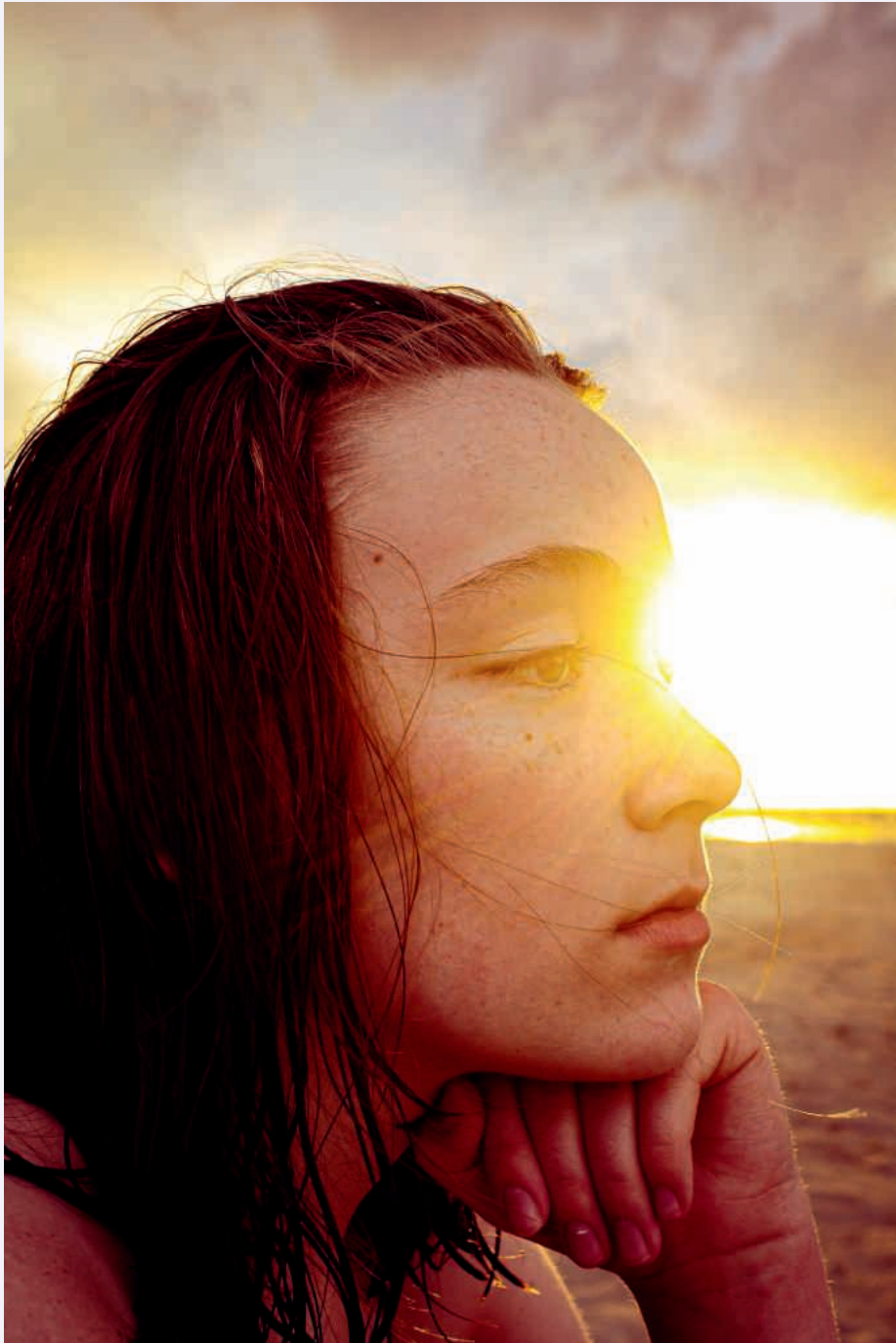


iris

literature and arts magazine



volume 1 / issue 1

What is Iris? We are the next successor in the long line of JMU's literature and arts magazine. You may have once known us as Gardy Loo or Temper. After a short hiatus, we decided to bring the magazine back – with a new name and a new staff, but the same mission as always: to promote and celebrate the creative work of JMU students. Welcome to Iris. We hope we'll be around for a long time.

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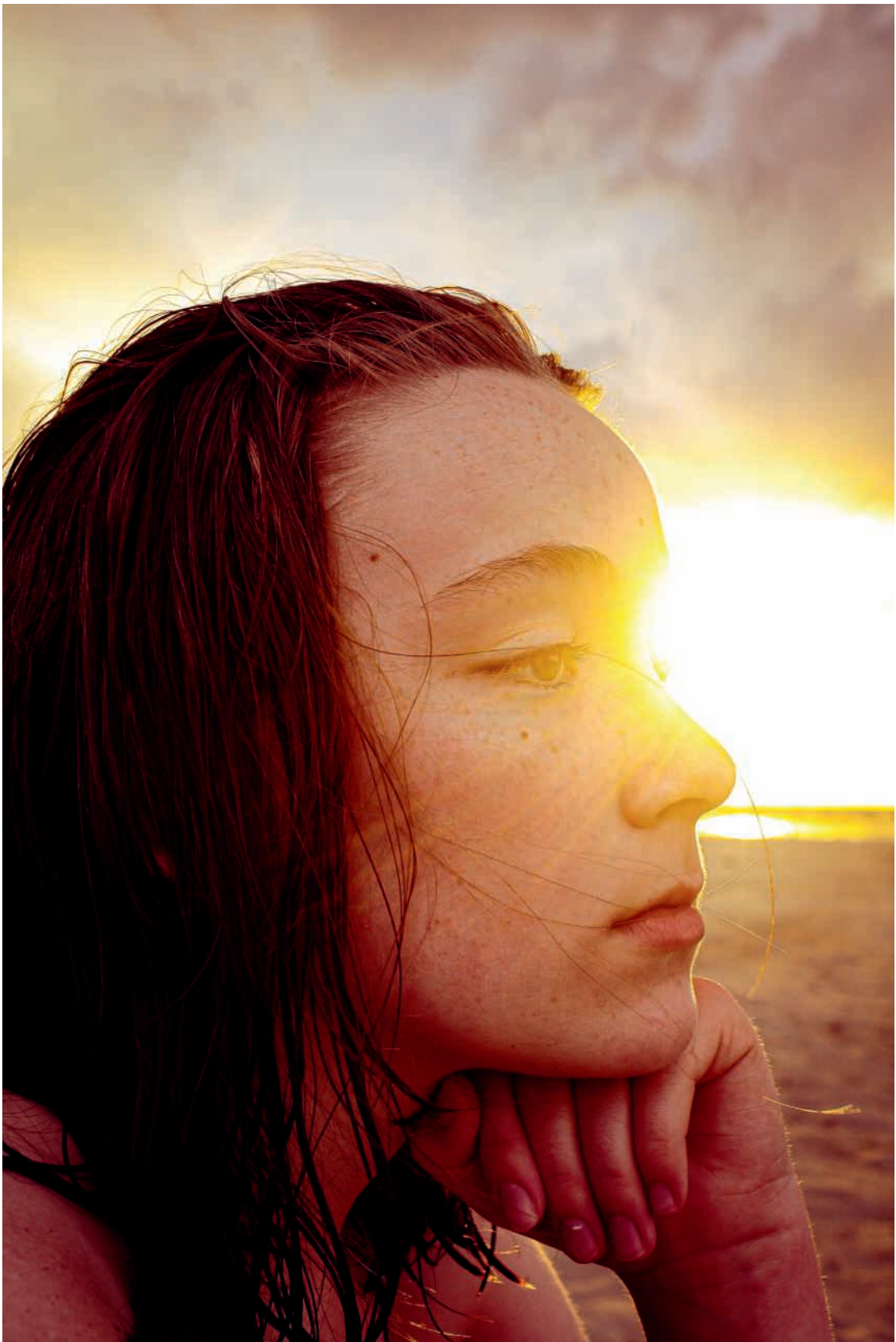
JMU Media Board

College of Arts and Letters

colophon

This issue of Iris was created by staff members, using InDesign. Fonts used throughout include Georgia, Avenir, and Manrope3. Iris is printed using McClung Companies in Waynesboro, Virginia. Submissions were accepted from any JMU undergraduate and chosen by staff members.

Contact us at jmu.irismagazine@gmail.com or visit our website, iris-mag.com.



Untitled (photograph) Emily Myers

letters from

Dear reader,

First and foremost, welcome to Iris! I'm so glad you're here. When I heard about the opportunity to rebuild this organization from scratch, I jumped at the chance, not fully knowing what that would look like. But here it is—an issue of Iris in your hands, a staff full of lovely and thoughtful people who I've had the joy to work with, and a whole load of stress off my shoulders now that we can—tentatively—call our relaunch a success.

I hope you enjoy this issue, and I hope some of you will join our team, submit your work, or simply continue to pick up a magazine at the end of each semester. We're excited to keep growing and be a part of the JMU community for years to come.

Haley Huchler

Editor in Chief

the editors

This semester, we have been the pioneers. As the Assistant Editor, I have had the unique experience of helping Haley, Danielle, and all of our other staff members craft a brand-new iteration of JMU's literature and arts magazine: Iris. Working on Iris has been central to the formation of my own personal editing philosophy. It has engaged me with varieties of literature and art I hadn't been previously familiar with, and given me valuable experiences working within a team of people with shared passions for reading and writing. Not only do I wish to continue my journey with Iris throughout my time at JMU, I wish to continue honing the skill of engaging with the creative work of others throughout the rest of my life. I could not be more grateful to have been afforded this opportunity.

I hope each person who reads this magazine enjoys reading it as much as we've enjoyed creating it. And to all of those who submitted, whether you were published or not, thank you for allowing us to read your work. Your creativity is boundless and you are the driving force behind this magazine. You are Iris.

Grace Keeler

Assistant Editor (& resident spreadsheet-maker)

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literature

On Fairy Rings

Charles Nicholas-Owen

Cursèd cap and foot of stool,
That make right round the dancing fool-
No spurs are sharper, no greater stings,
Than gleaned from broken fairy rings.

Fair be fate to fate's great fool,
Who clops a-top the toad king's stool.
Yet no fate be fouler felt,
Than frog and blade and gauntlet dealt.

Should mushroom caps turn mushroom bowls
When taken from their feet and poles,
Then elvish wrath and fairy-scorn,
Will find poor oaths to make thee sworn!

Sworn- yes- sworn to life,
Sworn to death and endless strife.
So save your steps for safer paths,
And stir not up the pixies' wrath!

White-washed rod and billowed blouses,
Make for sprites the finest houses,
As food and shelter they do offer;
The rings too make for magic coffers.

The rings of shroom-seeds cast about,
With fairy-dust to make them sprout
And cast about a mystic's ire,
Should they be met by foe and fire!

Turn your wrath from fairy-rings,
And bend your ears to hear them sing
New words to you in native tongues,
Lest air be last that's in your lungs!

Those touched by death and dollars be,
That perturbs the sprite's serenity,
Turn your steps with patience's gaze,
And keep onto the kinder ways.



Untitled (photograph) Emily Myers

Twenty-One

Corinne Martin

At 11:55 PM on my twenty-first birthday, all I can remember is my tenth.
How I watched the clock where it peered from my dresser,
As it plucked towards midnight,
Neon like a billboard, heavy on the eyes of nighttime travelers.

Ten was the shiniest toy with the catchiest jingle,
Sold out before Christmas.
A novelty in comparison to now,
When birthday vouchers for older and wiser,
Expire upon exchange.

At ten I didn't think of how quickly a decade doubles.
One moment my young jubilee cheeks are sore from birthday smiling,
The next I've come to learn, that 11:55 on your birthday,
May be the saddest time to be alive.

I'm getting older, but each year feeling *smaller* and *smaller*,
And wondering if I somehow knew more at ten,
Huddled under a quilt that settled on me like the weight of a year passing,
But I didn't dread the clock finally thumping on midnight.
I savored the feather's brush of nervousness,
At the possibility of meeting a new version of myself.

At twenty-one, I cannot open the door for a new inhabitant,
While grieving the reality, that life was better at ten.

painfully average

Ava Menoni

i'm scared that i'm painfully average
pretty enough to be loved
but not gorgeous enough to be a "one and only"
smart enough to never need any help
but not gifted enough to be noted
talented enough to be a hometown favorite
but not polished enough for any other stage
tough enough to handle it all on my own
but too scared to try

i'm happy where it's comfortable
where i sit and applaud
the awards and accolades
knowing i'm too flawed.

always supporting
always congratulating
happy as ever, stomach in knots
yet when i go home to my thoughts
with no hope i'll ever be recognized
envious tears fill my eyes

heaven howl

Starlight Fields

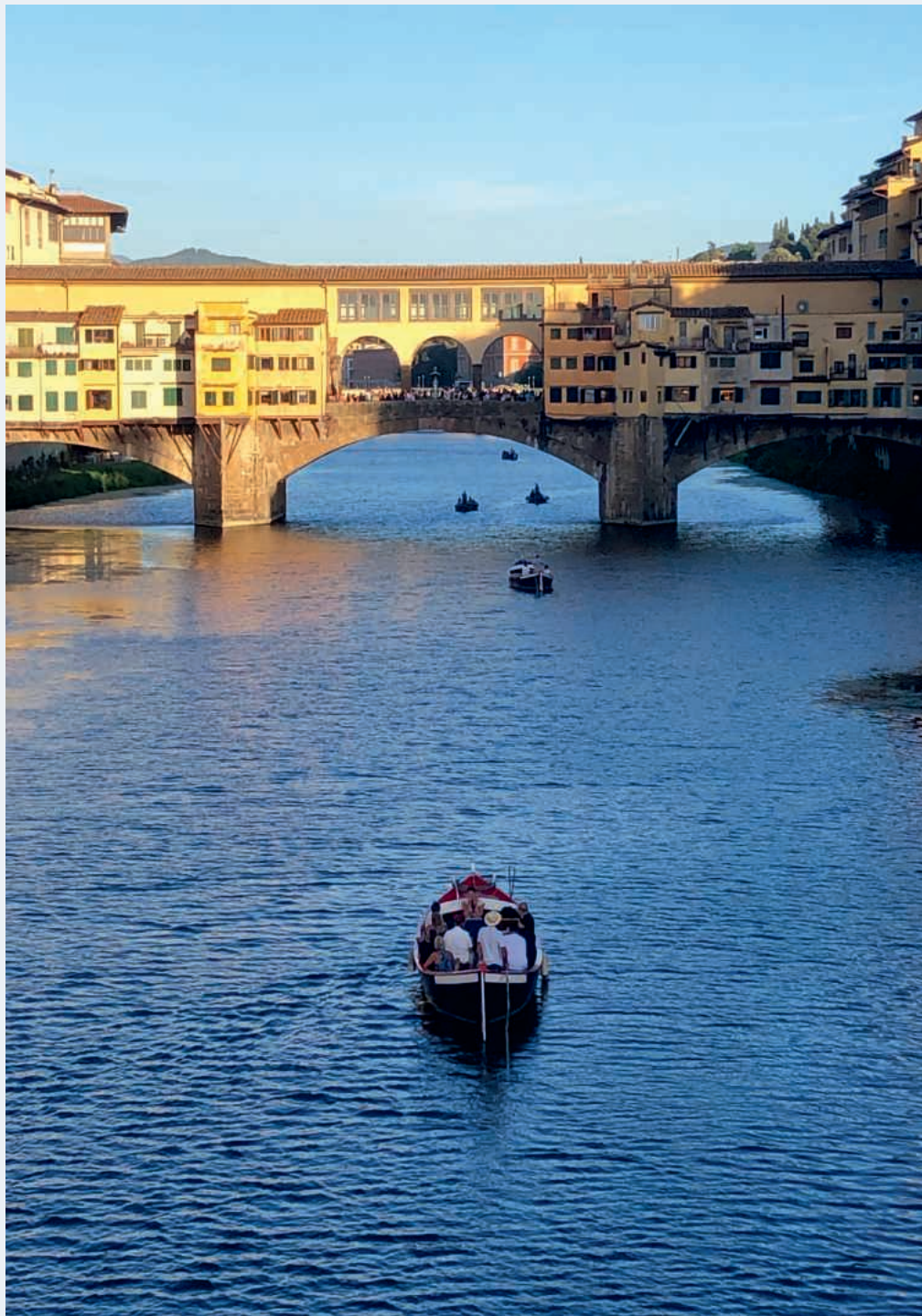
my mother reminds me often
that i was once born screaming,

as they tore my flesh from hers
i called out unintelligibly to God,

part of me knows i will die
without being that honest ever again



dead leaves bloom (film photograph) Grace Little



Untitled (digital photograph) Shannon Parente

A Sonnet of a Small Ship in a Bottle

Zera Williams

The waves gently rocking us to the end
I heard your heart drumming, mine sang along
Tears told the tale: how you were my best friend
You were the strong steady beat to my song

As the sun rose, your light blue eyes held mine
Ourselves tangled, you made me feel more than
Our paths designed us to in time entwine
Though the end, your heart is where mine began

Wet from dew the boat held me and held you
Embraced by the mountains our time ended
A gift that was all mine, with you I grew
Dreams looked like you sweet and safe and splendid

Time passed, sun now shines through the glass with the
small ship in a bottle, with you and me.

Shedding Light On Foundational Issues

Michaela Powell

When asked for my address, I used to say with absolute certainty that my home was 56 Bonnie Way, Allendale, New Jersey, ZIP code: 07401. Ugh, I just exuded pride, which my dad only fueled with his constant reassurance. He told me that our realtors couldn't say enough about our amazing location. I mean, it was only a few blocks away from the school, on a quiet, dead-end street, with an abundance of natural lighting. I remember being confused, though. What about the house? What did you like about the house itself? I asked. He told me that it didn't matter because the location made it perfect. Location, location, location, he said, are the three most important factors in choosing a home. All the other good stuff would come later.

At first, he was right. The house stuck true to its listing description, as light always filled every corner of our home. Each morning, the wall of windows lit up the entire family room as the sun rose over the trees, while the thick burgundy drapes perfectly bordered the image of the yard like an ornate frame. Streaming through the window, the light cut through the shadows and dust particles that swirled through the air. It cut through the glass end tables, casting hundreds of tiny rainbows on the stucco walls. That was until each evening when the rainbows flickered out one by one and swatches of pinks, oranges, and yellows from the setting sun replaced them. The fading light painted even the most grotesque, cobwebbed shelves with warmth.

The brightness of the natural lighting lingered even at night thanks to artificial replacements. Crackling in our great room fireplace, flames illuminated the family pictures on the surrounding shelves and warmed the stones bordering the hearth. Especially in our kitchen, the halogen bulbs cast everything in a hazy yellow glow. They drew us to the kitchen each evening, like moths to a flame, even on days when we were exhausted from running around to this activity or that soccer practice.

The bulbs shed light on the meal my mother concocted in the hopes of getting my sisters' approval. She labored over the steaming and hissing pots that littered the stove, even as Ciara pestered her with questions: "What's in that sauce? Is that something green? I won't eat that. What's for dessert?" Awoken by the wafting aroma of spaghetti and spicy meatballs, Dad wiped his sleepy eyes after he finally rose from the brown couch. Sorcha nearly snapped her waxy plastic silverware as she impatiently clenched them in her pudgy fists, mere minutes away from a hanger tantrum. I let their idle chatter wash over me, content to just behold the chaos.

I felt content with my life as it was, I think. Or at least I believed it wasn't possible for me to be sad when I supposedly had so much to be grateful for. So, once we settled into our designated seats at the island and the obligatory friendly conversations fizzled out, I tried to ignore the tone of my mom's voice when she told Ciara to finish her corn even though she didn't feel hungry anymore. I told myself she wanted Ciara to grow healthy and strong. That didn't make it any easier to see the shimmer of tears in Ciara's eyes as she shakily raised the spoon of corn to her mouth. Over and over again. One kernel at a time. I wanted so desperately to convince myself that she would grow out of her picky habits and thank my mom later in life, even as I turned my eyes to my plate to prevent my own tears from flowing.

Sorcha screeched in my ear, interrupting my poor attempt to dissociate, when mom told her she wasn't excused until we all finished dinner. Their voices rose two octaves with each scream, practically competing for who could reach the highest pitch. Glancing to the head of the table, I noticed a red flush rising from my dad's neck to cheeks until it finally reached the vein popping out of his forehead. With a single gulp of breath, he shouted, "Everyone to their room. NOW." That I could not excuse or re-interpret, no matter how many ways I tried to spin it. Not when his spit flecked my cheeks and his thunderous voice still rattled my skull on the way upstairs.

I scurried as fast as my slipper socks would let me, straining to get away from our parents' hushed conversations, but not even the groaning of the wooden staircase and layers of insulation could mask my dad's barks and my mom's hisses. I couldn't escape these conversations about our ridiculous behavior, about the nonsense they had to put up with, about how they couldn't believe they raised us to act so selfishly. Eventually, their disapproval flipped on themselves, and they argued about how Dad can't just contradict Mom's decisions. About how Mom acts so stupid and Dad so hot-tempered.

In their discussions, they never mentioned my name specifically, of course, yet it felt so overwhelmingly personal. I should have told Ciara and Sorcha to eat their food. Or maybe tell Mom and Dad about my 100% on my most recent essay. I just sat there, though. Time and time again, I refused to involve myself for fear of actually becoming their next topic of discussion.

The cycle continued each dinner (unless, of course, it was chicken tenders and french fries), making me believe this was natural. That all family dinners end in tears, shouts, and degradation. That I should always want to melt into the crevices of my chair to get away from any arising conflict. The pit in my stomach and the tense conversations didn't matter because my parents told me they didn't. They were irrelevant because familial duty obligated us to love each other unconditionally. No matter how often we fought, no matter the severity of the fight, and no matter the cause.

Over time, this detrimental belief caused the light in our home to dim in spite of our many, many windows. Without a powerful enough light to keep them at bay, the shadows more forcefully emerged from hiding, and our family dinners became far and few between. My parents no longer bothered to work around our extracurricular schedules, so I hardly had to see them at all. Instead, I became very well acquainted with my bedroom, adjusting to its soft morning light instead of the family room's harsh exposure. Except not even the warm lighting could be saved in our household. My dad decided it would be an awesome idea to switch all the warm halogen light bulbs to luminescent LED bulbs, which quite literally cooled the ambience of our home. Apparently, they shine brighter, last longer, and save energy. But I swear, our home had never been so dark.

I remember when my dad finally reached my room: the last place that halogen bulbs reigned. I refused to give up the last bit of comfort that they offered me. However, one by one, the bulbs in my room went out, and the yellow light of my safe haven grew dimmer and dimmer. Despite my pleas, my dad refused to restore my room's soft lighting. I had no choice but to accept the harsh reality of LED lights. My stomach turned each time he ripped a bulb out of its socket. I had to leave. I couldn't bear to watch the unashamed satisfaction that lit up his face as he opened the boxes of LED bulbs.

Once I finally felt brave enough to return, bright white lighting jarringly greeted me as I opened the door. The goosebumps on my forearms tingled with discomfort at the sharp shadows that now inhabited the contortions of my comforter, transforming it into an extraterrestrial landscape. With a quick turn, I noticed the light even washed out the honey-colored walls, fading them into a dull beige. My dad, so pleased with his work, only grinned. Oblivious to my distress, my dad asked, "What do you think? Pretty cool, right?" Very cool, indeed.

I could only think to respond, "I feel like I'm being beamed up." My dad just scoffed. For someone who becomes attached to things so easily, he couldn't wrap his head around the significance of these lights. And the last place that felt like home to me no longer felt quite so comforting.

So, despite the realtor's insistence on its homey potential, 56 Bonnie Way deteriorated into just a house. A house where people related solely by blood inhabited. I think my parents realized this too (finally), but their attempts to bring us together only drove us further apart. After years of failed family game nights, disastrous vacations, and a couple of ruined birthdays, my parents decided a renovation would be our saving grace.

Not even a day after they signed the contracts, landscapers returned to chop down the trees that we lay under in elementary school, turning our backyard into a mud pit. And not the fun kind. Layouts, floor plans, and 3D models sprawled across the kitchen island where we used to eat family dinners. Phone calls with contractors, architects, and landscapers soon took up all my parent's time. Sprawled around the house, there were plans with kelly green sod, with vaulted ceilings and wooden beams from old barns in Pennsylvania, with a tiled TV room in the basement, and with a waterfall that cascaded into a bean-shaped pool. These images filled our minds and our hearts with hope for months, conditioning us to eat, sleep, and breathe renovation. Conditioning us to believe this could repair our family.

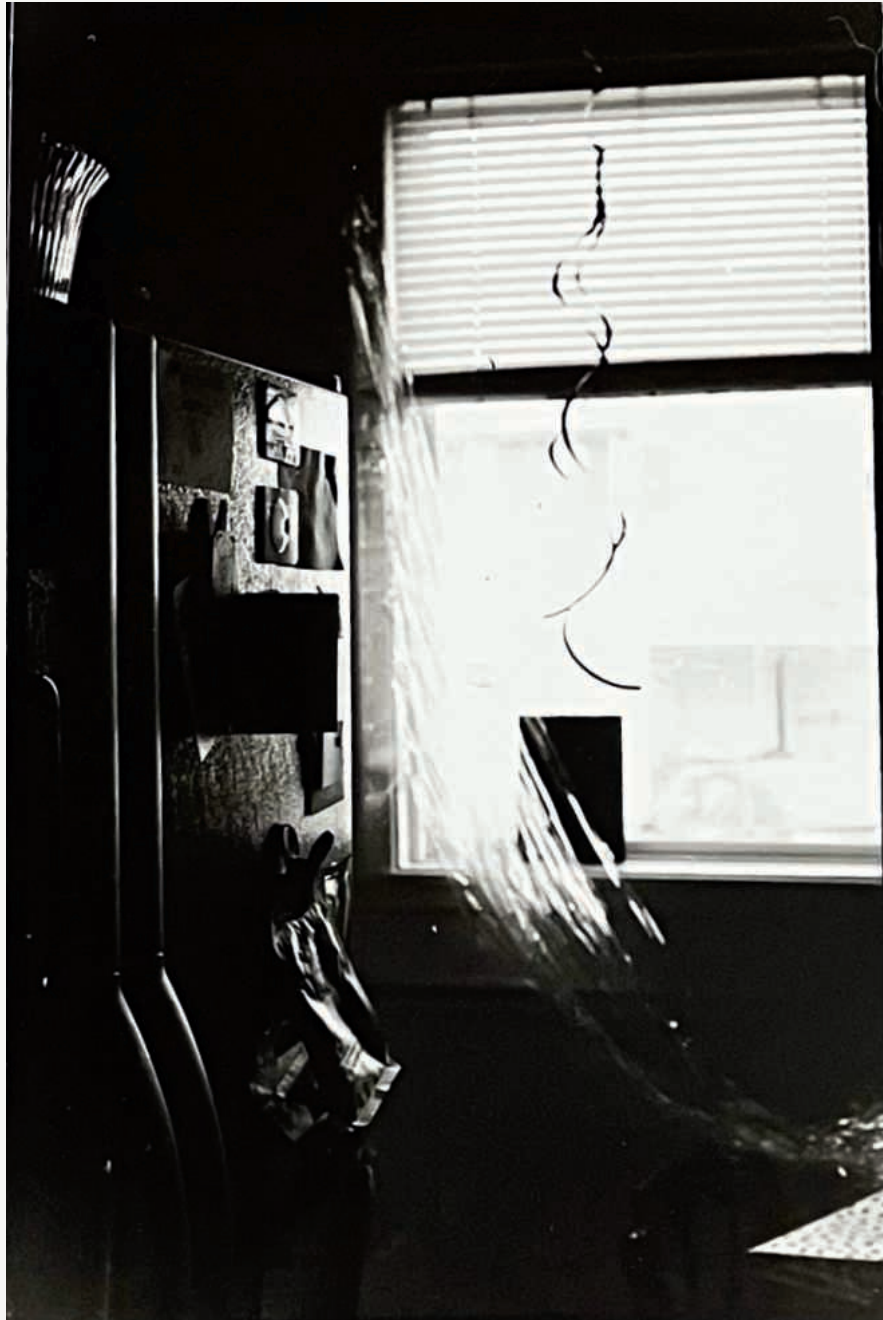
I tried to remain hopeful, to resist the pessimistic tendencies I had developed after years of detachment, but I still couldn't bring myself to believe in these plans the same way the rest of my family did. Instead, I chose to hold both the past and future at a distance, stuck in the limbo I called my bedroom.

Because of that, I didn't care when the construction workers came to tear my childhood apart. I felt nothing in the gaping pit where my stomach should've been as I watched them rip out the yellowing and peeling kitchen cabinets, lovingly dented by years of play, and replace them with the smooth, ivory models. As the jack hammers pummeled the wall where we once recorded our heights in Crayola washable markers, I plugged my nose and ears the best I could. I pinched my nose until it burned against my fingertips and tucked my head between my knees like a preening bird, anxious to fly away. Yet, it was pointless. It did nothing to block out the bone-crunching noises or the smell of sawdust that lingered in my hair. I could only huddle in my outlandish room. Meanwhile, our cream-colored playroom with its tarnished gold chandelier (once filled with halogen bulbs) turned into my dad's office and a dining room that we don't even use.

My parents were too distracted by the grandeur of our new vaulted ceilings and vintage beams to notice that they actually destroyed the few remaining things that made our house somewhat homelike. They couldn't see beyond the walls of our eerily hospital-like kitchen nor beyond the fence surrounding our newly paved bean-shaped pool. To them, these physical improvements would allow us to reconstruct our emotional family ties, maybe even making something wholly new and better. But the renovations only filled up the cracks, sanded down the most obvious splintering bits of our issues, and demolished the few remaining things that once connected us. It failed to directly address the problem, since our issues stem from the very foundation of our home.

On that fateful visit day circa 2002, the realtor failed to stress the importance of this. How greatly the foundation influences the longevity and strength of an entire structure. My parents easily glossed over this rather important detail, as they only noticed how 56 Bonnie Way perfectly fit their idea of what a home should be. Sandy and Bob didn't bother to consider the work that would go into maintaining its structural integrity. They only imagined their small children riding on little tricycles around the cul-de-sac and eating Sunday pancakes on our deck overlooking the woods. Strolling through the great room, they saw their future kids huddled around the fireplace while my dad demonstrated how to roast the perfect marshmallow. To them, these components ensured a happy, predictable life, because how could a family not flourish in such a great place?

They didn't understand (and still don't) that people transform a house into a home. It's the people who must fill it with love, tenderness, empathy, and warmth, since these are the things that brace relationships for potential breakage in the future. And, no, these can't be substituted with pretty cabinetry and a big backyard. In the end, the foundation of our home came to rest solely on pettiness and turning a blind eye to recurrent problems, so it easily cracked under the weight of all my parents' expectations. Even with distance, I can feel these cracks fissuring further and further. I know it's only a matter of time before the lights in our house go out forever.



post 21 (film photograph) Grace Little

SOMETIMES WRITING PAPERS IS TERRIBLE ACTUALLY

Sophie Uy

And maybe it's stupid of me to say this,
but I don't think my work is ever
complete. Reaching the 1000-word requirement
doesn't account for
everything that went into pressing *SUBMIT*.
Final drafts are never finite. They're
growing pains. Backbones constructed from
heavy, verbose
I-know-what-I'm-talking-about-isms.
"juxtaposing dynamic and rhythmic themes is a hallmark of Mozart's compositional style..."
kills me inside, just a little. Yes, I wrote that.
Like, can you imagine what would happen if I wrote—I can't say "like" that way. Like—look,
my language should
not be your choice. Can I get standing
ovations for neatly-placed
participles? I'll throw in *symmetry* for bonus points. If you
question my diction, I'll get back to you later; I'm still in
Requiem remission.
Sorry to disappoint, sort of. You can reach me on
Tuesdays and Thursdays between the
urgent hours of 3 and 4 A.M. for
Very Professional Meetings if you have inquiries about my
word choice. What do you mean, I should try
Xanax? I'm hydrated!
Yesterday I drank twelve fluid ounces of water
zested with coffee grounds. I'm doing great! Last edit was seconds ago.



worldender (mixed media collage) Grace Little

sea, swallow me

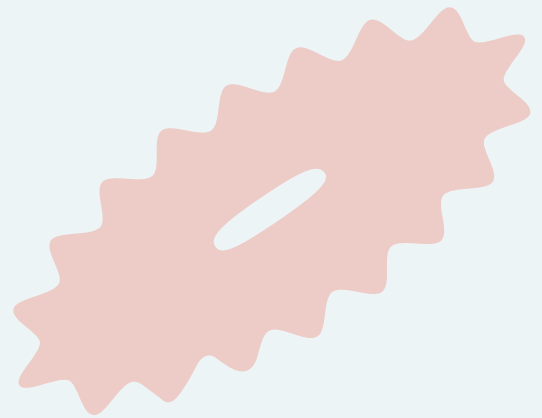
Starlight Fields

envelop the cage of my humanity
cover it like a battleground
take all that remains still solid inside
liquify me,
smother the edges of my sick smile,
flush my insides with salt water
make my purified mouth your fountain,
i want to feel it,
while the sky above us performs
the danse macabre,
ordinate my eyes onto orion,
allow my last bet to be placed on the ox,
then take my very last sin
out to the tide,
fight against the thrashing fears of my flesh,
too long have they been disillusioned from death
they know not what —
rough waves rectify me
rearrange this reality
pull me
pool me

Our Cells

Laurel Seay

how savage is it, to take apart one's own body?
to remove the flesh,
the breasts,
the ovaries whole.
down to the very last cell,
the vigilante,
thief.
breaking, multiplying, killing.
and if my cells are like my mother's,
i will tear into my body too.
if my own organs turn against me,
crisp, red, burnt from chemo,
i will rip them out myself.
how powerful is it,
to speak so freely?
to show one's scars,
where her breasts should be,
where femininity is defined.
i would not be able to carry
my mother's same strength.
oh how womanly it is, to take apart one's own body
for the chance to live.



The Winds

Charles Nicholas-Owen

The winds flow over mountains
Like rivers formless run,
Born from distant fountains
Through fields beneath the sun.

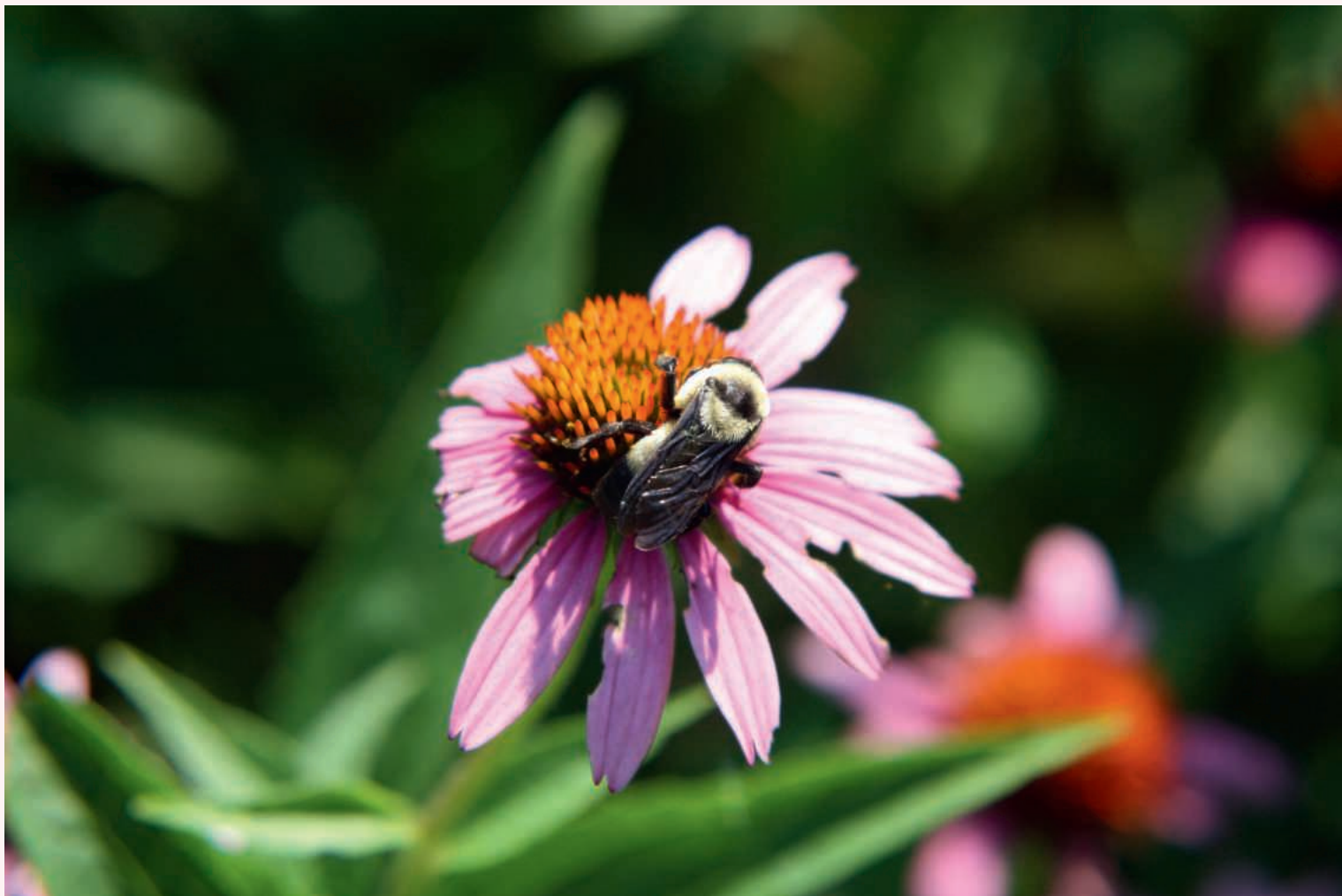
Softer breezes some once knew
In fields of softer gold—
Under cloud and sky so blue.
At night the winds fall cold.

When the sun has made his run
And the evening moon arrives,
Cold winds are felt by everyone,
The cold like biting knives.

The howling winds like a hungry beast
Hunting down its prey;
They'll plague the night till from the east
The sun will make the day.

The sun will rise up once again.
The winds have changed their course.
The sun will ride up to regain
His winds beneath his horse.

Tamed winds roll round the mountains
Like rivers shapeless run,
Born from far-off fountains,
Through fields beneath the sun.



Untitled (digital photograph) Emily Myers

Chase.

Haylee Chase Edwards

I was given your name, right there in the middle,
Sandwiched between the frybread of who they wanted me to be
And who decided not to stay.

I know so much of you through snapshots of us:
Me in your arms, you with a mustache, disappointed brows;
A baby-faced grin backlit by the seriousness of a soldier,
Worn out from holding on too tight.

And at bedtime, Mother revised your lore:

Catches of your Blackfoot dreams
Wound tight round the hoops of her hopes
Woven through restructured memories
Pearls of truth like twinkling dew along fibbed threads
Feathers from our horse's hair hung by the webbing
Of stories strung tight enough to last generations.

She reworked the tales of the gunmetal skies looming behind you when you
Told the children they were worth nothing, they wasted your time, patience,
Love. The way they cried when you told them to remember their place or to
Go fetch a switch, prepare for a lashing, bring you another cigarette.
If only you had known that the echoes would reach me one day
Even after you were long gone.

You faded away before I was two but these blurred visions
Hang over my bed still—the spider imp forgot to sift out
What we know from what we wish.

The wickedness has yet to slip through the gap in the center
Because outside, the cloud of your harm has yet to part
And the only daylight left to cleanse our snares is

fractured by falsity.

i met an angel last night at the gas station

Lib Fetzer

i met an angel last night at the gas station
its impossible form flickering under the sickly fluorescents
the neon glow cast from the signs in the station windows
glinting off its sash, its wings, its eyes
and oh, it had so many eyes

i met an angel last night at the gas station
a bag of chips in one hand and my phone in the other
still in the previous day's clothes
it looked down at me with its eyes
(and oh, it had so many eyes)
and i could have sworn it was smiling at me

i met an angel last night at the gas station
be not afraid, it said, and reached out
its hand, with too many joints to resemble anything human
brushed against my cheek and i tasted television static

i met an angel last night at the gas station
it smelled like sulfur and sage, burning rubber and burnt umber
a bit like a campfire and a bit more like a house fire
but underneath: holy oil, incense, evergreen

i met an angel last night at the gas station
we made an exchange of the holy sort:
a bag of potato chips, unopened, mint condition
for a kiss that tasted of a supernova and something else entirely:
a bit like salt water, a bit like salvation
(and just a bit like a blue raspberry slushie)

i met an angel last night at the gas station
it was hours ago; my lips are still numb
pins and needles of the frozen sort every time i smile or swear
i'm going back to the gas station; maybe tonight
i'll get to keep my chips

feasting on fallen stars

Starlight Fields

as drops of jupiter drip down my jaw,
their light illuminates me to be
the glutton of galaxies,

the grotesque mess
an overfed dreamer forced to their knees,
guilty hands gripping the ground

caught choking down,
the very last words,
of a swallowed shooting star,

the consumed constellation cursed now
to float only through the fabric
of my logical fallacies, cries

haven't i given enough

my insides howl of desecration,
will this body ever be more than a cage
for the chaining of rare and beautiful things,

the black matter of the fact,
is that, i somehow only know,
how to feast on falling stars

to sink my fangs into their cosmic flares,
to depollute my blood stream,
with the sickly sweet sip of starlight,

once i prayed to learn how
to love them from a distance,
but something more than human inside of me knows,

it will never be enough.



Blaze

Sara Buie

Stars twinkle because they're irregular
They spin around and around
Prima ballerina trapped in the sky
Imperfect edges
Glimmering in the night

Wet grass
Shivering toes
I wrap myself in starlight
Insignificant under the moon's eye
Comfort in the fact
That I am nothing to the universe
But it is everything to me

How does the sky feel to see airplanes
Attempt to be part of its beauty, if even just for a few hours

Sometimes I feel 30,000 feet in the air
Terrified of falling, euphoric in the freedom
The longer I look
The more stars I see
And I so desperately wish
I could bathe in their warmth
Sit near, and behold the miracle
Warm my hands like at a campfire

I come back to this blanket
This cold, hard ground under my body
Sit in the realization
That some things are only meant to be looked upon
Not experienced



MEMORY IS A BIOGRAPHY

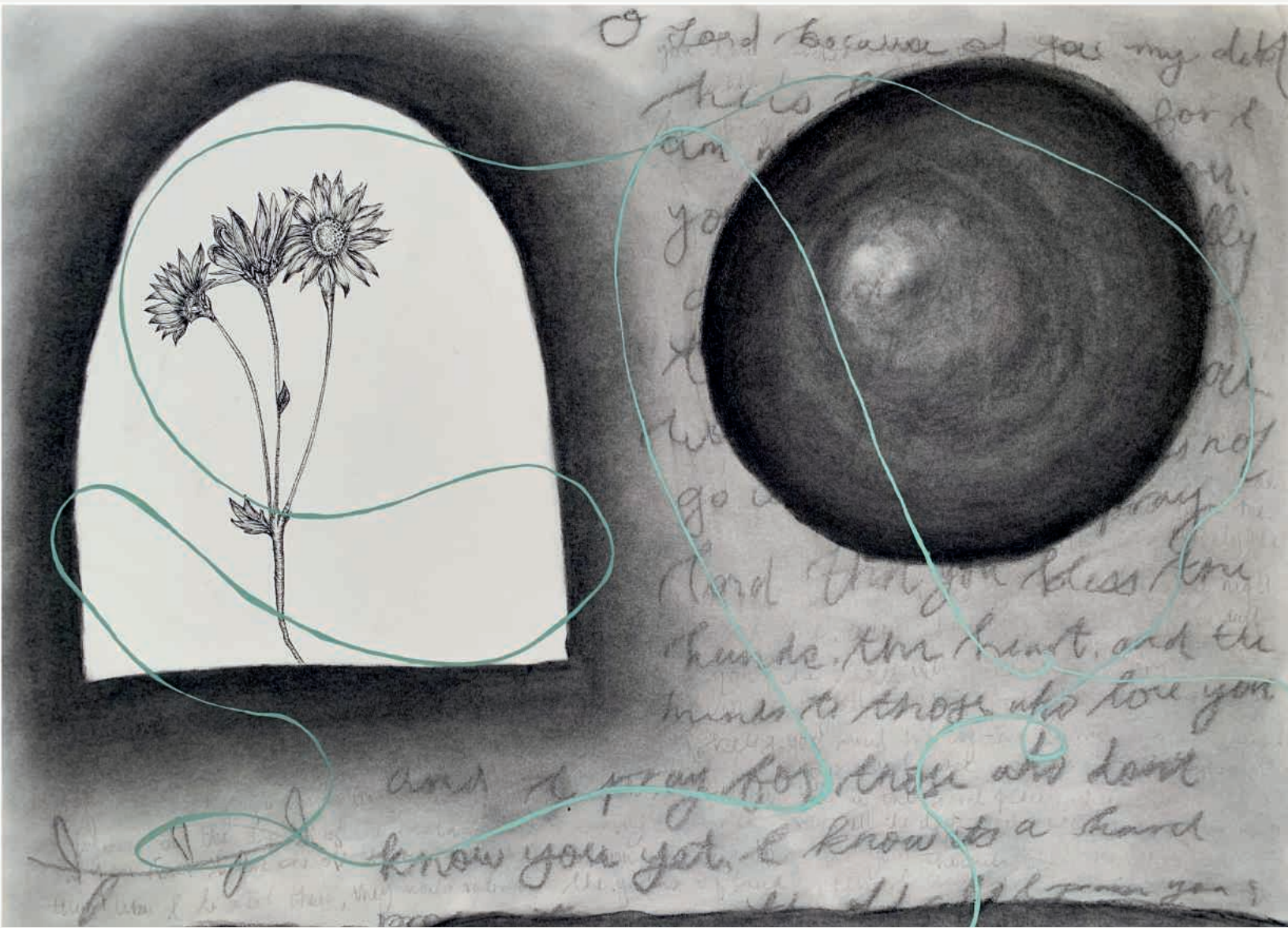
Sophie Uy

I.

You asked me what I'm looking for
I said Consider a library on fire
Books peeling away from the shelves
like skin
Pages slipping from burnt palms & fingers
Because life is a cruel joke
the only artifice left amongst these ruins
proof that for a time all those words had a life
is a biography with my face on the cover still intact
Death passes over
under
through everything else &
Nothing forges a home for itself in rubble and blank space
those words once immortalized memory
reduced to prefixes
un-
caring of what it leaves behind

II.

Is a memory yours if you're told it happened to you
*Hey a-chí do you remember your eighth summer when
you tripped up the escalators in Robinsons Manila
it's not called Robinsons Place Manila anymore
the concept of place died a while back*
*Do you remember your knees thin & scraped like the sound
a butter knife makes across a crisp slice of toast Wasn't that funny*
Can I call it mine if I don't remember it
Maybe language is the mouth biting into us
I'm still searching for it Someone could
borrow a book from the fiction section
& call it my biography I'd have to cite that
I'm still searching for it
Writing isn't waiting but aging



dreamscape (mixed media) Grace Little

just like betty

Corinne Martin

I look just as she did. That's what Betty tells me. I smile for the camera. I am crushed against her, crushed within her tan arms. I wonder who is looking through the lens, each shutter imagines a stranger self. Betty sees me clearly.

The breeze hushes through trees, over buzzing cicadas. Betty releases me. She places her hands on tanned knees and pushes to her feet. We watch the children of the tribe run and play their games. We watch until the tribal center's wooden steps leave splinters on my bare legs.

I don't know much about Betty, but she is always there. She appears at every Sappony gathering, every youth camp, every Brunswick stew. Today is her favorite of them all, homecoming. She loves homecoming most for its late August air. She says it smells like memories.

I cannot imagine Betty's memories or Betty's past. I know from the gray hairs on her temple that she has lived. I don't know what the story of that life looks like. She is only present to me. Existing right this moment, and never before.

We leave the stairs, leave the children to throw their balls and wrestle each other to the ground. Betty wants to see what's left of lunch, and I follow her. I follow her if only to look for the pieces of myself in her. To wonder whether the lines around her lips will one day find rest on my own face. I watch her run her hands over the folding tables, rough and plastic. There is little food that hasn't been picked over yet.

"There's one cupcake left," I tell her.

"You have it."

"I can't."

"Surely you can."

"I'm too full."

I present it to her. The icing is coated thickly atop it, a shade of orange existing only through chemical creation. She smiles at me, thoughtful. She tells me she only likes the icing. Before I can set it down she smothers her face against the cupcake, biting the icing from the top. Nuclear orange icing is smeared across her face.

The way she grins at me as she lifts her head somehow transcends age. She could be a parent, maybe even a grandparent, though she has no kin of her own. I've only ever seen this fascination for the world in children. Children who've yet to feel the weight of time in their bones. I am not like her. I don't have her ease. Her joy. I can feel the weight of more than just time on my bones.

I walk with her to the bathroom. I stand at the sink as she wipes her face. I watch our reflections beside each other. Dark hair. Dark eyes. Tan skin.

"Do you think I look like my momma?" I ask her.

"I never met your momma, she's not from around these parts."

"People tell my sister that she looks just like Momma."

"Well, you don't look like your sister."

I watch the orange-tinted water drip off of Betty's face. Betty is not beautiful, though I watch her as if she might be. I imagine her sturdy rounded shoulders as elegant, her muscular legs somehow graceful. I soften her edges in my mind, into a beauty I might wish myself to be. Beautiful like my mother.

I often think of my momma, the last time I'd seen her. Mascara blobs polluted her cheeks, suitcase open in front of her. She wore a yellow apron. I held my small hands onto it, I rubbed my snotty crying face into it. She untied the apron and took it off. She left me clinging to it as she loaded up the car. I don't want to remember this. I want to remember that Momma was beautiful.

"Do I look like you?" I ask Betty.

"I think I see myself in you."

"That isn't what I asked."

"You are my happier self. You are a tangible reminder of the girl I once was. It is in how you look, yes. But deeper than that, I can feel in you the person I once was."

"What if I'm not happier?"

I watch her straighten, and wipe her face. I know then the look of memories in her eyes. A push from the present into a lingering past that follows you only to swallow you whole. I leave her there, crumpling a brown paper towel in her hand.

I cannot keep my mind from her memory laden eyes. I know them too well. I know how a memory echoes inside of you, rattling around your ribcage. I have never told Betty my own memories. Yellow apron. Mascara. Suitcase.

I drift through the festivities a ghost. I sit silent at dinner, letting memories sneak down my throat as I lift food to my lips. I do not talk to Betty, but I watch her. The waves of her dark hair nearly spilling onto her plate. Again, she is carefree.

I hear her laughter as flame catches an old shoe box. It is thrown upon piles of branches until a bonfire is forged from cardboard embers. The tribe gathers around it. The tips of children's cheeks are pink from the heat.

A young girl sits beside me, her golden hair burns brighter in the reflection of the flame. She looks beautiful. She looks like Momma did. I am wordless, but I watch her. She asks me if she may braid my hair.

I turn on the bench until my back is to her. She runs her fingers through my hair, she is gentle on my tangles. When I apologize for the knots and runs she does not acknowledge it. I let her weave the strands together. I feel a tingle down my spine each time she tightens the braid. The tingle soon settles into something softer, a feeling of safety.

She tells me she wishes she looked like me. I tell her how beautiful she is. That she looks just like my momma did. I tell her it is a gift to look as she does. When she finishes my hair, she tells me again I am beautiful. She asks me if I am crying but I tell her it is merely bonfire smoke.

I am sitting with the aunties, staring at the embers before me. I watch their colors shift from gold to red to a color I cannot describe. Fading in and out of my ears is the gossip and chatter of the aunties. They mention a man from the tribe who had recently moved away.

I do not listen until I hear Betty's name. Her daughter, they say. The one who died, they say. It was a car accident; somebody had stolen the stop sign again. Her daughter didn't see the driver coming head-on.

Betty sits on the other side of the bonfire. She sits alone. I can see again in her eyes a glimpse of memory. I make it over to Betty and her side of the bonfire is quiet, she stares into the flames. I sit beside her.

The fire illuminates every crease and wrinkle on her face. She no longer seems ageless, instead her age seemed to have seeped into her all at once. Her tan arms are wrapped around herself.

"I didn't know that you have a daughter," I tell her.

"I don't really, not anymore."

"Do I look like her?"

"You look so much like her it hurts to breathe sometimes, just looking at you." I have always seen Betty as sturdy, but now she seems small. The past had been following her all along. How could she bear to look at the ghost of her daughter? I watch a beetle walk across my boots. The green of its shell shifts and shimmers underneath the fire.

"How do you carry it all?" I ask her.

"Carry what?"

"Time. Pain. Everything. It's like time is pushing down on me every day."

"Oh, I've felt time as heavy as it comes, pain too. But I think they're only as heavy as you let them be."

I ask Betty then how she ever learned to let go. She tells me that at first she didn't. She fought tooth and nail to keep every nasty piece of pain inside herself. It is as if I can see then every bit of pain that had carved itself into her body. In the gray hairs on her head, in her calloused hands. As if it had made an imprint on her body.

Betty tells me then how she learned to let it go. She tells me that in tragedy, there is a fine line between being careless and being strong. That she has found joy because it was the only way forward. That she wouldn't let it consume her.

I want to tell her that I am not like her. That I want the pain. That it is easier to find pain sweet as it goes down, than to find a way to move past it. Instead, I watch her face in the firelight and I know then she is beautiful. I rest my head against her shoulder and we wrap our arms around each other. The flames reach toward the sky, and we are small beside them.

I CAN SEE IN HER EYES A GLIMPSE OF MEMORY

Sonderlust

Liz Shanks



I have a habit of sucking the marrow out
Of songs and swallowing their sticky, sappy,
Lilting words until they've turned sour, rotten, like
Smashed watermelon on a summer patio. At first,

The words taste like rich honey, they are tender
And soft as I chew on them like bubblegum. They are
Warm and loving, they whisper to me the names
Of feelings I didn't know I had. Soon after the songs

Have made their imprint on my tastebuds, the rich
Honey crystalizes, the bubblegum melts and now
My gums are bleeding and there are fruit flies that
Long for the rancid taste, the putrid smell. Where

Daisies and maple once resided now lies fuzzy
Static in my brain, an itch to be scratched by a
Different song to come along soon, come along
With the next wave of watermelon words until I am

Spitting out seeds. I never intend to exhaust the songs,
To turn them lime-sour in my ears until they ring. It isn't
Fair, how easily the grassy plains we roll on turn to muddy
Clay and desolate waste. All I wanted was for the fruit

To dribble down my chin, for the juices to never die. But
This can never be as long as I bleed songs dry.

dark room negatives

Lib Fetzer

in your hands you hold a camera
and in that camera are our lives
the birthday parties and the living room photoshoots
the "quick! make a face!"
and the complete candid,
the flash taking us all off guard,
the late night adventures and the tipsy celebrations
when everyone's limbs are a little looser,
their smiles a little wider.

you edit them so beautifully,
making the edges of this cruel world softer
forcing the background to fade away
while bringing the subjects into focus

but i think the real gift lies
in your talent for capturing moments
a thrown back head as one friend laughs with her whole body,
the incredulous look on another's face as she takes it in,
my roommate's expression as she tries not to burst into laughter,
the ridiculous faces your housemates make
as they belt their hearts out over dinner
and me, in the background, taking it in with a smile

you aren't in any of them
you say you don't mind,
that your true joy comes from documenting
but just once, i'd like to flip the camera around
use your own medium against you
to document the lines of your small, fast smile,
the way it crinkles your eyes at the corners
*the artist and photographer himself, captured
black and white film, 2022*



softness (film photograph) Grace Little

Covet

Vanessa Rivera

I want to eat peppermint sticks in dull soft licks
instead of into sharp spears that puncture cheeks
I want to wear my hair tied like ballerinas do
instead of an archer's tuck
I want my face to melt like honey on fresh toast
fill every pore with sweetness
I want fists that curl around a hand
Not around shards of stained glass
I want my skin to burn under sun,
from peachy white to cherry
I do not want it to darken,
embrace the harsh heat
I do not want to be created from
the abrasive, drying day
I want to be made of soft moon and night
Spoonfuls of maraschino glaze and sugar
Not cough syrup and salt

CICADA'S REQUIEM

Sophie Uy

You will never know music
like I did. Not sing or die, but
sing & then die. O human,
I'm not angry with you but

the maple & how I watched
a-chí inhale dew from its roots
like she had no option—she
had no plan B, only the plan A

given to us by a mother we
never met. Only the plan A
molded into our faces, white
& innocent. Not like you, who

can shed your future like a
second skin. I loathe you not
for my failed life but because
I don't know if you'll live yours.

I don't have secrets. I am trying
to say you won't understand
what you don't listen to. You'll
block out our song because

you've done it before. Walked
past a-chí's aria & asked the
vendor *shūshu can I get the*
yú wán tang please. With

extra là jiāo yóu too. Scraped
coriander from your chopsticks
while a-chí fell to the maple's
feet. Trampled over a-hia's

wings on your walk home
while I flattened myself on
the branch to niente. Dawn
broke through crinkled leaves

and my dirge got lost in
translation; my weeping
became a war anthem. In a
way the maple was a mother

without familial instinct. It
didn't give, but we took—
warbled *gānbēi*, licked sap
from its roots, our bodies.

Poor man's *huángjiǔ*: heady,
more than mortal. We drank
but never asked for more; we
were already raising ourselves

to die. I watched a-chí & a-hia
become alcoholics over it.
Seventeen years old was my
concert premiere. It was

clinging to the maple like its
leaves wouldn't also wither &
knowing my life was fraught
because I didn't ask for it.

man's muse

Grace Keeler

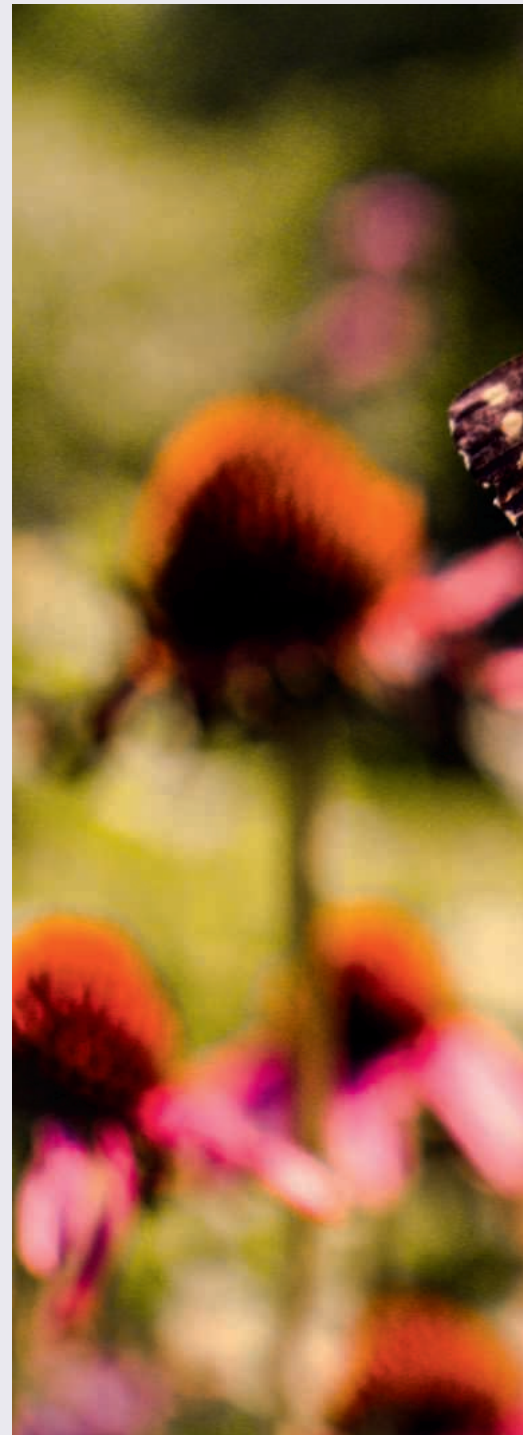
woman's body is ocean
glimmering surface
undiscovered depths

woman's body is constructed
as muse and as mother
never afforded the luxury of autonomy

woman's body is pure
until she taints it
until blood drips from her wicked thighs

woman's body is unchaste
in service of father, husband, son
maimed, disfigured, cut down
becoming less and less

woman's body is graveyard
where dreams come to die
she has been worn down so deeply
that even her core is shedding layers



Untitled (digital photograph) Emily Myers



Feminine Defined


Sara Buie

I watch as my friends do each other's hair
Share glitter and shirts
Secrets and laughter
The covenant of girlhood encompassed in a
dorm room
The constant open and close open and close
open and close
The floor rattles
My heart a revolving door
Where the ideas of identity filter in and out
I try them on like I did dresses
In a TJ Maxx fitting room for a school dance
Where I realized both my broad shoulders
And large breasts
Were not accounted for in fashion design
And I grapple with my image on the floor
While my mother sits outside in the corridor
Asking how it looks, do I like it

And I'm crying,
Why am I crying?
This is what women do, no?
Perhaps the frustration with not knowing
what's wrong
Is the rawest proliferation of my birthed
gender
Each tear down my face carries with it
The confusion
I'm curled against a kitchen cabinet
Sobbing post soccer practice in middle
school
Crying out to a celestial being who would
not answer
For why my body felt so wrong, why I was
so angry
Certain I had a hormone imbalance not fit
for this skin

Awarding me wrestling trophies against my
brothers
Gifting me with bruised knuckles from
punching walls
There was no other way for the aggression
to leave
Tears and punches, punch and tear at me
The dichotomy of the stereotypical
Feminine and masculine
That only worsened my condition
I was willing to hurt myself to expel the
desire
For the male body that I thought I belonged
in
That would be better suited for such physicalities

Femininity divine, goddess, queen
I write them on my body because they fit
Until they don't
Like pants that are too small
And fit only after wearing them for hours
Then the elastic stretches and they're too
loose
They fall down revealing the skin
underneath
The muscle I desperately try to pack on
To make it all work together
To be able to shoulder the burden of
balancing the real and ideal self



I want them to marry, I want to officiate
I want to take two ice sculptures and join
them as one
They kiss, they melt in the sun
I fall to my knees
Lap at the pool
Baptize my body in their union
Liquify my assets into their puddle
Evaporate into the sky, above the mortal
worry of
Who am I

I am a summation of many
I am Barbie movie marathons at annual
Christmas party sleepovers,
Mascara, and ripped jeans, heart,
Aggression, empathy, and stoicism,
The femme, the masc
The cacophony of both, the presence of neither

I am the fear of dying alone, of taking up too
much space
I am pushing my way through a crowd
I am pushing others away, pushing myself
for more
Pushing to understand the cosmic war inside

I am yard work, a leaf blower, the kitchen, the fridge
I put things into myself only to take them
out days later when they're no longer good
The expiration date on the food of my
identity is only hours long

I am a living art piece that changes with
each blink
One that charges onlookers for the privilege
of seeing it
Yet apologizes for its existence
I'm sorry
I'm sorry
It started as a mantra to others
And now I repeat it to myself
To the person in the mirror

To the six-year-old
Who wore bows in her hair
And knew what it meant to be herself

To the fifteen-year-old
Who didn't think it was possible
To be both feminine and masculine at one
time in the same skin

And to the twenty-year-old
Who is learning to embrace
That being a woman
Is not a statue already made
But clay to be molded
In her image
By her hands



Untitled (digital photograph) Shannon Parente

feast of venus

Danielle Wagner

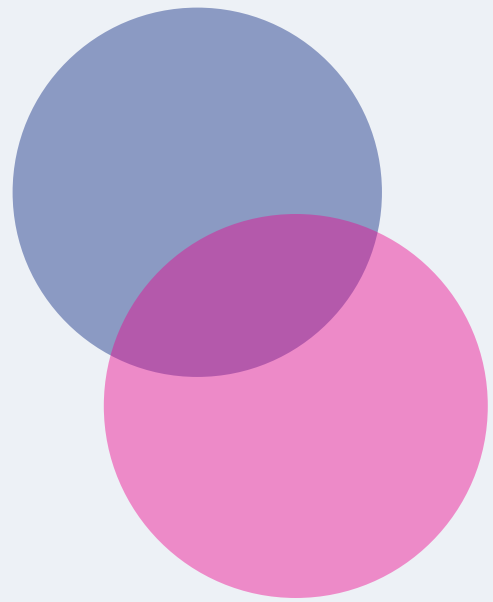
half-past six I wined and dined
on mercury — medium well
on taurus — toasted

the feast taunted me,
the chilled wine — bitter, boiled
the meat — spoiled, raw
and you,
you said nothing

you swirl a martini – a dry dalliance
the olives, teetering on the rim, a tightrope
the chandelier swings,
the waltz begins
the violins swell, as you plead for venus,
but I laugh, mercury's mercy
and you start, waxing poetry,
the words melting onto the floor –
but I snuff it out
and so we fell
into the black and the white
a chessboard, sliced and diced —

you rolled a one
and let us tumble back to earth,
grains of sand, heavy like stardust
pouring into
our mouths, our ears —

your shoes — still laced to perfection
ready to flee, always the prey, the fatality
ready to twist the door
like there was
still something
to be found
other than the void
that carried us here.



Fruit of Labor

Tony Gonzalez

Every time I look into their eyes
I'm reminded of all that was stripped from them
Their loss of freedom
Loss of independence
And loss of dreams

What they are is a reminder
Been too in over my head about who I really am
Stripped off from my roots and bleached
Trimmed down to nothing but leaves
Yet it is their tears that have given me breath
Tears of joy and pain
Shaped me to grow and reach the sky above

My roots now reach down south
Deeper and deeper to where the colors are a warm green
and red and gold
The mountains that birthed them and their parents
The life they struggled to just get by
I am their roots, I am their pain
I am their journey to the north
And I can only carry their forgiveness to their parents
"Sorry for leaving you behind," they often say
It's a burden to leave it all there

I'm their hard work
Their sacrifice
Their pain and their dreams
Their aspirations and hopes
I'm doing this for them
Just as much as I am doing this for me

In my blood I carry the roots of my people
Taken advantage of by those who have power
I can't fail them
I'll be what they always wanted to be
An immigrant to some but a dreamer to many
This is my identity of who I am
I am them and they are me

I am their blood, they are my roots
I am their pain, they are my courage
I am their hope, they are my support
I am their son, they are my heroes

I'm the fruit of their labor
The tree that will rise above

It's within me all their love



Untitled (digital photograph) Shannon Parente

Swan Song

Benjamin Turner

Swans sing as they die, one glorious
mourning elegy that arches the elegant neck
upwards in angelic surrender.

This is wrong. van Gogh painted his
starry nights as he recovered, not in
fits of misery and certainly not as he
bled to death. He sent sketches to his brother,
writing,

*"...this house and its surroundings under a
sulphur sun, under a pure cobalt sky.
That's a really difficult subject!
But I want to conquer it for that very reason..."*

I should think that beauty has tired of
ephemeral sadism, of teasing taunting twisting
artists to cut it whole from open wounds;
maybe now it allows itself to be caught
demanding only a sunny day and cobalt sky.

I told you this after I read the letter, and
you nodded, or else you shrugged or
remarked about how van Gogh died anyway, and
your coarse brain continued in its private machinations.

No poetry guided your movements,
no sensuous music bounced in your step and
your heart beat in off-rhythms.
If you had said goodbye there'd
have been no swan to serenade your exit
yet the echo lingers.

Such roughness is preferable, I think –
the sketch of a night sky –
a graceless friendship –
the song of a swan who has
much left to sing.

Vincent

Laurel Seay

Early summer in Northern France was sticky and hopeful. Locals flooded the market in hopes of buying something sweet to cool them off, and an enigma of a man, sporting a scraggly beard, arrived at the Auberge Ravoux Inn in hopes of starting over. He brought with him a single bag, filled with paints and brushes, and an armful of clothes. By the end of the summer, everyone in that traitorous town will have witnessed history in the making, they just didn't know it yet, except for one girl.

Francine sweat her worries away in her family's tailoring shop in hopes of more customers. More customers meant more revenue for her father, which meant more paints or papers for her. If she was lucky. Francine considered herself an "up-and-coming artist," and wanted to start selling her pieces that summer to help pay for university. There had been no luck thus far, but Fran had a stark determination and wild imagination; a combo that may as well be the death of her.

The summer season brought incredible scenes to the town of Auvers-sur-Oise, and nature seemed to come to life above the shadows of strange travelers and busy locals. The quiet and humble streets were lined with traditional cottages, some with charming rustic-colored shutters, and others with thatched roofs. Most of the families in Auvers were far from high class. Clouds painted in violet haze swirled above morning fields of amber grain, and not far from the village were miles of hills lined with dirt paths that caked the bottom of your feet until they cracked. Francine loved the fields. Each blade of grass was a different shade, and she often plucked them from the warm ground to admire their color. The fields helped to pull her out of the funk that seemed to perspire on the walls of her family's workshop in the early months.

Her father, Michael Laurent, was a tailor, and despite the hard work the entire Laurent family put into the business, it was never enough.

"You know, these colors don't exactly complement each other." Francine motioned to her father's latest work and sat down in an old wicker chair they had borrowed from the neighbors. Michael Laurent was an amazing craftsman, and Fran couldn't understand why the townsfolk were not bursting through their door at this point.

Her father winked and folded the woolen shirt. "Ah, the artist's eye strikes again." He was an older gentleman, with a curved nose and bulbous chin. His hands were weathered from years of work. There was no craftsman more dedicated than Fran's father, and she liked to believe she inherited that trait from him.

"You have to forgive me for the mistake, Daughter, I wasn't feeling my best last night." He grinned and put a hand on Fran's shoulder. "Though I do appreciate your critiques. Your mother has little capability of noticing such things." The two of them shared a small laugh and a glance towards her mother, who was hard at work baking bread in the back kitchen.

"Well, if you need any further help, Father, I will be around." Fran couldn't help but notice his knuckles, which were skin-tight and almost bloody. Her father had hired an assistant early in the spring to help with the business, but Fran knew he needed all the extra hands he could get, though he would never admit it. Pride was another trait Fran and her father shared.

“Francine! Come get the oven!” Her mother screeched from the kitchen, tugging Fran from her thoughts. Her father raised his eyebrows and nodded in the kitchen’s direction just as the new assistant entered the shop. Fran knew she must go without him having to say a word.

The kitchen was situated in the back half of the cottage, with the workshop out front facing the street. Upstairs were the living quarters and bedrooms; Francine shared a bedroom with her younger sister Blanche, while the youngest Laurent sibling, Jerry, had his own. It was a modest house, and Fran enjoyed the sound of rain on the rooftop in the spring. Though most of the time—it leaked.

“I need you to go to the market this evening for more ingredients.” Her mother slammed her hands down on the table and kneaded another soon-to-be loaf.

Evaluating her mother’s mood carefully, Fran struggled with the oven as smoke poured out into the already humid air. “I was actually thinking of going to the fields to sketch tonight—”

“Do not argue, Francine. Madame Ravoux sent word this morning that Adeline is making a trip—you shall join her. Oh! And I don’t want you around the new tenant of theirs, child. I have heard disturbing things and I don’t want anything he says poisoning your mind.”

“Well, I have heard he’s a very talented artist.” Francine shrugged. “Besides, all the most famous artists were troubled. It’s how they can see things we can’t.”

Her mother tittered in disagreement. The two of them looked at the bread loaf in Francine’s hands.

“It looks good, Mama.”

“Mmhh. It’s a bit burnt.”

9 years earlier

The most putrid smell filled the house, and eleven-year-old Francine held onto her salty tears. Her mother didn’t condone crying.

“Ha—you burnt Mama’s bread!” Blanche, who was then still a tiny child, wagged her finger in Fran’s face.

“It’s not like I did on purpose!” Fran yelled. Spittle escaped her lips onto the child, making her cry as well. That winter Fran lost control of her temper one too many times.

The loaf was almost gray in color, and dark smoke rolled throughout the warm cottage. Francine’s father was upstairs in his quarters, and her mother was out at the Ravoux’s borrowing vanilla for the cake they would make tomorrow. It was inky black outside, so Fran couldn’t predict when her mother would return. Jean, her saving grace and eldest sibling, raced down the stairs. His face was red from the oven’s heat, but his lighthearted grin never wavered.

“Hey now. It’s just a small mistake, Fran.” He wiped tears from her cheeks with his nightshirt.

Fran couldn’t stop her heaving sobs. “She’s going to never—let me—bake with her—again.” She took another breath. “It’s—my fault.”

Jean glanced towards the door leading outside. “Here’s what we are going to do. I’m feeling a bit cold, why don’t you go fetch my overcoat for me.”

“But it’s so—hot.” Francine frowned. “The oven.”

“Listen, when Mama gets back, I’ll tell her I had you leave your station to get my overcoat for me.” His grin turned mischievous. “While you were gone, I simply lost track of the time and left the bread in too long.” He nodded with encouragement. Fran smiled and turned to Blanche who sat on the floor nearby.

“Not a word.” She scowled and ran upstairs.

Jean never faltered; he was always there. Three years her senior, Jean had grown up close to Fran and they were always together; Fran and Jean, Jean and Fran. He showed her how to draw for the very first time, and that winter night, Fran left him in the kitchen prepared to take the burden for her. Funny how things change.

May 1890

“And he cut off his ear! Oh, it’s a horrible sight, Fran. Mama says I should keep a distance from him, except for supper, which he joins us for every night of course.” Adeline Ravoux walked beside Fran on their way back from their nightly errands, scuttling along quickly in order to keep up with Fran’s long legs.

“Well, that’s hardly fair.” Fran turned to the small girl with knit brows. “He may be lonely—I know I would be if I went through all that.” The two girls fell into silence. Sidewalk bricks clicked sharply under their heels, the night air swelling with each breath.

“Yes, but he chooses to be alone. Locks himself up in his quarters every night to paint and mope. Rather tragic in my opinion.” Adeline was pale from disapproval. “Sometimes he takes his supplies to the fields and paints, but he has no real trade, I’m not even sure if he’s sold anything yet. Like you.” Fran huffed and looked away. What evil spell had come over her that summer to take the company of Adeline Ravoux? She was a small, pale thing, with wisps of golden hair and a petite nose. She had thin lips that always seemed to move, mustering up a way to let Fran know how much better off she was. Much in contrast, Francine possessed straight, flat locks that more resembled tree bark than the golden light of the sun. Fran was much taller and more muscular than Adeline, and she made sure to lengthen her strides when walking beside her. It was only fair. Adeline’s family owned the Auberge Ravoux Inn, directly next door to the Laurent’s shop and home.

It was a fine building, with classy windows that overlooked a little more of Francine’s living quarters than she would have preferred. However, when she found herself unable to sleep many nights, she often peered through her own window to watch the silhouettes of guests in the inn go about their own mundane lives.

“Have you seen any of his pieces? I am actually quite interested.” Francine chimed, in an attempt to turn the conversation away from gossip.

“You cannot be serious.” Adeline halted a few feet away from the inn’s entrance.

“Oh, but I am.” Fran smirked. She liked to tease the young girl. “Maybe I’ll even purchase one.”

“Francine! You don’t have the assets for that. What will your parents think if you continue to joke about such things?”

Francine laughed.

“And I have seen them, they’re nothing more than jumbled colors and strokes that he cracked up and painted at the mad-hous....” Adeline’s words were cut short by a figure approaching the front of the inn. Fran hushed her quickly to clear the tension before the man could hear. He was slender, his hair more auburn than brown as it caught the light of the setting sun. Wooden easels and brushes crackled with every step he took, his arms full of canvases and paints. He suddenly noticed the girls. Darkness danced behind his eyes. Francine imagined all the strangers he had met, the places he’d seen. Soiled men in ragged clothes, ghosts that others could never witness. The bandage. She noticed it at once as he broke away from her stare. It wrapped around his head, thicker where his left ear should be. Yet, he was still beautiful. Not attractive, no. Francine did not think he was beautiful in a loving way, but in an artistic way. He was art too beautiful for this world, lost in it—in the gray space where colors don’t belong; and she understood.

Before art was all Francine ever spoke about, her parents didn't condone it at all. Her entire childhood she spent creating with the tools she had and the time she was given, in secret. The back shed was where Fran used to spend most of her summer days. It was the only time she could be alone, providing sweet, short, freedom. The wood siding was moldy and old, pieces of scrap metal laid around, and exposed nails decorated the walls. Fran used to make her own paints there as well. She ground up wildflower petals from the fields and smashed clumps of soil. By adding the elements to water, and mixing in her own secret ingredient, she created semi-permanent colors. With her father's scraps of old leather, Fran added textures to her work, pressing them to stolen fabrics that she stretched out and tied up to the decaying boards with twine. Lately, she had just been painting in nature, the fields, or her bedroom. She missed the musty smell of the shed and the safety it provided from the outside world. A few summers ago, when Fran was sixteen, she decided to share her haven with Jean.

3 years earlier

"You did this, Fran?" His soft fingertips traced the grooves of her latest work. "Very abstract indeed." He turned back towards her and pushed his sweat-riddled hair off his forehead. The shed was even hotter than the kitchen in the summer.

"I can hardly take credit for it. Do you remember when you suggested how pretty the grass is this summer? Or how bright the flower petals are? I used them in my paints."

"You are so brilliantly wise, little sister." Jean smiled his unpredictable, curious smile. Francine admired him for that. She knew he wouldn't lie to her about her talent, or her work; only question it with curiosity, suggesting new perspectives. No one else listened to her like he did, that's why she decided to show him. Her space, her freedom. He had seen her drawings before, but nothing like this.

"So—are you still planning on attending university?" Francine hadn't talked to him about it much that summer. She couldn't bear to see him go.

"I am." He pulled himself deeper into the shed to evaluate the work Fran stored in the back. "Someone has to save this family from the poor house." He turned around slightly and sighed. "Teasing of course."

"About which? University or the poor house?" The two shared an identical laugh.

"In all seriousness, Fran, if I don't collect enough funding to go to university, I need you to promise me that you'll try." Jean usually took on life with a loose attitude, but now Fran saw something different in his eyes.

"I—I don't know Jean; will Mama even allow it? What if I just sell my paintings and become a famous artist?"

"You could do both." He shrugged. "Study art in school—or maybe do it on the side. Times are changing Fran, and you're next up." He looked at her with hope and expectation she'd never seen from someone before. "Do not let them decide anything about you." He trudged further into the shed, took a big step, and leaned down to grab another painting. "Now this is a gorgeous one—ah!" Air escaped his mouth in discomfort.

"Heavens, Jean, are you okay?" Fran called back. She tried to make her way to where he was standing.

Jean rubbed his calf with his hand. Blood seeped down his skin. "Just a small cut. Most likely from some scrap metal." He looked up casually. "I'm sure Papa can bandage me up well."

"Here, let me help you." Fran grabbed his hand and the two hobbled back to the cottage together.

It was indeed not a small cut. By the end of the summer Jean's leg was horribly swollen and he was bedridden. His plans of starting university come fall were pushed back. The nights grew colder and Fran stayed with him until he slept, talking, drawing, laughing. The family soon saved just enough money to call the town doctor, who declared it was a case of sepsis, and the infection had moved to his bloodstream.

"Is there anything we can do?" Her mother clutched the doctor's shoulders tightly, aggressively, as if she could squeeze the cure right out of him. Her voice was low and guttural.

"At this stage we cannot help patients, we still know so little. I am sorry."

Francine had never seen her mother so vexed before. She was angry at Fran, at Jean, at the doctor. She stomped around the house, shaking the floorboards, and bringing unrest with her everywhere she went. The anger spread like a fever. Her mother spent most nights in her quarters, while Fran continued spending hers with Jean. Her father worked harder than ever those months, so that sleep found him quickly at night. Time passed into fall, and Jean's condition worsened as the grass turned brown. It was night when he died. Francine didn't return to the shed that year, or any time after.

June 1890

Fran's first of many encounters with the strange artist came in early June. As he left the inn for the fields to paint, Fran waited around the corner, in her own stubborn determination. She had managed to convince her father to let her take the day off. The artist left at precisely ten that morning, and Fran fell in stride beside him as he headed though town.

"Hello, um, sir, I'm sorry if this comes at a strange time, but I was wondering if I could talk to you about your art?"

His steps shortened and he looked back at Fran. "I guess—so? What does someone like you want to do with my lousy work?"

"Oh, I don't think it is lousy at all. I can see your paintings as you carry them in and out every day. They are very inspiring." She stopped and held out her hand, professionally. "My name is Francine Laurent, but you can call me Fran, or Francine if you please. I live next door." He didn't shake her hand. "And your name is?" Her question clearly surprised the artist. Fran knew very well what his name was.

"Vincent van Gogh." He smiled softly before walking away, dust flying up into Fran's face. Clearly her efforts were not making a mark.

The next time she spoke with the artist it was a hot rainy day. Steam escaped from the crevices in all the bricks, but Vincent painted anyway. Fran approached him again on his walk.

"I make art myself; you know." Her words suddenly seemed to spark his interests. "I am hoping to sell pieces so I can go to university, but I am not sure how to do so."

This time, he had slight animation to his look. "You should try to sell at the market in town. Vendors make much more here than private artists, I assure you." He looked down at his own painting. "I don't think I would have much luck at the market—perhaps you could tell me how it is."

Fran reveled in the thought. "Of course, sir, what are you working on now?" The picture in his hands was half finished, dreary looking with what seemed to be trees and grass covering most of it.

"It is of the town, the hills."

"A bit sad to be Auvers, don't you think?" Fran looked up at him with curious eyes.

“You may see things in the painting that you don’t notice in person, but that doesn’t mean it isn’t there.” The artist gestured to the street they stood on, but Fran looked at him. His ear, everything else. She thought of her conversation with Adeline.

“You’re right. I see—I see.”

Fran and Vincent had many more conversations that month, sparking her interest in the market, though it would surely not be approved by her parents. Fall was approaching, and if she was to attend university, she had to work fast. The market brought energy to the sleepy town of Auvers. Vendors filled the streets with homemade sweets, handcrafted items, and baked goods that filled the air with the smell of warm sugar and pies. Francine set up her own vending station for her art near the back of the market. Sadly, she was missing a colorful canopy to keep the bugs and heat at bay, but she was willing to face the elements.

“You know, you aren’t too bad yourself.” Vincent appeared around a corner and made Fran jump tremendously.

“Aren’t I the one supposed to be frightening you with my questions and comments?” She grinned at the tired man.

He shook his head, “I don’t think we are much different.” He browsed her work for a minute in silence while a few commoners stared. “Is this one for sale?” Vincent gestured towards a simple piece Fran had painted of Jean, or what she could remember of him. It was for sale because she hated it; she had many better renditions of her brother stored back at home.

A few seconds passed before Fran realized she hadn’t answered the artist. “Yes!” She seemed a bit apprehensive. “It is for sale.”

“I’ll take it then.” Vincent quizzically studied Fran’s face, but even if he had been able to read her thoughts, he did not say so.

“I hate to run so fast.” He glanced around them at the constant stares. “But I have to go finish up a piece that is absolutely begging for my attention.” The corners of his mouth turned into a sad smile as he took the painting under his arm. “Good luck, child.”

Vincent left her alone in the market, deep in her own thoughts. How she missed her brother so. She wondered what Jean would think of the mysterious artist.

“Madame Laurent?” A surprised voice startled her again. She was beginning to realize how jumpy she had become in her own heedlessness. The lovely Madame Ravoux stood studying her set up. Fran cursed herself for not being more inconspicuous. “Are you selling these?” She turned a judgmental eye and raised her neatly trimmed brow. Fran scanned the area for her mother and seemed to be lucky; Madame Ravoux was alone.

“Yes, Madame Ravoux. My parents sent me out to make a bit extra.” She chuckled nervously. “Money is tight this time of year, you know.”

“No, I don’t, dearest. But I love the effort you’re making. I will say it is quite—um—interesting work.” Her neighbor mustered up a fake smile and fanned herself in the heat. “Dear Adeline did not tell me you were a painter.” Fran sighed. “Painter” was hardly the word she would use, but she expected nothing less as Madame Ravoux moved on. The only person to purchase a painting that day was Vincent.

Francine returned home later that night exhausted from standing all day. “Mama is mad.” Her sister Blanche said as Fran put her materials away in the room they shared. She had yet to see her mother.

“What do you mean?” Fran bent down next to her sister in an attempt to comfort her, though she feared the worst.

Blanche suddenly had tears in her eyes. “Why do you have to do bad things?” She yelled, crossing her arms and crying. Fran was not the best with children, but she stroked Blanche’s long dark hair. She could only shake her head in disbelief. “Stop it.” Blanche slapped Fran’s hand away. “Why is it when—when you mess up, Mama gets mad at me too.”

“Blanche, I don’t know—”

Blanche sobbed and slumped down on the bed as Francine stepped away from the small girl. Her head was hurting, and she thought of Jean. She would have said anything that night to raise him from the dead if words could do such a thing.

Her mother took her art supplies and threw them out. “Mrs. Ravoux saw you at the market Francine! How could you—are you mad? Talking to that strange man too, directly disobeying me!” Francine had seen her mother like this before. “The rumors will soon begin about us too; I am sure of it. You have gone too far, child, and there is no one to hide behind now.” Her mother’s expression was far more weary than angry. The rest of that month Francine barely spoke to her mother. She didn’t paint, and she didn’t speak to Vincent. She saw him sometimes, wandering around outside. The shadows followed him that month, she knew, because they followed her too.

July 1890

Fran decided to cut her hair that July in a manic episode. The shop scissors were perfect for the job, laying out on the thick wooden table and glistening from the starlight; stars that were far away memories, holes to heaven. Sometimes things seem worse in the darkness, and that small glimmer of shine off the metal was exactly what Fran needed. When her mom saw her choppy hair around midnight, she sank to her knees where Fran was sitting and seized Fran’s cheeks in her hands.

“Heavens above, Fran, what did you do?” The tears were quick to come, although they were not her mother’s. Her mother didn’t condone crying.

“I’ll have a better chance at things if I look different.” She spoke slowly. “I don’t know, Mama, I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry.” Fran’s soft voice rambled on, chokes echoing throughout the empty shop. “I think people will listen to me. If I was someone else?” She didn’t even believe her own words, overwhelmed by the touch of cold metal in her hands still.

There was silence. “Is this about your art?” Her mother spoke in a more sincere tone.

“I am incapable of everything I dream to do.” Francine inhaled sharply. “I cannot help support this family unless I sell my art, which I cannot because I am a woman; and you say university is not even a discussion because—”

“You’re a child, Francine.” Her mother interrupted. “You don’t have to worry about people listening, or buying your art, or giving you reassurance.” The pause was uncomfortable. “This family is all we have. You don’t think I had to sacrifice myself for your father? That’s what we are built to do, and what will others think of this?” Her mother stroked where her long locks used to be, choppy chestnut strands still falling to the ground. The nape of her neck was now prickly; Fran hated the sudden chill of the air on her bare skin. She was not a child.

“I could not protect him, Mama—it is my fault. If I went to university I could provide for this family, I could sell my art to get there, we could afford a good doctor. We would never have to worry again.” She took a breath. “I am the eldest, and this burden is mine now; I have to carry it for Jean, and you could not ever understand—you were barely even there after his death.” Fran’s voice got louder and louder, more shocking. Her mouth tasted like poison.

Her mother stood up abruptly, so she was no longer at eye level with Fran. “It is not your fault, Francine. It never was and never will be.” Her face wrinkled with agitation; a trait Fran was ashamed to have inherited from her mother.

“Oh, how you suffer for your sanity, child—we will not all face the same fate as your brother, whether you make a fortune off art or not.” She paused. “You will be content, Francine. You want to help this family? We need you here in the shop.” She left the room leaving Francine with the scissors still in her hand. They looked more gray than silver now. Dull, lifeless. Gray space. She wished she could paint the gray.

A few days later, Francine sought him out for advice. A figure among the rolling green hills. Art. She picked up her pace and as she approached him, she saw him slide something small and shiny into his bag.

“Miss Laurent. You cut your hair, I see.” His bandage shifted up as he smiled. He was touching up a painting.

“What a keen observation.” She grumbled and shook her head.

“I am sorry, I didn’t mean to offend you. What brings you to the fields this afternoon?”

“This.” She motioned sharply to her head as he laughed sadly.

“Some lessons have to be learned the hard way, child, but I understand.” And he did, Fran could simply tell.

“May I stay a bit and watch you paint?”

Vincent paused and looked lost for a second, unsure of what to say. “Of course, as long as your parents do not come looking for you. Then I would be in heaps of trouble.” They laughed identical laughs.

“Of course not, sir.” The two talked a bit, Fran on the grass beside the easel, admiring his work and the town below them. Her weathered face, lined with pain, was quickly soothed by the artist’s hand.

The painting he was working on a month ago was now finished. “It is of grave beauty, isn’t it? I call it Houses in Auvers.” Vincent spoke softly. The finished piece was a colorful rendition of the fields and town.

“I suppose it is beautiful sometimes. The people much less so.”

He sat down beside her. “People are too rigid. They believe what they want and never let go. Do not ever let them decide anything about you. You have quite the future ahead of you.” He turned and met Fran’s eyes. “I made a grave mistake. I let them decide everything about me. There is no escaping it now, not here. But maybe one day they will change their minds.”

Francine felt her eyes stinging. “Someone very close to me—he once said that same thing.”

“A very wise man indeed.” Vincent turned back towards the scenery. His mind was far away, and Francine cried. She cried because she wanted to, whether her mother condoned it or not. The artist let her because he understood.

“I must be getting home now.” Fran stood up. She felt like she could breathe again. “Thank you. Really, for everything.” The artist simply nodded as Fran turned to head down the hill. It was almost supper time. Vincent waited until she was gone to pull the shiny revolver out of his bag.

Iris:

- 1. a flat, colored, ring-shaped membrane behind the cornea of the eye, with an adjustable circular opening (pupil) in the center.*
- 2. a plant with sword-shaped leaves and showy flowers, typically purple, yellow, or white.*
- 3. the goddess of the rainbow and the messenger of the Olympian gods.*
- 4. a literary magazine publishing student work at James Madison University.**