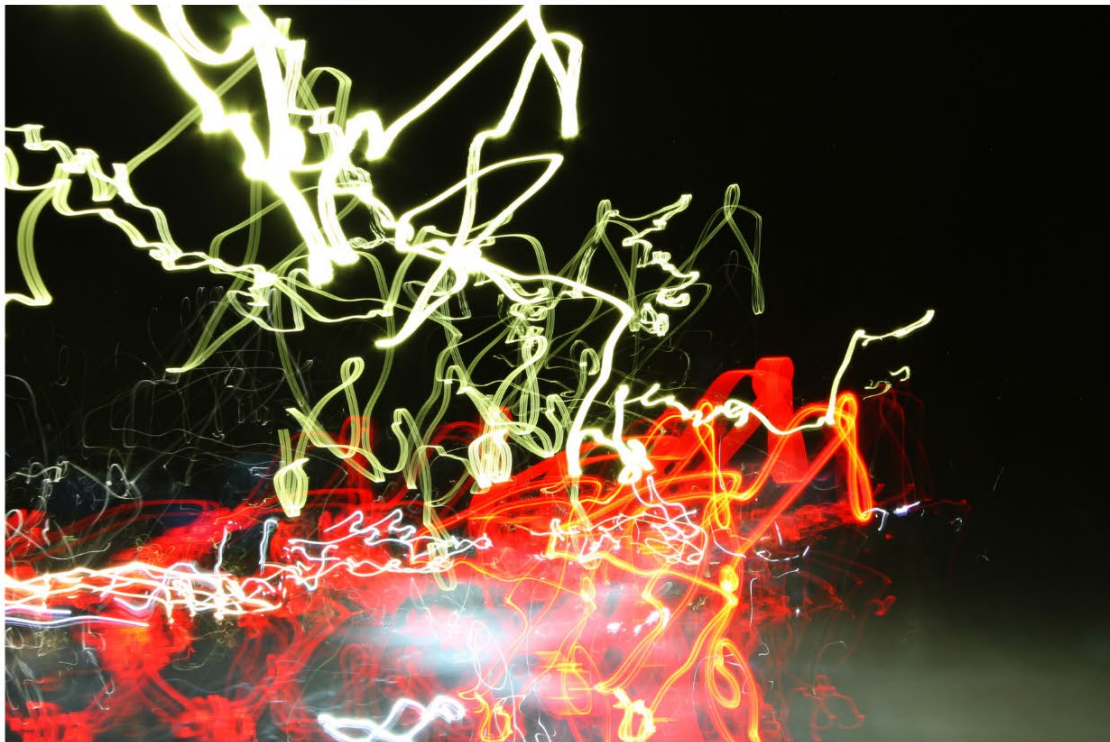


The Dragon's Toe

Middle School Literary and Arts Magazine



2026



Writers

Mera Al-Balas	8	Parker Leavell	18
Ever Andrews	9	Matthew Lu	19
Feride Akce	5	Bea Marcus	20
Ayah Ben Jazia	10	N'Kele McNeely	21
Emory Carter	6	Gabe Parcak	33
Sanvitha Chava	12	Madeleine Price	22
Oliver Dorman	4	Elizabeth Scribner	23
Juliana Faul	12	Coco Sellers	24
Palmer Gregg	13	Kaylyn Sun	25
Abigail Harwood	14	Raimi Tong	26
Rex Hirsch	15	Zachary Tsivourakis	28
Fischer Horton	16	Mia Ward	29
Carla Jimenez-Arellano	16	Chloe Washmuth	32
Arisa Khan	17	Megan Wetta	3

Photographers

Lucas Azuero	3	Matthew Lu	24
Emory Carter	7	Vivienne McPherson	1, 13
Mica Cuellar	28	Cole Quinney	32
Emory Goldberg	11	Stewart Reid	26
Palmer Gregg	22		

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A Day in the City

By Megan Wetta

Photo by Lucas Azuero



I wake up to sunlight flooding into my room. The golden rays fill my eyes and reveal little specs of dust floating around me. The slight crack of the window lets soft notes of jazz float through, filling my ears. The slight chatter of people is barely audible in the distance. The sweet aroma of beignets engulfs my senses. I slowly get out of bed, stretching as I try and clear the remnants of sleep from my head. I slowly walk down the stairs as the smell of beignets from the shop below gets stronger.

When I reach the kitchen, I spot a pile of the sweet French treats sitting on the counter, layered in sugar. As I eat, the soft buttery flavor fills my mouth, sending me back to the picturesque city. After I eat, I head out. Purple, green, and gold shower my eyes. Sequins flash

with every glint of sun. Beads hanging from people's necks clash together nosily, making their own melody. The sun is slowly warming the city, showering it in more gold. People walk quickly by, bumping into me here and there. Floats pass by every now and then, the occupants throwing candy and beads to onlookers.

I amble through the crowded streets, taking in all the sights and sounds. Scents mix as every shop tries to sell their own unique gifts. Everyone chatters happily. The occasional person walks by with a mask as if on their way to a ball. Everyone seems to be having a great time. By now, noon has arrived. The sun blazes and temperatures rise as spirits do the same. The jazz bands come out and serenade everyone who walks past. Gentle melodies mix as they float through the air. The floats and parades come through more consistently, the smells of engine fumes combining with those of sweet pastries and rich dishes.

Slowly, night falls and the moon rises. The streets empty slightly as people rush for dinner, but they fill once again after everyone has eaten. By now, the parades have thrown thousands of beads, some taken and some left on the ground. The jazz now plays loudly for all to hear. Streetlamps illuminate the city as sequins still flash faintly. I make my way back to the apartment. The moon gently peeks through the window, the soft jazz still drifting into my ear as I fall asleep.

An Average Walk Down the Street

By Oliver Dorman

Once upon a time, there was a man named Gary. He was depressed because he had just learned from the paper that his name was going extinct. In reality, the author had been trying to explain that the *name Gary* was declining in popularity; however, Gary was concerned. He thought that she was saying that bad things were happening to *people* named Gary, causing them to die out! He had been staying at his most vigilant for the past few days, however oblivious that still may be.

His suspicions had only been heightened by the fact that his good friend Gary had died just a few days before, seemingly out of nowhere. His wife had awakened to find him with a sharpened gardening tool in his chest. His funeral was being held today. Our Gary's car had broken down the day before, so he was forced to walk there.

What a perilous journey, he thought nervously. I just hope that I can make it there.

He sighed. He packed his bag with a ham sandwich and his favorite hat. He dressed in his black suit and black pants. He put on shiny black shoes and a long black tie. He put a (different) hat on his head and packed another (a third) in his bag... just in case. He went downstairs to the door, grabbed a (fourth) hat from a drawer, and went out the door. It was not three steps before he realized that he had forgotten something... his favorite hat, of course! He went back inside, couldn't find it, gave up, and started on his journey.

He began walking down the street, moving quickly to escape any danger that might be following him, yet not so quickly as to arouse suspicion. He passed his mean old neighbor, Mr. Grishma, who smiled at him. He happened to be weeding his yard at the time and was holding a sharpened gardening tool. Unfortunately, to someone who was paranoid and fearing for his

life and had just lost a good friend to a gardening tool, this appeared extremely terrifying. Mr. Grishma was missing many teeth, grinning wildly, and waving the deadly sharp weapon at Gary. He sped up with each step, soon breaking into a run. Only when Mr. Grishma was no longer in sight did he slow. He wondered if Mr. Grishma had killed his good friend Gary. He realized that, after the vigorous run, his heart was beating dangerously fast.

Oh no! he thought. He clutched his heart and fell to the ground. *I have such a weak heart. Could this be where I die?* It was not. He was just nervous. His heart was beating no faster than usual, but he was so nervous about going extinct that he had begun to feel like everything was moving faster. He saw a bug fly past him seemingly at the speed of light. He took some deep breaths and composed himself.

He stood up.

He began walking again.

He was nearing the funeral, now only about ten minutes away. He walked along the cracked concrete sidewalk, watching mysterious city juice oozing through the gutter, killing all insects it touched even before they drowned. Fearing for his life, he decided to take the long route with no toxic city juice, adding ten minutes to his walk. As soon as he turned the corner of the street with the funeral home, he was grabbed by a tree. It seemed to grow arms and grab him, pulling him inside itself to his doom. He screamed, but before he could finish everything went dark.

(A man across the street told the paper the next day, "Well, just yesterday, I saw a man get tangled in tree branches, run headlong into the tree, scream, and faint." The reporter left.)

Gary woke a few minutes later, covered in tree sap and leaves. He sighed and congratulated himself on surviving such a dangerous

expedition. He had escaped death four times this far. Could he do it again?

He continued walking and soon made it to his friend's funeral. Nothing tried to kill him during the funeral, and he even got a ride with his safest-driving friend. He told his wife of his adventures, and she seemed unimpressed. She said, clearly quite bored, "Gary, it's all in your head." He was revolted at her lack of empathy and went to bed immediately.

"I shall not die any time soon," he said in his bed that night. "I do not plan on it."

Sadly, those were his last words. When his wife woke him in the morning, she found him with a sharp gardening tool in his chest, a blank stare on

his face, and three of his favorite hats on his head.

"Who sleeps with hats on?!" she cried. She called the police, and using the fingerprints on the gardening tool, they were able to determine that it had belonged to Mr. Grishma.

Gary had been right all along. The article had been about how the name had been declining in popularity, but Gary's misinterpretation had been correct. Mr. Grishma hated the name and had been killing the Garys for years. Gary's wife had thought that he was just paranoid, but, as the old saying goes, just because you are paranoid doesn't mean people aren't out to get you.

My Mask

By Feride Akce

I am not enough.

Everyone is perfect, but I'm the opposite.

It's not me in the mirror; it's a mask.

Everyone has a mask in this society.

Not showing who they truly are.

If only I could tear mine apart.

If only I could show them who I really am.

Would they understand?

Would they still laugh at my jokes, or hang out with me?

Would they ever think of me the same?

Would they ever talk to me again?

I'm tired of everyone thinking I'm perfect.

If they could see who I am,
and accept me for my identity.

If I took off my mask, would people see I'm not a product of society but a human?

The Apple Tree

By Emory Carter

The old, slowly rotting apple tree sat in the middle of a cotton field. The dark red fruit resembling the blood each lash on the backs of the oppressed had forced out. Its skin thicker than a block of concrete, tougher than a military sergeant, and darker than the vast and unknown universe. The tree looked through the hole in its torso, where a mother had fought to keep her eggs from becoming the next meal of a predator, where a father had jumped in front of the long leather whip protecting whom he loved most, where a once-united country had divided itself.

Where it saw bloodshed.

The thick toxic smoke making the leaves hyperventilate and whimper, the trenches grazing its veins under the coarse thick dirt, it cries in pain every time it's pierced by a ball of lead supposed to kill someone who was his neighbor less than three months ago. The tree had never truly recovered from all the hate, sorrow, blood, and the bodies,

God, the bodies.

The decapitated, the lost limbs, and the people mutilated praying their next breath wouldn't be their last. The old apple tree soon had lost its hair. The chemicals that killed bugs burning its scalp. The large tracts of open farmland soon turned into an abundance of kids, climbing its arms that touched the sky. The rough skin scratching and peeling the skin of children who dared to touch it. Blood, but in a different flavor.

The red gooey liquid wasn't extracted out by hate, no, but by joy, exploration, curiosity. Its rough skin is still getting rougher. The police bashing in the skulls of the innocent children, the dogs ripping into flesh like a dinner bone, and the water with high enough pressure to shave off hair.

The tree, slowly dying, had seen the worst of humans, and only one interaction gave the tree light bright enough to grow its hair back.

A girl with red bows and a yellow Sunday dress slowly galloped with curiosity around the tree, placing her hands on the tree's base. She was a kid, like all the others who climbed and pierced the tree's skin with knives to no repair, but she was gentle. In the way your mother would tuck you into bed.

The tree slowly lowered its branch, seeing the girl regularly hungry. She always wore the same dress, same red bows, but they were always in pristine shape. The girl would go to the riverbank and carry a bucket of water a day, quenching the trees' chapped skin in the summer weather, and warming the tree in the cold harsh winters. She would sit at the base of the tree reading new literature every day, now eating its bright red apples.

The old, now growing apple tree sat in the middle of a green meadow. The bright red fruit resembled the two bows of the girl that once saved it.

Photo by Emory Carter



He Never Came

By Mera Al-Balas

They told me he was coming.
The prince, the savior, the one who would make sense of this wreckage.
So I waited in the garden, impatiently,
sipping wine that promised tomorrow would be different,
hoping the ache in my chest would finally quiet down.
Love, they said, would arrive like dawn.
Sudden. Inevitable. Changing everything.
But the stories lied.
Though, he did come.
And he was beautiful.
The kind of beautiful that makes you forget you were drowning.
He whispered that I was his world,
that he'd been searching for me in the dark,
that together we would be whole.
I believed him.
I gave him everything.
My walls, my secrets, my reasons to survive.
I opened myself like a book he could rewrite.
I thought this was the ending I have been promised.
But love was just another drug.
Another escape.
Another way to disappear.
He loved the idea of saving me more than he loved me.
He needed my brokenness.
Inhaled it like it was oxygen.
When I stopped needing rescue,
when I started to heal,
when I began to remember who I was before him.
I realized he was never there at all.
The wine had made him.
My delusional self had given him a voice.
The loneliness had dressed him up in fine clothes
and taught him how to speak my language.
He was the ghost I created
so I wouldn't have to face the truth.
That I was the one destroying myself.
That the poison was coming from inside.
That there was no savior because I was the only one
who ever had the power to save me.
And I chose not to.
I am still here.
Still waiting.
Still sipping wine that tastes like him.
Still believing in a man who was never real,
because facing the truth is too much to bear.
True love is a lie we tell ourselves.
We are alone.
We will always be alone.
And we keep waiting anyway.
He never came at all.

Accepting Your Fate

By Ever Andrews

I tried to pull my eyes away from the flames, but I couldn't. The way they moved captivated me. They seemed to be dancing. My eyes were stuck staring into the endless pool of fire. The only thing keeping me in this world was the fierce wind that pierced my skin as it blew past me. I watched as the house began to give in to the fire. It crumbled under the pressure of the flames. The remaining structure of the house disappeared, never to be seen again, except as a pile of ash.

When the roaring fire destroyed its first victim, it began to spread. It started to find more things it could erase from everyone's memories. I watched as the firefighters realized that the first house was completely destroyed, that there was nothing left to be saved. The fire had taken everything and everyone inside it, lives that were only to be remembered as victims of fire's true power. The firefighters began to point their hoses in the new direction, but it wasn't enough. The blaze was spreading in every direction. If you looked closely into the eyes of the firemen, you could see they knew this fire would be the end of so much.

As I watched the inferno spread, I looked a little closer. If you focused on each sparkling flame, you could see that each one had its own hunger for destruction. This fire had a hunger that could never be put out by anything other than satisfying its need to take and destroy. When I figured this out, I stood back and let the fire take its course, but no one else could see what was in the flames. They just saw their own fear. Some people tried to help others, while many just tried to save themselves. But they were never going to

affect the outcome of the fire. All they were doing was speeding the inevitable. The fire was going to take whatever it wanted and we couldn't stop it.

Everyone exhausted themselves running around trying to fix something they couldn't control. They all eventually collapsed and were left there to feed the fire's hunger. I stood to the side watching all of this unfold. While I watched the fire, I embraced my fate. When I was ready, I began my walk towards the forever fire that would be my doom. Or would it? Why is the thing that kills you called 'your doom'? It's what's going to happen, and it's neither good nor bad, it just is. You can either choose to accept it or reject it. That day, I chose to accept it.

I walked into the flames, and as they embraced my body, I let out an ash-curdling scream. It rang out in my ears until it seemed to get farther away from me. I looked down to see my lifeless body embraced in a never-ending pool of fire. As my spirit rose above the flames, it was picked up by the wind. The same wind that I had said was the only thing that kept me in the world.

Now, I travel with the gentle wind, picking up more souls that were lost in the hungry flames of fire. The wind is amazing. As you travel with all the other souls you move like one. All the weight that was hanging over your shoulders on the ground is lifted away from you. It is taken to be fed to a fire whose hunger is uncontrollable. And you continue to travel with all the other people that were hurt by something or someone's uncontrollable need for destruction.

In Between the Lines

By Ayah Ben Jazia

You held my hand through the fire
As we burned with hope and pride
You told me everything's ok
That together we'll survive

You held my hand and grasped it
Leaving marks around my skin
You told me it'll be fine
through a regretful grin

You held me through the sobs
Through the shattered broken cries
You held me close and whispered that
together we'll be fine

But throughout the help and comfort
I saw it in your eyes
Your worried glare and empty stare
As I saw between the lines

I looked into your eyes,
your stare no longer divine
Your eyes blank and lips in a thin straight line
You looked me in the eyes
and said everything was fine
But I now I know that there was more to see between the lines

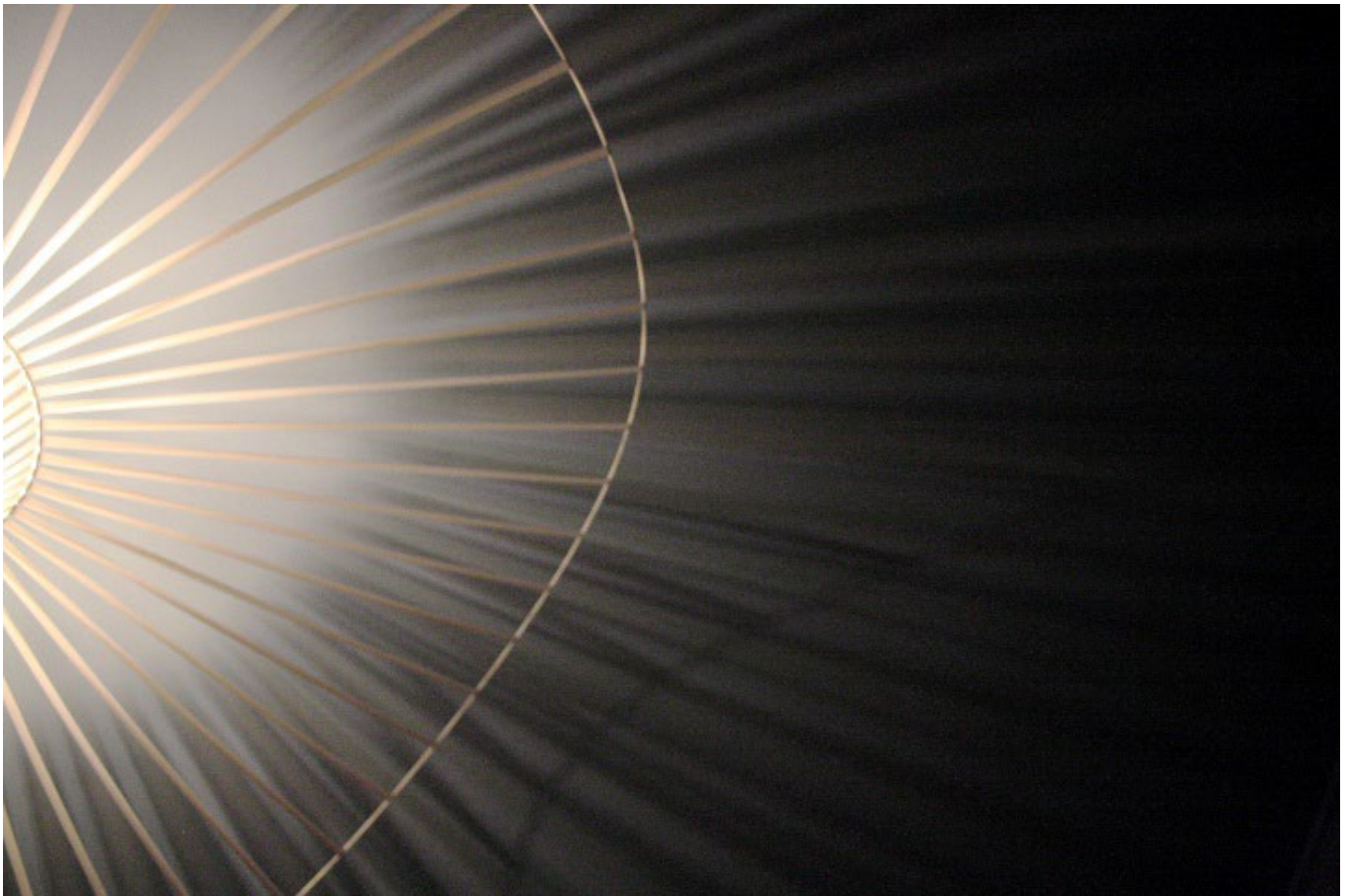
I ask myself why you died
Where were all the signs
But instead of giving me your help
You needed some of mine

I wonder how it started
All the self-doubt and all the hate
But it was always present there
I was just too late

The mind of yours that worked too hard
The mind that had no end
The mind that constantly *endlessly* spun
Until the very end

But when we meet again
Not in this world but the later
I'll be the one to hold you
And together we'll be greater

Photo By Emory Goldberg



Mondays

By Juliana Faul

Mondays are full of dread.
Everyone looks like they're dead.
It's the worst day of the week.
Most of us too tired to speak.
Monday makes everyone sad.
When Friday comes everyone's glad.
So, it's true Monday is the worst.
Since it's sadly the week's first.
Monday is full of gloom.
You feel like you're in your own tomb.
It's true that Monday is not fun.
But without Monday, Friday wouldn't come.

Affirmations

By Sanvitha Chava

They tell us to "be yourself,"
Yet they're the ones that say we need to look like her.
Even though she wants to be someone else.
And then that someone else wants to be another.
How can I "be myself" in a world where no one is themselves?
How can I "be myself" in a world where no one will let me?

They tell us that "Your voice matters,"
Yet they're the ones who shut us out.
They say it's not our turn to speak
and that we should act our age.
How can "my voice matter" when my opinions are still left unspoken out of fear?
How can "my voice matter" when I'm not even free to make a sound?

They tell us to "love yourself,"
Yet they're the ones that say we should lose weight,
They're the ones that tell us to eat less.
They're the ones who claim we're just not trying hard enough.
How can I "love myself" when my worth is based on a number on some scale?
How can I "love myself" when everyone around me is pointing out my flaws?

I say that you're lovable, caring, and capable.
I say that you shouldn't let them change you.
You shouldn't let them decide your worth.
I say that the only person in the entire world
Who can decide *anything* about you
Is you, and that will never change.
No matter what they try to say.

Hallucinations

By Palmer Gregg

Photo By Vivienne McPherson

As I lie in bed
shadow-like figures come out,
the voices of friends,
come from their direction.

Every time I look at them,
they go away.

The voices, they get louder,
and louder,
suddenly,
I go back to the real world.

My friends are talking,
I'm frightened by what happened before,
I hang up the call.

As my finger presses the button,
I go back to the frightening world,
I am paralyzed in fear.

The voices have stopped but new things have appeared,
floating heads popping out from every nook and cranny.

The world seems to stop,
but the creatures, they move,
they glide around the room,
not making a sound.

My worst memories are on repeat,
the cringe of my past self comes back again.

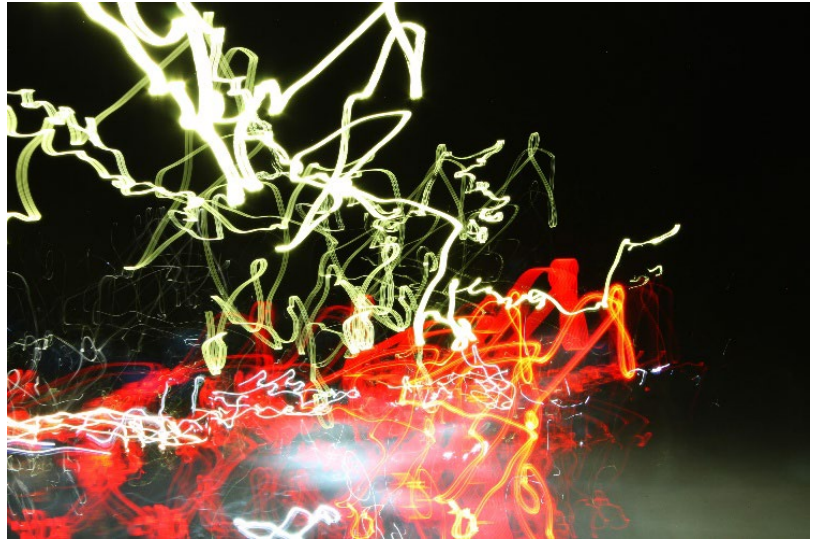
I try to get them to go away,
but they keep persisting.

I know they won't go away,
unless I go to sleep.

I close my eyes,
frightened by their presence,
but slightly hopeful,
the light will shine on me again.

It felt like a second,
but it was eight hours.

I know they'll come back the next night,
but I know they can't hurt me.



The Bystander

By Abigail Harwood

They hate each other. There are no other words to describe it.

They hate each other, and they disagree on everything. They view the war differently, they view life itself differently, but they both want the same thing.

This results in pure chaos.

When we get caught in the middle, it tears us apart, and we're already far away from each other as it is.

When the stress builds up, so does the panic, fear, anger, and all of those other bad things that we naturally feel.

They have so much tension between them that you can't talk with them in the same room, otherwise the trigger will be pulled, and another fight will break out.

When they ask us to pick sides, the middle seems like the only safe place, even if you *do* agree with one more than the other. If you pick a side, you know that the other will never forgive you.

They both seek a place to belong among us, but at the same time, they criticize us for not understanding them. We can't help it.

They really do fight each other, and they really do hate each other, but they will understand each other better than we ever will. That's how enemies work, right?

If we can see it, why can't they? Are they too blinded by uncontrolled rage and misdirected irritation to see the obvious?

Yes, I suppose they are.

They both have done bad things, to one another and to others, but could they just put it aside for a minute and find a way to work together?

They are more alike than they know, but no matter what they say to us, we will never be able to pick a side or understand them. Those are two things that they want, and they are the two things we will never be able to give. But we can't tell them that.

I used to see them as enemies or rivals. Now, I only see them as two lost people.

I find it so difficult to stand to the side, but I do it anyway.

Of course, I know if I had to pick a side, I know which one I'd choose, but that doesn't change how they feel or how guilty I feel.

I find myself waiting ... anticipating ... longing for the day when they both decide to stop and realize how similar they are.

Why can't they just realize they don't need us? Why can't they realize that they don't need me? Why can't they realize that by fighting, they are solving nothing and only getting closer to each other? Why?

I've played many roles over the years.

But The Bystander is the hardest.

The Queen Of Spades

By Rex Hirsch

As I ran through the dark, cold, tall grass of Seyðisfjörður, Iceland, I looked up at the stars.

I walked through the park that Tuesday like it was any other day. I had my dog, Oliver, with me and my phone in my pocket. It was sunny that day. I felt happy, which was something that I so rarely felt. The feeling of loneliness, however, was not so rare. There were people in the park, but I still felt alone, like there was no one present. Just things set up to make this feel real. To make this thing I felt *every day* feel real.

The next thing I knew, I was in the place I was most scared of: the desert. I didn't know how I got there, but I looked around and saw what I assumed to be a military base. I ran as fast as I could straight to it. The sand was hitting my ankles, the sun shining in my eyes, and I was getting farther from the base. To say I was confused in that moment would be an understatement; I even had to look around to see where I was again. I thought about it and then SNAP: I was off to somewhere else again.

This time it was a birthday. For just a moment I felt as though I had been there before, but in a life unimaginable to me now. Overwhelming sadness and disgrace washed over me. At the party, there was just a kid and his parents. He looked happy but was slowly realizing what was

happening. For a second I thought it was me, but eventually I knew I had never been there. I thought for a second longer and felt genuine fear.

The next thing I know I was in my bed scrolling and trying to relive the stress that had kicked in. I felt better, but at what cost? I stayed there for what seemed like ten minutes, just relaxing and killing time. I saw all my favorite content creators and saw experiences that made me jealous and somehow even more stressed. I had thought this really helped me relax, but I didn't know the truth in that moment.

That takes us to where I am now: running in Seyðisfjörður, Iceland. I don't know how I knew where I was, but I did know that this felt better than anything I had ever done. Way better than scrolling, and way better than talking to people. All my senses were doing something. I was doing something. I lied down after a while and felt a kind of peace I had never felt.

While I had that thought, I was transported again and I saw a queen. I don't know why, but as I saw her, I thought of the Queen of Spades. She looked like a normal queen, by queen standards of course. She had a scepter and red and blue robes. My favorite thing to do, other than using screens, was playing cards. She started to speak but didn't get a word out before loud beeping started coming out of her mouth...

The Mountain

By Fischer Horton

The Mountain, the trial all players must climb
Running the court, struggling for time
Coach pushing everyone harder each sprint
Shoes slamming the ground, leaving a dent
Taking each breath, leaving lungs spent
The test of stamina every player must beat
The Knights must be conditioned or else it's DEFEAT
Made by the coach to test his players
The laps increasing, heart-muscle slayers
You'll want to stop, but you got to keep going
Even if the pain in your legs keeps on growing
If you want to play basketball, lock in for the ride
Because you'll have to beat the mountain to test what's inside.

Let the Tide Roll In

By Carla Jimenez-Arellano

I look up at the sky, the sun hitting me just right. What would it be like to be at the beach? Would the waves crash? Would the sun shine bright? Would the wind blow a nice breeze? Would laughter echo for miles as new families come in? I wouldn't know. I've never been. But one day I hope to feel the ocean water surround me. To rush around me. Let the cold water settle into my bones. But life has many ways to ruin your life or greet you with your wishes. I hear screaming, crying, and cars zooming. I look around as people push past me in fear. I turn towards the beach that I'll never meet. There's a wave. A big one coming towards me. Will my dream come true? I start walking towards it, even though my insides tell me to run. Should I? I don't run. I keep walking towards it. The big blue wave, so hypnotizing. I'm now walking more quickly toward the wave. People are too scared to notice me. But a mother does. She grabs my hand and pulls me in the other direction. Why? *Why?* I try to stop her, but she's

too strong. I thrash and kick and scream. But she won't budge. I give up. I turn towards the wave to say goodbye. To finally realize that the world doesn't plan on letting me ever feel the cold, ocean water. To hear the joy and laughter you hear at the beach. To feel the sun burning into you because you forgot to put on sunscreen. I look back at the mother; she seems terrified. I start running with her. Maybe I should help the people around me instead of risking their lives for something I so selfishly want. Maybe I was never meant to experience the ocean, and I've realized that. I look back at the wave once again. It's too close. I don't want it this close. I want to live my life. I want to experience joy in some way. But no, the world chooses your ending. And it has chosen my ending. And it's close. Too close. I look at the mother one final time and say to her, "Thank you."
She knows, and I know. We're not making it. I let go of her hand and face the water. I look at the world one final time before I feel the tide roll in.

The Eyes See but the Mind Overlooks

By Arissa Khan

Eye contact gives you nothing
but the awkwardness of the unknown.
Glancing gives you far less.
Speculating gives you less than nothing.
Simply peering requires nothing
but the mere motion of eyes.
Looking isn't where the challenge lies.
Seeing is where most choose to struggle.
Seeing the truth isn't optional,
it is required.
Listening with both ears isn't optional,
it is required.
Picking up on the seemingly insignificant details isn't optional,
it is required.
Noticing the talent beyond the beauty isn't optional,
it is required.
In order to become a good friend,
choose the challenge over the despair,
the hard over the easy,
the terrific over the desolate, empty palace,
and then, and only then will you become a person,
a prize,
for anyone willing to win.

At Night
By Parker Leavell

I look at the time
It's tomorrow already
I get up and head down

I hear every step I take
Each creak and groan of the wood stairs
I can't make out my hand in front of me

I also can't see the next step
I take a short and painful trip down the rest
I'm sure the sound made its way throughout the house.

I see a horrid creature coming from my parent's room
It asks, "Why aren't you in bed already?"
I quickly react

Terrified by the monster that has come from the dark I get up and run
Sprinting through the house, knocking into unseeable objects, stubbing multiple toes
I leap into my bed and hide under the covers

I hope that the monster doesn't decide to kill me
After realizing it did not give chase
I fall asleep and let the morning come

The Swimming Pool

By Matthew Lu

Little kids everywhere,
Playing in the sun's glare,
Screaming, running, their parents don't care.
The lifeguards sitting in their chair,
But unfortunately, the kids don't stop there,
They trip, they fall, they scrape their knees,
But it's fine, because they're enjoying the breeze.
The parents on the side,
Watching their kids play,
Start getting worried because the sky's turning grey.
It starts sprinkling,
Each drop of rain,
Hitting people and causing pain.
It soon starts pouring,
The parents are yelling,
The kids are screaming
I must be dreaming!
Traffic is forming,
Thunder is roaring,
Lightning is striking,
And poor Timmy is crying.

Henry's Morning

By Bea Marcus

Henry's morning started with a blaring alarm. All of his mornings started this way. He already had a shirt and pants on, probably from the day before, and his hair looked like a mess. He walked into the kitchen; the lights were already on. He made a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. He ate it in silence, the jelly falling out onto the table. He finished eating and looked at the table-jelly, and though his eyes were concentrated on the jelly, his mind was too far gone to really see it.

He got up and started walking. Every room he passed was bare, with no pictures, no plants, nothing that felt like a home. Eventually he reached the door. He paused in front of it, his hand reaching for the doorknob. He waited a second, hoping something would stop him, but nothing did. Hesitantly he stepped into the room and stood just past the doorway. Inside, there were toys and a cradle, but they were dusty as if they hadn't been touched in years. The walls were painted yellow, and a window let in light that was too bright for Henry's eyes. He looked down, not wanting to see the

cradle or toys, and instead saw a photo. It was of Henry and a woman, the woman holding her stomach and smiling. Henry was smiling too, but looking at his wife instead. They were standing in this same room, but everything looked new and the sun was brighter. They looked nervous but happy, like they had what they'd always wanted but didn't know if they could handle it.

Carefully, he crouched down and picked up the photo. He paused, really *seeing* something for the first time in a long time, and then his face turned red and his breath caught. His eyes squeezed shut, but tears fell anyway, staining the picture. He held it close to him and looked up, as if hoping some god would fix his problems.

When nothing got better, he looked down to the ground, hoping to make some deal, but even though he would have given anything, there was no one to give him something. So, he sits there in his regret, tears of love and loss falling. All he is, all he wants to be, everything he thinks of himself, is in this moment and in this picture, forever.

There's a Woman Outside

By N'Kele McNeely

"There's a woman outside, whose house is full of cries."
A tale founded on lies.
From the people I abide.
"There's a woman outside, whose mind is full of shame."
The one who took all the carrying and took all the pain.
"Two kids are a lot for a girl who was kicked to the curb," they say.
"There's a woman outside, who beats her kids at night."
The same one who smiles as the flames ignite.
The house once so big and so tall crumbles as the walls of lies fall.
"There's a woman—"
Don't you ever feel the pain? The sadness? Or the shame?
Do you think it's fun to be called names?
To look like a joke?
To look insane?
The screams drown as the music in the night sways.
Along with the agony, the shame, and the pain.
I was in my prime!
I did everything I could!
I never asked for anything even when I should!
I loved those kids!
I loved this family!
I really, really tried...
Didn't you see me?
So why?
Why stab me in the eye?
Make such a foolish lie?
What else could I have done?
Sit there? Agree? Look dumb?
Now I've lost everything!
From the children I loved to the already bitter air I breathed!
I worked day and night.
I didn't fuss; I didn't fight.
Now all I have is this melancholy streetlight.
And the bare trees to hold me up at night.
Emerald, gold, and olive-green bodies resemble the patterns I see.
Violence is the only answer where I can exist or be free.
"It's never too late to change," I believed.
"Things aren't always what they seem."
"Two wrongs don't make a right."
But maybe, just for tonight.
I am the woman outside.
The lie I was told I was.
The lie I became.

Obsession

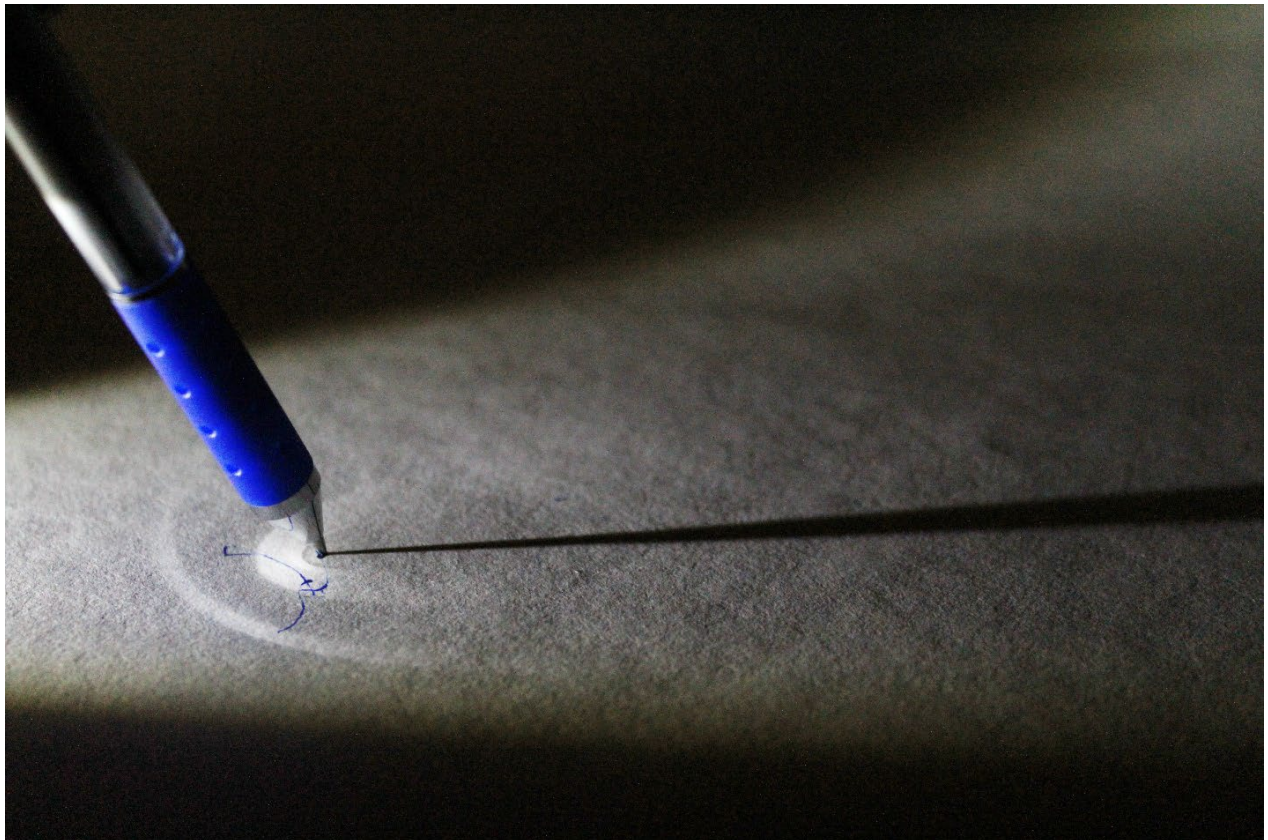
By Madeleine Price

Photo By Palmer Gregg

If you walk fast enough, you can avoid anything. Well, almost anything. You can avoid people, coyotes, and even bears. You can't avoid the stares. Most people don't watch you, but there is always someone. You may not see them watching you, but you know. You can feel them staring at you. They don't blink, they don't look away; they just stare. They follow you around. You can try to keep them away, but they will find a way. A way to get to you. A way to watch you. A way to monitor you. They appear in your nightmares. They can't touch you, but they can scare you. They hope you are afraid. Sometimes, they try to talk to you. They whisper into your ear as they walk by, "I'm watching you. Don't walk away. Don't avoid me."

If you ignore their whispers, they scream, "Don't leave! Don't ignore me!" When they stare at you, don't look them in the eyes. If you make eye contact, they will come for you. Your friends try to stop them, but your friends aren't always there to protect you.

They fixate on you. They follow you through the halls. You walk faster. They keep following you. You run. They chase after you. You find somewhere to hide. They think it's a game. You try to avoid them, but you can't run forever. If you tell them to leave you alone, they just become more motivated. They worry you are getting away. They don't know how to live without you. They will follow you forever, and all you can do is run.



Coma Memories

By Elizabeth Scribner

Margaret was driving home through the darkness and rain. She wasn't paying attention to the road because she was too deep in thought. She was very stressed after her long day at work. She wished she didn't have to work all the time. Her phone buzzed, and she looked down. Suddenly, she shifted right, and her car veered off the road. It all happened in the blink of an eye. Everything went black.

Margaret woke up in a familiar environment. Though her parents had sold the house 10 years ago, she recognized her room in her childhood home. She thought that maybe she was going crazy until a familiar figure walked in. It was her mother, but she looked so much younger.

"Hi Honey. How was school yesterday? You were fast asleep on the couch when we got home," she said.

"School? I'm thirty-three."

"Are you feeling alright? Maybe I should check your temperature."

Her mother walked out of the room. Margaret was confused, but she liked the idea of going to school instead of going to work. She remembered that school was less stressful, even though she hadn't realized it as a child. But what did her mother mean by going to school? Why was she in this house?

Margaret had lots of questions and wished she knew what was going on. She decided to just go to school to see what was happening. She found

her backpack, went outside, and got in the car she got for her sixteenth birthday. When she finally got to the school, all her friends she hadn't seen in years were there. She went to all her classes. They were easy for her compared to everything she had to do for work.

After school, her friends invited her to go to the mall, which had shut down a long time ago. They spent all afternoon there. The whole day made Margaret miss her childhood. It all felt so real to her. As soon as she got home, she went straight to her bedroom. She was very tired, but she didn't want the day to end. She thought about her school, her classes, and her friends and wished it could last forever, but it didn't work. As she lay in bed thinking, her eyes closed, and everything slowed down and went dim.

She woke up in the hospital with a broken rib and brain swelling. A nurse shouted, "She's awake!" Margaret's husband and parents walked in.

"What happened? Why am I here?" Margaret said.

"You drove off the road and crashed your car into a tree. You were in a coma for six weeks," her mother said.

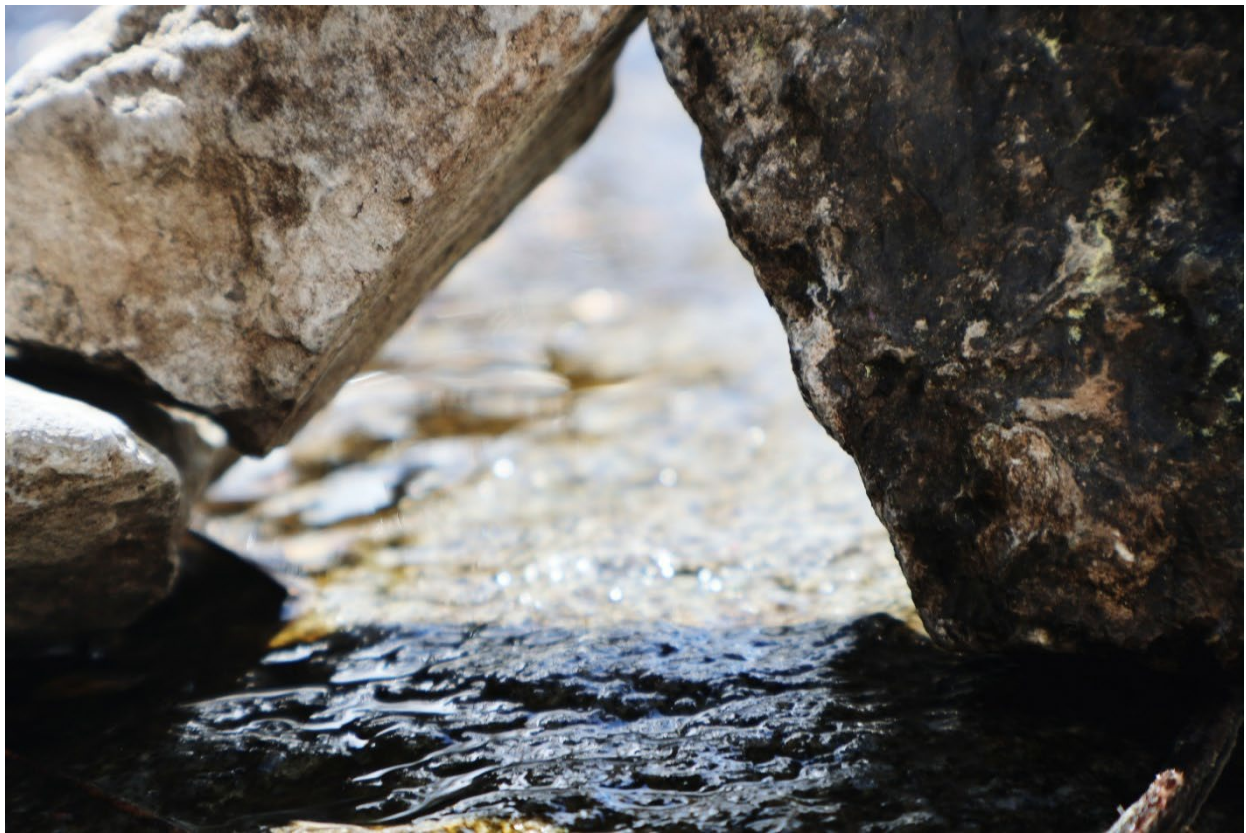
Margaret was in shock. She couldn't move. She was frozen still. All she could think about was what had happened yesterday "back home." It couldn't have been real if she had been in a coma for six weeks. One of the best days of her life had been just a coma-dream.

Crazy and Caged

By Coco Sellers

Photo By Matthew Lu

No one understood him.
How could anyone, with his blank expression
and hollow eyes that seemed
to stare at everything but nothing at all?
He paces around the narrow room
that grows smaller with every step.
He's like a tiger; caged and restless.
But if you really know him, you know that he's hungry.
He yearns for a different type of reality he had once experienced
but could not find anymore.
They call him crazy and say he's just schizophrenic.
They say he's making things up.
I like to think that they were crazy, and he's normal.
Because I too had experienced the reality that he cherishes so much.
Really, all of us have.
Most of us are sane enough
to push the perfect life we once had to the back of our minds
and move on, because we know we aren't getting it back.
There's always one man who can't push it away.
No one understood him, but I did.



How Many Times?

By Kaylyn Sun

How many times?
"I'm fine. I'm okay. I'm alright."
But when will I really be happy?

"Life is a series of tides.
It'll knock you down, just get back up."
But what if it drowns me?

"You'll be fine."
"I know them enough, they'll be okay."
But I'm dying on the inside.

The person with the biggest smile
Hides the most pain.
The person with the prettiest eyes
Cries the most tears.
The person with the kindest heart
Is broken the most.

How many times must we suffer?
How many times until they realize?
How many times are you going to hurt me?
How many times?

The cries will stop
When it's too late.

The day they call,
Phones will drop and feet will run down the hall.
They blame themselves for it all
While drowning my memory in alcohol.

But the world won't stop.
Traffic lights will run.
The clock will tick.
The sun will rise and set.

Sooner or later
Your friends will start school with third period
With one desk painfully empty.
Your family will sleep at night
With one bed bitterly empty.

Somewhere else,
Someone else feels the same.
They act the same.
They cry the same.
They'll die the same.
How many lives must be taken?
How many times?
Haven't we given *enough*?

Pocket Ace and a Queen

By Raimi Tong

Photo by Stewart Reid

"Gah!" I shouted as I fell to the ground. I tried to get up, but I started coughing so much that it made my throat hurt. It was the result of the cold, sharp wind that had pushed down my throat when I fell. I saw beat-up shoes peeking out from the alley's shadows and I heard a boy's voice.

"What are you doing down there?"

I froze. Suddenly the cough became irrelevant. I didn't know what to do. I was scared, mostly because I wasn't prepared for anyone to start talking to me. I coughed once more, the final one. "I didn't do it on purpose!" I said defensively, quickly standing up. The boy sighed, stepped out of the dark a foot or so in front of me, and tilted his head up just a little bit to make eye contact. He was much shorter than I was, I noted, and his eyes were dull and pitch black. He looked like he hadn't slept in a good bit.

He slowly looked me over, scanning me. I studied him right back. He had black hair that was very messy and dirty, and he had black-rimmed glasses. I was surprised they weren't broken yet, and his choice in style was... questionable, at least in this weather. Then again, it might not have been a choice. With that in mind, I tried not to judge him as much. He was wearing a black hood attached to a torn-up scarf and mask, tan cargo shorts with a faint camo pattern that reached his knees, and a white tank top. I looked down at myself and saw red dust scattered on my clothes from the road I'd just landed on.

I scowled at the boy as I dusted off my clothes, annoyed that he had never told me. When I looked up, I saw him smiling a little bit, trying to hide what seemed to be his amusement at my predicament. I just knew he didn't plan on telling me.

"So, what just happened?" He tried to distract me. "The whole coughing on the ground thing that just happened, I mean." The boy clarified, clearing his throat.



"I just got thrown out of my shelter," I explained, gesturing back to a shop with my head.

"It's to be expected."

"Right."

To anyone, that remark might have sounded rude or insensitive. But it was the truth. Being thrown out of your own shelter was common in this city. Said city was nicknamed by *some* people inside it – but mostly by people *outside* it – "Opossum City" after how many opossums and other rodents infested it. Though it was true, I never called the city that. I also never knew the city's actual name. The place felt apocalyptic when you looked around; it was trashed, torn to pieces, rugged, and dirty. Edgy people surrounded ... well ... everything. You could always hear someone speaking, yet it somehow seemed empty – at least it seemed that way to *me*. Anyway, I'd been standing in the same position for way too long.

"What's your name?" I said, trying to change the subject. It was getting awkward.

"Ace." He paused a moment, still holding eye contact. "Yours?" I puffed up my cheeks in thought. I was glad my icebreaker worked, but now I had to participate in conversation. I thought about telling him a fake name, but I believed Ace had told me his real name, so I did as well. Deflating my cheeks I replied, "It's Ana, that's EH-na, A-N-A."

He cocked his head, "Not AH-nna," raising his eyebrows, waiting for my answer.

"No," I said plainly, and the shorter person snickered.

He turned around and started walking. "Well, you're with me now!" he called as he looked backward. I suppose he meant we were traveling buddies, or maybe even friends – but maybe that was a stretch.

A couple of minutes went by before I heard Ace clear his throat and start to talk again. "Where'd you get clothes like that, Ana?" he said as I walked beside him.

"They were given to me."

"From the people from the shelter you got thrown out of?"

"... Yes."

I looked down at my clothes, cyan athletic pants and a hooded black and grey jacket made of material like a raincoat. Ace hummed in response, then he started to rant on about something else, seeming more comfortable with talking now.

I didn't know where we were walking, but for some reason I felt that I could trust Ace. Wherever we were going, I tried to tell myself that it'd be okay because Ace was leading me, and Ace was good. That trust I had in him ground

to a halt when his rambling came to a stop and he said, "Oh, Ana, do you have someone we could go to?"

I felt my eyebrows furrow. "What do you mean? Do you not have a plan already!?" My voice rose.

Ace looked around. "Shh! Don't you think you're being too loud?"

My eyes widened, "Wha-!? Can you answer my question!?" I started gesturing wildly.

Ace held my hands down. "Yes, fine, I have a plan! We're going to my mother's village, okay? I was just checking with you in case you wanted to go somewhere else," he said calmly. I wondered how he could do that, be that calm. I breathed out, trying to settle myself.

"Oh, okay."

"Yeah," he said softly, almost breathy. He widened his eyes too, using them to point out how dramatic I'd been.

"Are you okay now?"

"Yes. I'm sorry for... acting out."

"It's okay. I should've told you earlier anyway." He looked down, letting go of my hands, "We've been walking for 30 minutes now." He looked back up at me.

I nodded, looking back at Ace, then up and over the hills. "Well then, let's get going."

Side by side, we continued our journey. I was deep in thought and Ace was talking about something he was clearly very interested in. I was glad I'd said sorry. I had assumed he was too good to be true and lashed out immediately, reflexively, confirming my mistrust while thinking *I knew it! I knew it*, then scolding myself in my head. But I didn't "know it" and I was wrong about him. I shouldn't have thought that he was like that. I looked over at Ace, who was still

talking and facing straight ahead, and smiled. It was a small smile, but it was there. Fifteen minutes later, we came to the entrance of a vast tunnel, with bright, warm light coming from inside of it.

“Is this it?”

“Yep, come on!”

Ace smiled, nodding his head toward the tunnel and running to the entrance. I followed silently behind him, shoving my hands into my pocket to fiddle with the loose lint. Maybe I could be friends with Ace.

The Beach

By Zachary Tsivourakis

Photo by Mica Cuellar

Glistening in the sunlight,
Shining in the moonlight.
The seagulls screaming,
The parents dreaming.
The fish jumping,
The schools of fish clumping.
The sand shifting,
The kids slipping.
The rays curious,
The sharks furious.
The dolphins spying,
The babies crying.
The floaties floating,
The sunscreen coating.
The waves crashing,
The runners dashing,
The flashlights flashing.
The sun rays hitting,
The grandmas knitting,
The fishers fishing,
This place is just fitting.



Judgments and Jars

By Mia Ward

"What's the definition of a name?" I ask no one specifically.

"A name? It's something someone calls you, so that you're different from other people ... I suppose," Kai responds, accustomed to my random questions.

"Why would people call you more than one name then?" I look up at him from my spot on the floor.

"Well, in some cases people call you different names, or nicknames, because they feel it matches your personality. Or sometimes they shorten your name to make it a fun thing between the two of you."

He was staring at his phone as he answered me. Something that matches your personality?

"But you and Ishikawa aren't coldblooded in my opinion."

Kai turns to me, his eyes wide. Ishikawa steps into the doorway of his bedroom.

"How do you mean?" Ishikawa asks, sounding slightly irritated that his nap was interrupted by my questions.

"I've heard people talking about you guys at galas and such. The ones who know of you, I often hear them calling you coldblooded murderers." I stared at Ishikawa intently. I've been meaning to discuss this for a while.

"People are entitled to their own opinions, and some people have very strong opinions about people in our line of work. Especially rich people. Once they find out that we're hitmen, they start avoiding us like oil to water," Kai pointed out, his voice slightly more somber than before.

"Well, that's because they don't want to die and lose control of their money."

"Yeah, Ishikawa makes a good point. Anyway, what does that have to do with your other questions?"

"I would consider that a name. According to your definition, a name is something you are called when someone wants to refer to you; and people were referring to you when they called you that. But, if names are supposed to represent you, then why would they call you that?" These thoughts began gnawing at me, as if I was a piece of clothing being slowly devoured by a swarm of moths.

"Names are also based on one's judgement of you," Ishikawa said, still sounding irritated and uninterested. Judgment: the act or process of forming an opinion based on careful thought. At least, that's the dictionary definition.

"Judgment..." I mutter to myself. Judgment had always been on my mind, but I had never considered it so seriously before now. "What gives people the right to judge you?"

"Jeez Mina, what's with all the questions? I need to rest. Kai and I have a job later tonight; it's some CEO whose been embezzling funds, according to our client." Ishikawa turned away and retreated into his room. I looked at Kai.

"Do you know?" I ask. He stares at me. I can almost see the thoughts whirling behind his obsidian eyes; he had a solemn demeanor to him now.

"I ... can't say for sure. I bet if Andrew were here, then he would know how to answer you," he replies, chuckling half-heartedly. Kai, Ishikawa and I grew up in an orphanage together, and Andrew was our caretaker, but he was basically

like a father to us. I could always talk to him about *anything*. Kai looked down at his feet. "Sorry, Mina. I didn't mean to bring him up."

"It's alright, you're allowed to talk about him..." I responded, a sudden sharp pain appearing in my chest. "I'm going outside, I'll just order dinner for myself later."

I stood up and walked to the balcony door. As I opened it, a gust of cold wind smacked me in the face. December in Japan can make you feel that you live in an icebox at times. I closed the door behind me and leaned against the railing. It was dusk, and the city was starting to glow with a warm, comforting light. I always liked that; it reminded me of light sparkling off the ocean as the sun slowly sets behind it.

I watched the city slowly come alive. I wanted to think more about judgment; why we feel judgment, why it's such a specific feeling, why some people's matters more than others.

"Weird..." I murmur, as I consider my last thought. "Why *do* some people's judgment and opinions matter more than others? Like food critics! What's so important about *their* opinions on food?" I stopped. *Why am I ranting to myself?* Before I could continue scolding myself, I heard something behind me open.

"Kai feels bad." Ishikawa stepped outside and leaned against the railing next to me. "Brr... it should be a crime for it to be this cold," he shivered.

"He doesn't need to feel bad. Also, weren't you sleeping?" I ask.

"Yeah, but then I heard you go outside and I assumed something was up. Also, Kai was curled up on the couch looking guilty, so that too."

"How many times do I have to say this? It's fine, and he doesn't need to worry. He's allowed to talk about..." – I couldn't bring myself to say his name. I was afraid that if I did, then the sharp pain in my chest would never leave – "... him."

"That's exactly why he feels bad. We both know how hard this time of year is for you, especially since Andrew is gone—"

"No, he's not gone. If he were gone, then that would mean that he's still somewhere to be found. He's dead, Ishikawa." My heart felt like it had leaped into my throat. I stared into his unrevealing eyes. "Sorry."

My gaze wandered to the ground. We were silent for several moments, but it felt like we needed that silence desperately.

"So, what was with all the questions earlier? You were thinking a lot about judgment, or so I heard. What's that about?"

"I was just thinking about your comment earlier about people's judgment on things, and that got me wondering why some judgments are more valued than others. An example I thought of was food critics, and how restaurants always want to have good reviews from food critics."

"I think that has something to do with reputation and respect. If you really respect someone, and they complement you, then it feels better than a random person complementing you. That's usually because you value their opinion."

"Hmm... I guess that's a good point." I still felt like I needed *more* somehow.

"Another way you could think of it – it could be like a jar. Everyone has a jar that they fill with opinions, or in our case judgments. There is a limited amount of space in the jar, so you must be selective with the judgments you store there. If your jar is filled with too many judgments that don't matter, then you won't have room for the important ones."

"So, if you're storing up the judgments of too many people who don't have your best interests at heart, then it's just wasted space ... wasted space that might hurt you. You need to save

space and value the judgment of people who *care* about you, right?" It was slowly starting to make more sense to me.

"Yeah, that's how I like to think of it at least. It's a difficult thing to wrap your head around." He paused for a moment. "Those people at the gala you overheard – their judgement doesn't belong in our jars. I've overheard them, too, but I've denied them access to my jar and so has Kai. Don't let them into your jar either."

He walked away from the rail and opened the door to go inside. Kai was lingering in the doorway, looking troubled.

"Is she mad at me?"

"Of course not. However, I will be if you don't get ready soon! We're leaving for the job in ten minutes." His scolding was followed by the *THWAP* of a playful slap to the head.

"Hey!" Kai yelped. I chuckled as I heard Ishikawa pushing Kai towards their room. I felt better now, after talking with Ishikawa. For someone who barely had an education, he was quite wise. He's always been good at explaining things to me,

ever since we were young children; I think he learned from the best.

Andrew barely ever cared about people's judgments of him. The only one that mattered to him was ours, but he knew how much we cared for him, so he never worried that we would have negative opinions of him. I always envied that trait; not worrying what others thought. When people were openly cruel to Andrew, he let it pass over his head like a weak wind. Even when they chose to target him about whom he loved, he didn't let those comments faze him. He was skillful at selecting what he allowed in his jar.

I let out a sigh. The sharp pain in my chest is still lingering, like a vulture circling over its next meal. Ishikawa was right; this time of year *is* always difficult for me, but that's partly because of how I've tried to block Andrew out of my mind. And that, of all things, hurts me the most.

As tears begin to well in my eyes, I turn to retreat into the comforting warmth of the place I call home. Before I make it inside, I cast one final glance at the city: *my* city. The lights have slowly grown brighter with the setting of the sun, and the night-time rush is beginning.

Seasons

By Chloe Washmuth

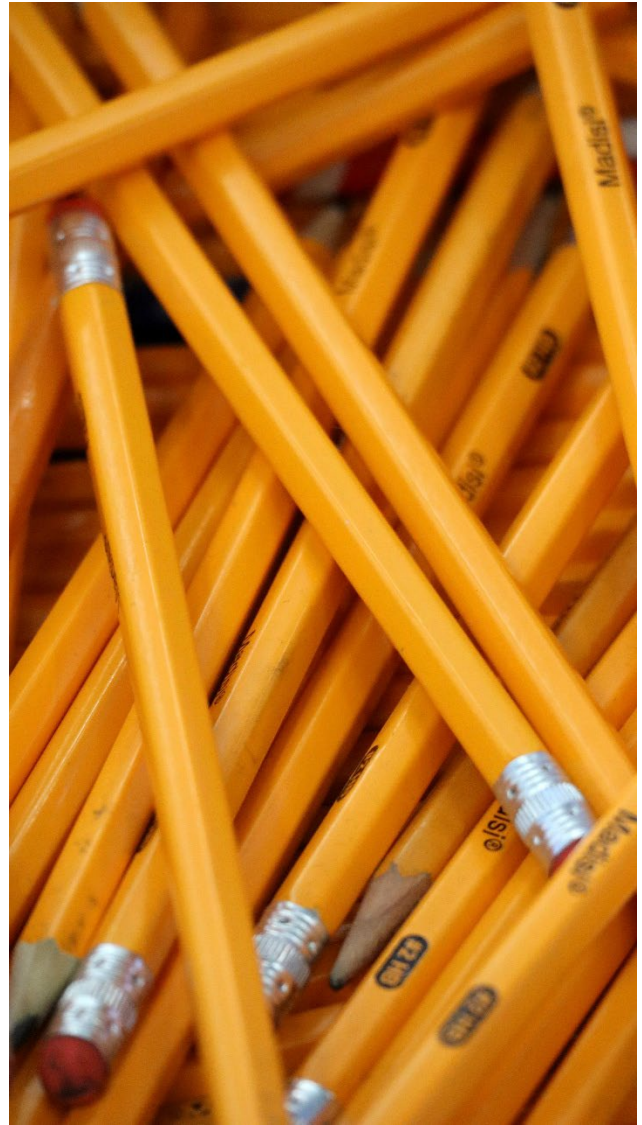
Photo By Cole Quinney

Spring is filled with liveliness
Flowers bloom on trees
The natural world wakes up
The pollen makes you sneeze.

Summer is filled with warmth
A gentle light every day
Birds explore the blooming world
Playful children shout hooray.

Autumn is filled with colors
The trees begin to shed
Nights begin to lengthen
Happiness starts to spread.

Winter is filled with shivers
Everywhere you look there's ice
Though it's the holiday season
The cold is not so nice.



Almost Midnight

By Gabe Parcak

The ticking time bomb
Nearing midnight,
The roaring train
Falling into an endless pit
Of hate and disdain.
Rage, rage against this dying light
Before you do go gentle into that good night
Where storms await,
Ever growing,
Waiting for the moment to strike.
A storm so precarious in movement,
Like a mouse, a ninja,
A shadow evading your eyes,
Blinding many from the truth
That is sought by many,
Found by few.
The truth that answers everything,
The truth that is most hidden,
Like a Pandora's box
Calling you to open it.
Yet when you do finally find this truth
Only a daring black meets your eye.
A black that intentionally seals the truth away from you.

The ninjas, the weasels,
The hated, the corrupt, the insane,
All the same,
For they have evaded you,
Ruling you
Till your demise.
Their words like clockwork,
One grand symphony
That brings a discord so loud that it echoes throughout every shadow,
Heard and felt by those who created it.
A discord that consumes all,
Eventually destroying everything
Leaving two options,
But to flee the inevitable,
Or to stay and make the choice to
Take a stand!