass. Maggie stands in silence in front of a cheap Walmart floor mirror, remembering the words of the man in white from her dream. And like that surreal moment on the bridge, she makes a choice that will change her life. She puts on her favorite blue knitted sweater, combs her hair, grabs her face-mask, and goes outside in

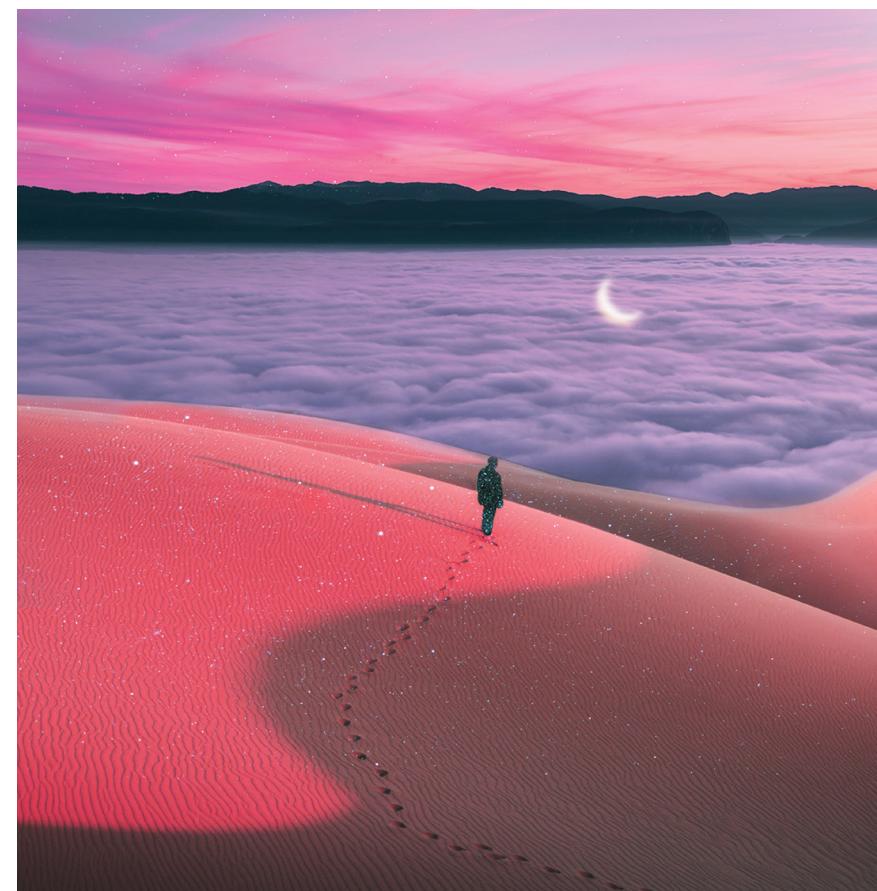
hopes of finding . . . a new-*new* beginning. Maybe she'll find it in the sun, or in the wind, or even perhaps in a neighbor. After all, maybe she did have more control than she previously thought.

No sooner has she reached the sidewalk from her front door when she spots a familiar dog vigorously tugging on his owner's leash to get to her. She kneels down and notices a heart-shaped spot on his hip. The dog wags his tail frantically and licks her face as if it was peanut butter. Caught up in the moment, a sweet voice from above interrupts the joyous reunion, “Wow, I've never seen him react that way before! He really likes you.” Maggie quickly stands up, wipes her face and meets the warmth of this man's smiling eyes. The moment is followed by an invitation to join him on a walk with his dog, who he refers to as Champ. Unpracticed, Maggie smiles back and mumbles, “Uh, sure.” ●

Mindful

YEYA MILLAN

Yeya Millan received a BA in Human Development from Cal State San Marcos in Spring 2017. She is currently working on a certificate for Video and Media Design at MiraCosta College. *Mindful* is about struggling to find peace within and turning to the universe for guidance.



It's the Most Wonderful Time of the Year

MITZI ISHIOKA

Mitzi Ishioka is a San Diego native who decided to attend MiraCosta after changing careers and pursue a field in medicine as a physician. The inspiration for this piece came as a cathartic way to honor her mom who passed away from ovarian cancer in November of 2018.

The smell of pine and peppermint filled the air outside Westfield Mall as joyous carols played through the speakers. Bustling crowds of people leisurely bobbing in and out of stores angered my already annoyed mother.

"The mall JUST opened and it's already so busy. There's nowhere to park!" Disdain filled my mother's eyes as she scoured the quickly filling parking lot. I could always tell when she was mad by the way she drove. Quick accelerations, sudden stops, and sharp turns made the seatbelt dig into my collarbone. I shared a knowing glance with my two younger brothers as our mother zipped into a parking spot. My dad simply sighed in the passenger seat.

Keep the peace at all costs. Don't do anything that will cause a scene. Maybe it will be different this time.

My mother didn't like crowds. I don't know why. My best guess is that it made her undiagnosed anxiety worse. She was not used to paying full price for items she could get at a steep discount on her Saturday garage sale escapades. She loved the art of haggling and getting something at a cheaper cost than its actual value. It was a rare aspect of life that she felt like she could control. Therefore, we almost never shopped at the mall as haggling is largely frowned upon in that setting. The

mall was also too normal for my dysfunctional family, like it was something only reserved for white, happy families in Macy's commercials. Yet last minute Christmas shopping needed to be done, so off we went.

As if our family didn't stand out enough, my mother's furrowed brow and pursed lips contrasted sharply with the happy smiles and cheerful eyes of store employees and giddy shoppers. Everyone knew the rule: stay close to her at all times. Like little ducklings, we followed her into each store, temporarily pausing to look at toys that caught our eyes before scurrying back under her watchful gaze. Slowly, my brothers started to relax and found themselves playing with toys. It was Christmas, after all. They became louder and more boisterous. I surveyed my mother's body language. Tense. As they started to laugh and joke around, I shot a warning glance to Diego.

Stop goofing off. You're making her mad. Do you really want her to start yelling at us in public?

He was the second oldest, so he should know better. They softened their giggles and moved to a different part of the store. I rolled my eyes and stayed close to my mother's side, lingering next to a baby blue sweater.

Terrible twos. More like stupid sixes and foolish fours! They never listen to me.

Don't they know that they have to respect their elders? I'm almost eight years old!

"Do you like that sweater? We can get it for you . . . if you want." She hesitated with her words, as if unsure how to proceed. "How much is it?" My mother's voice zapped me back to reality.

"Oh, no," I stammered. "I mean, it's nice and everything. I don't really like the design of it. It's just not my style." I had already seen the price tag. While on the sale rack, the sweater still cost \$28. Not worth the exasperated gasp and angry speech about department store prices.

"Oh, okay. Do you want to go to Claire's? Maybe we can get you new earrings," she said with a smile. Relaxation washed over me like a warm breeze. If she was happy, I could be too.

"Okay, that sounds like a good idea." Claire's was pretty cheap and it would make my mother happy knowing she got something for me for Christmas.

"Tell your brothers to stay with your father," she said coolly as she walked by. I quickly told my brothers where we were going and to meet us at Claire's in fifteen minutes. She was already waiting outside the store, so I had to move fast. Once together, she turned on her heel and started walking across the mall. I was used to the brisk pace

as she wasn't the kind of woman to dilly-dally. No words were spoken as we made our way through the crowds. Seas of red and green clothes whirled by as we made our way through the crowd. She put her hand down; instinctively, I reached up and grabbed it. Getting lost was one of her biggest fears—for her and for her children. I always assumed it was because of her constant need for control, but that was just speculation. Maybe she had a bad experience as a child in her native country of Argentina. Or perhaps her love for her children was so great that the fear of losing them would mean the end of the world. This hypothesis was more likely true as she had lost her sister to a car accident when they were young. I doubt her heart could survive another loss like that, and that meant she needed to be in absolute control at all times.

I wasn't very interested in new earrings but I showed enough interest to convince my mother that they were a perfect Christmas present. A pair of small, but elegant studs caught my eye at the corner of the store. I flipped the small, purple packaging.

Perfect! Only \$10.99. Expensive enough to show that she cares, but not so much so that she'll give me grief about—

"I told you not to buy anything else for them!" My mother's booming voice filled the

“My world was growing darker and darker by the second. Nothing but a spotlight on my parents existed in this moment.

store, interrupting my thoughts and obliterating my hopes for a peaceful day. Dread consumed me as I peeked my head around the corner. My dad, in his usual Japanese way, didn't address the verbal attack from my mother. "You never listen to me! You never listen to anything I say!" Her thick accent filled the small store we were all standing in. The walls were inexplicably shrinking.

In his broken English, my dad responded, "What's the problem? He wanted a present for Christmas. What's the big deal?"

My dad is quintessentially Japanese—stoic, quiet, and unassuming. That is the Japanese way. Our family name, Ishioka, means "rock mountain" and he embodied it to a tee. Unmoving, stubborn, and taciturn were qualities I grew to love about him. We didn't need words to communicate. This was how he communicated with his family and he inadvertently taught his kids how to do the same. My mother felt differently. His 5'10" stature, tall for Japanese, was no match for my 5'2" mother.

"I told you not to buy him anything else! You never do as I say! You just always want to be the fun parent when I'm the one

stuck with having to discipline and raise them!" She was only getting louder.

They left the store but continued to argue outside. My dad doesn't usually argue back or raise his voice, but for whatever reason, today was different. Though their voices were getting louder, I couldn't hear them anymore. Time came to a painful halt as they continued to argue about God knows what. I could feel my brothers next to me, internalizing another fight between our parents. They didn't say a word. Strangers stopped talking, slowing their strides to capture this spectacle unfurling before them. But I hardly noticed them. My world was growing darker and darker by the second. Nothing but a spotlight on my parents existed in this moment. Everything I had tried so hard to control, the peace I tried so hard to maintain, was blowing up before my eyes. I finally saw the culprit of this argument—a toy car in a plastic bag.

"I'm leaving! And I'm never coming back! Never!"

My mother spun on her heel and marched away, this time faster and more aggressively than before. My dad, fed up with

the ordeal, huffed off in the other direction. His normally passive persona was nowhere to be seen. My brothers and I looked at each other, knowing something had to be done but unsure of what to do. They both darted after my dad. I started after them, longing to also choose the parent who never yelled at me, the parent who would take me and my brothers out to eat for Saturday breakfast, the parent who would let us play video games on weekdays. He was the one who had to work six days a week, the one who made dinner every Monday night on his only day off, the one who didn't care how expensive a Christmas present was, so long as it made his child happy. The one who stormed off.

My gaze shifted. My mom—the parent who yelled at us for the most trivial mistakes,

the parent who wasn't afraid to throw shoes whenever we disobeyed, the parent who demanded absolute obedience from her family at all times—was angrily storming off. My mom was the one who was always at home, making sure we did our homework, forcing us into showers when we got dirty, yelling at us to go to bed, and waking us up in the morning for school. She was the one who cooked for us the other six days of the week, the one who made our doctor's appointments, and the one who took care of us when we were sick and needed her most. She was now alone.

Maybe I can somehow fix this. I started to run down the hall. *Maybe it's not too late.* Maybe. ●



In the Dark

M. CLAUDIO PEREZ

M. Claudio Perez is a Filipino-American artist, currently taking Studio Art classes at MiraCosta College. She holds a Masters in Library and Information Science from San Jose State University. Prior to becoming an artist, she worked as a public librarian in California for over thirty years and was the Youth and Family Services Program Manager of San Diego Public Library until her retirement in 2017.

Volado

OSCAR JIMINEZ

Before leaving for his parent's hometown in Jalisco, Mexico, Oscar Jiminez came across *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* and fell in love. An urge he always had in his blood now had a name: Gonzo!

Inspired by his favorite artists and media, he finally found his artistic voice.

Growing up in Mexico, we didn't really see a lot of happy endings. Drug dealers would frequently show up, sometimes at our door, sometimes decapitated in front of the town hall. The town fervently worshipped a church that wouldn't get their hand out of politics. But it would be here—sy to imply the church is involved in crime, and I'm a man that goes to mass every Sunday, mainly because of the face I'd lose if I didn't. I would usually stand outside because I didn't like how crowded it was indoors or the way the collection basket would shake in my face. Sometimes I would throw in a bill and get my own change from the basket. This seemed to annoy the lady holding it, but I'm sure Jesus wouldn't mind.

Growing up my family didn't have much, so I would go to the arcade and search under the machines for coins. The best machine was always *Street Fighter*; it was close to the ground and the big kids couldn't get their chubby hands underneath. I would usually score enough for a sandwich before being shooed away by some asshole trying to hit me with a newspaper. Sometimes he missed, and other times I would read the day's headline with a smack. Today: *El Universal's* "Pablo Escobar Wanted Dead Or Alive."

I split with my coins and a torta ahogada took their place. All of my friends

were at the Loncheria. They were a relatively harmless, yet mischievous, group of four. To my left sat Chato, a twelve-year-old who looked like Tony Soprano when his mouth was full. In front of him was his little brother, Miguel, who was eight, picking out the onions from his burger. Miguel never really talked. You could catch him singing sometimes, but he would stop as soon as you noticed. Last of us all was Jesus. Jesus, how do you live up to a name like that? Everyone was done with their meal by the time Miguel had completely rid his burger of onions.

Soon after, we were now gathered in the town plaza, in front of the church across from the oldest bar in town, La Casa Verde. We each had our shoe shining box except for Miguel, who would share his brother's equipment. Chato wouldn't lend him the 500 pesos he needed to buy his own, at least not until his shining skills became less lousy. Besides, shining shoes was just the front. Running errands is where the real money was. Maybe you wanted a cigarette, but you didn't want to leave your warm bench. Maybe the day was too hot and your thirst could only be quenched with an ice-cold Coke. *People always need something*, that was the motto. And if the plaza wasn't up for paying for favors, we would pass the time gambling. *Volados* added the extra layer of risk that kept

us alive. The feeling of losing a day's work to chaos really got our blood pumping. This inevitably led to our second favorite pastime: fighting. Chato swung first. "I'm not cheating," I tried to reason, but it was pointless. Jab, hook, uppercut. I had practiced this in front of the mirror for days. We swung at each other for a good ten seconds before the brawl was interrupted by the tall shadow of a large adult. Like a farmer checking the clouds, we all looked up.

It was my uncle, Luis. He was a truck driver who could get his hands on anything—Playstations, BB guns, fayuca, you name it—he was now back from his haul. He demanded we stopped fighting; it wasn't the right place or time. He then got on his knee and asked me for some smokes. We all gave him a smoke and in return he flashed a ten-peso coin. When I reached for it, he flipped it. Revealing both sides to have the same eagle. He lit a match on his brown cowboy boots from Texas. He only smoked Faros which made his voice rough and coarse. Through the thick smoke he exhaled "Be careful who you try to fool, cause you might end up fooling yourself." He tossed us the coin and walked away.

"There you are, Luis! How was the drive from New Mexico?"

"Hard and long," Luis responded. Both men chuckled as they walked into the bar.

Excited to try out the coin, we made our way down the Avenida. We knew of a man who was very gullible, so we walked to his home with the intention of swindling him. When we arrived, we knocked on the door and, to our surprise, the town priest greeted us from the other side. He was not in his robes or his habit, but rather in short gym shorts and wearing a headband. "La juventud!" he exclaimed, letting us in. "We're going to play soccer. You kids want to join? You'll have to get out of those clothes and into something more . . . sporty."

"We actually wanted to see if you guys want to play volados," Miguel croaked. The man we came to scam, Raul, stopped looking at the leg warmers on screen and turned to face us. He seemed to be upset with the priest at first, until the priest told him he didn't invite us.

"Sure," he finally replied, turning off the TV, "We'll play a little, if you guys play with us after." Miguel agreed before any of us could voice our objections.

We began to flip a normal coin at first, so as to trick them into thinking this was a fair game. When we lost one hundred pesos, it was time to switch coins. Chato began his theatrics, coughing and wheezing heavily

until falling on the floor. The priest rushed to his aid. Touching him on his belly and asking, “Where does it hurt?” I knew that was my cue. I reached inside my pocket for the fake, but it was gone. The only thing left was a crushed-up cigarette and some tazos. Our spirits flushed down the toilet as Jesus walked out of the restroom. Like a group of altar boys during the homily, our facial expressions were all synched. We were in too deep, and we all knew it.

Chato faked a recovery, but the priest insisted that he stayed laying down. “He needs a more thorough check up,” he declared. He called Raul over and told us “Raul is a good man. He is a doctor. He studied homeopathy for six years. He will make sure you are okay.” Raul’s face lit up as he went to get his doctor’s bag.

“So,” The priest turned to us, clapping his hands with excitement, “you want to pay the 100 or do you want to play some more?” The vibes were getting nasty. I knew the only way to get out was to keep betting until chaos evened things up a little. *Maybe we could bring the debt down to twenty pesos*, I thought. Little time passed before we were in the dark, gloomy, shadowing debt of 1,000 pesos. The priest knew we didn’t have that kind of money. I began to think we were the ones being swindled. I had always thought

that I had very little to lose. I was just a young street urchin. What could they possibly want from me?

“Gambling is a sin. You don’t actually want us to pay you, right?” Chato blurted. “Plus, we don’t have that kind of money anyways.”

The priest looked around before he finally spoke, “You know, there’s more than one way you can pay me back.”

Chato interrupted again, “I’m not becoming an altar boy! My legs can’t support my weight for that long.”

“Cut it out with your nonsense. A little birdie told me that the Presidencia has a folder that belongs to me. What I need is for you to go and retrieve that folder. Do this and your debt will be cleared. And, Chato, if you’d like we can confess for gambling and pray together.”

Chato declined. *This was the way out*, I thought, *chaos had finally balanced things out*. “Sure, we’ll do it. Where can we find it?”

“Excellent! The folder will be in the room labeled ‘Evidencia.’ Once you get it, make sure no one follows you to the church. If this all goes smoothly, perhaps you could run some other ‘errands’ for me.”

We were not strangers to unusual errands, but this was something different. As we walked back to the plaza, we agreed that

“People always need something, that was the motto. And if the plaza wasn’t up for paying for favors, we would pass the time gambling.”

we would never play volados again. Now tasked with stealing files from the Presidencia, we needed a plan. We knew that at night there were only two guards at the entrance since all the employees went home at eight. We had a couple hours to burn, so to pass the time we walked to the local skatepark.

Unlike most skateparks, this one had no skateboards; los BMXers were the only tenants of this park. They always dressed in Hollister and Abercrombie and listened to Hip Hop music with bad words. We sat in the grass across from them. Biggie’s “Juicy” blared from the old stereo they’d found in the trash. We had a couple hours until D-day and I needed some rest. My eyelids felt like two heavy blankets, and I soon drifted into a haze. I was jumping from cloud to cloud towards a light. I kept looking back as if something was following me, but there was no one there. On my last jump, the cloud gave in and I fell to the pit of my stomach. I woke with a jolt, wiping sweat from my face. I looked around to see los BMXers had left. Another glance after wiping the cold from my eyes revealed only Chato next to me snoring. I flipped Chato over and slapped him awake since he was a heavy sleeper.

“Where are Miguel and Jesus?”

Yawning, Chato replied, “They went home. We’re better off anyway; they were

just gonna get in our way.” I silently agreed. I felt a strong urge to release, as I usually always do when I wake up, so I found the closest tree and gave it life.

Soon after, we hid behind some bushes and devised a plan. With a stick, I drew the Presidencia with two guards in front, “Chato you need to get the guards away from the entrance so that I could sneak in. Once in, I will get the folder and get out.”

Chato cried out, “What if you’re not out before they realize I bamboozled them and they return to their post?”

“If I’m not out by then, run away. Run as far as you can. Change your name and don’t ever look back. Move to Paris, start a family and love your children. And one day, when you are looking out to your vineyard, you’ll think, ‘Why did I leave him behind?’ And these words won’t stop the pain, but it’ll be ok. Now, let’s go.”

Chato sprinted to the guards and yelled, “Ayuda! Ayuda! Están robando la tienda de la esquina.” The guards quickly followed behind Chato as he led them to deception. I tiptoed up the stairs to where the offices were. As my head reached the last step I froze. There was a light on in the office next to the room labeled “Evidencia.” The door swung open as a man with no shirt fiddled with his keys. Finally find-

ing the right one, he unlocked the evidence room. I caught a glimpse of a woman before he walked back in and slammed the door. I crawled to the evidence room and began to look around. I needed to be quick. I'm sure the woman would need to powder her nose as well. The folder was still on the table, open, with all the contents laid out: priests and penises, Catholic and phallic, Polaroids galore. Enough to ruin a generation of childhoods. I wasn't sure if the guards were back yet, so I needed to find a different exit. The cold draft led me to an open window at the back of the Presidencia. I tried to sneak out like Snake in *Metal Gear*, but the real-life game engine added pain to the fall. I limped away as the borrachos in the alleyway stared at me. They'd probably remember me as a dream, and if they told anybody, nobody would believe them.

The glass walls of the banks down La Calle Blanca illuminated the midnight street. If you followed the smell of gunpowder you'd find laughter and cheers. The August festivals were hosted by the town church. Every Friday they would construct a tower of fireworks and light it off in front of

the church. On top of my dad's shoulders, I had the best view. Fifteen minutes of pyromaniac heaven and no washed-up security guard telling me I couldn't stand this close to the fireworks like in the States. Unfortunately, this time I was here for business, and I needed to get rid of this evidence quickly. I clutched the smooth folder and proceeded through the crowd. The smell of freshly deep-fried churros filled my nostrils. Chalino's "Nieves De Enero" echoed off the walls. Kids were standing beneath the shower of firework sparks like warriors with cardboard as their shield. Surely no one could follow me through this crowd. After a few blocks I made it to the back entrance of the church.

A solid oak door towered above me. It had a large metal ring that I slammed three times. *Thud! Thud! Thud!* The priest opened the door, he was now wearing a black dress shirt with one of those white collars. "Back for some more volados?"

I shoved the folder into his hands. "We all set?"

The priest calmly said, "Settle down. What's the big rush? Have a seat." The old wooden chair was uncomfortable, having no

lumbar support. His office smelled of incense and old wine. Two large pictures framed the walls: one of Jesus on the cross, and the other of Al Pacino in *Scarface*. "Would you like something to drink? Milk, wine?" I declined.

"I really did not expect you to succeed, but perhaps God is on your side. Tell me, are you a man of faith?" I had to lie to him, if I told him the truth this meeting could get nasty real quick.

"Of course I'm a man of faith. I come to church every Sunday. I even go to the Rosario on Friday nights."

Like a good poker player he called my bluff. "What was the mass about last Sunday?"

Luckily, I had overheard some old heads talking about the mass in the line at the Loncheria. "I believe it was about not passing judgment on others for we are all

sinners." Shocked by my correct answer he relaxed and took a sip of his milk.

With milk still on his lips he blurted, "Teach a man how to fish and you feed him for a lifetime, throw a man to the fish and they will at least have a good meal. I need help feeding some fishes."

Abruptly, the heavy oak doors swung open and a nun stumbled in. "Help! Raul is about to fight a trucker at La Casa Verde."

By the time we got there, a crowd had already formed and bookies were taking in bets. It was free entertainment at La Casa Verde, a bar notorious for cartel shootouts. However, this was no cartel business because the trucker that Raul was going to fight was my uncle, Luis. "Nobody needs to make a fool of themselves," cautioned the priest with his homily voice. ●

Mia

DAWN LAGMAY

Dawn Lagmay is a first-generation daughter of Filipino immigrants. In fall 2021, she plans to study Political Science at UCSD in hopes of working towards a career in policy writing.

For those who are still learning to love themselves, she would like you to know, she is with you.

I spent five years of my life wondering if self-love and eating could ever coexist. After every meal, it was the same routine: My fingers violated my mouth, as they desperately tried to release the contaminants of my stomach. I grasped the rims of the toilet seat, like the arms of a teddy bear I had once adored during my childhood. Flush. Teardrops descended from my cheeks, melting and molding my flesh into thick skin. I splashed water onto my face and wiped off any evidence of a bulimic from my mouth. You're almost there, I reassured myself.

I spent five years of my life being conquered by my measurements. From the circumference of my wrists, the girth of my calves, to the prominence of my collarbones— I was always in constant calculation. No matter how much I lost on the scale, I never gained an ounce of validity.

*I spent five years of my life in a daydream.
Dreaming of the days of being light enough to be swept up and carried away like a feather
Dreaming of the days of a concave rib-cage and a gap between my thighs
Dreaming of the days of being in a body that was worthy of being loved by others
Loving myself never occurred to be a part of my recovery. I discovered that only distracting myself could ever subside my self-loathing*

*But, my love, you are my favorite distraction
you are the comfort of a warm home-cooked meal
you are the blanket that wraps around me tight
you are the cold spoons to relieve my puffy eyes
you are the floor that holds my weight if I ever decide to get out of bed*

*Your love cannot replace the love I need to give myself;
but your love wakes up smiling next to me
but your love kisses the scars
but your love makes me believe;
that if someone can love the ruins of my body this way;
then maybe one day I can too.*

Death, Mortality, and Immortality

JENNIFER LEDFORS



Jennifer Ledfors has enjoyed drawing, painting and the creative process since high school, but has only recently pursued a formal education in creative arts. Inspiration for her drawings published in Tidepools came from studies in a drawing and composition class that is part of the Studio Arts Associate Degree program.

Don't Call Me Ching Chong

AMANDA LEE

As I exit from the dingy high school classroom, I am met with the blinding light of the sun. I try to navigate through the throngs of people swarming to get to the lunch tables as I hear a faint call from behind me. My ears perk up, like a dog who hears his owners returning home, and suddenly all the other commotion around me fades and I can hear the faraway chant: “Ching Chong. Ching Chong!” I quickly try to block out the words as my head instinctively ducks down and my eyes stare at the black tops of my shoes, scurrying to find my lunch table or any safe haven.

I think to myself, *I didn't hear that correctly.*

Though, I'm sure I did.

Then I think, *They weren't talking to me.*

There's no way they could be calling out to me.

Abruptly, my thoughts are interrupted and I feel a strong pull on my arm—a pull with enough force to swing my entire body around. As my eyes are forced to look up, I am met with the small but menacing stature of our school's most feared campus guard: Ms. Howard. Before I can speak my confusion, Howard barks out, “Young lady. I have been calling and calling you. Don't act like you didn't hear me. I know you did.” I can

feel the press of her acrylic fingernails digging into my arm as she continues to hold me tightly. My thoughts are racing and I try to find the words to respond. Before I can, Howard goes on, switching focus to my shorts, or rather the length of my shorts.

“These are too short. You're in violation of the dress code.”

“Oh, I am?” I respond.

“Clearly. Report to the front office. Change your clothes and next time I call you, don't make me chase you down the damn courtyard,” she spat bitterly. She pushes me in the direction of the office and stands with her arms folded in front of her as if saying “Don't try me” with her body language.

As I make my way through the long hall of the front office, I try to process what just happened. *Did Howard—a campus supervisor and a person of color—really just try to get my attention by screaming ‘Ching, Chong’ after me? For a dress code? No way,* I thought.

But as my breathing shakes and my hands tremble, I know that I am lying to myself. The incident rattles me to my core as I realize that after being publicly and openly referred to by a racial slur my first instinct was to dismiss it, as if it never even happened, as if I did not want to believe what was true.

With this clarity, I begin to think back to times when I've felt called out or

uncomfortable by my peers. *How many of those times were incidents involving my race?* I think about my freshman math class. I was in geometry, a class that was “advanced” for a ninth-grader, and I think about the upper-classmen who used me for my “Asian math powers.” While the phrase is supposed to resemble a form of superpower, I never once found glory in it. I remember being the only freshman in my entire class and being looked to as if I had all the answers for whatever equation was thrown at us by our teacher. I remember being overwhelmed by my first high school math class and having no one to turn to for help because I was “the Asian” and that meant that I was good at math. However, I'm not really that good at math.

I never allowed myself to be particularly bothered by this because my peers were calling me smart and that was a good thing, right?

As I recount this experience in my mind, I plainly realize that the stereotype of Asian students excelling at math—the stereotype that was metaphorically pinned to my sweater—hindered my actual learning experience for geometry as a whole. Without the support of my peers throughout the class, I struggled immensely. If I needed help with a difficult problem, my classmates wouldn't help me because they'd assume that I would

be providing them with all the answers. If we were assigned group quizzes, I was always expected to complete the quiz myself and fill in my group's names—all due to the blatant misconception that I knew what I was doing because math is “easy” for an Asian.

I think back to my middle school years, and how every day my friend would tell me: “Wow, you're the prettiest Asian I've ever seen,” or, “You're so pretty, for an Asian.” Every single day of seventh grade, this is what I was told.

I tried not to think too much of it; it was a compliment, right? Who doesn't enjoy being complimented? So, every day, I would smile and say, “Thank you,” and tell myself that this was a kind thing for her to say.

Now, I see that I was lying to myself. It was not a kind thing to say. By throwing my race into the “compliment” my friend implies that Asian people are usually unattractive and I am the anomaly.

Looking back, I recognize the small, shy smile I'd paste onto my face in response to the backhanded praise was not “shy” out of bashfulness or modesty like I believed it to be at the time, but one of awkward dissociation. I never claimed, nor wanted to claim, the title of “prettiest, for an Asian.” Although, I still didn't understand the full weight behind the phrase at the time. I didn't

see that this casual remark was actually a deeper dig into my cultural roots and especially slanderous toward all Asian people.

I think of my sixth-grade math class, when Morgan Sammis blatantly cheated off of my unit exam and then told me that she's "sure to get an A now." The betrayal burns fresh in my mind as I recall watching her submit my work as her own after spending the lunch period prior telling me that she liked my highlights and that she thought I was smart.

I wonder if this too was an act decided upon based on my Asian background. I think back to elementary school now, when my best friend, her twin brother, and her brother's best friend all called me by the nickname "pancake face."

I remember the very first time they said it, and I could feel the hot tears welling in my eyes, but I refused to let them fall or to let my friends see that they had just poked

fun at my biggest insecurity as a young Korean girl. I remember giving a weak laugh in return and then asking my dad to pick me up from the playdate early.

I kept telling myself that it was a funny joke and they called me that because I really liked pancakes. But I knew then and I know now, I was lying to myself. They weren't referring to me as "pancake face" because of my affinity towards the breakfast food. They said it because I have a particularly flat face: a trait many Asian people have.

I've always kept this memory to myself, never wanting to outwardly admit that my own best friend could be so cruel to me—to my self-esteem. As I ponder why this is the comment that I have secretly carried with me throughout my whole adolescence, I wonder why this is the one that stings the most.

It stings the most because this was the first time I had ever felt put down and embarrassed for simply being Korean, an attribute

“ . . . my first instinct was to dismiss it, as if it never even happened, as if I did not want to believe what was true.

I've never thought twice about. Suddenly, I was too self-conscious to wear my hair tied up in a ponytail because I was insecure about the size and shape of my face and didn't want to draw any extra attention towards it.

As I recount these small moments throughout my life, I can think of a hundred other times I've heard a racial comment or forced stereotype off the top of my head. With newfound clarity, I realize that all of the little, odd remarks that have been thrown

my way share the same genetic makeup of horrible microaggressions. I never wanted to believe, or be aware of, racial naysayers targeting me. Thus, when faced with insensitive comments, I have always chosen to turn the other cheek rather than recognize that I have been micro-aggressed. Evidently, even if I wasn't paying attention, it was still happening to me and all around me—I was just too scared to see the truth. ●

Of Fish and Confetti

SHERRY MANDE

Sherry Mande is certain of only one thing: Uncertainty is timeless and will persist long after these unprecedented times.

my heart is full of confusion
or maybe it's my head
thoughts swimming around
like fish in a bowl
that's been shook
chaotic
disturbed
erratic
thoughts sinking
into the unknown
like confetti floating
and gently drifting
i sigh and find no comfort
i lay awake and un-sleeping
a restless mind swimming around
tumult of fish splashing in a bowl
exasperated as i toss and turn
while floating between
restlessness and peace
spinning rapidly
and gently
drifting
...

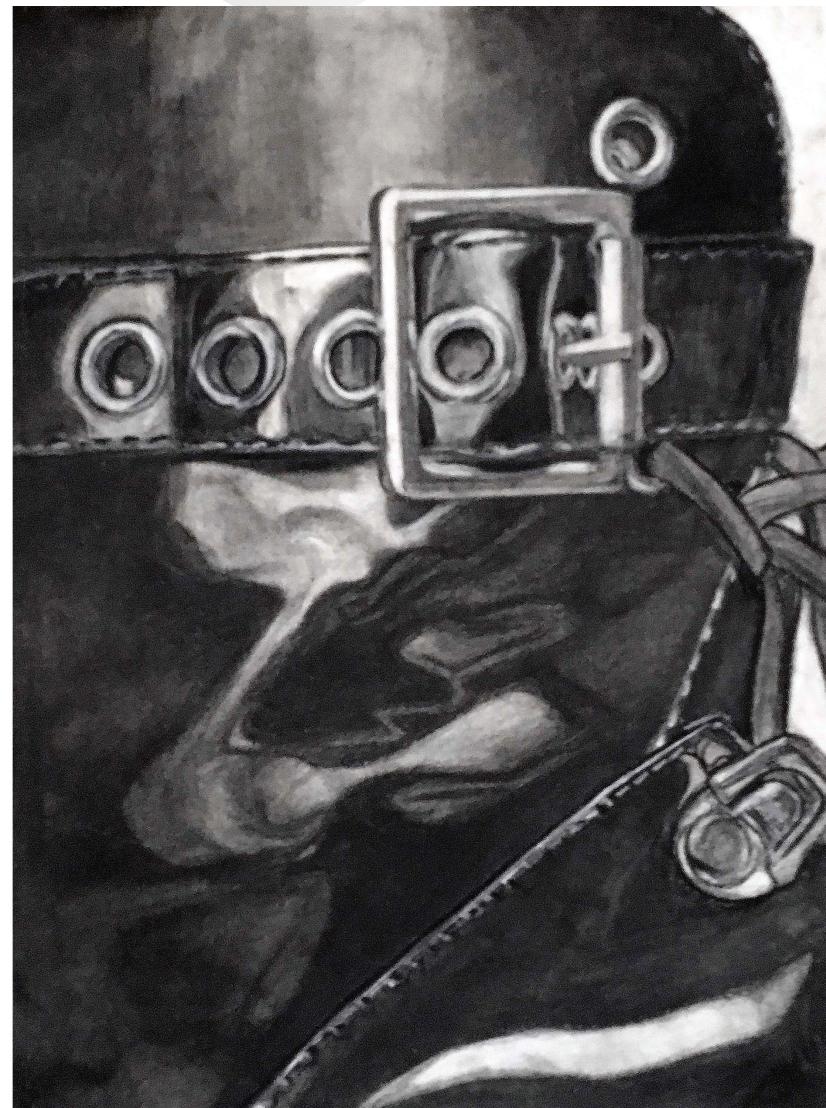
Solitude

LEXIZ MANZANO

Lexiz is a simple man who likes to fight his depression with writing and video games. Nothing more nothing less. He just wants to live a small and simple life.

I went to sleep and woke up dead / E Dubble - Changed My mind
In my solitude / Bille Holiday - Solitude
And I'm weak / AJR - Weak
I've been broken, heart's contentious / XXXTentacion - Sad
And now, as tears subside / Frank Sinatra - My Way
All alone I break / Korn - Alone I Break
This is how I disappear / My Chemical Romance - This is How I Disappear
Through the aging, the fearing, the strife / Interpol - Evil
Kinda drifting into the abstract in terms of how I see myself / Only - Nine Inch Nails
All the world I've seen before me passing by / System of a Down - ATWA
Another moment is another eternity / Killswitch Engage - The End of Heartache
Something's tearing me down and down / Pendulum - Propane Nightmares
Broken down and paralyzed / A Perfect Circle - Judith
Disconnect and self destruct / A Perfect Circle - The Outsider
I'm staring down the road my life has gone / Hopsin - Ill Mind of Hopsin 7
I'm staring at the mirror looking back at the person I hate /
From First To Last - Waltz Moore
So I smile and I say that the world is just fine, as these fucking parasites eat up my spine /
In This Moment - Roots
Goal was waiting for the world to end / Metric - Black Sheep
Now even if I lay my head down at night / Brand New - You Won't Know
I can't believe this could be the end / No Doubt - Don't Speak
And was not prepared for a dead end / Skrillex - Ease My Mind
Now I'm dead inside! / Muse - Dead Inside
A birth and a death on the same day / Fallout Boy - Twin Skeletons
My secrets are buried now from my heart and my bones /
Bring Me The Horizon - Sleepwalking
No thoughts, no prayers can bring back what's no longer there /
Grandson - Thoughts and Prayers

Every line is lyric from songs that have had impact in my life.



Czech Boot

SARAH NOVAK

Sarah Novak attended MiraCosta last spring, now San Jose State University—majoring in Graphic Design. *Czech Boot* was her first time doing art, and since then she has started exploring fine arts as a hobby. She aspires to be a UX/UI designer, but enjoys doing art in her free time.

November Rains

DANICA MORRIS

Danica Morris uses poetry as a way to express herself and write about topics she is passionate about. She

is currently double majoring in English and Psychology and plans on establishing a life full of health and happiness. Dedicated to those who were brave enough to escape the rabbit hole.

I was spiraling down hoping to meet Alice,
but when I reached the bottom I saw a
version of myself that no longer smiled when she was
met by her fears.

My head found a new place to call
home on a pillow,
eyes staring blankly above as
whispers of clouds
fought over dominance.

Walls that isolated me held conversations and were
able to keep promises and remain pure even when I
stained them with indigo violence
that left them unpolished.

The echo in the looking glass
saw a girl drained of her blush and eyes glazed over,
waiting for a touch of light to come and
bring back the force that was once
captivating and full of hopeful promises.

I wondered if I would ever find my old self again,
or if the waters of chaos had caused the
bottle of butterflies to be captured by a boat of Chesire cats who
smiled viciously while playing with mice.

I tried to catch happiness while traveling along a road that seemed to
parade me in circles, but I knew I had to return home to a place of
uncertainty, where the sun wouldn't go and the
jesters could stay afloat.

While I thought my story was over, I reminded myself that it was
just a page in which I liked the ink,
but now, as I dance along the lines of wishful thinking,
it was clear that a turn of a tune
was all that was ever needed.

I Want to Be a Woman with You

Letters to My Best Friend

KYLIE NECOCHEA

Kylie Necochea wrote this piece for Professor Hidle’s creative writing class, inspired by Ali Wong’s memoir. She wrote this about her true fifth grade feelings on this new, confusing, uninvited mark of womanhood. These letters are imagined, but all of the events, feelings, and people are real.

So, so real . . .

November 14, 2008, Age 11

Dear Marcella,
DI JUST got my period. I got home from school and was thinking about my birthday in a few days (which you are DEFINITELY invited to and I can’t wait to see you—it’s American Girl themed) and I went pee and then blood came out *in* my pee. It doesn’t look like scary horror movie blood or anything, it looks more like really watery High-C like what we have at Girl Scout meetings. My stepmom Cheryl put these fluffy things in my bathroom cabinet a few months ago and told me to “use them when needed.” At first I thought they were chocolate bars or protein bars, but let me tell you, they are *not* that. I opened one today for the first time and it unfolded like a cotton tri-fold poster, or like those planetary travel brochures we made in Mr. Vallee’s class, you know, those ones we made for each of our assigned planets for the science project? It makes sense that I was assigned Uranus. Jack and Armaan laughed at me when I was assigned Uranus. But they also laugh whenever the classroom door opens because it makes a fart sound, so I don’t really care what they say. Anyways, I remembered those packages that Cheryl put in my bathroom and after opening one of the “Always” pads—which is a weird name because I’m pretty sure there’s a

limit to its lifespan—I then opened the other box. It was full of weird cotton non-hollow tubes with dangly strings. The directions on the box said to insert one of them into one of my down-there holes to stop the blood. Did you know we have MULTIPLE holes?!

The problem is I’m not sure exactly which hole the blood is coming out of or how many holes I have down there (the American Girl book on puberty didn’t help much). I’m really not sure how the tampon works but I’m wearing one right now and I don’t think I put it in right. It’s like walking around with a knife inside me. Cheryl didn’t really tell me how to use them. You know how sometimes your mom leaves her *People* and *InTouch* magazines on the counter and there are those pictures of amazingly happy girl athletes advertising Tampax? I can’t say I relate to their enthusiasm.

My dad has been looking at me weirdly since I put the tampon in because I’ve been waddling up and down the stairs, hugging the railing like an old woman who was shot in her uterus, or ovaries? I’m shamefully unclear of my own anatomy. That “Understand Your Body” book from the nineties where all the diverse kids on the front are wearing solid-colored sweaters did not help AT ALL. And I can’t sit down very well either, I have to sit with my legs splayed out and my back

on the part of the chair where my butt is supposed to go . . . so it’s less of a “sit” and more of a “lie down,” which is not super productive for doing homework. I can feel the string dangling on my leg and the tampon is half hanging out . . . I don’t think I did this right. But I’m not about to ask Cheryl about it. I’ll wait until I see my mom this weekend.

Anyways, I heard that you got your period a little while ago (by way of your mom yelling that information out of the window of her SUV as Cheryl was walking into Target on Saturday) and thought I’d tell you that I got mine too. I guess we’re adults now. I didn’t think I’d get mine two days before my eleventh birthday, but I really hope I don’t have to wear these cotton knives inside me forever. I might use a pad next time.

Your kindergarten pal and American Girl best friend (#Samantha&MarisolForever),
 Kylie

November 18, 2008

Dear Marcella,

Update on my period: now it *is* scary horror movie blood. It’s dark and brownish and gloppy and weird. It looks like if poop were pee . . . ? But it’s not . . . I’m so confused. And I’ve been trying to wear a tampon to school since I got this period thing, but I walk super slowly to and from class and I’ve

resorted to not wearing tampons and just letting the blood come out, but I’ve been bringing a big black sweatshirt to school and tying it around my waist to make sure nobody sees the blood. The good thing is I’ve been wearing my favorite jeans so they’re dark and no one can see the blood. I’m not sure what’s going to happen when we run the mile tomorrow in P.E. . . . I might try and use one of those trifold cotton pads. But the pad package says the pads have “wings” and I have no idea what that means. I’ll update you when I find out. How is your period? What does your period blood look like?

Have you tried a tampon?

Don’t.

Thanks for coming to my American Girl birthday party!

I wanted it to be Samantha-themed, but my dad said “the Kit costume is cheaper.” We all know Samantha is a lot better, but I liked wearing Kit’s wig. I learned I’m never going to go blonde, though.

See you at the Jog-a-thon (I’m not very fast, maybe we can jog-walk together),

Kylie

November 19, 2008

Dear Marcella,

So I ran the mile today with a winged-pad on and it was the most uncomfortable

“... there are those pictures of amazingly happy girl athletes advertising Tampax? I can't say I relate to their enthusiasm.

run of my life. The underside that's all sticky and the surrounding "wings" kept sticking to the side of my leg when I ran. It was so uncomfortable that I ran an eight-minute mile which I was super unhappy about. Meanwhile, Jaydin ran a five-and-a-half minute mile. I know he's usually faster than I am, but I doubt he ever has to wear a sticky cotton glob between his legs that clings uncomfortably to his hair down there.

I'm just saying.

Have you tried a tampon yet?

DON'T.

Also update: don't wear your favorite jeans while on your period without any pe-

riod protection. The blood is never coming out of them and I need to go jean shopping this weekend, and my mom said I can't donate them to Goodwill because it would be "a crime to give that to another child."

Have a great weekend!

P.S. Why did the school DJ play Flo-Rida's "Low" at the Jog-a-thon? It seemed off brand. Also, did you know that Flo-Rida is actually FLORIDA! Like the state?! It's crazy, I know. Let's talk about it tomorrow.

I love you. Let's be friends forever.

That was less of a question and more of a demand.

xo, Kylie 🍀

Sprite in Kossuth

KYLIE NECOCHEA

Kylie Necochea studies public health and writing at UCSD. She read *The Sunlight Pilgrims* in Professor dara's English 201 course and loved it! This piece is some alternate universe extension of Stella from *The Sunlight Pilgrims*. She thinks aliens should be involved, but she's not sure yet.

Cool aliens, of course.

**December 2017
Kossuth County, Iowa**

The junkyard is tired. Rats carve through the sharp pieces. A rabbit's foot was cut by a sharp piece last night as he was being pursued by a coyote. His carcass is nibbled by the rats this morning.

Stella steps on top of the 1987 AMC Eagle's car hood and sits on its caved-in roof to watch the sunrise. She holds a thin, cold bottle of Sprite. Cold not from refrigeration, but the AMC's glove compartment plus night temperatures can mimic a fridge well enough.

Stella stares out at the cornfields to the northeast with her serious blue eyes, her metallic hair stretching down to the middle of her spine. Her mother begged her not to dye her hair this summer. It has stayed silver since July. Now she can feel it fading, just like everything else. She looks down and sees the once-red palm trees on the chest of her In-N-Out shirt faded to pink by three summers in the sun.

Her dad sent her the shirt from California for her birthday three years ago. His birthday card to her read, "Happy thirteenth Birthday!" She spoke with him on the phone that night. She didn't bother telling him that she was fourteen then. She's never been to California. But she dreams of staring at a sunset over the ocean someday, instead of staring at a sunrise over cornfields.

The junkyard smells perversely pleasant, like a family dinner that has been out in the sun too long, or a combination of sunscreen and milkshakes and fries that have gone soggy but once held such promise of salty crispness. She climbs inside the car through the window to reach for another Sprite in the glove compartment. The car smells metallic, like tampons soaked in period blood or the inside of a new stainless steel water bottle, but cleaner, more natural somehow.

Stella climbs out of the car through the window, holding borax in her left hand and a lighter in the other and a Sprite under her right armpit.

"The ants will come," she says to no one but the rats and the cornfields.

Stella smells like old dreams that never found their way out.

**August, Nine Years Later
Coronado, California**

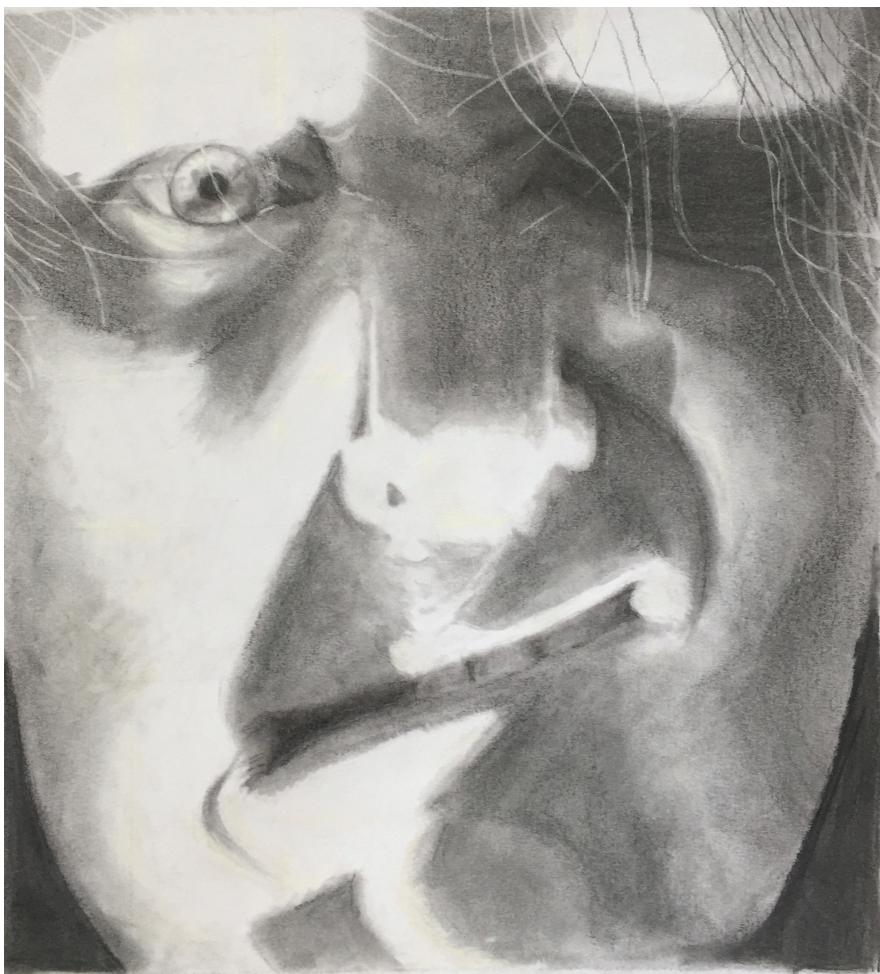
Stella stares out at the ocean with her serious blue eyes, her metallic braid stretching down to the base of her spine. The palm trees on the chest of her In-N-Out shirt faded by eleven summers in the sun and one summer of grey.

The shirt's white background is still light, despite everything that isn't. ●

Extreme Angst

JENNIFER LEDFORS

Jennifer Ledfors has enjoyed drawing, painting and the creative process since high school, but has only recently pursued a formal education in creative arts. Inspiration for her drawings published in *Tidepools* came from studies in a drawing and composition class that is part of the Studio Arts Associate Degree program.



A New Path to Follow

ZAYNE RANDEL

Although Zayne Randel's religious ideologies have and continue to transform since writing this piece, she encourages putting understanding before ego. Zayne hopes to embolden readers to cross the closet threshold, leaving fear and resentment behind. She aims to inspire others to bravely step onto a path of their own.

I have decided to stick with love. Hate is too great a burden to bear.

—Martin Luther King Jr.

The prospect that minorities must love their oppressors to hope for equality sounds—and *IS*—ridiculous. In an ideal society the strong would fight for the weak simply out of an ingrained sense of goodness and justice, however, no semblance of perfect equality survives in the current broken world. And hate, even justified, becomes our own “burden to bear.” Hatred brings no justice to an offender, and self-hatred simply justifies them.

For months, I sank into depressive habits and was overthrown by fear of the horror stories I heard about coming out—not to mention the evident inequality of LGBT people in my religious community. My mother loved me fiercely from the moment I left the womb. “You look beautiful today, princess,” she told me nearly every single day as I woke up. I suppose more than anything I feared her rejection—not because I anticipated it, but because I felt I deserved it.

I sat beside my mom in our silver Chrysler Town and Country, Tuesday afternoon, on our way to church.

“Do you *like* anyone currently?” my mom interjected.

A bit startled by the question I quickly answered, “No, no, I just . . . teenage boys are, ya know??”

She pressed on, “Yeah, I get it. But you would tell me if you did, *right?*”

“Yeah, Mom, sure,” I obligingly responded.

“Even if it's on a girl?” She probed.

Silence. And it persisted . . . she knew. The tension in the car wrapped around my throat and tightened. Finally, my mom pulled in front of North Coast (my church), and I hopped out of the car as if chased by a leopard. I sensed the moment of uncovering and unraveling that would soon be manifested.

That night ended a time of hiding, but flung me into a new era—a much scarier era—of coming out. When I came out to my mom, tears were shed, and fears were conjured into tepid admissions and revelations. She responded as well as she was able, although she says she wished she handled it differently, better . . . more gently. Fortunately, the twenty-first century embraces different sexual orientations more than ever, and I had many wonderful experiences with loved ones. Still, years of oppression and negative stereotypes do not crumple overnight and not all experiences went to plan.

Of course, I anticipated some push-back and homophobic jerks, but what I had not considered, was how gutting the rejection would feel from those I loved. How much my fear and anger and suppressed hatred, drawn from their words, would burn. The rejection from my sanctuary, my church community I had known since toddlerhood, that was unexpected. I was no longer a “sister in Christ,” I was a sinner in waiting. I heard a lot of, “It’s not a sin as long as you don’t act on it,” or “God will use you as a witness; you can be celibate and show how you will fight these sinful urges.” Those words cut like daggers deep to my core, words said in Christian “love,” leaving festering wounds on my soul. As a lifelong Christian, I was taught to love, yet I felt so unlovable. Still, I persisted in my calling to be an instrument of love, but how was I to properly **love them**?

See, I wanted to lash out with anger. Throw a punch. Scream and curse. A few times I simply isolated myself and held grudges so strongly they burned in my heart. I swear if I heard “Love the sin not the sinner” one-more-time! **BUT** I remembered something my dad told me about his upbringing on a late night drive with the radio low.

“Ya know, I used to be homophobic,” he said with a twinge of shame. My eyebrows raised, but I chose not to interrupt.

“Well, I never hated them, but I used to think all sorts of dumb things like ‘you had to be abused to be gay, or something had to be wrong with you.’ But I had this flamboyant co-worker Darren, super nice guy! I had all these stupid ideas and he was so kind to me, and everyone! It’s hard to hate anyone when you have a face to it. It’s hard to justify stereotypes when you get to know an individual,” he concluded. I kept his words in my mind like a beacon of light guiding my mission. I would be my own witness, and my advocacy would be the love God put in my heart.

This does not mean it has been easy. One night my grudges became too much to bear. The weight I put on their words and actions crushed my organs and bled my heart. That night I discovered my parents were forced to resign from leadership in our church based on their support of me, for what the Christian community calls “affirming views.” They were willing to step down, and my mom righteously declared, “Zayne, I don’t want to be a part of any organization or religion where there is no room for you. Fuck’ em!” My dad, ever the voice of reason, said he would turn in his resignation if they heard my testimony first-hand. I agreed with that notion, before we were relegated to be brushed under the rug of sinners, I

“ . . . and they looked on shamefully as they justified their narrow worldview with flimsy passages of scripture.

wanted the church administrators to hear my story first.

As I sat across the leadership, the head Pastor and other church elders, I felt an odd sense of fortification. My parents looked on lovingly and nervously; my Dad wringed his calloused hands and fought the urge to reach out and comfort me. My mom sat firm, her running mascara betraying her defiant gaze. As I looked at her for strength I was reminded of something she had said on occasion. She described how God breaks down walls around your heart, and for each brick he brings down, he places them at your feet, making a path of light for you to follow. That night was like that. I spoke from the very depths of my pain and isolation. I professed my love for God, my disappointment and hurt for fellow Christians, discriminatory church policies and my desire to love and be loved. I expressed my belief that each person has a right to hold grudges towards people with opposing views, just as it is the op-

poser’s right to voice them. But I described how these remarks ate me alive and I knew I needed a change. I spoke in a fluidity and clarity that my parents would describe later as transcendent. I watched these grown men weep and they looked on shamefully as they justified their narrow worldview with flimsy passages of scripture. Some would come to support me, others simply took my words to fortify their own beliefs. Even knowing this, I swallowed the frustration and simply nodded politely, “Thank you for listening.”

When I got up from my seat, my teary face and unsteady feet did not accurately portray my profound sense of unburdening. When I closed the door to that office, I felt God saying it was time to leave, to leave the shame, to leave the guilt and to leave the darkness. I opened the door to something new. I felt the bricks spreading below my feet. I had a new path to follow. One of loving others, and *myself*; no matter what adversity may face me. ●

Fun Town

BRIDGETTE ROBERSON

Bridgette Roberson escaped from the Placebo Syndrome, arrived on this planet on a spaceship from the galaxy of Funkentelechy, and landed in the Nickerson Garden Projects in Los Angeles, California.

She transformed into a super-duper nerd that likes to keep it funky. She dreams, then she writes.

Isolation is my beat down
On 76 in my metallic whip with my Honey Brown.
Listening to sweet sounds
On our way to-

Fun town

WHERE THERE IS NO LOCK DOWN AND NO MASK TO BE FOUND

In a Drive-thru ordering some animal fries

Gunned down

A brother with the same skin tone stopped my clock

Now my heart does not tick

TOCK

Our Ancestors crossed the middle passage together

Stood on the auction block beside each other.

Three hundred something years later, we are still enslaving one another.

Instagram say one Nigga took another Nigga-

OUT.

No one came out to protest this offense

Now that's sad, sad nonsense!

Momma!

They about to put me in the ground.

Seems like me and Honey Brown won't be making love in

Fun town.

I Got My Covid Proof Sneakers On

BRIDGETTE ROBERSON

Bridgette Roberson escaped from the Placebo Syndrome, arrived on this planet on a spaceship from the galaxy of Funkentelechy, and landed in the Nickerson Garden Projects in Los Angeles, California.

She transformed into a super-duper nerd that likes to keep it funky. She dreams, then she writes.

I Got My Covid Proof Sneakers on
These days of isolation have been essentially long.
I left my Air Jordan Retros at home.
Cause I'm a roustabout about to step into the unknown.
I Got My Covid Proof Sneakers on.
Twenty-four can you and Gigi hear me?
I need some herd immunity-
April scattered showers bloom bodies of virus-infected May flowers.
Repentance is in my hands; this virus is not a scam.
Momma call Obama cause, according to the man in command,
the Chinese got us into this jam.
How can that be when all I see is every nationality dying in front of me?
I Got My Covid Proof Sneakers on.
A mask is an asymptomatic illusion because my eyes see all the confusion.
I Got My Covid Proof Sneakers on.
Wuhan is wet.

Buena Vista Lagoon

CHRISTINE AMES

After a career in pharmaceuticals, Christine Ames is currently pursuing her passion as a Mixed Media Abstract artist. Her work is a process-oriented journey, and her inspiration comes from nature, architecture, and science. She hopes the viewer's eye will speculate the aesthetics and compositional balance of the overall painting.



Immigration Consternation

ANI RODRIGUEZ

Ani Rodriguez is a second year Architectural Design Major planning to graduate in Spring 2021. She plans to transfer into a Bachelor of Architecture program after MiraCosta. “Immigration Consternation” was written for English 202 as a recollection of an experience with anti-immigration sentiment in the early 2000s.

La Cima Middle School was Hell on Earth on a good day. The school was full to the brim of students who resented it. A suffocating amount of teen angst saturated the atmosphere; any given moment there was bound to be some problems.

“Where’s your green card?” Asked a classmate, rather loudly even for the packed hallway.

The time between the second and third periods of the morning were chaotic at best. Students were milling about like bees, darting from one end of the corridor to the other. We had places to be and only seven minutes to switch books and be there. The hallway was an obstacle course. We jumped and crouched around our upper or lower locker-mates, dodged shirt-tucking and sock-color checks from roaming administrators, and tore across the building at full speed.

At first I didn’t realize that he was talking to me. Busy fighting with my locker that had far more objects crammed in it than should have been physically possible, I simply was not listening. Usually, only friends interrupted each other’s precious seconds of freedom. We were acquaintances at best, running around in different social circles. His crew bought their uniforms at department stores and mine shopped at Target. With their holier-than-thou aura

it was a wonder how they didn’t end up at rich White L. W. Cross five minutes down the road. Literal clothes aside, we were cut from different cloth. He had no reason to approach me during passing period. We would have seen each other in class later anyway. Nonetheless, he repeated his question and poked my shoulder.

“What?” I had never heard of such a thing. For a brief and blissful second I considered ignoring him. After that second was over I reconsidered. Perhaps it was a new student council ordinance. We already had to carry ID cards around our necks and wear bland uniforms, so what was another rule? I would rather know about it sooner than later, just in case. “Y’know, papers? Don’t you have to carry them around?”

Those I knew of. Any Mexican-American living in 2012 Arizona did. SB1070 had struck fear into the hearts of everyone. People desperately clutched their immigration documents like jewels. For a 13-year-old, political intricacies of SB1070 were not so much of a big deal as its ramifications were. The shape of your nose or the depth of your skin tone could mark you as other. If you got stopped, you’d better hope that you spoke textbook Mid-Atlantic English. Even the lightest lilt in your voice could get you taken

“If anything, I was ambiguously ethnic to the point that my status could be casually questioned.

away. Any cop was a secret ICE agent if they didn't like your accent.

I finished retrieving whatever I was looking for in the blasted locker and slammed it shut. Whirling around on my heels I faced my classmate, schooling my face into only mundane storminess. Immigration was a hot topic, sure. But his leering tone was aligning more with fighting words than a constructive conversation about political controversy. I couldn't help but wonder what he was trying to accuse me of.

“I don't have any papers.”

“Oh! So are you—” He grinned wickedly and leaned forward. Way closer to my face than he should have been, he stage-whispered, “—*illegal*?”

“Dude, I told you, like yesterday, that I was born in California.”

Even so, we had just learned about the kinds of citizenship in the United States. We took Honors Social Studies together, there was no reason he wouldn't have known this already. Being born in California meant I was born in the US: automatic citizenship, right there.

“Suuuuuuuuure.” He said conspiratorially, as if I had let him in on a big secret. A barely-there blond eyebrow crept up his face. “I won't tell.”

“I'm from here!” I protested.

We had gathered an audience. I was a loud person and middle schoolers are drawn to conflict by nature. Students descended upon us. If there was going to be a fight, then everyone wanted to be watching. Their eyes bored holes in my body, as if they could get the truth from a single look. They would have made good vultures.

“*Right.*”

“I don't even speak Spanish!”

In my own ears, this was weak. It felt slimy as it left my mouth. I was trying too hard. In five words I had betrayed the plight of the people and fell to the stereotype I hadn't even been accused of embodying. The sting of internalized racism raised goosebumps along my arms. I would regret saying that long after the school day ended.

“Your last name is *Rodriguez.*”

“That doesn't mean I'm from Mexico, asshole.”

“Whatever, just don't do anything stupid because then you have to get deported.” He turned away to get to class. The group of students followed his example disappointedly. Some were laughing, some looking confused, and others disinterested. We had not given them the brawl they were hoping for.

“I'm from here!” I shouted at his back.

I was beside myself. Who was he to ask for papers in public? Speculating citizenship

was dangerous. Didn't he know that his careless comments could have gotten me carted away to the station without anyone stopping to call my mom?

Of course he didn't. He was so privileged to be safe in his pallor.

Still, if I *was* undocumented, my safety was his joke. I wasn't a white kid like him, where my citizenship was assumed. If anything, I was ambiguously ethnic to the point that my status could be casually questioned. My first name was uncommon and the last was foreign. That alone was enough to justify an inquiry, so much that he had brought it up.

In that moment, left scrambling to make it to my class on time, I considered how

many other kids at our school had experienced such a nightmare. A real undocumented student would have been stuck between a rock and a hard place. An affirmative would single them out as a permanent resident. A negative would assign them an undocumented reputation. Refusal to answer could only mean trouble. The only place they were safe was the school. If someone reported, there was no telling when ICE would show up at their house unannounced.

If someone went digging they would find my American birth certificate and I would be allowed to stay. I couldn't get lawfully deported, probably. Despite that, the time and distance that spans since that morning, the anxiety lingers. ●

I Am You, You Are Me

ESTHER RODRIGUEZ

As a fine artist, Esther Rodriguez majors in studio art and pursuing a career in Visual Art and Design. Her watercolor and illustration pieces represent a medium to tell a story of everyday life. Also, her works depict how humans are resilient, trying to see the best side in life.



The Day the Grim Reaper Wept

JOHN SIEBELINK

John Siebelink spent most of his life in Michigan before moving to California. “The Day the Grim Reaper Wept” was inspired by a paper written for Professor Jacob Strona’s English 100 class. Despite being based on sleep-deprived memories, it has been verified by actual Marine Corps drill instructors as accurate.

“Don’t let your drill sergeants learn your name.” Dad’s words came back to me in the early hours of October 2, 2008 as my boot camp platoon and I awoke after a mere hour and a half of sleep and began preparing to meet the Grim Reaper. After almost fifty hours of non-stop combat exercises and having only eaten a single meal in three days, I started to wish that it would be the *real* Grim Reaper who would be meeting me shortly. I tied my boots and threw my massive pack over my shoulders before joining the rest of my platoon in formation somewhere in the heart of Camp Pendleton, California. Within seconds we were marching, the strap of my M16A2 service rifle re-blistering my shoulder every time I pushed my heel into the dirt road in front of me. This painful hump persisted for what felt like hours, before out of the dark the sharp cry of Senior Drill Instructor Staff Sergeant Valdez tore into my ears.

“Platoon, HALT!”

Light was just starting to cut across the sky. It was considered undisciplined to look around while at the position of attention, but I could not help trying to get a glimpse of the monster in front of us. We remained motionless for an indefinite amount of time while the space around us turned from black to gray. There were too many re-

cruits in front of me to get a glimpse of the alternatively named Mt. Motherfucker, but I was close enough to the side of the formation to watch Recruit Tully ride up in the back of a jeep driven by one of the Navy corpsmen.

“Poor dude,” I thought to myself, remembering Tully listing the medical conditions he’d had to get waivers for in order to enlist in the Corps at the beginning of training. “He’s not going to become a Marine.”

I managed to snap my eyes back in front of me as Drill Instructor Sergeant Fisher marched past. The chances were high that if he had seen my eyes wandering that I would be volunteered to lead the entire company on the march up. My legs were cramping so bad and I was so tired that it was already going to be a snail’s pace going up the Reaper. To do so with six hundred exhausted, hungry recruits who were eager to become Marines and stuff their faces at the Warrior Breakfast behind me being slowed down because of my lack of discipline . . . the thought of it made me wish that it was me lounging in the back of a medical jeep.

Rather than think about that or the many muscle spasms that awaited me once we got going up the mountain, I tried to figure out why I had woken up to my Dad’s words of wisdom. Not allowing my drill sergeants to learn my name was only one of

many pieces of advice I had received from my parents after I enlisted. Apart from agreeing not to fall for the first girl who bought me ice cream, though, is the one that kept being repeated most frequently. It just seemed odd to me that this random quote would come up out of nowhere at the end of a deep sleep when the only feeling occupying my brain at the time was pure dread. Maybe Dad's voice came to me here, at the bitter end, as sort of a premonition that I was not going to be able to make it up that mountain and that the entire company would know who I was when the dream of earning the title of United States Marine was taken away from me. Was this Dad's way of cushioning the blow—preparing me for my ultimate failure and embarrassment by providing one final piece of fatherly wisdom before I received the order to attack the Reaper? Whatever the case may have been, I was not allowed any more time to dwell on it. The senior drill instructor raged once more through the darkness.

“DOUBLE TIME!”

“MARINE CORPS!” We screamed in unison, our voices cracking as we took one final breath and loosened our muscles for the impending assault.

“REEEEEEAAAADDDDDYYYY!” I inhaled sharply. “MOVE!”

Whatever pain and exhaustion I had been feeling up until my feet hit the mountain increased exponentially as I started my ascent. As was usually the case whenever things got physically rough for me while I was at boot camp, I started questioning my reasons for putting myself in such predicaments. Why did I choose the most physical branch of the military to go? Why did I fill up on Pepsi and junk food and not ask Dad for workout tips before I left? What the hell is everybody going to think if I fuck this up and don't make it up this thing? My knees started to buckle after a few steps as the weight of my anxiety bore down on them.

What kind of person would I be if I failed boot camp?

I got so caught up in these horrible thoughts that I wasn't watching where I was going and bumped into the recruit in front of me. He maintained his balance and cursed at me as I lost mine and fell. All around me, recruits passed me or stepped over me, kicking the soft dirt in my face.

I attempted to pull myself up. Every muscle in my body was worn thin, and while I did manage to stand up and get my feet moving again it was only a matter of time before I hit the ground again. Between the exhaustion, full pack, rifle, and combat gear weighing me down I knew that I would be

“Between the exhaustion, full pack, rifle, and combat gear weighing me down I knew that I would be dog meat if I fell again.

dog meat if I fell again. Ironically, no sooner had the thought popped into my head when I felt all the feeling in my right knee leave my body and I started to fall for the second time in seconds.

This was not going to be my final hour, however. I was already falling when a strong hand seized my rifle strap and lifted me upright. John Endesley, one of my platoon's four squad leaders and a mountain in and of himself, slapped my palm onto his pack and began dragging me up behind him. My legs felt like iron and every joint was losing feeling, but Endesley silently and stoically forced me along with him, surpassing some of the most athletic recruits in the entire company as we hiked. So intense was the march that I nearly fainted at least three times, but my hands were twisted up in one of Endesley's straps so I could not let go. I was forced to push through pain that I was sure would destroy some part of my body later in life, but after several minutes of panting and struggling to keep my vision from clouding it dawned on me that we were already to the top. It was anticlimactic because I had not been paying attention. There had been no euphoria of energy in me or any shot of relief. Instead, we both stopped moving and our packs came off and were tossed into a makeshift formation, with Endesley hurrying to get in line at a

water cooler while I slid slowly to the formation, taking my cue from other recruits that I saw sitting on their packs to let myself fall on top of mine. I squeezed my eyes shut and again Dad's words echoed through my head.

“Don't let your drill sergeants learn your name.” I smiled slightly, the realization finally coming to me. While I'm sure he meant for me to keep my head down and stay out of trouble, at the end of this march it did not matter one bit if my drill instructors had known my name or not. Whatever person they had attached that name to was now gone. Permanently. Just as John Siebelink, civilian, had died the second he had arrived at MCRD San Diego four months before, Recruit Siebelink was now also dead. Private John Siebelink was about to be born, and all the drill instructors knew it. Everyone was about to know it.

When I was finally able to open my eyes back up, I saw Tully being examined several yards away by a corpsman while being talked to by the series commander. I could not make out what was being said, but even from a distance the look of relief on his face was evident.

“Son of a bitch,” I whispered aloud as he walked with the commander over to our platoon and took his place in formation. “He's going to be a Marine after all!”

I stared at Tully for quite a while, breaking my gaze only briefly when Endesley walked by to slap me on the back and tell me that I did good not giving up. I almost broke into tears when he told me that, but instead I kept looking over Tully sitting on his pack, struggling to hold back his own tears. Envy flared up in me when I watched Tully's own squad leader walk over to him and give him a pat on the back. Still, I was happy for him.

He was the closest thing I had to a friend during my entire boot camp ordeal. I may have wished that he had been forced, even at a snail's pace, to climb even a little bit of the Reaper, but that wasn't my call to make. All that mattered was that we both, in our own way, had made our own journeys up the Grim Reaper. We were both about to become United States Marines.

And the Grim Reaper wept. 🟩

Morning Quarantine

JOHN SIEBELINK

John Siebelink, age 31, is currently in his second semester at MiraCosta College. "Morning Quarantine" is his first poem, written among a host of science fiction stories—none of which had anything to do with quarantining. Besides fiction, he is also a blogger for legendary science fiction magazine *Amazing Stories*.

Awoken to screeches, every morning, the coffee goes on.
 Drink a cup. Drink several. And wake up.
 Bringing the baby up to Nana for
 A few fingertips of peanut butter
 And whipped cream
 I dream my dreams in front of the sink instead of in bed.

Goo-goos, ga-gas, and Baby Einstein
 I don't think in her short life she had ever known the sun.
 I myself, in my daze, missed the cool breeze
 Legs in danger of atrophying
 From all the time my ass spent lounging in my chair
 Rocking.

I have become lazy. Tired. Weak and not because I am the father of a baby.
 We know what we got ourselves into.
 The world does not, and continues to shirk its responsibilities
 While Enfamil warms up in my microwave
 And pacifiers freeze in the freezer
 To soothe the Covid Teeth ripping through my daughter's gums.



Crisis

SUMMER HERRERA

Summer Herrera is a Studio Art major, working on sharpening her artistic skills through education. She strives to produce meaningful work that conveys her evolving understanding of the human condition. Her work hopes to provide refuge from the eyes of uncertainty and countless COVID-19 headlines from this past year.

The Right to Kill

C.J. VANDERLIPE

C.J. Vanderlipe is a science-fiction and fantasy writer who combines strong, characterized dialogue with fully-realized, fantastical worlds in order to ground readers in new realities. Often taking inspiration from various forms of media, he spends most of his spare time expanding upon worlds or creating new ones.

Justice comes at a price. Always.

—Artemis Fengari

CASE 1021-31 OF ARTEMIS & ORION PRIVATE INVESTIGATIONS

INTERROGATION 3343-1

DATE June 26, 2078

[Begin observation.]

[Artemis' fingers pause on the datapad. She shows the screen to SUSPECT 3343—all future references to SUSPECT 3343 shall be categorized and labeled as SUSPECT, or the Suspect, from this point onward. Her eyes harden. The image is listed as: **REDACTED**.]

ARTEMIS: What do you see?

[The Suspect's gaze flicks from the ceiling light fixture to the shining screen of the datapad. Despite their nerve-racked state, they are dressed in expensive, hand-crafted attire.]

SUSPECT: A body.

ARTEMIS: Whose body?

[The Suspect bites their tongue.]

SUSPECT: I do not know. What is it that you want from me? To write you a Sec report?

ARTEMIS: Very funny. Despite the severe burns, the thousands of lacerations, and the hundreds of stitches all over the

body, the death crew was able to identify the child as ten-year-old David Miyashita.

[Artemis swipes the image aside and flips the datapad landscape-wise. She hands it to the Suspect and presses play. The video is listed as: **REDACTED**. The Suspect's hands tremble as they watch the video. Once it finishes, they return the datapad to Artemis.]

ARTEMIS: You were spotted in the area by patrolling air-cams thirty minutes prior to emergency services being called and the child's body being found. Not only that . . .

[Artemis scrolls past the video. She begins to show the Suspect numerous pieces of evidence linking them to the crime. The evidence is listed as: **REDACTED, REDACTED, REDACTED, REDACTED, and REDACTED**.]

ARTEMIS: Based on these print scans of the Brightbolt used to torch the child, DNA samples from the room in which the murder occurred, two hours of air-cam footage, and five corroborating eye-witness testimonies, all evidence points to you as irrevocably guilty.

[The Suspect crosses their arms. Their demeanor changes suddenly. From nervous and twitchy to entirely nonplussed and untroubled.]

SUSPECT: Then why haven't I been thrown into the Barrens yet?

ARTEMIS: Because you don't have a clear motive. We've sent info probes through the Net and throughout Shigai. You're an upstanding person. Graduated top of your class at Cryo-Academy and went straight to working as a head geneticist at GenTech. You have a good standing with your employers, co-workers, friends, you make an excellent living, and you have no prior criminal history.

[Artemis sets the datapad onto the table and leans forward. She rests her elbows on either side of the datapad, steepling her fingers.]

ARTEMIS: Tell me everything you know, and it might help reduce the severity of your judgement or clear your name entirely.

SUSPECT: How so? What do you mean "clear my name entirely"?

[Artemis says nothing. The Suspect does not speak for approximately two minutes. Then, they continue hesitantly.]

SUSPECT: If telling you what I know is all it takes, then I suppose I can do that. Chihiro, David's mother, and I were in a quasi-relationship for awhile. David was a great kid. Loved to watch Stormball on Sundays. Every time I dropped by her house, I would see him lying on his bed with his back propped up against a pillow, cheering on the Greengrass Cadets with a wide grin.

[A gentle smile ghosts the Suspect's face, quickly replaced by a frown.]

SUSPECT: Chihiro told me about a condition David had; the reason why he was always bedridden, always coughing, why his room was kept shut behind an air seal, why she could only see her son through a two-way window.

[Artemis raises a brow. She takes her finger and with it, scribbles something onto her datapad.]

ARTEMIS: And what exactly was his condition?

[The Suspect draws their hands together and interlocks their fingers. They look at the ground, suddenly interested by it.]

SUSPECT: A rare mutation of Caedocorus. It disabled his immune system and reduced his cells' protein production by approximately 85 percent. Chihiro had spent the better part of eight years looking for a cure. She asked me if it was possible for me to synthesize a cure due to my connections with GenTech. I told her that it could be done, but only with David's sacrifice.

ARTEMIS: His sacrifice? So you killed one to save the many? Commendable.

[The Suspect nods.]

SUSPECT: David was eight. At least, when the experiments started.

ARTEMIS: Experiments?

SUSPECT: Caedocorus is an affliction that affects only 0.1 percent of the population, and in comparing socio-economic status, sex, race, parentage, and diet, no correlation is shown between each afflicted individual. It is an interesting yet concerning condition. GenTech deemed it interesting enough to research. So, they asked me to get my hands on a subject. And I delivered.

[The metal chair squeaks as the Suspect shifts their weight.]

SUSPECT: DNA extraction. Gene therapy. Thousands of skin and blood samples. Mutation implanting. Bionic enhancement. Hundreds of live test subjects. You name it, GenTech did it to David and hundreds of others. For two years. They tore David's limbs apart to get all the data they needed before stitching him back together. It could be called torture, but I would argue that it was entirely necessary.

[The Suspect pauses their speech. Their words hang in the thick air, as if waiting for Artemis to refute them. When she does not, the Suspect continues.]

SUSPECT: Are you familiar with GenTech's motto?

ARTEMIS: No.

SUSPECT: "Improving Humanity, One Step at a Time."

ARTEMIS: How direct.

SUSPECT: Directness is what is necessary in my field and yours, as is direction. Though, your methods are more barbaric than mine, one could argue that you too are improving humanity.

[The Suspect separates their fingers and allows them to lay atop the armrests of their chair.]

SUSPECT: The world is not a pleasant place. It is cold, unrelenting, and evil. Even those that claim to be the most virtuous of us have done wrong.

ARTEMIS: Not an uncommon perspective. We've all done things we're not proud of.

SUSPECT: If you can understand that, then you can understand why it needed to be done.

ARTEMIS: Maybe I can, but I need it to be said on record.

[The Suspect pauses to think.]

SUSPECT: The gifted and intelligent few must make the decisions for the weak and uneducated many. These decisions do not come easily. They never do. But to further advance humanity, they must be made. That is why I joined GenTech. The experiments we performed on David were necessary. For the greater good.

ARTEMIS: Then why would you kill someone so important to the "greater good"?

“SUSPECT: If you can understand that, then you can understand why it needed to be done.

SUSPECT: I thought it would be obvious to a private investigator.

ARTEMIS: Enlighten me.

SUSPECT: His uses had run its course. He no longer had any information that we needed. As such, we removed him from the equation as one would remove an insignificant figure in a math problem.

ARTEMIS: And that justifies killing a ten-year-old boy?

SUSPECT: Of course. I do not think there is any greater reason for killing anyone. Think of it as a totalled vehicle. You do not put in the effort, the money, the time required to repair that vehicle. You simply find a new one. Perhaps we could have kept David for one or two more tests, but the data would have only supported our hypotheses by an insignificant margin. Not only that, our research lab in the Heise Ward—

[At the mention of the Heise Ward, Artemis draws her Silverbolt in a flash and fires two rounds into the chest of the Suspect.]

ARTEMIS: Thank you.

[The Suspect's hands fly to their chest. They grasp at the bullets protruding from their skin, desperately trying to wrench them free.]

SUSPECT: What did you just shoot me with? What do you mean? What are you thanking me for?

ARTEMIS: For giving me what I needed.

SUSPECT: Why did you shoot me?!

ARTEMIS: To clear your name.

[The Silverbolt rounds activate. The Suspect begins to convulse violently as the rounds burrow through their skin and tear them apart from the inside. The near-silent sound of miniscule drills moving through their flesh and organs are quickly covered by the Suspect's screams and howls that echo throughout the interrogation chamber. A full minute passes before the convulsions cease and silence fills the room. The intercom clicks.]

OBSERVER (ORION): Don't think that was necessary.

ARTEMIS: You wanted a lead, and we got a lead.

OBSERVER (ORION): You didn't need to kill 'em for it.

ARTEMIS: I disagree. She got what was coming to her.

OBSERVER (ORION): Fuck, Art. Killing the suspect won't do anything to change what happened to that kid. Now we just have another death on our hands—

ARTEMIS: My hands. Not yours. Mine.

OBSERVER (ORION): And now we're going to kill more people. The suspect

wasn't wrong about. Maybe about me, too. Anything for the "greater good," right?

[Artemis ignores Orion's words. She returns her Silverbolt to its holster. She stands and looks into the observation mirror.]

ARTEMIS: Orion.

OBSERVER (ORION): Yes?

ARTEMIS: Close the case and get me every file you have on GenTech. I want everything about this case written and printed on paper, and sent to my office. Once you're done, clear out all of the data. I want none of it on the Net.

[End observation.]

CASE 556-31 [CLOSED AS OF 27678]

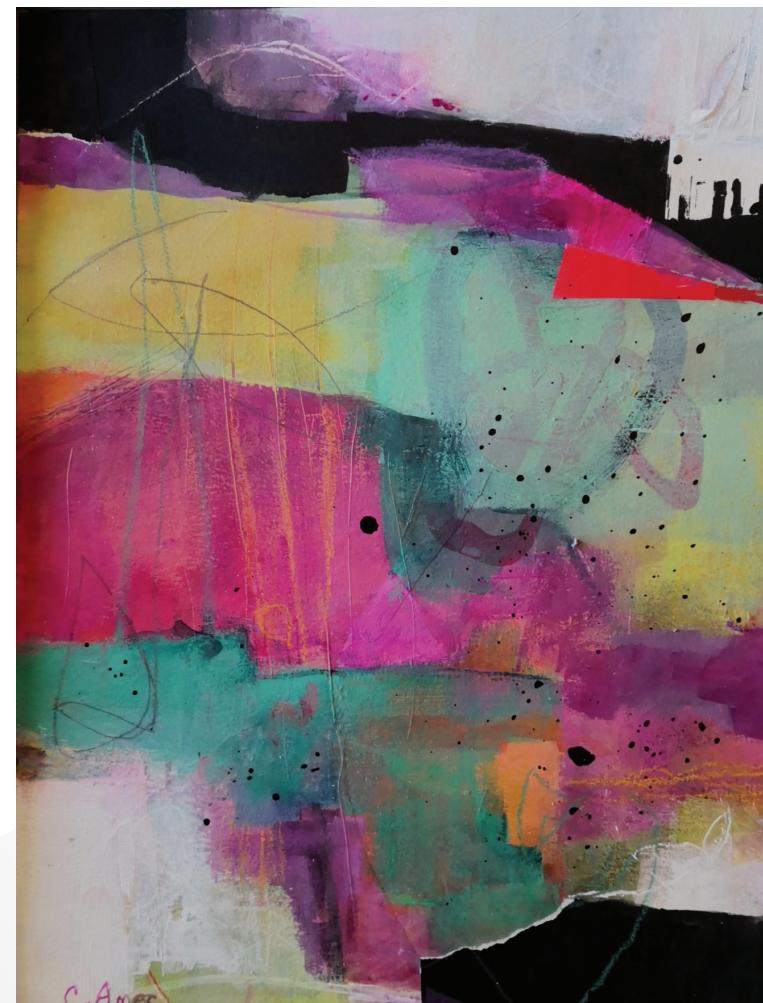
INTERROGATION 3343-1

DATE 26678

[Summary: SUSPECT 3343 was terminated upon completion of the interrogation. The information gathered from INTERROGATION 3343-1 has been re-located to REDACTED. This file thread has been marked as: CLOSED.] ●

City Deconstructed

CHRISTINE AMES



After a career in pharmaceuticals, Christine Ames is currently pursuing her passion as a Mixed Media Abstract artist. Her work is a process-oriented journey, and her inspiration comes from nature, architecture, and science. She hopes the viewer's eye will speculate the aesthetics and compositional balance of the overall painting.

How to Tackle Life When You Are Wiggin' Out

SKYLAR VERMAAK

Skylar Vermaak is an aspiring cosmetologist, tattoo artist, and business owner. Though her aspirations are plenty, she keeps herself grounded by focusing on healing from Trichotillomania, which is what inspired her to write this piece. She is working towards building a community for those who have struggled similarly.

September 17, 2007. You are in Palm Desert, California, and it is 102 degrees. You sit in the second row of your parents' black Tahoe, with windows rolled down, and stare down at your ratty, double-knotted Converse. They used to be white, but now they are hues of green, gray, sand, and caked dirt. You wait, anxiously, for your thirteen-year-old step brother to exit the dusty purple gates of his middle school. Your hand grazes over your hair, strawberry blonde, smooth as silk, and you can feel a fresh sunburn on your cheek from the blazing sun on you, like a spotlight. This was your equivalent of Tatooine's twin suns, and you are Luke Skywalker beginning your journey in a barren desert. Except, you do not get to pick up a lightsaber. Instead, your hand forces hair to come out of your scalp. You cannot tell which hurts more, the scorching rays of the sun, or the stinging of the hair that has lost its home, and the feeling of a rope-burn on your fingers. Though it is foreign, it comforts you, and your anxiety fades. You are silent, you are stealthy, and you do it again. The only cries of pain come from whichever trashy rock band your stepdad allows on the car radio. As your fingers weave through your mane of red, circling around your scalp for their next victim, you hear the door unlock, and the putrid smell of sweaty teenage boy

fills the car. You snap out of your trance to find that the windows now hide the sun, and you feel like a criminal as you sit between your two siblings, guilty hands clasped together with invisible shackles, unaware of the fate you have just sealed for yourself.

When your mother yells at you to get your hand out of your hair, try not to get mad at her. It is entirely possible that she is in more pain than you, although she has a funny way of showing it. Sometimes it is through screaming, other times it is by forcing you into psych appointments. The psychologist and psychiatrists all blend together at this point: old white men with small, silver glasses, their walls adorned with framed degrees that their prescriptions will pay off. Sit in silence, and accept the Xanax or Prozac or Sertraline cocktail that they hand to you on a small piece of paper. You can't make out their list of pills, but then again, you're only ten, so of course you can't pronounce them, even though you are old enough to take them.

Try not to throw the book that your mom handed you against the wall. Your mysterious condition has been diagnosed, and the answers lie within the pages of "The Hair-Pulling Problem: A Complete Guide to Trichotillomania" by Fred Penzel. The name of your disease is harder to pronounce than it is to understand, and the side ef-

fects of your depression medication are not mixing well with puberty, leading you into a rage overdose. Take a deep breath, and a nap. Thank your mom for the book, crawl back into your cocoon, and put your favorite fuzzy gray beanie on as to protect your head from your pervasive hands.

Learn how to comb your hair. Sweep it to the left, sweep it to the right, consider getting a mullet. Your hairline is receding faster than a forty-five-year-old man's, but you didn't know that until the wisecracker (who you beat in the seventh grade spelling bee, thank you very much) points it out in front of his three friends as your class runs a mile. As the desert sun beats down upon your face, you consider yourself lucky that you are currently in PE and nobody can tell a red face from a sunburn, nor streaming tears from sweat. When you get home, you grasp at your hair like straws, like oxygen when you are trapped underwater. Luck is your coping mechanism, and luckily for you, you look amazing in headbands. Get a satin one with rhinestones, get a teal one with ribbons. Place them at the forefront of your forehead, and allow a smile to bubble forward. Like the natural problem-solver you are, you give into a toothy grin for defeating that mini Goliath, until you notice that your braces match your headband. You shut your mouth, and

decide not to give in to that fashion faux-pas. You have to pick your battles, and you fight them all.

Consider yourself blessed that you have blonde eyebrows and blonde eyelashes. They were so sparse to begin with that they were invisible. This gives you an alibi for when self-important and emotionally unintelligent strangers ask you where they went. Fifteen-year-olds are brutal. Whether you picked them out with tweezers, or whether they are fully grown back, nobody will ever know. That is another lucky strike for you. You write down these small victories in your online journal, one that nobody else could stumble upon, attempting to stay positive besides repeatedly getting the short end of the stick. But, don't allow these victories and tricks to inhibit you from making friends. You find it hard to let people in, not because you don't want them, but because you fear that they won't want you. So, stick to smaller groups, all girls, and never, ever, let anyone braid your hair. And, most importantly, don't let anyone EVER know, that underneath all that dry shampoo, hair spray, and root cover-up, you are actually bald.

When you show up to school one day with a head of hair, a full mane, make sure you have your excuses memorized. Yes, I dyed my hair. Yes, I got extensions. Yes, I got

“ You became confident. You learned how to do your eyebrows. But, most unfortunately, you became a liar.

a Brazilian blowout. Yes, I curled my hair. Yes, I used argan oil so my hair shines brighter than a disco ball in the '70s. NO, I am NOT wearing a wig. Little do your fellow classmates know, you ARE wearing a wig. You don't owe anyone an explanation as to why, nor do they need to know. Junior year was said to be the hardest of all, but for you, it was the year of change. You were invincible. You belonged in a shampoo commercial. You looked like a ginger Beyonce. You became confident. You learned how to do your eyebrows. But, most unfortunately, you became a liar. Self-preservation became your crutch, and you felt guilty for finally feeling beautiful. You wear a wig, and it weighs you down like an anchor.

Go to the mall. Ignore the man at the kiosk who asks you if that is your real hair color, and tries to hand you a sample of his "keratin boosting serum". Give him a grim smile, and briskly walk away. As your mom googles the product to see if it actually works, drown out her results, nicely. Even if it did work, it wouldn't *work*. Try to avoid looking at other women's hairlines. You wouldn't want them to look at yours, no

matter how perfectly your lace front is glued down. "Her hair is so shiny!" "That guy's hair is longer than mine?!" "Is she really f**ing bragging about not washing her hair?" You think to yourself about all the hairstyles you would do if you had your own hair; if your "hair" didn't have a warranty and \$1,000 down payment. Instead of resenting these women for not appreciating something you would kill to have (or at least sell a non-vital organ for), instead focus it on what you *will* do when you finally grow out your hair. P.S., you would look really good with bangs.

Reflect on how you are twenty years old, and you will never know how to braid your own hair. Most girls taught themselves at eleven years old, but you did a different kind of twisting to your hair. However, learn to enjoy the braid-ignorance because that means that you get an additional five minutes to spend with your mom as her magic hands weave in and out of your wig, grazing your scalp, as if she were a sorcerer, alleviating you of temporary anxieties. The times that she braids your wig, once or twice a week, add up. Those five minutes will become twenty-seven hours and twenty-five

minutes that you will have gotten to enjoy her presence before leaving this earth in however many years. Somehow, five minutes and a French braid give you the strength you need to conquer the day. You forget you're even wearing a wig.

Finally, sit down in front of your laptop, with skin prickling because your eyebrows were just washed off for the day, realize that you are more than what your illness says you are. Your wig will work no better than a bandaid on a gunshot wound if you don't deal with how you feel internally. Some days you will feel great, others you will be so depressed and stressed that you could rip your

hair out (pun very much intended). Take the small victories as they come, and consider yourself lucky for all the small blessings and coincidences that come your way, no matter what caused them to happen. So, stare at your screen, ready yourself to type out your Hannah Montana moment to thirty random classmates, and let down your hair. Although you fear the judgement of strangers, remind yourself that any judgment they could have will be no greater than how you have judged yourself for the past twelve years. Take a silent breath, open up your palms, tuck your silky, strawberry blonde hair behind your ear, and wield your story like a saber. ●

Dissociation

EMILY MAZZA

Emily Mazza is a student majoring in illustration. Her work often reveals catharsis through color and detail, sometimes with comedic flair. She's worked in many art facets including: drawing, printmaking, sculpture, installation, painting, and (her favorite) doodling. She's honored to be included in *Tidepools* and can't wait to do more!



No One Gets Out Alive

ERICA WINTERS

Erica Winters is a Psychology major studying to get into medical school with the hopes of becoming a psychiatrist. Her inspiration for writing this piece comes from her experience in the mortuary science field. In the past she has enjoyed working strange and unusual jobs in order to “Keep life interesting.”

I was just handed my name tag and granted clearance to enter the building. In a stern, serious voice, John, the head of the funeral home, went into detail about how I was one of the few people allowed access to the building, and I was not, under any circumstance, allowed to grant access to anyone else. I took my name badge and clipped it to my shirt, as instructed. The metal clip of the badge caused my shirt to wrinkle up, and I struggled to get it to lay flat as John was explaining my responsibilities and what was expected of me. John was a tall, thin man that had broad shoulders, with a smile that was warm and inviting. I found comfort in his smile and enjoyed talking to him. I began walking down the long hallway that led to where my office and the embalming room were. As I walked down the hall, people working in their cubicles looked up at me and watched me walk past them—some offering a slight smile, others, a dead, cold stare. The light in the room felt dim. All that could be heard was the faint clicking of keyboard strokes, and the soft rustling of papers being shuffled around. I wasn't even in the embalming room yet, but I felt as if I was staring death in the face. As I smiled at people and offered a meek and quiet, “Good morning” here and there, I was still fumbling with my name badge. I took notice of everyone else's badges—how they

were clipped on their clothing, the location of their badge, what degree it was sticking up from their shirt versus mine. I knew I was anxious about being the new person and being granted a position with such high power with no experience behind me, but it was easier to focus on the name badge to sooth my frazzled mind.

I approached the door that led to my office and the embalming room. The door was stark white and stood tall before me. I hesitated, but opened the door quickly in fear that everyone around me would think I was too afraid to enter the room. I felt the pressure of being “the new person,” but that pressure became exaggerated as I kept reminding myself of my newfound title—Embalmer's Apprentice. This job title was a high position in the company, and most people who obtained this job were just out of school with a Bachelor's in Mortuary Science under their belt. The only degree I came with was a high school diploma, and a strong work ethic with a desire to work in the funeral industry.

Behind the door revealed a tall, intimidating body guard standing in front of two large, looming double doors with a keypad attached to the handle. His gaze locked on me, and before I could fully comprehend his presence, he addressed me.

“What are you doing in here?” he barked.

“Um, I think this is where my office is,” I said meekly.

“You aren’t allowed in here. Get out!” he said with a domineering tone. I quickly exited the room, tripping over myself and fumbling with the door handle. All of this happened within seconds, but I stood outside the door recalling the event as if it were hours worth of memories I was trying to remember. I gathered myself and, despite the feeling of my stomach in knots and my palms sweating profusely, I mustered the courage to go back into the room to tell the security guard that I was granted clearance and I belonged in there. I took a deep breath and swung the door open, but, to my surprise, he was no longer standing in the room. He was instead replaced by a short, heavy-set woman with short brown curly hair sitting at a desk looking up at me with a bothered stare. I quickly came to find out her name was Mary, and she was terrifying.

“Are you Erica? You’re late,” Mary said, looking up at me over her glasses. Her dark brown eyes peered into my soul and her gaze made me uncomfortable.

“Yes, I’m Erica. Sorry, I came in here earlier but the security—” I began saying as she cut me off.

“He doesn’t work here. We have a high profile celebrity in the building today being worked on, and he was hired to protect this man’s identity. You have clearance to enter every room in this building, specifically this one, so no one is allowed to give you a hard time. Go, put your things down, and go into the embalming room and get started. I’ll be in there in a minute.”

The embalming room was bright, but cold. The walls were painted an off-white that, upon closer inspection, was a very pale blue, making the room feel clinical and unsettling. The smell swirling around the room was a mixture of hospital-grade cleaning odors, with undertones of embalming fluid, and hints of sweet death. There were six tables lined up one next to the other, with stained white sheets draped over long figures lying down. The man, standing in the corner turned to me and greeted me with a smile that seemed distant.

“Good morning, my name is Steve. I assume you’re Erica?” the man said casually.

“Good morning, Steve. Yes, my name is Erica. It’s a pleasure to meet you; I look forward to working with you and learning everything you can teach me,” I said warmly, trying to get a smile out of him.

“Have you ever worked behind the scenes of a funeral home before? It’s a lot of

“The inflection in his tone made my brain go into overdrive and wonder if I made a mistake.

work, and without prior experience, it’s a lot of to take in—not just in terms of knowledge, but visually as well.”

“No, this is my first experience, but I know this is what I want to do, and I know I’ll do fine,” I said with fake confidence.

“Have you ever seen a dead body—or better yet, *touched* a dead body?” He asked, as if he already knew the answer.

“Um . . . no, I’ve never been around a dead body before.” His question struck fear and nervousness in me. All of a sudden, this one question made me question my decision to work as an Embalmer’s Apprentice in a funeral home. The inflection in his tone made my brain go into overdrive and wonder if I made a mistake. I quickly felt like I needed to leave and tell everyone I made a mistake; that they hired the wrong girl.

“Well today is your lucky day then. We just got six new bodies in this morning, and I am about to prep them for embalming. Go suit up, and let’s get started,” he said with a ting of excitement and a slight sadistic smile.

Steve was the head embalmer at the funeral home. He was tall and handsome, with muscles bulging out from under his overly tight shirt. He had bright blue eyes, light brown hair that was just long enough to comb back with a slight wave to it, and a beautifully squared off jawline. He was *not*

what I pictured when I thought of an embalmer. I stood next to him and watched him work, pumping light pink embalming fluid into a body as he drained the blood out simultaneously. He stood with perfect posture the whole time, while his hands moved gracefully with every instrument he used on the body. He didn’t talk much when he worked, but would stop every few minutes, look up at me with a furrowed brow, and explain what he was doing and why it was important.

After spending a few hours with Steve learning all I could in a short period of time, I was assigned my first body to work on. He was an older gentleman, about eighty years old with a permanent scowl on his face. He was tall and skinny, with long fingers that started curling inward due to the rigor mortis of death setting in. The little bit of hair he had on his head was disheveled, and his hospital gown was loosely draped over his body. His gaunt arms and legs stuck out from the gown like misplaced limbs. Steve had just finished embalming him, and he was returned to me with a pale, pinkish tint to him—a pleasing change from the grayish hue his complexion emanated when I first unzipped him from his body bag. I was instructed to work on his hair, makeup, wardrobe, and placement in the casket while Mary worked alongside

me on a different body so she could supervise my work. I stood, staring at the man, unsure where to start. Waves of emotion washed over me as I tried to think logically, while processing the freshly deceased man that lay so peacefully in front of me.

The man's family brought in a bag of clothes, a blanket, and some various personal items they wanted placed in his casket with him. I rummaged through the bag and pulled out his red and white flannel shirt, blue jeans, and black socks that were heavily wrinkled due to being rolled up and thrown in the bag without being folded. First, I needed to start by undressing the man. I felt intimidated by this, like I needed to ask his permission for me to remove his hospital gown. Apprehensively, I started trying to shimmy the blue jeans up his legs without removing the gown, to protect his privacy. Mary saw me struggling and, without hesitation, used her body to shove me out of the way, ripping the jeans from my hands.

"You're going to get nowhere doing it that way. Let me show you how it's done,"

she said. Sitting next to the body she was working on were a pair of black scissors, with the words "Cloth Only" written on them. She took the scissors, ran them up the back of each pant leg, cut the back of the waist band in half, with grace laid the pants over the man's legs and waist, tucked the legs and waist band behind his back, and was done. She peered at me with a look on her face that said it all—she had been doing this for over twenty years, and it showed.

"Now it's your turn. Whatever article of clothing it is, minus socks, cut it up the back, drape it around the body, and tuck the back part under the body so no one can tell it's been cut. This is the fastest way to dress a body. Any other way, and you will throw your back out trying to manipulate the body to do what you need it to do," she said as she tossed the flannel shirt at me.

With my newfound knowledge of how to properly dress a dead body, I did exactly as she said and cut the flannel shirt right up the back starting at the bottom. I could feel Mary and Steve's eyes staring at me, their gaze

burning a hole in my back as they carefully watched to see if I would make a mistake. As I neared the neck of the shirt, I heard Mary and Steve let out a sharp gasp. I instantly froze my hands, looked over at both Mary and Steve, and noticed them laughing hysterically.

"Did I do something wrong? Oh god, what did I do?" I panicked.

"Why would you cut it like *that*?" asked Steve.

"What? I did it exactly as you guys showed me! Did I ruin it? Will the family be

able to tell?" I asked, panicked, and looked quickly at both Mary and Steve for an answer. A million questions started swirling around in my head.

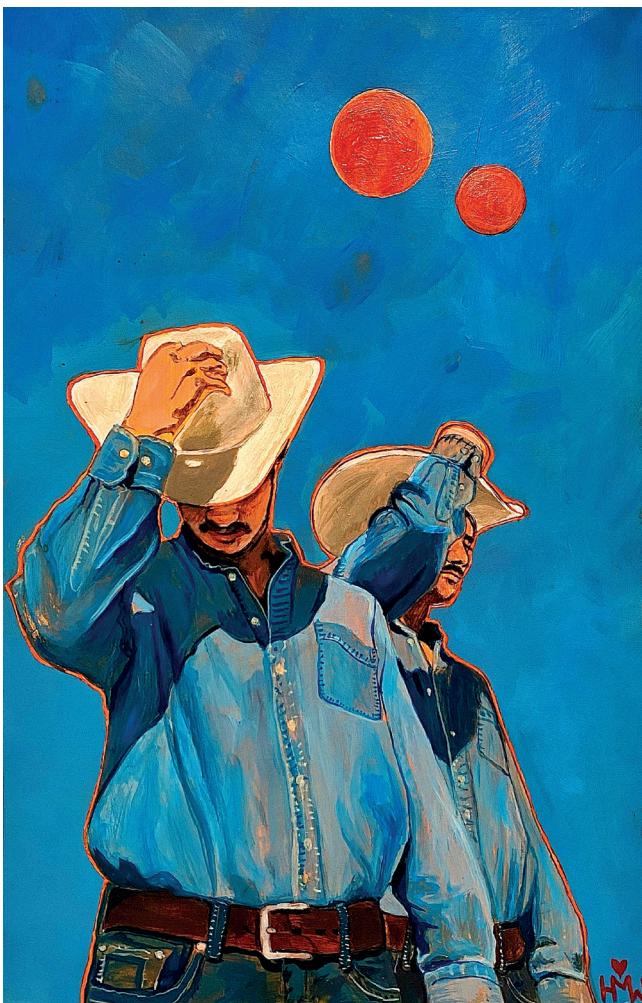
"Relax, we're just messing with you. You cut it fine." Steve chuckled as he returned back to the body he was working on.

"Lighten up child, you've got to have a sense of humor if you're going to make it in this industry. After all, no one gets out alive," Mary said as she and Steve continued to laugh at their inside joke. ●

Death Valley Daze

HELENA WESTRA

Helena Westra is an art major studying at MiraCosta for transfer. This piece is heavily inspired by one of her favorite colors, the deep blue of the California sky. We see a lone cowboy, his shadow ever so tangible in the desert, where time eludes and heat fuzzes the mind.



INDEX

A

NATALIE ABBOTT
ALONENESS, 12

LAUREN ADAMS
CRUISING BY, 13
RUTH, 14

CHRISTINE AMES
THAT DAY WE PICKED FLOWERS, 44
BUENA VISTA LAGOON, 136
CITY DECONSTRUCTED, 153

ANONYMOUS
TIGER STRIPES, 15

LORI I. AUSTIN
Q IS FOR QUARANTINE, 20

B

MADISYN BRILLO
WHERE I'M FROM, 24

DANIELLE BUFORD
STRANGERS TO THEMSELVES, 28

CHRISTOPHER BURROUGHS
SOMETIMES IT TAKES A LOT, 29

C

TATIANNA CADET-HAYNES
I SHOULD'VE BEEN
A BOY, 33

GRANT CLOVER
THE PEDESTAL, 37

D

SABRINA DUNN
WHEN LOOKING IN A
MIRROR HURTS, 45

E

DEBORAH EDWARDS
DADDY BRUSHES BY
ME NOW, 46

BROOKE ESPOSITO
10,000 HOURS, 50

F

ABSALOM FESILI
SHARING FACES WITH MY USO, 51

ANNE FLEMING
HARLEQUIN, 60

G

ANDREW GARAY
SOCIETY'S DIFFERENCES, 63

HILLARY G
THE LIE, 68

JENNIFER GLASSFORD
THE SELF PORTRAIT, 73

CAMERON GROGAN
THE PILGRIM'S GUIDE: HOW TO WALK
500 MILES IN A MONTH, 74

H

SUMMER HERRERA
NO'ÁÁ'ALVISH KÚT: MY FIRE STORY, 78
CRISIS, 146

**HELEN LEINANI
HIGHLAND-COSLOW**
CALENDAR COVID, 86
HERE WE GO, 88

BRENNA HUGHBANKS
TO THE DECORATIONS, 90

ALEXANDRIA HUNT
REGRETFULLY, I STILL [XXXX] SO, 92

I

CHRISTINA INZUNZA
A NURSE'S TALE, 96
AFTERLIFE IS CLOSED, 98

MITZI ISHIOKA
IT'S THE MOST WONDERFUL
TIME OF THE YEAR, 102

J

OSCAR JIMINEZ
VOLADO, 108

K

ROBIN KILRAIN
SNAPPY DRAGON SERVES UP
SAFETY AND A MEAN MU SHU, 59

L

DAWN LAGMAY
MIA, 114

JENNIFER LEDFORS
DEATH, MORTALITY, AND
IMMORTALITY, 115
EXTREME ANGST, 130

AMANDA LEE
DON'T CALL ME CHING CHONG, 116

M

SHERRY MANDE
OF FISH AND CONFETTI, 120

LEXIZ MANZANO
SOLITUDE, 121

EMILY MAZZA
HOME, 48
DISSASOCIATION, 158

YEYA MILLAN
DANCE AROUND THE FIRE, 36
MINDFUL, 101

DANICA MORRIS
NOVEMBER RAINS, 124

N

KYLIE NECOCHEA
I WANT TO BE A WOMAN WITH YOU, 126
SPRITE IN KOSSUTH, 129

SARAH NOVAK
CZECH BOOT, 122

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Tidepools publishes original art, poetry, fiction, and essays exclusively from MiraCosta College students, staff, and faculty and awards cash prizes to students in each category.

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Black and white and color drawings, prints, photographs, paintings, mixed media, and graphic design.

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P

M. CLAUDIO PEREZ

OUR TIME SEDONA, 26
IN THE DARK, 106

TATUM PERRY

SELF PORTRAIT, 89

R

ZAYNE RANDEL

A NEW PATH TO FOLLOW, 131

GUI TI RAVANBAKSH

SONYA, 19

BRIDGETTE ROBERSON

FUN TOWN, 134
I GOT MY COVID PROOF
SNEAKERS ON, 135

ANI RODRIGUEZ

IMMIGRATION CONSTERNATION, 137

ESTHER RODRIGUEZ

LOVE IN QUARANTINE, 77
I AM YOU, YOU ARE ME, 140

SHELBY ROSSMAN

AMERICAN APOCALYPSE, 10

SYDNEY ROSSMAN

COVID MIGRATION, 66
SOLITUDE, 94

S

JOHN SIEBELINK

THE DAY THE GRIM REAPER WEPT, 141
MORNING QUARANTINE, 145

TATUM SMITH

LOOK AT ME, 84

V

C.J. VANDERLIPE

THE RIGHT TO KILL, 148

SKYLAR VERMAAK

HOW TO TACKLE LIFE WHEN
YOU ARE WIGGIN' OUT, 154

W

ERICA WINTERS

NO ONE GETS OUT ALIVE, 159

HELENA WESTRA

DEATH VALLEY DAZE, 164

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