

CROSSROADS



**Literature and Art by Students at
Hudson County Community College**

Crossroads

Literature and Art by Students at Hudson County Community College

Sponsored by The Writing Center at HCCC

Issue 3
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Haven Flowers by Melissa Vasquez

We would also like to thank all the creative students who submitted literature and art for this issue!

Editorial Policy

The student editorial board considers submissions from all currently registered HCCC students and alumni. Submissions must conform to college guidelines regarding behavior and speech, and the editorial board will not accept material that aims to denigrate based on race, sexuality, or other aspects of identity. The editorial board is open to considering all submissions, but not all submissions will be published. Decisions of the editorial board are final. All submissions will be automatically entered into the Writing Center Student Writing Contest. *Crossroads* asks for first North American publishing rights. Authors and artists retain their copyrights, own their work, and have the rights to future use of this work. *Crossroads* accepts submissions on a rolling basis. Send submissions to crossroads@hccc.edu.

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Dear Readers,

We welcome you to our third published issue of *Crossroads!* Another year has passed, and we have a new treasure box of imagination waiting to be unearthed. Our menagerie of poetry, prose, photography, and art will give you a glimpse of the creativity that lies in each of the students at HCCC; it just needed to be tapped into. Our literary and art magazine has allowed—and continues to allow—the students of Hudson County Community College to express their creativity.

To all the writers, poets, artists, and photographers who have submitted their work—thank you. We are honored that you took time and shared with us your thoughts and work, and share it in print, as well. Without you, there would be no ink to our paper. Our deep gratitude goes out to the faculty and staff who have committed to *Crossroads* and persevered to get this issue published. Your love for students' creativity in prose, poetry, and art have inspired the creation of this magazine.

Escape into the minds of the authors and artists of *Crossroads*. You now hold the key. Turn the page. Explore.

Loriebel S. McElrone

Student Editorial Board

/Prose/



Butterflies Series by Edwin Collazos, Acrylic on Canvas

Afterlife

by Nicholas Hickson

When you reflect on younger days and your eyes begin to close, your arms begin to fold. You let out your last warm breath. Everyone surrounds you, and they hold each other as your skin begins to lose its natural color. You lived what some would say, a magnificent life, filled with fast cars, flashy clothes and beautiful girls. Yet, you were miserable and filled with emptiness. You were always looking for your parents, whom you never met. Now you lie there with a heavenly grin—no one would tell you to your face that they used you. You die thinking everyone loved you, but they loved what you brought them, money and power. You gave them what they wanted and you gained nothing in return. I tell you this in this cold world; you were the one with the warmest heart. You gave people something to believe in and they took you for granted. The world took you for granted. You gave happiness to the unhappy with your positivity. You cared when everyone was scared to. You were the optimistic type, and when someone hurt you in the worst way possible, you forgave them.

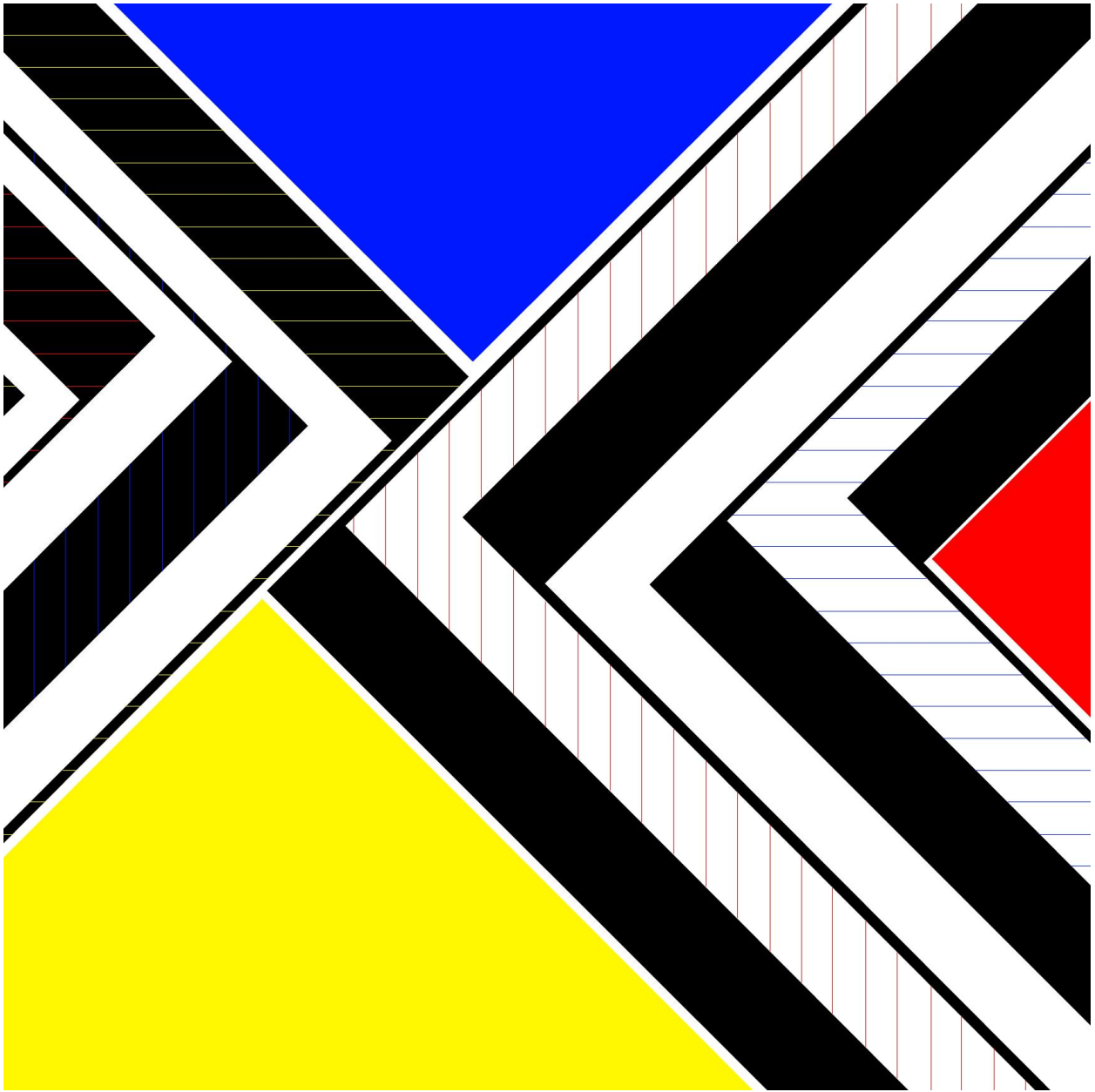
All the love you had in your heart was enough to start your own world. It is sad to see you go, but you go to a place many won't be able to. Your lifeline was cut short, and you always knew you would go before your time. Please don't leave me alone on Mother Earth. I wish I could go with you, my young friend. I won't think about you leaving as you being selfish but as you going back to where you truly belong. In the afterlife is where you will be from now on—your spirit will rise again. This is your second coming; you will be reborn stronger than ever, bones sturdy, lungs filled with new breaths of eternal air, skin restored to its original pigment. You will be swimming in the clouds of heaven with the people you longed to see since you were young.

All the good memories we had together; I remember the very first time we became the best of friends. I was a scrawny boy with chicken legs and noodle arms. I wore a long t-shirt and baggy blue jeans with different color pockets. You were the coolest kid in the school to me. You had the strongest arms that I have ever seen. You had the cleanest sneakers, which squeaked every time you walked. You were wearing grey and black basketball shorts and a yellow tank. Kids in the school never understood me and they would always bully me. They trapped me in a corner and started punching and kicking me. You leaped into action, without hesitation and started throwing your fists. Our parents had red faces and resembled trains with steam coming out of their ears and nose. They were called into the office by our fat,

greybearded principal. We were just laughing at how much trouble we got into. You were my superhero and that is a day I will never forget.

You will reunite with your parents, the ones you've been searching for your whole life. You will play basketball with your dad and help your mom cook dinner. If you are lucky they will read you a bedtime story and explain where they have been all your life. Yes, my beautiful friend, they will tuck you in at night, while you sit there in the blue sky and watch the glisten stars dance. You will gaze down at us and see the world from a new perspective. You will have a new point of view from which you can look at everyone and see their true color; see those who smiled in your face but behind your back, they wished for your downfall. Now that you're up in God's grace, I hope you take care of yourself. I hope you realize what God put you on Earth to do. Now that he has one of his greatest gifts back in his possession, he can now send you on another mission. This time, as an all seeing magical being, who I will call my invisible angel.

Hopefully you will be my guardian angel because that would mean nothing has changed. For now this time you aren't by my side physically, but you will be with me in spirit mentally. Because you were my angel and you never fooled me into thinking that you were a normal human being. And I remember you as an angel walking on Mother Nature's green earth with your bandana, jeans, jacket, brown boots, navy blue shirt, cargo shorts and your fluffy soft unseen wings. I hope you don't forget me because I won't forget you. Goodbye my friend with an old soul that died with a young heart.



Mondrian by Nancy Guerrero

Afterlife

by Martha Jaikissoon

Mom and dad are hanging out with their friends, while I'm here alone. Nobody wants to play with me. Billy and Mandy, two of my iniquitous classmates, won't let me play freeze tag or ring around the reef with them. Billy wears a blue hat and Mandy wears this tiara that makes her look like a princess with pink lipstick. When I come out to play with my classmates, they display an evil smirk and run away from me. Let's face it, nobody likes me. They always isolate me and leave me hanging alone in this dirty brown water. Seaweed is always smacking me in the face, and it's hard to remove it with my little fins. The water has a very salty taste, and that's the only thing you can smell around here. Salt and the feces and fluids of this city. I should move. It's hard to live in this area. People always throw wrappers in the water, empty soda bottles, and loads of garbage. I wish we could move somewhere with clean blue water and friendly fishes. Like Florida! Now that I think about it, I will move away from Mulletina. Nobody loves me or wants me so I'm sure they wouldn't even notice if I were gone.

The traffic is busy and people keep bumping into me and pushing me out of their way. I feel abused. But when I stopped at the green, molded stoplight, I saw this beautiful girl smiling at me. Her eyes were as white as paper, and her scales were colorful. The bottom of her mouth was yellow, while her whole body was blue. And around her eyes were the colors of the rainbow. I landed in Rainbow Tropica. Her purple and blue fin signaled me forward, and my body went directly to her as if she were a magnet. I followed her throughout the city, and I couldn't stop staring at her elongated tailfin. The way it moved side to side was hypnotizing. But then there was a distraction in the city that caused everyone to holler for their children to run back home. Everyone was evacuating the city and I lost sight of the beautiful girl. I looked from right to left to find her, but she was gone. I tried to scurry out of there when I knew what took place, but it was too late. Fishermen ran and tossed their net into the water. The net lowered into the water and it was closing in on the town, leaving no sight of an exit. Before I knew it, they caught me. The fishes and I were trapped in this white net and there was no room to wiggle free. As soon as I knew it, the fishermen threw us in a bucket, and I was at the top. Everyone, including me, was gasping for water. The bright yellow sun was beating down on us, soaking up our moisture. Our scales began to dry out and it was getting hard to breathe. I was gasping heavily, and soon my heart rate started to decrease.

What will happen to me after I die? Will I go to heaven or hell? Do I even believe in heaven or hell? I don't know. Life is flashing before my eyes, and I can only think of the negative. After I die, they will take me home for dinner with these other fish. They will throw us in a pot of masala and place us in individual plates with rice and spices underneath our bodies. We will be served to five other members of the family and they will spit out our indigestible remainings. But that's just my body. When I am detached from my body, I will go to an unknown land.

The sky is grey and gloomy. No sun and no clouds. Am I stranded in the middle of nowhere? All I see in the far distance is water. Nothing but water. Dirty water. It is the darkest shade of brown, with seaweed lying around. But there are fish guts floating around too. The guts the fishermen's wives removed from our bodies. Ew, it's so red and gooey. They scraped us clean and tossed everything in the ocean. Everyone's fins, guts, and scales have been removed. Is that what they did to me? And these poor mothers and their unborn babies! The eggs lay stacked at the side corner of the water. They are round, transparent, small yellow eggs that are in a bag.

This place is disgusting. What makes it worse is the smell of rotten eggs in the air. And I think it's coming from the guts.

I see families putting their fins around their loved ones. Individuals with nobody to turn to. Two young kids are sitting on top of the eggs with their heads facing downward. Boy is this place depressing. They are crying. Grieving. I hope they're okay. There are skinny fishes in the far corner shoveling the guts and fins. They are trying to put everything at one side so there can be room to roam around and be free. But when more fishes die, their guts automatically fall from the sky and land in the same location. And as the guts fall, it rains blood.

I really hope the afterlife isn't what I imagine! Although my life hasn't been the best, I would really like the afterlife to be better than my life right now. But it doesn't matter now. The fisherman is grabbing a handful of us and we aren't going to see our friends and families again. I felt someone lift the bucket. The bucket was moving for a long time. Sooner or later, the fisherman placed us on the ground. An older looking woman stretched her hand out towards me with a knife, and punctured me in my stomach. The sharp shooting pain; it hurts. She ran her blade upwards towards my throat. The thought of raining blood and guts falling from the sky took over my mind. Maybe when I reach the afterlife, I can make friends with those two kids sitting on the eggs. They might like me.

The Groomp
by Andre Amorim

The night was particularly cool for a summer's night. It was as if though fall had decided to show up a few weeks early. The rain began falling ever so lightly and a man without an umbrella quickened his stride to see if he could outrun the rain's playful intent. The night was still and many were already asleep. Gumerzindo tried to find sleep, but couldn't. He kept tossing and turning, hoping for sleep to embrace him as a soldier's spouse would, seeing him return home safely. It was always the same—he would be walking on the grassy plains of Portugal, smiling to the sound of her sweet voice gently falling upon his ears. She called his name—he knew if he turned around, she wouldn't be there, but he always turned. He felt a force of will, greater than his own, playing its foul hand—love wasn't supposed to betray him this way. He envied Orpheus for being able to see Eurydice one last time, as he sealed their fates with a glance towards hell. An ear-deafening sound made its way into the house—it was the sound of thunder. Gumerzindo's eyes shot open as he sat upright in bed. The darkness was silent, save the endless droning of the rain crashing against the window. This dream was not a dream, but a recurring nightmare. There, in the infinite Cimmerian shade, he began his nightly lamentation.

The following morning, he awoke before the sun had risen. Looking outside, he noticed a rose, crippled by the night's ferocious storm. A drop of water coolly slid down the end of one of its petals, making its way to a small puddle which surrounded the emaciated rose. "Plop"—the sound rang in his ears and snapped him out of his trance. He lifted his head and his clear, blue eyes met the dense fog that laid over the land. He recalled countless days of his youth where the weather conditions were very much the same as they were on this day. Days like these were the most dangerous when out on the sea; this was common knowledge—common knowledge he knew all too well. On one occasion, he and his ship-mates gathered up on the shore in the early hours of the morning; together, they pushed the longboat off of the sand and into the glacial waters of the sea. As they pushed, mountainous waves crashed against the boat on either side. One by one, each man climbed in—the fear they might never again see the shore crept into their every thought. All thirteen men thrust their oars into the water and pulled back at a furious pace—beads of sweat rushed down the side of Gumerzindo's face. After a few minutes of the relentless pace, the sandy haven vanished into the incessant fog. Across the boat, a man began to nervously fidget. It was his first time out on the open sea and mentally, he wasn't ready to deal with the overwhelming blindness of the fog. He stood up and before

anyone could utter a word, he plunged head-first into the deep, dark water. The man started frantically swimming deeper and deeper into the thick fog, gasping for air each time the waves spat him back out. They knew they wouldn't be able to turn the boat around in time to save him, so they let him swim until he either died or reached the shore. By the time they had reached the shore, it was late in the afternoon. Thinking the man had made it, they assumed he went home because of the time—this was wishful thinking. When he did not show up for work the next day, they felt a pang of guilt spring in their chests—the great ocean had taken another victim. The corpse of the man was found a few days later; it was in one of their nets, frozen stiff.

Gumerzindo snapped out of his daydream and realized he was still lying in bed. He threw the covers off of him and kicked his legs out to the side in order to sit in an upright position. He searched for his slippers with his feet, for it was still quite dark in the house, feeling the right slipper first and the left a few seconds after. Putting all of the weight on his legs, he rocked forward and shakily stood up. The house was silent—oddly enough, the silence was deafening; it spoke words only he would understand. Holding back the unforgiving tears of loneliness, he made his way towards the hallway and over to the living room. There it stood in all of its glory—his greatest accomplishment—what he had worked so hard for—his beautiful house. Although it was filled with wondrous furnishings from couches to rugs, to carpets and chandeliers, it had never seemed so empty, then. It was more like a prison cell than a mansion—the memories were etched on the walls like knife markings, counting down the days till freedom, on the cement. What had it all been for? Who was it all for? Was it all a waste of time? Could he have spent more time with her instead of focusing on the godforsaken house? They were supposed to live out the rest of their lives together; that's what it was for. That was the plan since he was twenty-two. Why had life robbed him—robbed her—of what was rightfully theirs? It all happened so fast—too fast. His hands began trembling; his lips parted; his knees gave way to the unbearable grief which consumed him from the inside—he was the host and love was the parasite. Before going down, he grabbed onto a ledge; he would not let it defeat him once more. As he pulled himself up, his eyes began to water; he would not let it defeat him once more. Slowly, he walked over to the kitchen sink and turned the water on. His hands clasped together to form a fleshy bowl as he caught the water between them; he threw the water upwards towards his face. With the water still running, he looked up to a photo on the windowsill; it was of his daughter and his grandchildren. The frame read, "Home Away From

Home." He shut the water off and took the frame in his hands; he forced a small smile. He knew he'd be leaving the place he called "home" for so long—sooner than later. There was nothing for him there and he knew it. Leaving would be hard, but he knew things would get better; he'd be with them—love broke, but love mended. Placing the photo down, he looked over the land and up towards the grey sky as he whispered, "Rosa, meu amor."



Flowers by Albeirys Fancisco - Acrylic on Paper

Disoriented

by Oliver Pavot

I awaken. The fluorescent lights of a familiar dining room strike my eyes. A Kellogg's® Rice Krispies® cereal cup sits before me on a table already opened, filled with milk, and with spoon dipped inside. Children chatter around me. One boy yells out. "Come get your just-add-water eggs!"

I begin to hear a man's voice.

A bus with four passengers on board leaves the terminal.

My mother stares at me with disbelief while we are seated across from each other in our living room. I had just finished rambling on about something. The medical transportation van is going to arrive soon. I run to my bedroom to grab my backpack. I had been going to an outpatient program every weekday for the past two months. I step out of my bedroom and head towards the bathroom at the end of the corridor. I look into my parent's bedroom and see my mother genuflecting to her little shrine filled with figurines of Christianity's legend. I hear her weeping and proceed to the bathroom where I will look to the mirror and quickly comb my hair before rushing out of the apartment.

At the first stop, three people board the bus.

The driver, responding to a movie advertisement on the radio, shouts. "SCOOBY DOOOO!" My mind is on its way to an unknown place. Looking out the window of the van, the colors of the world outside became more vibrant. I inexplicably closed my eyes. I no longer understood the English language and so the radio transmission seemed other-worldly. With my eyes still shut, I sensed that I was in motion, but I had forgotten that I was in a moving van. I was being transported to a strange world. I open my eyes and see the clear blue sky, but I am convinced that it was not the same sky I saw just a moment ago. I close my eyes once again.

At the second stop, four people board the bus.

I am suddenly standing in my social worker's office. My mother and my aunt are there with my social worker. They were all seated beside each other while I stood by the doorway. My mother's face was flushed and her eyes were like two large black marbles behind her coke-

bottle glasses, tears running down her cheeks. Like a dream sequence I felt paralyzed and heard myself spout out random numbers. I should close my eyes.

At the third stop, five people hop off and one person boards the bus.

Now I am lying on a hospital bed. A small TV hangs a few inches to my left. A well endowed woman is on the screen. My aunt yells from my right side. "NO!" and pulls my hand away from my groin.

At the fourth stop, four people get off the bus.

My pleas for escape are being ignored. It is awfully nice to suddenly find myself in a lucid dream, but now my imagination has left me trapped in a bedroom with bolted windows and a door with a little window. *I must complete some kind of a puzzle; that's what I have to do!* Maybe if I just wore my pajamas backwards, it might do the trick. My special dance is failing too. Nothing is working. I look to the furnishings of the room. Minutes later, I finish assembling my tower by throwing my blanket over it. A man steps in to the room and says, "Here, take your Ativan." He then hands me a small cup of water and a pill.

At the last stop, six people get off the bus.

Finally reaching the conclusion, the clinician asks me, "How many people are left on the bus?"

I ask back, "Am I alive?"



Work Station by Edwin Collazos - Charcoal

A Family Tradition by Andrea Holguin

A woman was walking to grab a shopping cart to go inside Shoprite when she noticed something laying on the ground next to her foot. Not knowing exactly what it was because she didn't have her glasses on, she bends down and picks up this beautiful shiny gold necklace with a nice pendant. Instead of asking around if someone had dropped their necklace, she decided to put it in her back pocket of her jeans and walked away like nothing had happened. Who was this? My mother. This was nine years ago. Nine years ago my sister was a teen mom whose plan was to one day move in with her new husband. When she moved out, my mother decided to give the necklace to her. But like many mother-daughter relationships, they were times when they were on good terms and then there were times where they would just scream at each other at the top of their lungs. My sister thought my mother was a bank. She was always constantly borrowing money to pay her bills but then my parents had no idea when they would receive it back.

Then on one of those heated arguments that they had one day, my sister gave my mom back the gold necklace. Who do you think kept the necklace? I did. I was given the necklace and I kept it for many years but it would be just that type of jewelry that was always kept in the jewelry box and was never worn. As a young teen I would sometimes think, "I have brown skin; gold doesn't look nice on brown skin!" Now, I laugh at myself for thinking such things. So many years have passed that I don't remember where exactly this piece of jewelry is located. Is it still in my old jewelry box or is it maybe its hidden somewhere in my closet? I am really curious about this now. Every time I looked at the necklace, I remembered all those ugly arguments my family had and the troubles my family faced during my sister's teen pregnancy. And when I looked at the necklace, I sometimes thought, "Wow, I just have this because my sister didn't want it." Because of these feelings, I guess I should state that it didn't have sentimental value for me.

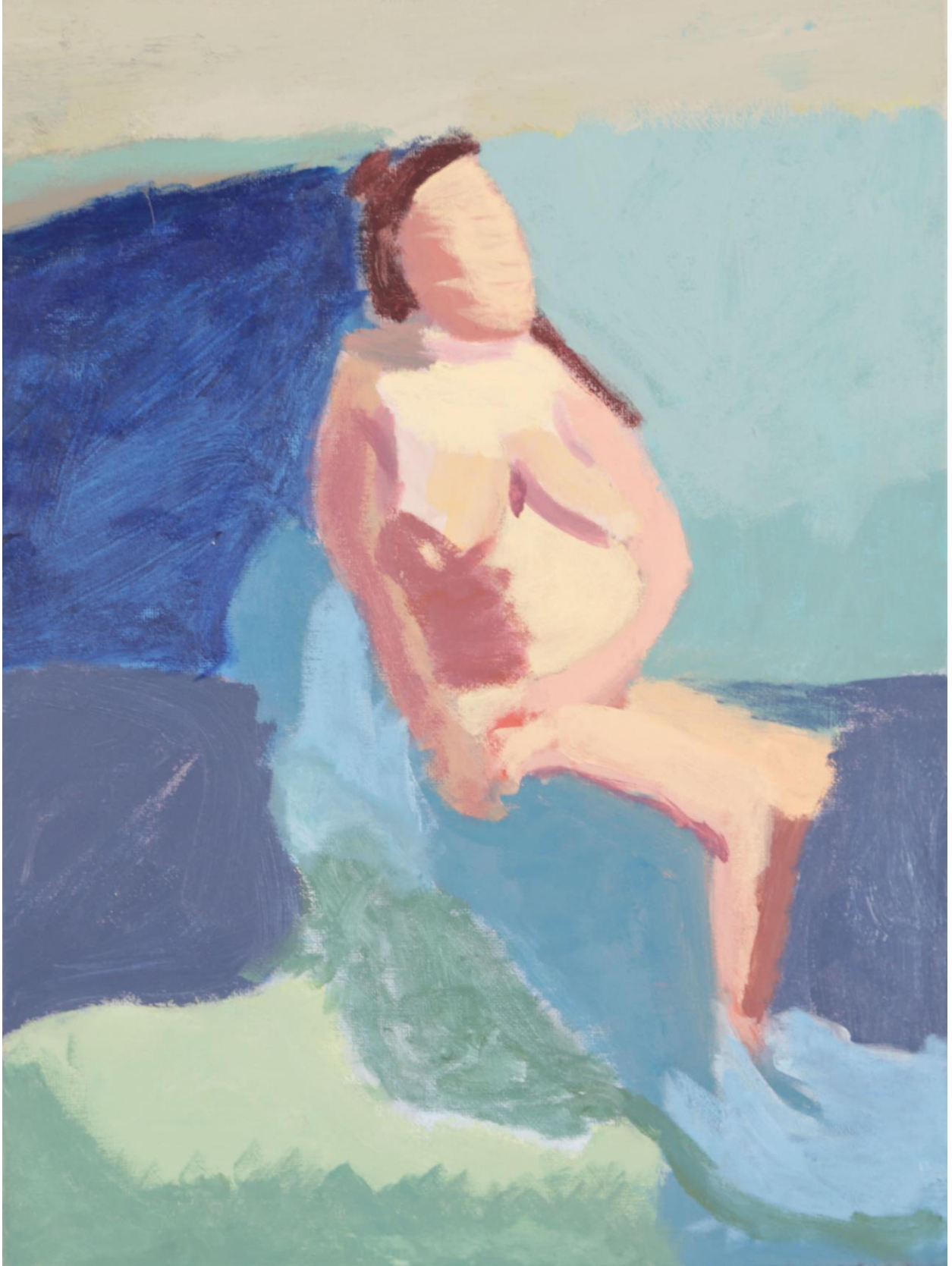
But on a happy note, I guess I am continuing the tradition of passing down jewelry to family members. When I was a young child, I had a pair of small gold earrings that are shaped like happy faces. And guess what? My sister has another baby who's six months old right now. Her name is Akemy. Akemy?! What! I have seen many different face expressions and awkward responses at family gatherings when my sister would state her name. Akemy is a Japanese

word. I guess I should mention that we are not Japanese. She choose that name because it stood out for her and she liked the meaning of it: bright and beautiful. While at the baby shower last spring, I decided to give this pair of happy face-shaped gold earrings to my sister with the hopes of one day when my niece gets older I will see them on her. Or maybe not. Maybe she will grow up to be a rebellious child who will just put it in a jewelry box and forget about them. Or maybe she will throw it somewhere in her drawers and then years later think "Where did I put those earrings that my aunt had given me?" This is already worrying me! Let's hope this doesn't happen. But when I look at those gold happy face earrings, I'm reminded of all those happy childhood memories spent running around in parks with kids from school and making sure my long hair didn't cover my ears so I could show them off. I hope one day Akemy grows up and creates new fun memories and continues this tradition that began when I was just a young girl.

Struggle

by Brittney Vermillion

As a young child I felt no one could fathom a bliss such as mine. The warmth of my mother's embrace; the unconditional approval of my father; the tingle the winter snow left upon my face as I basked in the glow of the afternoon sun. The perfection of it all might have been too much to bear if these moments had dared to weather the passing of time. The sting of my peers' disapproval and the banality of my father's half-hearted attention were the only truths in my lonely existence. Or so I thought, until a darkness overcame me in a magnitude previously inconceivable. The realization that one's fate is not in your hands was a burden I was not willing to accept. The grandness of the sprawling city enveloped my soul day and night. The bustle of my comrades throughout the daylight and the twinkle of our city lights could do nothing but transform agony into aspirations. The thirst for knowledge that overwhelmed me hastily expanded my horizons beyond those that besieged me. As if to undermine my own solidity and empowerment, I have come to entangle my dreams with another. Acting as one entity, we share this moment, in solace, to succumb to our fate in this existence that we could never truly control.



Nude Woman by Albeirys Francisco, Acrylic on Canvas

Caligula's Soliloquy

A Place in History

by Andre Amorim

Have you ever wondered what it would be like to be a God—to have crowds of people who adore and worship you bow at your feet—to have these very same people die for you and in honor of your name—to look around you and know everyone fears you—wants what you have—idolizes you? I should know, I live it.

Has the glimpse of your silhouette ever struck fear into the heart of the most valiant men; have you ever been so close to someone you can hear their thoughts—feel the heat rise from their skin, and evaporate into the air—sense each bead of salty sweat roll down the side of their cheek as if it were rolling down the side of yours—whispered the words of death into their ear and watch the blood slowly drain from their visage? Have you ever heard someone scream in such agony at the misfortune of their terrible existence—what a pleasure!—you had to prolong their misery by twisting the knife just enough to hear it turning in their spine as a child would do to their favorite wind-up toy; a metaphorical knife, of course! Have you ever gently slid a blade against someone's skin, watching as the bits of dead skin cells flaked off of them as it would perfectly cooked fish; have you ever made someone feel they were dying? Have you ever been labeled a murderer? I should know, I have.

I am what I label myself to be, not what they wish to perceive me as. These vultures devour any scrap of spoiled meat thrown their way; they never cease to amaze me. They slander and sully the great name of Gaius Caesar Germanicus—of Caligula. Who are they now? Where are they now? They are no one and no one is dead. To the ears of many, including “no one,” that wouldn't make much sense. Nevertheless, no one—or everyone—of those vultures is dead and buried. With these “little boots” I dance upon their graves and ask their family to join me and do the same. Not as a sign or display of power, but as a commemoration to the ignorance of their child! Oh, but by doing this, my toga will slip and I will reveal to the world a little more of myself than I wish to. The eggs of those who have but just left this world have not yet hatched, but this will give them purpose. With each day that passes by, their hatred for me grows like a sapling and branches out to other parts of the city, spreading this incessant shade of vengeance and anger. Let them hate me so long as they fear me.

As much as I'd like to believe these wretched followers still have faith in me, I cannot muster the strength to do so. My own sisters and my brother-in-law conspired against me—

their brother—their dear, little Caligula! You would not think my acts to be an overreaction if you were in my position, would you? Could you? No, I'm being foolish! I know you wouldn't, my sweet pulchritude, Drusilla. Oh, how I loathe the abhorrent Pluto for ripping you from my arms for this lifetime! You wouldn't scorn me for exiling our sisters and having our brother-in-law slain! After all, they did go against me. They deemed me "unworthy" to rule and believed I was coming "unhinged" and thought it was disastrous for me to continue ruling. I even had the hapless Gemellus relieved of the burden of ruling over such an ungrateful grouping of worthless savages known as the people of Rome. In the end, it is I who bears this burden on my shoulders, as the Christian god bore the cross of death upon his back.

Since you've passed, I've been unable to satiate the need my body has for yours. I've invited countless senators and their wives to have dinner with me. I'd take the wife of my choosing to bed with me, but still, the warmth of her thighs would not thaw away the frigid rime which has hardened over my heart. These senators' wives pale in comparison to you; they are the shadow the candle casts when a hand is placed over its light, but you are the *light*—the heat. The taste of you inside my mouth remains and it will never go away. I should have gone in your place, but my sickness was not able to put out the fire of my soul.

This sickness which plagued me for a month—this "fever of the brain"—seems to have had a positive effect on me; with its departure, revelations have come to me in the form of dreams and insufferable headaches. In these dreams, death is all around me, like a cloud of smoke. It envelopes my being. I become death; I become the plagues; I become the floods; I become the swords; I become the men; and I become the fire; I even become the lack of food! In these dreams, people are crying, mourning the deaths of loved ones—growing fearful of the Cimmerian shade that is death. They try to forget about it, but they cannot force it out of their lives. Death is immortal. When I awake from these dreams and when these headaches pass, I am in a state of euphoria. If I were to become death, I would never die. My name would live on long after I'm gone. That, my dear Drusilla, is a thing of splendor! I reveal my plan only to you, for you are already lost, but you can rest easy knowing my name will be given a proper place in history!

Purpose

by John Manuel Gomez

Ralph awoke from a slumber upon a field of a rye. He slowly opened his eyes and observed the stems of the surrounding foliage invading his field of vision. He began to orientate himself, pushing himself up with his hands and then getting onto his knees before positioning his feet against the ground one at a time. He focused on his arms, taking note of his armor and chainmail underneath. After a few deliberate blinks to clear his vision, Ralph gazed at his environment. Not a single tree was in sight. He was in a flat field of rye expanding beyond the horizon in every direction. He looked down, focusing on his feet. He noticed his iron helmet nearby, observing the reflected shimmer of orange light that occupied the sky. Then, after much brooding, Ralph's memories became clear. A sword had been lunged through his chest, rendering him unconscious.

Ralph looked at his chest and noted the puncture through his armor. It appeared the wound had sewn itself shut nonetheless. No blood was present anywhere. Ralph's eyelids parted wide to produce a look of disbelief. He sensed sweat run in rivulets along his sideburns. He did not recognize where he was. He had not fallen here, he knew that much. He inhaled deeply, closed his eyes, and focused his attention to the ambience. The leaves emulated the sound of waves crashing onto shore.

"Hello Ralph," said a voice calmly. Ralph's eyes immediately popped open and he tossed out a slight cough of surprise. Before him stood a black bear. Its fur was black as granite with white areas surrounding its hands and feet. Carrying a staff, the Bear glared with eyes that never seemed to blink. Ralph lowered his eyebrows and looked at the being before him with the piercing glance of a skeptic.

"Where'd you come from?" squawked Ralph.

"From below. I took the stairs," said the Bear nonchalantly.

"From below? Who are you?" asked Ralph.

"Death Bear," said the Bear. He raised his foot to present an insignia of skull-and-crossbones once hidden underneath the palm.

"Death Bear?" asked Ralph.

"Yeah, yeah, I was an unreleased Care Bear. Imagine how parents would react to their kids playing with a teddy bear representing death," said the Bear critically. Ralph stood quiet for

a moment. He felt a slight anxiety at the thought, the thought that his understanding of reality was under question. His world was crumbling before him. He was bewildered.

"What're you here for?" asked Ralph.

"Well, what do you think I'm here for?" asked the Bear.

"I've died."

"No, you can't die. What's the last thing you remember?"

"I died in battle—I believe."

"No, you were lost."

"Lost?"

"Yes, lost. Riddle me this Ralph, what do you remember before your death—what about life before the war?"

"I—recall nothing."

"It's not your fault, you're only capable of remembering your last use."

"My last use? I am a soldier of God!" yelled Ralph.

"Yeah, that's cool—know why you're here?"

"No."

"You're a lost piece."

"A lost piece?" asked Ralph.

"Yes, lost. The games can't continue with your absence."

"Okay, I have absolutely no idea what you're speaking of. What is going on?" asked Ralph apprehensively.

"Welcome to the purgatory for lost toys."

"Lost toys!? What do you mean lost toys?" said Ralph rather perplexed.

"Okay. You're a pawn. Have you heard of Chess? Anyway, you're a piece to a game. Since you've been lost, the game can no longer continue. Meaning you've lost your purpose. That's where I come in, see? I can grant you two things," said the Bear. After a pause the Bear continued, "I can either grant you a new purpose to fulfill a duty you weren't intended for, or you can be broken and spend your eternity with all the other broken toys that have no use."

"Is that much of a choice?" asked Ralph rhetorically.

"Yes, yes it is. Realize your new purpose might not make you as content as your intended purpose." Said the Bear warily.

"Existence is better than nonexistence."

"Very well," said the Bear, smacking his staff onto the earth.

She was sitting up in bed, knees to chest, giving herself a pedicure with red varnish. After finishing the final coat, she scurried through a drawer within her nightstand to look for toe separators. She took out a pair and noticed on one set that a separator stub was missing. She placed her feet precariously on the floor and began to walk on her heels toward the bathroom. She was looking for toilet paper to crumple up and place between the toes where the missing stub belonged. When she entered the bathroom she noticed the toilet paper roll was empty and let out a sigh. She began to make her way back to her bedroom. While traversing the carpet floor she felt something cold scrape the arch of her foot. She stopped and looked down, and discovered a brass chess piece, a pawn, lying among the follicles of the carpet. She slowly bent her knees and reached for the piece, careful not to ruin her pedicure. She returned to her room with the piece in hand.

"Hm, this'll do," she said to herself.

Free at Last

by Shirley Cruz

Listen man, it's hard in these streets. We're born, we die, it's inevitable, it's the cycle of life. I see it happen every single freaking day. Only the strong survive out here. One day a human decides to move and you and your family decide to hide in their furniture. Before you know it you have a new home, but it doesn't end there. This life is a constant struggle, it never gets any easier and it never ends. I thought I was one of the few that would make it out of this place. I come from a long line of survivors. Many of my relatives (including my father) lived a full life span, 705 days on average. My family has been leading this colony for years. I'm ashamed to say that I may have single-handedly ruined the family tradition. If I'm lucky, one of my offspring will carry on the family reputation.

Life's funny. You work your whole life, raise beautiful babies, for what? I was there to see all of my kids hatch. I taught them right from wrong. I taught them how to fend for themselves, everything I knew. I live by a few simple rules: you are only safe under the cover of darkness. You must avoid lingering around for too long; get in, get out, and hide. Simple enough, right?

If only I had taken my own advice. I really almost made it. 405 days on this earth and it all ended with a damn shoe. My father would be ashamed. My glorious legacy all put to an end in one swift movement, "SPLAT!" Just like that, I was reduced to mush on the ground. My biggest mistake was crossing paths with the lady human of the house. As soon as she caught sight of me, she let out a terrible, gut-wrenching scream, which I had only thought existed in tales that I had heard of involving others that met the same cruel end as I. Two of my other relatives were also slain in cold blood at the hands of a lady human: my uncle Tony and my cousin Lorenzo. Uncle Tony was doing his nightly food run, looking around on the stove for bits of old food, when the lady human struck. Seems someone else was in the mood for a late night snack too. One flick of a light switch and Uncle Tony's cover was blown. Whacked to death with a fuzzy bunny slipper. Lorenzo died at the hand of one of the braver lady humans, she simply squished him with her bare hands.

Lady humans are the most vile, deplorable creatures around. So vicious and heartless, they are willing to grab anything in sight and use it as a weapon for murder. They are relentless: shoes, pans, napkins, books, I've seen and heard it all. The absolute worst is when

they call the male humans in to do their dirty work for them. They just sit there and watch; it's disgusting.

I really don't understand why this woman feared me so much; she was 20 times my size. Humans clearly aren't very rational creatures. I still don't understand why they are the reigning species on this planet. They wouldn't survive a day living the way I've had to live. They're so weak it's disgusting. Such a shame. The only advantages they have are size... and that Raid spray that they use against my kind all of the time. Seriously, what's in that stuff? My friends and I can survive a nuclear war for crying out loud.

I'm really going to miss all of my kids. I won't ever get to hear all of those little sets of legs scurrying along; it's very sad. I'll miss my mates' antennae tickling mine every morning. I know she's strong enough to go on without me, but I sure will miss her. I'll miss the little pleasures in life. I'll miss the taste of soggy food left on dishes in the sink. I'll miss the smell of hot, rancid garbage on August afternoons. I'll miss running around the house freely when the humans aren't home. I'll miss eating crumbs off of their faces as they sleep. Most of all, I'll miss being able to put fear into their wretched little hearts.

I'm kind of glad that now I get to rest at last. No more constant fleeing. No more fighting for food and shelter every night. No more hiding in the shadows and desolate corners. Maybe now I'll get to enjoy the sunlight more and roam freely without a care in my heart.

Sandy

by Andrea Holguin

As I faced my old and cracked apartment window that I loathed so much, I feared and wondered how my parents were going to make it back home. The wind was going sixty mph and the never-ending lightning strikes made me feel like I was a part of one of those bone chilling horror films. The fact that the lights were also out resulted in having my Silky terrier follow my every step around my home. My parents had gone off to pick up my pregnant sister Mary from her job, and all I would see was water rising higher and higher outside. My sister worked at a local Dunkin Donuts and it was a miracle that the 24-hour store had decided to close early. The news that I had heard all throughout that week was about a big hurricane hitting the state later tonight. A super storm, some called it.

Earlier that day and before the electricity had gone out, I was watching what every New Jersey resident was watching: the news. They were showing footage about how NYC did not look like NYC anymore. For the first time, I did not believe what I was seeing with my eyes. Because of the serious warnings about the storm coming soon, there was not one human being on the streets. The taxis that would usually fill up the streets were gone. The music and the smell of hot dogs that would fill the air were no longer there. The stores were locked up and tape was now the new decor on many of their windows. Complete silence was taking over that city.

Fast forward and here I was, finally, relieved that I was seeing that white Ford Explorer parking. They arrived at the door and, by the look on their faces, they looked like they were ready to beat up someone. They were saturated in water but they arrived safely so that was all that mattered. Morning came and I jumped out of bed and rushed to push the curtains as far as it could go. It still looked like the night before; dark but the storm had finally calmed down. Large tree branches surrounded the streets. An electricity pole was down nearby and still not a soul outside. That morning my stomach was yearning for food so I went to the kitchen, took out some eggs, flour, and milk along with some other things and made some pancakes. I must have somehow added too much of one ingredient because the pancakes turned out to be way too thin. There was nothing else to make so there was nothing left to do but to still serve it for breakfast for everyone.

The rest of the day seemed as if someone had literally placed their finger on the clock to stop it. My phone was dead. There were no small batteries to fit the radio so listening to music

was not an option. All the dusty magazines that were placed on the shelf in my closet were already read multiple times. So what was left to do? We decided to eat, eat some more and then eat again. The next day, nothing changed.

When we heard that the grocery store had finally opened to the public, my father did not hesitate to get in his car and go. But on the way up the hill, his car stopped and did not want to go any further. It had run out of gas and I couldn't help but chuckle when I found out. *What else can go wrong?* I thought. The line to get gas was like waiting in line to get a celebrity's autograph. People did not care how long they had to wait. They wanted their gas. After a week, not only were cars finally out and about on the streets but so were people. Things were finally going back to normal and we got electricity back after a few days after the super storm, which was a dream come true for many.

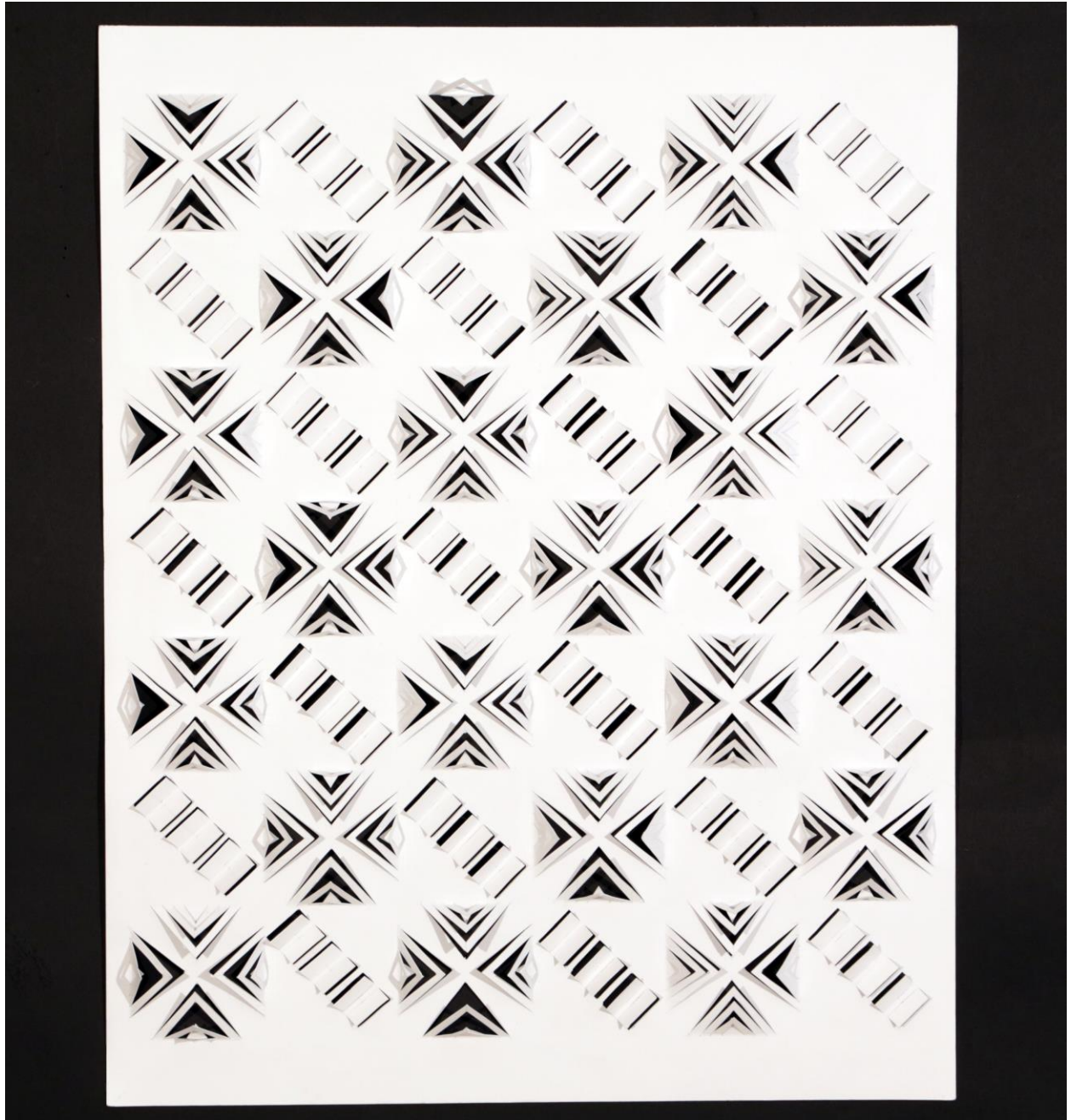
/Poetry/

Prescribed Duration
by Zaida A. Mohammed

Put my head on a block for you
Gave up my life for you
Shed my blood for you
Gave my unconditional love to you
Put my honorable-faith in you
All because I was fond of you.

Your lies,
cut like acid
Your betrayal,
stabbed like a dagger
Your artificial emotions, entrapped,
like an innocent bird to a cage
Your invisible disguise, like a barrier,
of gloomy clouds in the sky
Your imitation of the honest,
survived temporarily
Your sneaky and fatal propaganda,
surfaced like water in the ocean
Your love,
as fake as a puppet
All because you were biased and barbed.

No regrets, no miscalculations
Precisely experience and enlightenment
A prescribed path,
Executed.



3D by Nancy Guerrero

Love

by Zaida A. Mohammed

A feeling of emotion
at times speechless
Yet again unexplainable
shared between a pair.
At times, there are
moments of joy
Then there are moments of sorrow.

A feeling of in-separation
a combination of
Heart, soul and body
some last for days
Others last a lifetime.

As Hollering and Taunting Ocean Surfs

by Jose Mateo Sanchez-Palma

As hollering and taunting ocean surfs
silence the gasping breadths of fluttering nations,
as winds formulate beings with color pencils of life
and sentinel trees forest humanity
like mothers cradle their children,
as mountains' silhouettes sleep on our plains,
as our world exercises and sweats out our very fog
on rainy days,
as existence's muscles burn
yet always succeed to mold
into form beyond,
and winter cloaks our summers
and galaxies feast on planets
and rivers stubbornly walk their journeys,
I can only marvel...

First Born
by Benny Montalvo

In need of a phone call
She knocked on my door
And as I opened it
My tongue fell to the floor
She spoke to her mother
Who urged her to go home
I offered to walk her
So she wouldn't go alone
We got to know each other
As time went on
And after 8 years
In the oven was a bun
I had to be responsible
I could no longer run wild
I had to grow up quickly
I was no longer a child
With my hand on her belly
An oath I did take
To never ever make you
A promise I would break
Nine months went by
And yes it was time
For you to see the world
From the first time
I held you in my arms
And looked into your eyes
With me you found comfort
And ended your cries
It was then that I knew
I had gone farther

I am not just a man now
I am a Father



HCCC Winter Horse by Edwin Collazos watercolor on paper

Hello, Old Friend
by Lori McElrone

Hello, Old Friend, we meet again;
How long has it been since we spoke?
How long has it been since you left me in pain?
How long did it take to provoke,
In you, Old Friend, the need to come by,
Interested in how I have coped?
In your mind, did you think that I'd have cried?
In your mind, did you think I'd have moped?
Just calm down, Old Friend, I have not been bad, I mean,
Just lingering on my life and the notes,
Justly, you've left quietly placed in on my green
Jagged mailbox, but not a meaning they spoke.
Know this, Old Friend, you have come and gone,
Keeping score of the things th
at we broke,
Killed promises, maybe a wish and then maybe, some,
Knowing it will be impossible to cope. But,
Listen then, Old Friend, this is the deal,
Let's rebuild all the time that we hoped,
Let's rebuild all our wishes, and all that we feel,
Like the story written in that note.

Wake Up Again
by Lori McElrone

It's difficult when it is all going wrong,
And when everyone you know has come and gone.
When all that you grew up with have up and died,
And all the dreams you had have not survived.

It's difficult understanding why the pain is still there
When you thought you have coped and even have cared.
It's definitely hard to try and explain
When all whom you've spoken to have been in disdain.

It's disappointing when the day becomes a slippery slope,
Broke this, lost that, had to hear a mean, rude joke.
When we feel like all joy coming forth has evaded
the track it should follow, so our heart is satiated.

But you'll have to make do with what little you have;
And maybe some memories hold onto or grab.
Because it may seem futile now that you feel lost.
In the end it will be meaningful, and well worth the cost.

Wake up and see the world, the way that it was meant!
And each moment you experience must be lovingly spent.
Worry not that the heartache will overpower your smile
Because all this suffering and pain will last but a while.

Overcoming
by Jose Mateo Sanchez-Palma

Fear not
the oppressing microwavable walls
of failure,
see not yourself
in the eye of darkness' hurricane
but begin to comprehend
your presence
as the engaging light of waking,
like the perpetual
entrance of your senses
penetrating your mornings.
It's the awakening of courage,
the ability of your determined
blood-stained failing muscles in war
forever straining,
and it is the overall
surrendering to eternal
vengeance on death,
as you painfully
claw through inch after inch
towards death,
like all who eventually
fall victim to the varied poison of time,
you have died,
but emerged
from universally expanding moving mountains
of glory,
into victoriously ecstatic podiums
of immortal and untouched

territory.
You see,
now you
like rivers and trees
winds and breeze
humanity and species,
with rock climbing grips
quench to existence's eternal trip,
you have surpassed,
similar to the way bullets pierce flesh
but rather in the way love
like floods spilling through solids
invades hearts at sleeping rest,
you have piously conquered
the strangling and debilitating
shadow of fear.
Let the chamber doors
of possibility cringe methodically
as they magically
allow you in,
and be open.
For you have,
pawed stubbornly forward,
showed no defeat in soul,
disregarded injury and outcome,
you have,
conducted volatile emotions of
fast flowing rivers,
with slow simmering ponds,
interlocked aged and hardened lands,
segregated tumultuous and troubled skies
in the way sculptors beat their genius,

into a perfect and dazzling masterpiece
of bursting and thrusting spartan-ly forward,
marble of unrelentless action,
you have overcome and there can be nothing nobler
so leap in the example of planes swallowed by skies
and escape your concentration camp of fear,
here is the essence of change,
should one need it...



Summer Butterfly by Edwin Collazos, acrylic

Two to Tango
by Crystal Santana

It takes two of us to tango, bliss sweeter a bit better bitter than of Haitian mangos,
as hatred dangles around the neck with weight the body could not handle.
It takes two to bring up false interpretation disguised as lies and alibis,
...the woman sighs as the woman's cries when the two intermingle with thought and voice
lingers on...
to an infinite shackle sprains from nowhere,
a diligent anthem spangles...I don't care.
do NOT ever give a rat's ass, or sell your buttocks meant fat ass,
to please the other mate, the other soul trolling along with your fate
it takes two
it takes one plus one
three minus one,
see the sinus come, the silent ones ...can usually bring the violent numbs
of an unforgettable, persistently incredible, most likely now regrettable
tangoing of the two, according to metaphysics, you've allowed me now to you.
face the music, taste the ruins, embrace arms of which let you in...
the dancehall that both led a deep communication, a collaboration of two lost souls in a world
full of misinterpretation.
it takes two to make a thing go right,
it takes two to make an out-of-sight,
singing songs with kryptonite voices scorching all your might,
it takes two to tango, but are you willing to bleed through scars from fights?
it makes the two of us shining in a brilliant light so bright, despise the spite,
caress my hands and entwined the dance, where the moments feel so right,
despise the spite,
if we tango alright.

The Tree
by Joshua Thomas

What would the wistful sage impart?
A seed of recognition—
That those born anchored to the soil,
although uncoupled since, remain akin?
Of vessels tethered once in course—
parted by the undulating flow of season
Would the waning asterisks aid in their return,
Or are they bound to tides recurring?
Were the asters dared not sow in past,
Meant to yield the bloom in late,
Or must we languish in the squandered years
and solely reap regret?

My Community
by Giovanni Rentas

All I hear is
Screaming sirens
Metal clashing
From the potentials
Being chained to
Corner hydrants
Selling lost
Time in
Nano bags
Content with
Walking through life
In blue contrast
Minds holding holes
From bullet blasts
Watch the diamonds
Of ideas spill through
Hopeless scenes
Making its way down
Sewers draining dreams
Echoing zzzz"ss
Is what keeps us deaf
to organized schemes

The Other Side
by Giovanni Rentas

I've walked over
Bridges
With the sun
Shining
Every paint brush
Of gold it Had
With my head
Leaning
Into Hands
Drowning my eyes into
The darkness of its past
Keep your head up...

Engraved Pavements
by Giovanni Rentas

At teens
Filthy jeans
Padded knees
Cementing city scenes.
Days off never passed through these genes.
Had high hopes for
Architect dreams
But never finalized the blueprint
'cause of love for her rice and beans
And her child's cries and screams.
But Love is never what it seems.
Dreams never seasoned
To springs.
Stuck at teens

With
SAME
jeans
SAME
Padded knees
Cementing city scenes

The Wings At My Window
by Giovanni Rentas

The fire in its eyes
burns a path of light
Through the cracks
of the darkest slum.
It's blacker than the ripest plum
It values the crustiest crumb.
Still it can fly
The coldest sky
towards the sun...



Tyra Cyborg by Prosper Parabu

A Book of Poetry
by Michelle Diaz

I. To my light

Come to the dark, see what's inside
Come see all the things, I try hard to hide.
Will you promise...with those vows...to abide....
When I fall from the light, and from your company I shied
To bear not the part where the starlight has died.
And though never tears, inside I have cried.
From the moment I once was, and those I have vied.
You must desperately know, oh dear, I have tried.
This blood on my hands...it sticks...it has dried.
You will know my dark secret, inside lies no *fide*.
But you do not understand...my hands...they are tied.
See that they tremble....deeply I sighed.
If I could bear the light, please know that I'd
But my heart threatens also, from all these things so denied.
I ask of one thing, please to me, stay beside.
The crook of soul is aching, along the great divide.
Do not think less of anything...or the love that you provide.
I ask of yet another thing, as my words collide....
Do not defeat me wrong...of you...I've so relied....
And so lo! The sorrow...you see the whither of my pride....
As I sit in solemn stoic...I see...with myself I sit beside.
And so in my judgment, I have so misapplied....
You, creature of the light...I beg of you...be my guide?

II. To a hurt love

You who came to me with uncertain heart,
A small thought of union, and another to tear apart.
A whispered promise brought forth a thirst of yearning,

of something never had, but had begun it's burning.
Another word exchanged to expel the fear,
That one day among us both treachery will appear.
But an orchid among the roses, a masterpiece to behold,
Did whisper back a promise, those words needed to be told:
"A masterpiece becomes the greater when it has borne a mark,
And though I know it clouds your mind, I will keep you from the dark.
I trust in you in a way no words can ever tell.
Because I cannot change the fact I fell under your spell."

III. To one whom I foolishly loved
Let us think a moment on the matter of the heart
One to grow fondly, and another to grow apart.
Ere the distance, yet dash the way
Let the hope dull calm, not fade
And in the midst of the darkest night cold
I call for my jolly sailor bold.
Come and heed me, feel my strife,
because in this moment of my life...
I miss thee dear and ever so,
though in the moment, I prayed you'd go.
You've wounded me, and know not why
And explain to you, I did not try
Let us dwell a moment on what lies within this heart
A thought to grow fonder and strength to grow apart
And Lo! the distance, yet dash the way.
And in the murky night I pray:
I am not perfect, I know this so
And still the thought of them to go...
It would destroy me and I'd cry
I know I am not enough but I-...
-I- Will not hold a bond that stands

On pillars of salt and that of sand
When I add the water and wade the hold
And I know in the end I'd fold
And in the murky night I pray
To give me the strength to leave or stay
The happiness would destroy me so
But if it is, at least I'll know
That though I was not enough you see-
They were always enough for me.



Cloudy Day by Melissa Vasquez