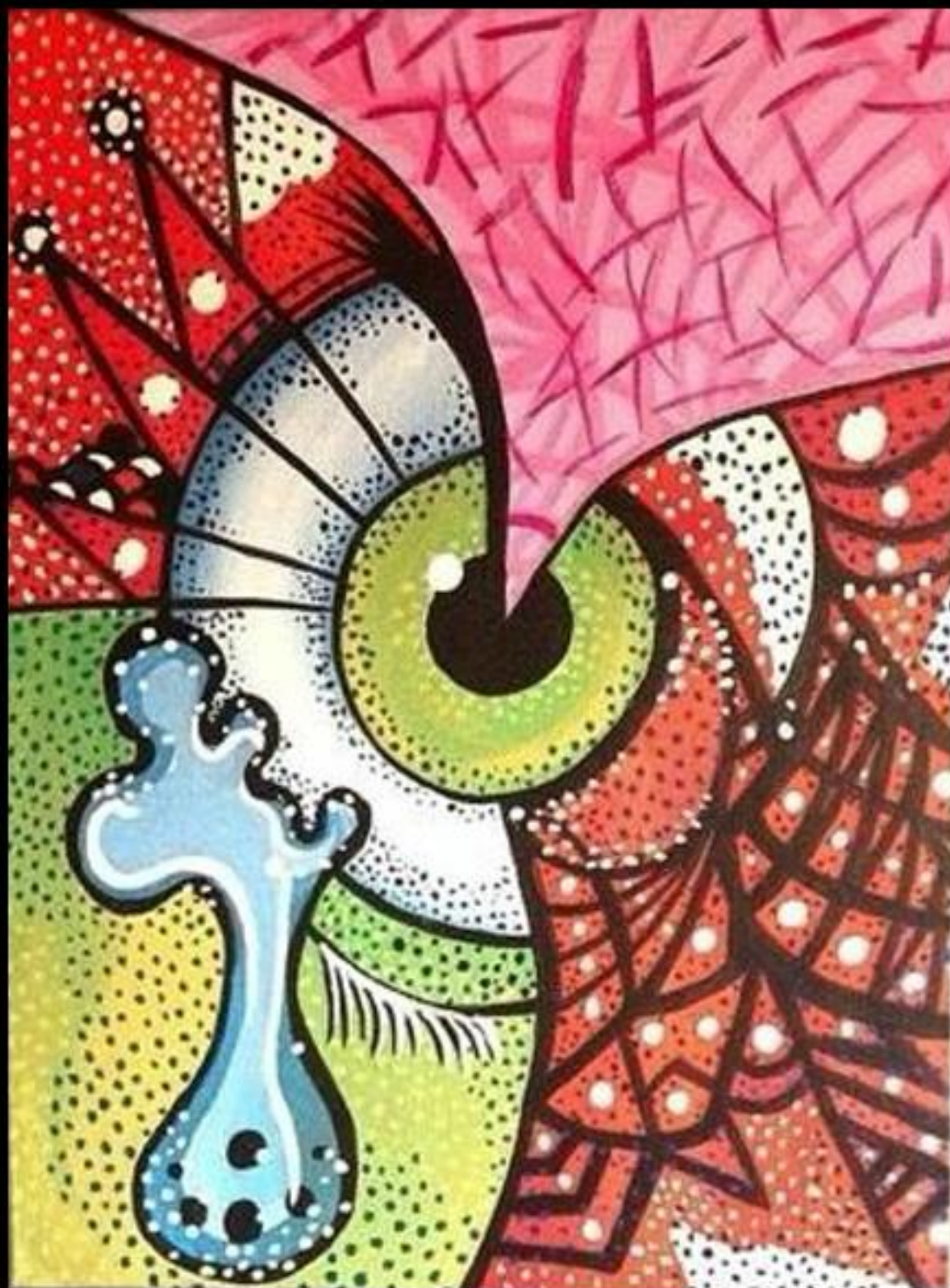


CROSSROADS



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

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

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***Crossroads* accepts submissions of creative writing and artwork on a rolling basis. Send submissions to crossroads@hccc.edu.**

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My *Hijab*, My Identity

by Nada Saleh

“Do you shower in that?” “Are you forced to wear it?” “Are you oppressed?” Last, but not least, the one question that irks me the most, “Are you bald?” Seriously? Don’t people see the slight bulge of hair under my headscarf? These were some of the frequent questions I was asked concerning my *hijab* during my high school years. For some who may not know, *hijab* is a veil or a headscarf many Muslim women wear. *Hijab* also means “covering,” in which women wear loose-fitting clothes. At a young age, I proudly chose to wear the *hijab*. However, I did not understand the full meaning behind the *hijab* until I was older, during my teen years. Thus, I saw the *hijab*, not just as a piece of cloth on my head, but a symbol of modesty, liberation, and morality that exemplifies my identity.

Undoubtedly, the *hijab* became an important part of my life. I admire and appreciate the *hijab* because it allows me to be judged on my intellect rather than my curves. I wear the *hijab* purposefully to preserve my modesty and to get respect. I do not only wear the *hijab* because God commanded me to, but because I want to be seen as a human being with a brain. Therefore, people are forced to judge me by my actions and words rather than by whether or not I am “good looking” or “pleasing” to their eyes. I do not follow the idea, “If you’ve got it, flaunt it,” meaning that if a woman has a big bottom, she would be considered “beautiful” if she flaunts it. My body is not an adornment to be put on display. I respect myself and my body. Hence, the *hijab* grants me the power to not demean my body in order to gain acceptance in society.

Contrary to popular belief, *hijab* has not oppressed me whatsoever, nor did it make me feel inferior to other women. How is it oppressive if I choose to cover up? The *hijab* has, in fact, liberated me. I am not forced, or in other words imprisoned, to fall under society’s expectations of me, to have the perfect body or image, nor am I a pawn of society. In a world that objectifies women, the *hijab* gives me a sense of freedom to regard my body as my own concern and to attain personal liberty. Society claims to have elevated women by allowing them to expose their bodies, but this has truly degraded them. It is clear that women are mostly used in selling almost everything from cosmetics to cars. Women are also sexually used in

many advertisements, commercials, and music videos. These women are perceived as objects and are valued solely for their “perfect” bodies. This objectification is most certainly a form of oppression. It is ridiculous to say a woman’s worth is rated according to her looks and the clothing she wears. Therefore, the *hijab* leaves no room for objectification and highlights what is within a woman, which is much more significant than her physical appearance. My body is for myself. If I choose to cover it, it is no one’s business. With the hijab on and being modestly dressed, I find that people, particularly men, tend to be more respectful towards me. I feel liberated and empowered, not because I look “sexy” or “attractive,” but because my intelligence, my character, and my actions are the focal points by which others are enforced to perceive me. This is the utmost true liberation.

Furthermore, *hijab* has not only made me feel liberated and modest, but it reminds me of who I am and what I represent: Islam. I am mindful of my actions; I am aware that my interaction with other people will help reinforce and shape their opinions and misconceptions about Islam, especially the *hijab*. I am reminded to follow the wondrous attributes of an Islamic woman: to be modest, pious, and respectful. I am constantly reminded of the great purpose in my life, which is to live a fulfilling life in the obedience of God. I feel confident and comfortable to conceal my body, so my inner qualities of knowledge, wisdom, and faith can shine through.

All things considered, my *hijab* is not an on-again, off-again kind of relationship; it is a commitment. Behind this *hijab*, there is a woman against following the “rules” of society’s expectations, a system that actually reduces and demeans women. I will not lose my value and individuality because society told me I’m “ugly” or I’m “oppressed.” *Hijab* lets me feel comfortable in my own skin; I feel free to walk down the streets, not worrying about whether or not my body is appealing to others. I would never consider taking it off. Overall, hijab raises me in society by desexualizing and individualizing me. No, I do not wear it in the shower, nor do I sleep with it on. Fortunately, it isn’t glued or nailed to my head. Yes, I do have hair under this hijab, and it’s blue, or is it?

Beast

By Priscilla Cruz

You make me sick with the way you think
You act like the Alpha male of a pack
Treating your pack with respect and reign over them with an iron fist
When it comes to your mate you use and abuse her
Like the male lions behave in their prides
She provides a meal and once she tries to enjoy it you hurt her
Treated like a king by the one that loves you
Yet she is treated like a peasant
When she should be treated like a queen put on the highest pedestal
You're no king or Alpha male
You're a monster and all you deserve is to be alone
Like the beast in the castle you shall be alone and remain a beast
Until you learn to stop abusing the beauty that once loved you
Or forever remain a beast with no beauty or pack to love a beast like you

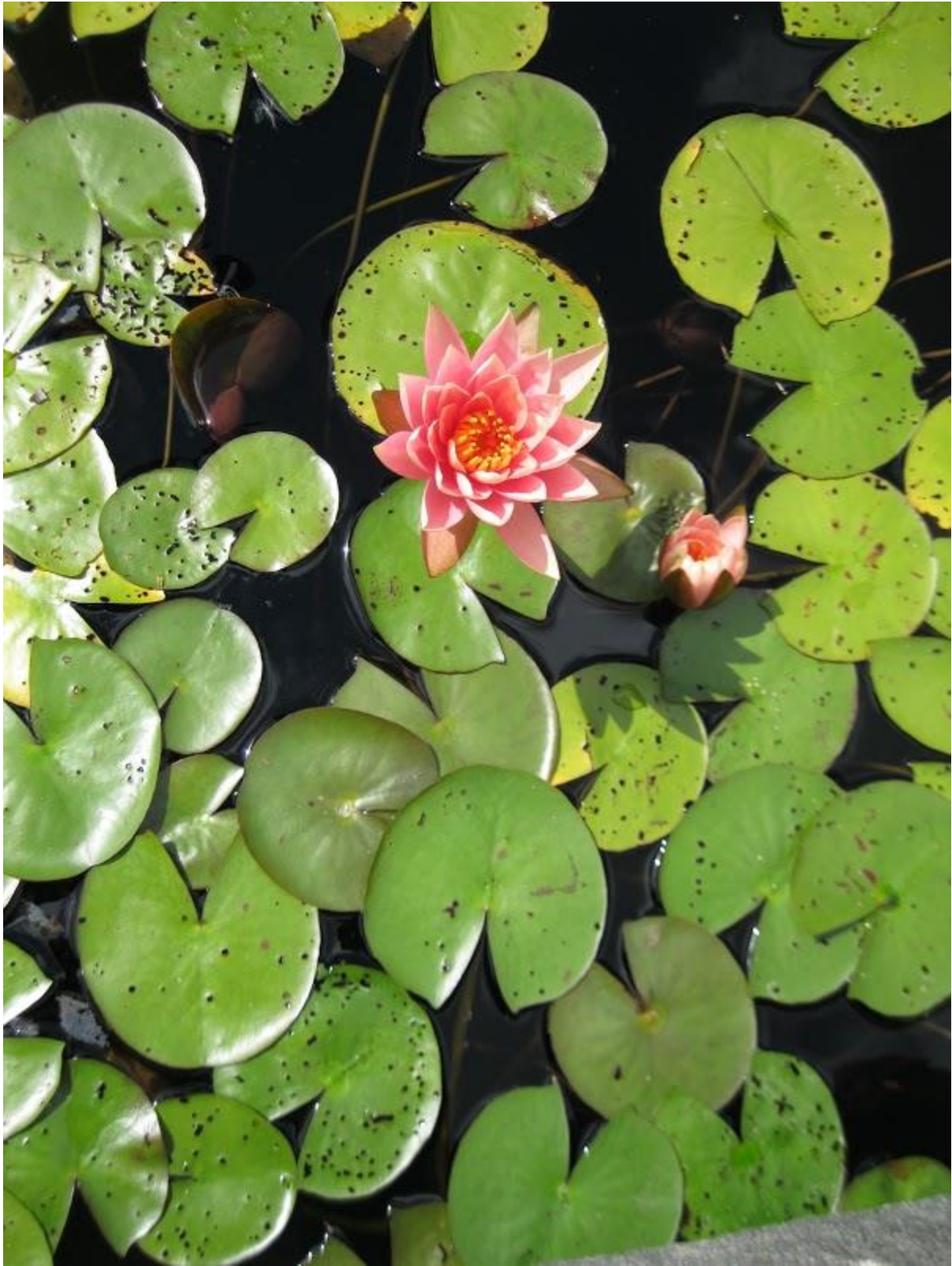


Image by Melissa "Missy Lee" Vasquez

Refraction

by Gabriele Rosado

Winner of the 2014 HCCC Theater Arts Playwriting Award

TIME: The dead of night.

PLACE: The Cathedral Parkway-110th Street southbound platform, empty and littered. Fare control turnstiles are situated center stage. A wooden bench sits stage left. A trashcan sits on stage right. Graffiti-trashed posters line the walls above the bench: a Museum of Modern Art poster promoting Akira Kurosawa's "Yojimbo" and the television series "Orphan Black."

An eerie atmospheric purple glow permeates the platform from a skylight from the street above along with slivers of gold light from the subway lights. An electronic marquee sign hangs above on stage left, facing stage right.

CHARACTERS:

WOMAN A: Late 20s, young urban professional. Wears a classic Burberry trench coat and pink business suit underneath. Has a small tattoo on her left hand between thumb and index finger.

WOMAN B: Late 20s, alternative type. Camouflage cargo pants, black jacket, knit hat.

HOMELESS WOMAN: Late 40s-Early 50s. Dressed in rags. Also has a small tattoo on her left hand between thumb and index finger.

NOTE: Although the play literally takes place on a subway platform, the characters enter and interact within a netherworld.

(The Cathedral Parkway-110th Street southbound platform.

WOMAN A enters from the fare control turnstiles. She sits on the bench, pulls a book out of her purse, and begins reading.)

P.A. ANNOUNCEMENT

Ladies and gentlemen, we are delayed because of train traffic. We apologize for any inconvenience... *(Announcement fades out.)*

(WOMAN B enters from the turnstiles. She walks past WOMAN A and stands a slight distance away further down the platform.)

WOMAN B

Hey...would you happen to have the time?

WOMAN A

(Lifts arm up in mid-air, tilts wristwatch to WOMAN B.) It's about midnight or so...

WOMAN B

(Walks to arm, Looks at wristwatch.) Damn...I missed the last train, didn't I?

WOMAN A

I wouldn't know. The next one isn't coming until twenty minutes. *(Points up to electronic marquee sign. Pause.)* Anyways, it's still early.

WOMAN B

(Walks back to prior spot.) For you. Obviously, the night is still young...and ghosts abound the urban jungle.

(WOMAN A glances at WOMAN B, desires to respond, but figures it best to return to her book.)

WOMAN B

You smell horrible.

WOMAN A

(Looks up from book.) Excuse me?

WOMAN B

You smell like cum.

WOMAN A

(Pause.) You must have some sort of olfactory malfunction. I suggest you see a specialist. There are plenty of good ones around.

WOMAN B

No, I don't think there's anything wrong with my nose, thank you. *(Pause.)* I think I know what cum smells like.

WOMAN A

(Exasperated.) Excuse me, I would greatly appreciate it if you could drop this topic.

WOMAN B

Sure...but the topic wouldn't have come up if you would've remembered to have taken a shower before you left. You think your odor is perfuming the city?

WOMAN A

(Drops book and rises from bench.) SHUT THE FUCK UP! JUST WHO THE FUCK ARE YOU?!

WOMAN B

(Pause.) No one of great importance...



Image by Kelby and Kelvin Vera

(Silence. WOMAN A proceeds to sit down, but stands back up.)

WOMAN A

You said...I should've showered before I left. *(Pause.)* Left from where?

WOMAN B

I don't know...you tell me.

(WOMAN A walks to the end of the platform. She paces about nervously.)

WOMAN B

(Walks over to the bench and sits.) Well...that was one hell of a party. *(Looks over at WOMAN A, who stares back.)* Eh? You were a *beast* with the guys...and not to mention with the pretty young things.

WOMAN A

What?

WOMAN B

Don't act stupid...those pretty young girls. You were all over them. *(Pause.)* Those girls definitely got a crash course in "Getting Fucked by an Experienced Woman 101."

WOMAN A

(Long pause.) Who are you? Some demented stalker?

WOMAN B

Do you really want to know?

(WOMAN A slowly turns to WOMAN B. She braces herself for the answer and nods her head.)

WOMAN B

(Turns around and points to "Yojimbo" poster.) Yojimbo.

WOMAN A

What?

WOMAN B

Yojimbo... means "bodyguard" in Japanese.

WOMAN A

(Scoffs.) You're far from a bodyguard. *(Pause.)* What's your real name?

WOMAN B

The same as yours.

WOMAN A

Liar.

(WOMAN B ignores WOMAN A's comment. Silence.)

WOMAN B

Does he know?

WOMAN A

(Alarmed, but attempts to maintain calm.) I don't know what you're talking about.

WOMAN B

Yes you do, you little bitch. *(Pause.)* Your husband.

(WOMAN A restrains her growing anger. She frantically looks around the platform for any other living soul. HOMELESS WOMAN enters from the automatic door next

to the turnstiles. She walks over to a garbage can and begins rummaging through it.)

WOMAN A

Excuse me? Miss? Hello?

(HOMELESS WOMAN turns around and acknowledges WOMAN A.)

WOMAN A

Would you happen to know if the buses are running tonight? What about the cabs?

HOMELESS WOMAN

No, the cab drivers are still on strike. And now those bus drivers are gettin' in on it too...

WOMAN A

Fuck...I thought that'd end by tonight. *(Steps closer to HOMELESS WOMAN.)* Do you think the trains are gonna shut down as well?

P.A. ANNOUNCEMENT

Ladies and gentlemen, we are delayed because of train traffic. We apologize for any inconvenience... *(Fades out.)*

HOMELESS WOMAN

Well...there's your answer. Looks like you're gonna have to wait.

(HOMELESS WOMAN returns to the trashcan and continues digging. WOMAN A reluctantly sits on the bench with WOMAN B.)

HOMELESS WOMAN

Ha-HA! *(Startles WOMAN A and WOMAN B. HOMELESS WOMAN triumphantly holds a soiled framed photograph in her hands, arms stretched upwards.)*

(WOMAN A slowly approaches HOMELESS WOMAN, eager to see the found object.)

HOMELESS WOMAN

I found my husband! *(Looks at the photograph closely. Wipes the glass and hugs it close to her chest.)* Wasn't he handsome? *(Turns and shows the photo to Woman A.)*

WOMAN A

(Long pause. Cautiously.) That man...is my husband.

HOMELESS WOMAN

(Laughs.) Honey, get some fresh air...

WOMAN A

I understand your life has probably cost you your sanity but -

HOMELESS WOMAN

I AIN'T CRAZY! I threw this photo away after I fucked everything up. *(Holds photo to chest. Begins stepping away from WOMAN A.)* When I lied...and lost it all... *(Pause.)* There are three things that can never be hidden: the sun, the moon...and the truth...

WOMAN A

(Notices the HOMELESS WOMAN's left hand.) What a coincidence... We, uh, have the same tattoo. *(Lifts her left hand to show HOMELESS WOMAN.)*

HOMELESS WOMAN

(Looks at her own hand and admires the tattoo work.) We got them done at Lucky's...by Greg...on November 15, 1997 at 5:36pm.

WOMAN A

But I was the only appointment that day.

HOMELESS WOMAN

Exactly... *(Pause.)* Because we are one.

WOMAN A

WHY CAN'T ANYONE LOCK YOU INSANE PEOPLE UP AT NIGHT?! *You (Points at HOMELESS WOMAN.)...and this psycho bitch! (Points to WOMAN B sitting on bench.)*

HOMELESS WOMAN

Psycho bitch? *(Looks up and down platform.)* Ain't nobody here.

WOMAN A

SHE'S RIGHT HERE! *(Runs to bench and gestures to WOMAN B, who sits calmly.)*

HOMELESS WOMAN

Child...you gone off that deep end...deeper than them train tracks! *(Turns around, walks to automatic door and stops. Pause.)* The past and future will collide... *(Shows photo of husband to WOMAN A.)* Nothing is written in stone... Change...

(HOMELESS WOMAN places her hand on the automatic door. It opens and she exits. WOMAN A chases after HOMELESS WOMAN but the door locks her in. WOMAN A watches her ascend the stairs to street level in despair. WOMAN B lounges on the bench, smiling.)

WOMAN B

At least you won't look so bad when you hit 50. *(Pause. WOMAN A looks at WOMAN B in disgust, but ignores her.)* So, hubby doesn't know that his picture perfect wife goes around fucking teenage girls? Tsk Tsk. *(Pause.)* Sounds like some crazy Simone de Beauvoir shit to me. *(Pause. Looks at WOMAN A.)* I hope you're not a teacher!

WOMAN A

(Angrily. Avoids WOMAN B's gaze.) I'm not!

WOMAN B

Obviously. You're involved in business, I can tell.

WOMAN A

If you knew that, then why did you ask me if I was a teacher?

WOMAN B

Just to bust your balls!

WOMAN A

(Silence. Stage whisper.) I didn't see you at the party. And I wasn't drunk either.

(WOMAN B sits forward.)

WOMAN A

(Looks at WOMAN B.) Who are you?

WOMAN B

Your other half.

WOMAN A

Can't you answer any fucking question seriously?!

WOMAN B

Why don't you ask yourself that very same question?

(WOMAN A grudgingly relents. Silence. WOMAN B patiently waits.)

WOMAN B

So what about the cuckold husband? Does he suspect? Doesn't he care where his precious, perfect trophy wife goes at night?

WOMAN A

I don't need some punk psychoanalyzing my marriage!

WOMAN B

Coming from the woman who can't even look a stranger in the face...

(Silence.)

WOMAN B

How long is the charade gonna go on? It's been five years. Then ten, fifteen, a lifetime... *(Beat.)* I thought you were in investment banking.

WOMAN A

I am.

WOMAN B

Oh really? Cause you looks like a bad actress trying to get on Broadway!

(WOMAN A charges and strikes WOMAN B. WOMAN B strikes back in defense. The lights flicker loudly, briefly casting them into darkness before turning on again. WOMAN A has grabbed WOMAN B by the collar of her jacket.)

WOMAN B

I dare you...throw me down into the tracks. Come on...*do it.*

(WOMAN A looks down to the tracks. She shoves WOMAN B to the ground, near the bench.)



Image by Kelby and Kelvin Vera

WOMAN A

You're not worth going to jail for.

(WOMAN A turns and cowers back to her opposite end of the platform. She stares at the electronic marquee sign. WOMAN B dusts herself off and fixes her wardrobe.)

WOMAN B

Are you worth anything?

WOMAN A

What?

WOMAN B

If I'm not worth going to jail for, is your life worth anything? The six figure paycheck, handsome husband, two cars, high-rise apartment, unsuspecting neighbors...

(Subway lights flicker again, making a crackling noise.)

WOMAN B

Are you in any pain?

WOMAN A

I feel no pain.

WOMAN B

Not physically. Emotionally. *(Pause.)* Spiritually. *(Pause.)* Do you feel absolutely...no pain?

WOMAN A

(Coldly.) None...at...all.

(Silence. Lights flicker on and off again with the crackling sound, this time louder.)

WOMAN B

I presume you have no morals.

WOMAN A

Excuse me? Who are you to make that judgment?

WOMAN B

I'm only making that judgment based on your actions. You pretend to have some happy, monogamous marriage while running off to feed your deepest hunger. You don't seem to plan to talk about it —

WOMAN A

I have my *extremely* valid reasons to do what I do!

WOMAN B

To save your ass? To play Ms. Perfect?

WOMAN A

Maybe...and what do you care? What are you gonna do? Come to my house and offer pro-bono marriage counseling to my husband and me?

WOMAN B

This isn't about him or your stupid marriage. It's about you. (Pause.) Now that I've finally got you alone, I'm saying what has to be said.

WOMAN A

Of the eight million people to bother in this damn city, why me?!

WOMAN B

I told you why.

WOMAN A

What?

WOMAN B

Because I'm your shadow.

WOMAN A

Stop with the fucking mind games!

(Lights flicker and crackle ferociously, slowly at first before picking up speed, like a strobe light. A deep rumble is heard softly and gradually builds louder and louder. The train is approaching.)

WOMAN A

I'M GOING TO ASK ONE LAST TIME — WHO THE FUCK ARE YOU?!

WOMAN B

(Gestures to "Orphan Black" poster.) Your clone. A refraction... the distortion of an image through light waves...

(The two women freeze in a tableau vivant, facing each other. The subway lights shut off, casting the women in darkness. The purple glow from the skylight remains. The rumble dies. The train has finally arrived.)

P.A. ANNOUNCEMENT

This is a South Ferry-bound 1 train. The next stop is 103rd Street. Stand clear of the closing doors, please...

(Light fade to black.)



Image by Kelby and Kelvin Vera

Silent as the Grave

by James Pereira-Shorey

The graveyard is silent. A silver sickle moon hangs in the star-studded sky. Circled by black cast-iron with tall withered oak standing sentry at the gate, the field of stone lies still. Dotted throughout the vast enclosed field are the grey angels, frozen in form forever. They stand as soldiers at the salute, unyielding and proud as they hold unending vigil over their citizens. Slabs of stone jut from the earth in rows. Each is etched with words and phrases, meanings lost when their audiences lay beside them.

In the distance there is laughter, chatter, clatter. A stream of merriment and joy sings through the air until it dies in the still, solemn silence of the necropolis that lies in front of me. A glance back would show flickering, orange light and dancing, unidentifiable children.

A step produces the crackle of broken frost as I crush the grass beneath. A push creates the screech of lonely hinges as the black gates fall inward. The next step brings wind, whistling whispers into my ear. Then I take another step. And another. And another. A pace at a time, I crunch and crackle into the garden of stone.

I crouch and brush my glove against a white gravestone. It stands tall and proud, lonely but triumphant, alone in a crowd. Each wipe of my hand reveals more of the sleet-covered stone.

A man on a horse, helmet in one hand, sword raised victorious.

A woman, standing in a field of grey roses.

A swarm of children, guarded by a shield. Upon the shield lies the lone colour on the entire edifice; a single chalice, darkly bronzed in sharp relief to the white that surrounds it.

A final wipe reveals words. A single line, etched again and again over the years, old words that I cannot read but still know.

Here lies a champion who died triumphant, a saviour of children.

A tale comes to mind. A tale of a man, husband and farmer, who took up arms to save children. Who died but won. A simple tale passed down in fairy tale and

local legend. A tale of bravery and sacrifice that rings true to this day. A tale that would be toasted each year as fathers and mothers raised their glass to an example they could only hope and fear to follow. A tale never truly told.

After all,

Dead men tell no tales.



Image by Kelby and Kelvin Vera

Pay for It
by Nicholas Hickson

Is reality your perception?

Or is your reality the perception of others?

What is reality?

I found out it's a dream like no other.

Everyone loves one another.

Ignoring the pigment known as color.

I recently found out that I'm partially a black brother.

Still I check the box on job application as other.

I don't know who I am or what I'm here for.

Therefore, I'm lost in the spectrum of now.

Destined to drown in the dark abyss.

Yet, I live for this.



Before Church by Melissa "Missy Lee" Vasquez

Nothing More, Nothing Less

by Stephanie Sanchez

Do you remember being young and carefree? Being the leader of the free world? With no worries and a stress-free life? Well now that you're old and grey that life that you knew and loved is about to end, but there are some that should not have died. Those that were killed when they should have lived; those are the ones that get stuck. You won't remember anything once you pass over, except for those few that die unexpectedly. You might be reborn, maybe into a new person or an animal, or maybe even a plant. Yes that's been known to happen. The afterlife isn't so bad. Amanda thought that it was going to be all black and she thought that she wasn't going to heaven like most people, maybe just stay in limbo. Boy was she wrong.

Amanda Hawthorne was only 25 when she was killed. It was a wrong place wrong time sort of accident. It was raining and she decided to walk to the Chinese restaurant instead of ordering. She waited for her pork fried rice and shrimp with broccoli when the gunman entered, his intentions only to rob the men that worked there, but when Amanda reached for her cell phone, he reacted and fired. She was down and holding her right hand to her chest. She thought *'This is it. I'm going to die. I won't ever see, hear, or feel anything ever again.'* As her last breath left her lips, she took one long look at the man that shot her and then everything went black.

Amanda felt nothing. When she opened her eyes, she saw nothing but darkness. Or what she thought was darkness. She hadn't realized that she didn't actually open her eyes. *'So this is the afterlife?'* she thought to herself.

'No my dear, open your eyes and see what the real afterlife is.' Was that voice in her head? No, it couldn't have come from her. Amanda thought she had her eyes open. Slowly, she lifted her eyelids and looked around. She was standing in a meadow. Everything was brighter—more defined wherever she was. The grass under her feet was soft. She could smell the pine trees all around her. There were roses and tulips everywhere of all colors. There was a big willow tree in front of her

with a tire swing hanging from the strongest branch. There was something familiar about this meadow but she couldn't put her finger on where she knew this place from. *'This is your afterlife Amanda Hawthorne. This is the place you last thought of when you died. All those who die go to a place where they were the happiest in their past life.'* Where was that voice coming from?

'God? Is that you?' She wasn't frightened, but curious as to who was communicating to her.

'No my dear, I am just a voice, nothing more nothing less. I am here to guide you through your afterlife to find peace. Everyone has a place they want to see for the last time or something they must finish before they move on. I am that guide, I will help you finish what needs to be done.' Oh, she thought to herself. Was that all it was? Just a voice?

'Ok, but I can't remember how I died. I don't even know what I was doing when it happened. How can I find peace if I can't remember anything?' Then, as she said her last words, it hit her like a force of wind only in her head. She was seeing everything like a movie. She saw herself walking from her apartment to the Chinese restaurant just to get some food for the night. She watched as the gunman waited outside the door. He looked young, maybe 20 or 21. His blue eyes were full of terror, as if he was scared of what he was about to do. His blonde hair was tussled and unkempt. There was nothing that she could do to stop what was about to happen and that feeling of lost hope and death filled her heart. The young man walked inside, gun raised, and said "Put all the money in a bag and I won't shoot!" She watched as she saw her former self reach for her phone that was in her back pocket, but before she could even grab hold of it, the young shooter flinched and a shot rang out. Her hand shot out to grab her chest; she could feel the warm liquid coming out of the open wound. Her body falling to its knees, the young man's eyes filling with tears of realization of what he had just done. Watching as her body fell to the floor, blood pooling around it, brought tears to her eyes. The last breath left her body, and she watched as her lifeless body lay on the cold tiled floor. The gunman hadn't moved from his spot, even when the police and paramedics came, he was still standing there, eyes cold and lifeless as if he were the one whose soul

had left his body. There was something stirring inside of her that she thought was anger, but it was pity. She felt sorry for the young man who had ended her life. She wanted him to know that she forgave him.

Anyone seeing this with her would have thought she was crazy for wanting to forgive her killer, but what else was there for her to do other than forgive the one person who should pay for the careless decisions that they had made? She didn't feel that way. This was her ticket to everlasting happiness, she thought to herself. That's what the voice in the meadow was talking about. Peace. She needed to find a way to talk to the man. She needed to tell him that it was ok, that she was in a better place and that he could live out the rest of his life in solitude.

She was back in the meadow. Her mind was made up. *'I see you have made a decision. Is this really what you want to do? To forgive is an entirely big step. It is wise that you chose to do this, let me know when you are ready.'*

'I am ready. I know what I must do before I can be at peace and if that means being face to face with the person who took life from me then so be it.' Amanda was ready. She wanted to have her peace. She closed her eyes and felt a gust of wind around her body and then nothing. She opened her eyes to see that she was in a cell. It was dark, cold and uninviting. She looked around the cell and saw the tussled blonde hair of the man she had the means to speak to. He was sitting on the only bed in the cell, his head on his knees; he was rocking back and forth. She wondered if she would be able to speak to him so she tried.

"What's your name?" He stopped moving and slowly lifted his head. When his blue eyes met her green ones, he froze. His mind was racing; he couldn't get a word out.

"Ry...Ryan. My name is Ryan." She was happy that he was scared, but he shouldn't be, she thought to herself. She was only there to talk to him—nothing more, nothing less. She walked closer to him and he moved farther away. "How are you here? I...You died."



Image by Kelby and Kelvin Vera

“Yes I did, but the world works in mysterious ways. I want to tell you that I forgive you. I don’t want to know your reasons for doing what you did or what led you to make those hasty decisions. Forgiveness is all I came to visit you for; nothing more, nothing less.” She was ready. She closed her eyes but before she was able to leave his voice rang out.

“I’m sorry! I wish I could take it back. I’d give my life for yours if I could. I should be dead not you.” He was sobbing. She felt nothing for this young man any longer. She had said what she needed to but felt she couldn’t leave without saying one last thing.

“The afterlife is all I had hoped it would be. Nothing more, nothing less. I’m happy now.” With that she closed her eyes once again and felt the gust of wind she was hoping for. When she opened her eyes she was back in her meadow. Amanda felt like she was at peace. In her own paradise. She finally remembered where she knew this meadow from. It was behind her mother’s house, where she played as a child; it was the one place where she could go and be alone, with no one to judge her or tell her what to do. She felt something on her face; as she wiped at her cheek and looked at her fingers she realized that she was crying. They weren’t tears of sadness; she was finally happy. She was able to have her peace, no voice in her head, or confrontations with killers. Peace, the afterlife she always wanted, the one she felt she deserved. Nothing more, nothing less.



Grounds for Sculpture by Melissa "Missy Lee" Vasquez

Stray
by Priscilla Cruz

You left me alone and lost
like a mother turtle
giving birth to her young
Abandoned and alone
I made it
but the hole you left cannot be filled
you said you would come back,
you lied and left me
to fall into a pit of despair
Like the owner of a cat
you left the door open
making me a stray
Never finding my way home
for without you
I have no home
I will always remain a stray
abandoned by her mother



Image by Melissa "Missy Lee" Vasquez

Lost Treasures by Cristina Batista

Treasure hunters dedicate their lives to discover lost treasures; children are inspired by the amazing stories of all treasure hunters trying to find them. When a treasure is finally found, it becomes an extraordinary discovery for the world. Gold, diamonds, and rare pearls inside a shell are buried in the deep ocean, but the darkness and the abyss of the ocean prevent people from achieving this amazing discovery. The same as a treasure, a precious person could be lost in this complex world because of the struggle for survival. Nowadays, lack of resources, oppression, violence, family status and social struggles lead to the fact that precious people just like precious treasures are lost in this complex world. The most valuable and sought after treasures in the world are natural pearl, diamond, and gold.

A natural pearl is formed spontaneously by a substance released by a clam when a parasite or a grain of sand gets into the shell and takes the shape of crystalline form. This precious stone is formed as result of the struggle for survival, and it is a rare find. Rosa Parks, "the first lady of civil rights," was born in the time of racial segregation; all the difficulties and struggles she went through gave birth to a rare pearl. Instead of staying frightened and hiding inside a shell, in the darkness of the world, she decided to stand up and fight for her rights. Her life is an inspiration for all people craving for a better world. By staying inside a shell, people will miss the opportunity to live in excellence.

A diamond is the outcome of high temperature and pressure in carbon inside of the Earth's mantle. When found in nature, diamonds are just a rough stone. The process that a diamond goes through to go from a rough stone to a gemstone needs multiple steps: planning, cleaving, cutting and polishing. The specialist has to study the particularity of the diamond and decide which form has to be adopted. The decision will determine the value of the diamond. This process requires time and extreme patience because a diamond is a hard and unbreakable gemstone. For instance, a man called "Cinderella Man" in the 1920's, rose from a poor local boxer to a world heavyweight boxing champion. James J. Braddock discovered his passion for boxing and became a professional boxer in 1926. However, the nation got into the Great Depression and Mr. Braddock lost everything. During that time he had to

struggle to win fights and support his family. He went through the loss of his possessions, abandonment by his friends and the humiliation of asking people for money to pay the utility bill during the winter. During all of this difficult time, Mr. Braddock, unbreakable as a diamond, was cut and polished to shine as the Cinderella Man, the heavyweight champion of the world, at Madison Square Garden Bowl, Long Island City, New York, in 1935. After his retirement as a boxer, he was a soldier in the U.S. Army during the World War II. When he returned, Mr. Braddock contributed to the construction of the Verrazano Bridge. Cutting and polishing people's lives can create shining bright people.

Gold is considered the noblest of all the metals. This noble metal can be found in open fields or underground in deposits called "veins." These veins are formed into the soil, changed by erosion caused by rain, wind, and temperature variations. The common process to refine gold is the use of high temperature flame or the use of chemicals. Gold is a malleable metal and doesn't lose brightness when exposed to water or air. The same was true for the Warner Sisters, who were pioneers in the field of modern Christian fiction in the 1950's. The Warner Sisters were from a wealthy family in New York City. When they were young children, they lost their mother and their aunt came to live with them to help Mr. Warner raise them. Mrs. Warner was a successful lawyer in New York. Through the Great Depression, the family lost almost everything. Their valuable possessions were confiscated and auctioned. The family had to leave their beautiful mansion to move to an old farmhouse on Constitution Island, located in a deserted island on the Hudson River, miles away from the center of New York City. The family struggled for years to recover from their financial disaster. The Warner Sisters in their young age were burned by fire like fire refines gold. The sisters became malleable people who can adapt to a new life. The Warner Sisters came up with the idea of writing stories to help their family financially. Supported by their aunt, they started writing stories inspired by the truth of Gospel. Altogether, they wrote 106 novels, children's stories and religious books; the most popular novels, written by Susan Warner under the name of Elizabeth Wetherell, were "The Wide, Wide Word" and "Tom's Cabin" and were translated into other languages. In 1860, the Warner sisters wrote "Say and Seal," inspired by their faith in God. In the story, Ana Warner wrote a

poem "Jesus loves me, this I know..." under the name Amy Lothrop. The poem became a song and until today this song is performed by children. Being flexible can be the beginning of a great adventure for some people.

Indeed, every human being has a precious stone hidden inside him or her. Rosa Parks, James Braddock and the Warner Sisters had one thing in common: in their difficulties, they learned how to overcome their obstacles. They focused and thought about noble things, such as trust, honesty, justice, purity, love and an untouchable reputation. Those virtues were acquired through their struggles. As a result, they became real treasures found in this desperate world. Human beings are not meant to just survive, they are meant to thrive for respect, determination and creativity.



Image by Kelby and Kelvin Vera

Pen
by Nicholas Hickson

Who knew a pen could represent hope?
I write down my life...addicted to this dope.
Sniffing up my confused emotion.
I wear my heart on my sleeve.
When I hug you, know that I bleed.
All the scars and wounds open up.
Reflecting all of my past endeavors.
Confronting my present fears.
Praying that my future won't end here.
And that this pen will heal...me!

The Strange Voices

by Yuleisy Rodriguez

It wasn't fear so much—it was more as if I was feeling unsettled. It was as if things were just slightly out of order or even warped. I did not know what to do or where to run. I didn't have a safe place anymore. I have searched in the deepest area of the sea to see if I could find what I wanted, but unluckily, I have not found it, yet. It felt as if I've been a prisoner, a prisoner in a net. Negative thoughts and vibes had haunted me. I did not feel as safe and secure as before. Meanwhile, in my search, I have heard a voice from the deepest darkness of the sea. It was a voice of hatred, a voice which was only meant to destroy my feelings and to put me down. As far as I could recall, the voice was saying, "You will never find your way. You will never find it." I started to feel a bit a desperate, a bit nervous, and a bit insecure. It was disturbing me from continuing my search. I didn't want to continue anymore after hearing that voice. I wanted to give up and my heart wanted to give up. Regardless of the voice, I was determined to keep on going, to keep on searching for what I'd been seeking for. As I was approaching even deeper in the sea, there was another voice. This time the voice was neither harsh nor soft. It was the type of voice in between, the one which cheered you up, but not completely. The voice said, "You might find it, but you still have a huge way to go. If I were you, I would just give up." I didn't want to listen neither to the second voice, nor to the first one, but something inside of me wanted to. Something deep inside of me felt the need to give up, to stop trying, and just go back. Nevertheless, my heart had felt the need to face the challenge and to not give up. As I kept on going, I decided to stop for a while. I wanted to rest because it had been a long way to reach my final destination. For a minute, I forgot about everything the voices had said to me, but then they hit me back. All these words came flooding back to me



Image by Kelby and Kelvin Vera

while I was standing there. I thought about everything the voices had told me previously. I thought for a second that I could not make it and that I wasn't good enough; my self-esteem had gotten lower and lower.

As I was flowing in the deep and dark sea, I saw a light coming from the horizon. I could not see that much though, because it was a very bright light. My eyes started blinking as I was trying to cover my face with my hands. "I think I see someone in the distance," I exclaimed with a shout of joy and excitement, as if something really special or extraordinary had happened to me. As I approached closer to the light, I heard someone. "You have to stop doubting yourself and start believing in yourself. You have a long way to go, but I know that you can do it. Don't give up and keep on going," the voice exclaimed. This was the third voice I heard through my journey. It wasn't a voice of hatred, or a voice which was meant to put me down. When I heard these words, my heart started beating really fast as if it wanted to leap out. The words weren't comforting at first. I felt as if it was just a lie because I had heard other negative voices before. I wanted to believe in the words of the third voice though. I wanted to believe that I could keep going regardless of what had been previously said. "This is what I really needed to hear in order to keep on going," I thought. After I heard the words of the unknown voice, I tried to reach closer to the light. I wanted to know more about the strange voice, I wanted to know who it was and meet the real person behind the comforting voice. "I guess I just felt anxious about the fact that someone who did not really know me could believe in me and my ability to accomplish my goal or dream," I thought. As I was trying to get closer to the unknown voice, it was getting far away from me. I did not know why though. I tried and tried my best to get closer. However, the unknown voice was there for a reason, and once the voice had accomplished the mission, it was supposed to leave. I did not want the voice to leave, but now I know that I have to keep on going on my own. "It may not be easy at

times, but in those times of struggle I know that I can find a way out and a stronger sense of who I really am," I thought. I understood that there would be challenges to face, and it is up to me to accept them, believing in myself.



Park Day by Melissa "Missy Lee" Vasquez

Cherry Blossom

by Alejandro Alvarez

It is usually around mid-March or it could be early April when they start to show their true beauty. It is a beauty so bold and brilliant that people travel across the world to NYC just to get a glimpse. This radiant display of color and life is something irreplaceable. The true beauty of the *Prunus Serrulata* cherry blossom tree is nearly indescribable. People from all over are gathering by the minute at Central Park NYC, but their presence is just as irrelevant as a grain of sand on the beach. Their faces are nearly anonymous as they snap their pictures of the main attraction that is the *Prunus Serrulata*.

The trees stand proud with dynamic colors that seem to electrify the audience. The calyx attached to the branches display vibrant shades pink and every passing day reveals more of its inner beauty. Some are already blooming with a pinkish tone seemingly unmatched—the priceless sight of corolla made up of alluring powder pink petals which almost seem to encompass a spectacle of hair-like stamen that transcends its true beauty—the bright yellow pollen-filled anther teaming with life, as if all the questions of the universe are answered in one viewing. It is a sight that makes you wish you can capture its ephemeral radiance for eternity. The green foliage attached to each brown branch further highlight the flowers striking radial symmetric elegance. The way the sun strikes the tree in an angle provides a soft glow and almost seems to magnify its allurement.

As the day carries on, the mild rose-like fragrance of the cherry blossom fills the air like a gentle spring mist caressing your nose with every refreshing breath. The seducing faint smell seems to dance around you, leaving traces of the scent on your clothes like a high-end perfume. It is the scent that is truly intoxicating. The pollen infused wind sweeps between every blossom cluster and impels your nose with a lick of nectar. Every breath taken provides a savor of fresh cherries and every gust of wind seems to heighten that sensation.

Even the soothing sound of the branches creaking in the breeze has a way of rendering one in a trance. As the wind gently brushes against each leaf and

every branch, a soft flutter begins to erupt. The branches sway, the leaves rustle gently and every tree seems to mimic each other with the same graceful motion. While the trees dance in place, a few blossom clusters snap off their peduncle and hit the ground with a soft thud like an acorn in the fall. Approaching the tree, one notices the bark is soft yet coarse and the branches are rubber-like. The leaves hold deep ridges and the blossom pedals are like a luxury satin.

The *Prunus Serrulata* is truly unmatched in every sense of the word, but its true beauty is short lived. The blossom's satin-like texture exemplifies that vulnerability. After about a week or so, the once beautiful blossom is barely even noticeable on the tree itself. Replacing the blossom is a set of rich green leaves, and as the clock winds down, another blossom hits the ground. Before you know it, the time has come and gone. The once thriving, vibrant flower that seemed to answer questions of life itself is now a collection of mulch. What once was the main attraction is now the burden for leaf blowing landscapers. As the last blossom hits the ground, all one can do is think about the experience. And although the end is bitter and the experience is life changing, next year the blossom will bloom again.

I Am No Different by Melissa “Missy Lee” Vasquez

My love, my dear, I sit you by me. I want you to hear something from me and me only

I sit by you today to let you know that I am gay. I am no different from you or anyone else. I am gay, I am proud, and this is the life I will be living in this journey. There is no turning back from here, and I will drive this car to the end of time when it is time for God to call me by his side.

I am still the same person as you know today, and I am still a human being with rights as anyone else in this world. That won't change at all. I want to share my love, my joy and happiness with a child as any proud parent does in life. A child has a curious mind and will ask a lot of questions, but by the end of time, I will provide all of the child's needs, such as love, care, being there for them, and watching them practice for a dance show.

A child may be curious, but I am still the same person that feels as anyone else feels. I want to be a happy and loving person for a child to share my life. I would like to be a proud gay parent to raise a child with love, hope, faith, and life in a home where there is laughter in each room—a heart that beats in each room of a home. I want to hear a child's laughter echo around the room as my partner and I brush our children's hair.

I am no different from any parent in the world. I am only a human being that has a beating heart—a human being that has a passion to raise a child in a loving home and a second chance to have a happy joyful life with a gay parent. I see myself as a parent: not gay, not straight, not transgender nor queer. But a proud parent who does not see herself as a gay. We love and raise a child as any parent would do. For instance, caring for a child, loving and teaching them that it does not matter what gender you are, you can achieve something in life to be happy forever. What matters is that a

child is put into a home where there are open arms and a caring parent who could hear them laughing, hoping that it will not stress the child when something goes wrong. The only difference is that we are gay. We love you no matter what. We love you anyhow.



Image by Deborah Bryant

Stubborn Heart

by Yuleisy Rodriguez

When going for a walk in the park, I saw an object on the ground; I bent down to pick it up. It was a bloody and beating heart that I carefully picked up. Somebody must have lost it, I thought. I promised myself that I would look for the woman who had lost her heart. As I was walking down the street, I asked each woman if this heart belonged to her, but unluckily, I had not found the one yet.

As I was walking with this wonderful, but wounded heart, I encountered this beautiful girl. She had black hair and big green eyes. At first, I wasn't sure if the heart belonged to her. As I was approaching her, I got to the conclusion that this heart definitely belonged to her. She was talking on the phone with tears in her eyes. She saw me staring at her, so she quickly nodded and kept walking. I asked her if she had lost something. She just looked at me all angry and kept talking on her phone.

I followed her as she was walking, but she was just ignoring me. I decided to grab her by the arm and once again asked her if she had lost something. She slapped me on my face with her soft and tender hands, which at the same time were strong. I just looked at her and once again asked her if she had lost something. This time, she rolled her eyes and very angrily asked what I was talking about. I tried to be funny and told her that she could not answer a question with another question. Then, she rolled her eyes once again, gave me her back and said, "No, I have not lost anything." I followed her without saying a word. She stopped, and asked me why I was following her. I told her that I had found a heart on the street while I was walking. She said that she didn't care if I found a heart or a child dying on the street. I gently told her that the heart I had found belonged to her. She looked at me as if I was crazy. "Are you out of your mind?" She asked. I laughed and said "Would you believe me if I told you that I'm a psychic? I

can tell that this heart belongs to you because I see sadness, pain, and bitterness in your eyes." She sat on a bench and with hatred told me that she was saying something she hadn't told anyone. I also sat on the bench where she was sitting. I looked at her, took her hands and told her that everything would be fine. She nodded and cried. I asked her to tell me why she looked so sad; but she said that it could not be possible that I wanted her to tell something so private to a stranger. I had to agree with her; however, she said she broke up with her boyfriend whom she had been with for almost 5 years. She couldn't hold it anymore, screamed and told me all the bad things she had gone through with her ex-partner. She had a bad impression of what a man was because of everything that had happened with her previous ex-partners. I couldn't believe it myself. I hugged her really tight and cried with her. After all these emotions came out, I smiled, and told her that one day she would find her perfect match, a guy who would only make her smile so hard that she would cry from happiness. She gave me this beautiful smile, stood up, shook my hands, and said thank you. I told her that I would keep her heart until I saw her again. I promised her that the next time I saw her, her heart wouldn't be as bloody and bitter as it was before. Then, I told her to take a deep breath and close her eyes, counting to five. She did, and when she opened her eyes, I wasn't there anymore. Well, I was, but she didn't know it. She seemed so confused, looking for me everywhere. "I didn't even ask his name," she said. Was that my illusion or my-own consciousness that was telling me something, she thought. She decided to go home and forget about all the bad moments she had gone through. She seemed even fresher after she talked with me about her problems. It was so sad seeing her in such pain. But at least I got her to speak about how she felt.

A month later, I encountered the same beautiful girl. She was with some friends in a restaurant. I waited outside until she was done. This time, those

big green eyes were brighter than before. She seemed happier, I thought. I approached her as she was coming outside and asked her how she was feeling. She said with a big smile, "I'm feeling great." She also said that she hadn't found her perfect match yet; but still, "You look really happy," I said. We talked for a while about how she saw life from a different perspective after our last conversation. She told me about all the plans she wanted to achieve and all the things she wanted to enjoy. I was speechless while she was telling me all that. I was happy for her though. She suddenly asked me what happened with the wounded heart I found. She wanted to know if it was still bloody and beating. I smiled at her and said, "No." Then she asked me, "Why isn't it a wounded heart anymore if you promised me that the next time you see me, it would mean that I had found my perfect match?" I once again smiled, and told her that she had found her perfect match. All curious and anxious she asked me who he was and how it was possible that she hadn't noticed it. I replied, "You. You are your perfect match. There is nobody as perfect for you as yourself. Once you feel satisfied and your self-esteem has grown, your life will be brighter as never before. You could definitely find someone who will love you and make you smile, but first you need to be happy with yourself." She tightly hugged me and gave me a kiss on the cheek. I did the same, and said goodbye. She told me not to say goodbye because she wanted to see me again sometime. I told her, "You will," and left.

Another month passed by really fast. This time, I couldn't see her. I couldn't say goodbye. I couldn't tell her how much I had loved her since the first time I saw her. She didn't know I was gone until one day as she was talking on the phone with her friend, she heard the news. Her friend was also a good friend of mine. He knew I passed away, but she didn't. When he told her about a good friend of his who had just died, she asked him his name. When she heard him say my name, tears were falling from her eyes.

She was in shock, speechless, confused, and sad. All those emotions came to her all together. My friend was still on the phone trying to talk to her, but she didn't answer him. He then hung up and went to her house. Everything at her house was broken and out of place. She was lying on the floor, devastated as if someone really special for her had just died. Her friend was really confused by her reaction. He asked her what was going on. She tried to explain to him how important I was in her life, but every word that came out of her mouth was confusing and he couldn't even understand her. Then, she asked him how I died and why I didn't tell her what was happening to me. Her friend knew everything about me and how I was suffering from cancer. She couldn't believe a word of what he was saying, even if he was telling the truth. She was in such pain. She threw a glass cup that was on the floor at him and told him to get out of her house. She kept crying for hours because she didn't know about anything I was going through. She then realized that she was worrying about something that only time could heal, and that she was lucky not to have cancer or any other sickness. She also realized that outside those walls, many people were going through a really hard time that might cost their lives or that might be worse than her own problems. Her problems, which she thought were so big, now seemed so unimportant. Even if she didn't understand how it was possible that I was smiling even in the most serious situations that I was going through, I gave a moment of hope to others, including herself.

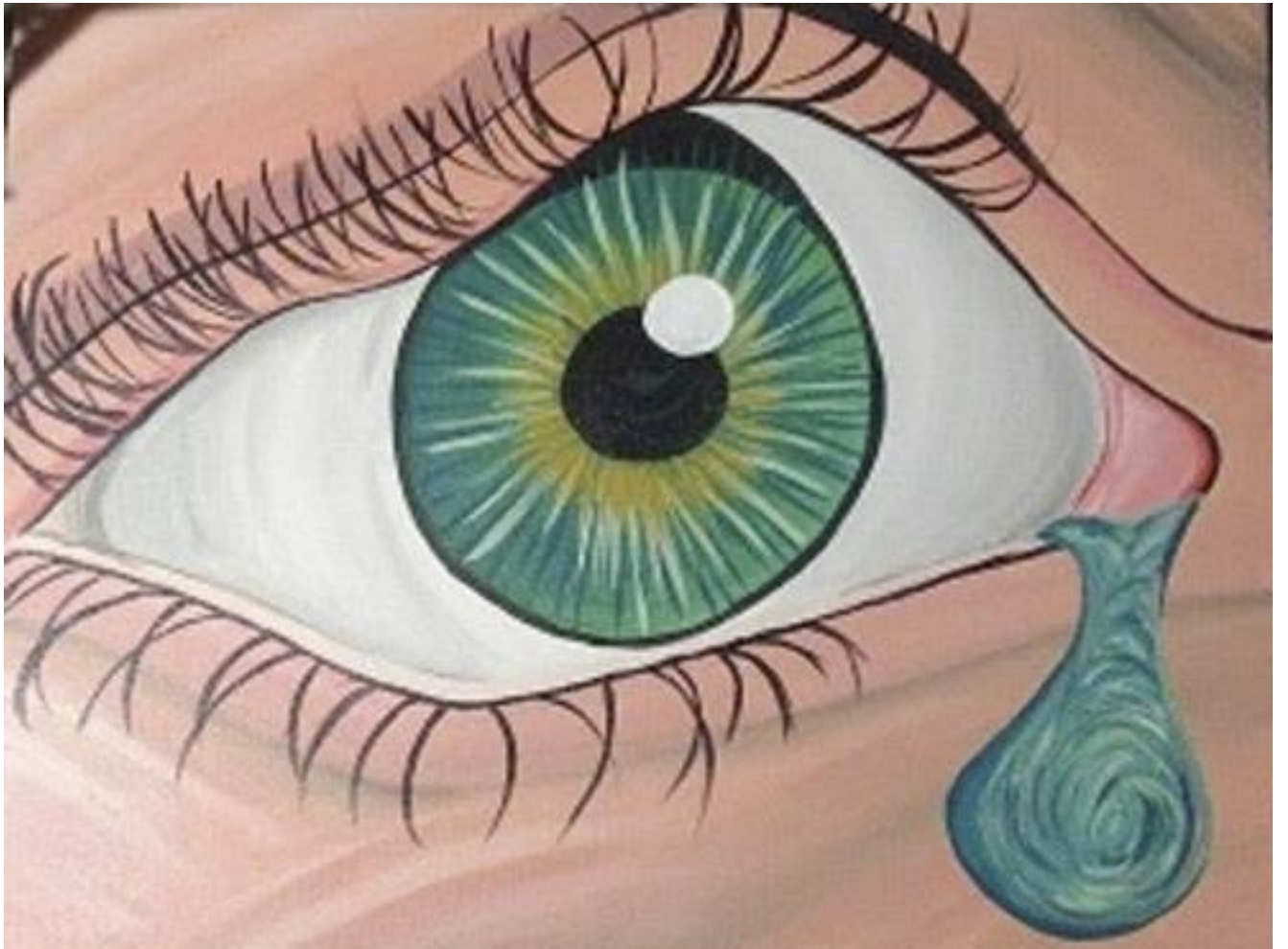


Image by Kelby and Kelvin Vera