

the **SLIGGO**
Journal
of Arts & Letters

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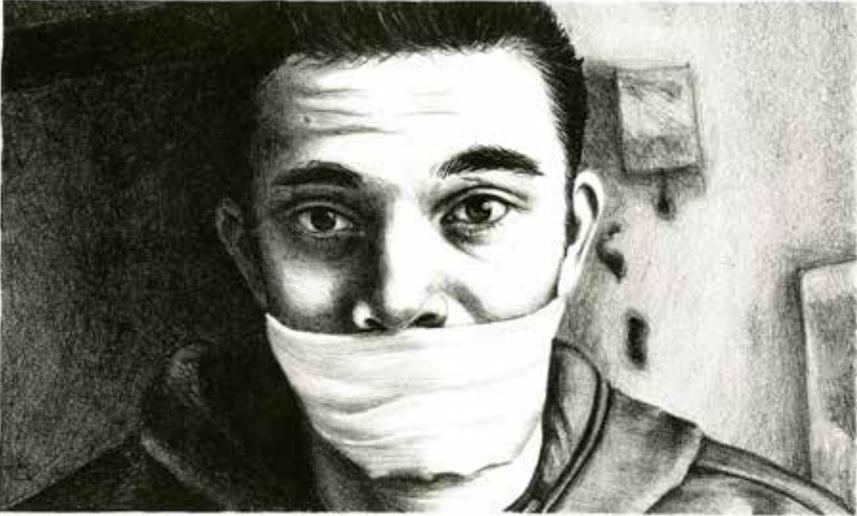
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the **SLIGO**
Journal

Poetry

Opinion
Rafael Rodriguez



Opinion

1

Rafael Rodriguez

In This Place I Call Home

Nneoma Kanu

First Place Winner, 2019 Sligo Journal Student Poetry Contest

In this place I call home,
the sky is always in this state of perpetual falling.
Nothing green pierces the earth,
only burnt feathers, splinters and bullet casings.
Steel streams of traffic fill the streets
and the breeze carries the scent of wasted things;
wasted lives of people who danced their bodies off balconies
because the noise became too loud to bear.
The women walk around like houses in construction:
exoskeletal, hardly whole.
Desperate prayers ricochet down corridors,
through old churches, into ceilings and drains.
They rise and then sink again.
All things slowly withdraw into shells of themselves.

The eighth world wonder has to be that we are still alive,
still straining our lips into smiles.
I cannot find poetry in the streets,
I cannot shake the taste of salt in my mouth,
I cannot see the clouds drenched in yellows, lilacs and reds.
I wonder if the god we pray to is a god who also sees small things –
little people in minuscule houses living tiny lives.

The sun rises wildly in the sky, an overbearing yellow flame,
and it swallows us whole.
The ones with houses high on the hill summon us
and the multitudes march to their call.
We open our mouths and they fill us
with the warm mercury of false hope.
They steal the silver and send our children
to the battlefield with blunt knives and old horses.
If my mother who gifted me this space in the world,
and her mother before her
were born into surrender

and stripped of their backbones before they learnt to stand,
who am I to demand that I be heard?
In this place I call home,
nothing looks towards the light.
Joy has no stomach for the things that live here.
I've never been one to relate to things that grow.

En collar de espinas (ekphrastic poem)

Ann Weisgerber

(based on “Autorretrato con collar de espinas” by Frida Kahlo)

Second Place Winner, 2019 Sligo Journal Student Poetry Contest

A woman in the limelight is nothing less than an angel,
Nothing short of a monster
Nothing short of an idol.

Rumors swirl around her; her love, her features, her
Body, her children—
What will become of it all?

The river rushes loud; life floats away on its waves,
But for one moment, one speck of sand in the ever-turning hourglass,
She holds me transfixed

In life, beaten, broken; a cracked windchime dangling in the wind
Muted pastels against a grey smoke backdrop
But still she stares, unwavering in her conviction,

Her still, unbeating heart tethered to her neck, dead love slowly strangling,
Bad luck and death over each shoulder.
Specks of soul seeping through to her shirt.

Self-Portrait with Blue Scarf
Ella Valenstein



Sweet Things

Julianne Murphy

When you came into my life, I thought I liked sweet things
Sweet things, being gumdrops and butterscotch dreams
And ice cream that sticks to your heart like wet cement

I thought I liked sweet things,
But too much of one thing can be detrimental to your health
And my brain is aching
And my heart is racing at a pace that I can't keep up with

I thought I liked sweet things,
But then I remember I come from a long line of diabetics
That binge on cotton candy that disappears as soon as it hits their tongue
And yearn for more as their body aches for them to stop
Because it's killing them

I thought I liked sweet things,
But maybe it's because I've been bitter for so long
That I can't tell the difference

I thought I liked sweet things,
But I know the story of Hansel and Gretel all too well
And witches have come into my life promising graham cookie houses that
crumble
Baking ovens of empty promises

I thought I liked sweet things,
But Mama always told me you can't have your cake
And hold it for too long
Because sugar has an expiration date that always comes quicker than you think

When you came into my life,
I realized I wanted someone that would stay

A Poem for a Professor Who Doesn't Like Poems about Fatherhood

David Linehan

I remember my dad crying
Saying that he had nothing
Without our family.
I was fifteen
and I hated his weakness.
How could a man
Of forty-five—
An engineer at NASA—
Get thrown down the steps
By his oldest son
and then cry about it
in front of the youngest?

His was the first generation
To be Present for the birth of their children.
Not pacing in the hall, nervously smoking cigarettes,
but truly present.
Theirs were the disciplinarian fathers
Of the sterile 1950's.
The American Fathers of the Nuclear Family.

When my turn came,
I participated in the grotesque miracle.
Holding legs, timing contractions.
Spotlights blasting the bed
and then onto the purple-octopus-afterbirth
and the sights and meaty smells of
The Bloody Show.
When after she'd survived the ordeal,
We had a plum fleshed, mushed face creature
And I could die a genetic success.

Within a year, I was down with mono.
Unable to pay for gas.
Unable to pay rent.

Unable to support my family
And unable to be a man.
It was then I understood
Why my father cried
Though I never had to be
Pushed down the steps.

Sunday Morning

Larry Cole



Untitled

Maria Paz Pereira Martinez

My legs are softest where I painted over skin.
Bare even though the air was still running at 50 degrees,
I remained a shade of green so vibrant at first glance, I thought it was just me.
Not even six in the afternoon yet, I excitedly await your call saying you'll come
over Saturday night.

The line between a canvas and flesh is fine at best and I lived to ink my skin.
Left thigh painted green, right thigh painted blue.
I made myself into a human canvas.
I became a light blue so fresh at first glance, I thought it was you.

Now nearing eight, the phone hasn't rung, I hope it does soon.
I started to paint again when I first met you.
When I was young, I'd paint with my father.
He'd draw princesses with long eyelashes and hairbows, and I'd paint them in
tones of pink and yellow.

Now I layer my arms in pink and yellow, covering freckles and bumps.
I am rose and sunshine, so lively at first I thought you were mine.
The bath runs at ten, and at ten fifteen I sit in my pool.

Paint comes off slowly in water,
making dips and curves that turn it into multi-colored shades.
Every few minutes I think I hear the phone ring,
but then decide my imagination has gotten the best of me.

My hair moves with the colors around me,
my eyes close for the first time in days.
In an hour or two I'll no longer be covered in my favorite shades.
But inside, I'll always remain a shelf of tints, so beautiful I never realized it.

I think the phone is really ringing now, but I don't miss you as much.

Imagine a Wall

Kathleen O'Toole

Imagine the Texas-Mexico border
bisecting a park, expanse of fields
and trails and desert pines, soccer pitch
on both sides. Zoom out, to satellite
or helicopter view: Juarez, El Paso —
one city or two?

Then imagine inserting a thirty-foot wall —
reinforced concrete with guard towers
where the double high-wire fence now
snakes along the I-10, traces what's left
of the Rio Grande. Unsightly imposition.

The last decade's line of demarcation,
still sufficient to slow the once natural flow
of commerce, waves of family ties ebbing back
and forth under the bridge, where contractors
now queue up with their high-tech designs, betting
millions for their chance to harden the border.

Now imagine this: a father in El Paso —
skilled craftsman installing ceramic tiles
in a new youth center. From its third-floor
bay windows, he can see straight through
to Mexico, so telephones his son to come
to the other side. There is Julito waving,
cell phone in hand. "But I cannot see you."

Pero Papa, no te puedo ver. Up the stairs
to the center's roof the father sprints,
hoping for a better view, and to be seen
by the son he has not laid hands on,
or embraced, in eight long years.

Self-Portrait
Amanuel Fetene



What We Carry

Judy Walsh-Mellett

I stroll through
this placid
lush forest
with a pack
containing
trail mix and apples,
figs, Triscuits and cheese,
surrounded
by
a cathedral canopy
of birch and sugar maple,
the sweet perfume of
fir.

Choruses
of songbirds
fling
melodies
of delight.

My pocket carries
images
of
women and children
vibrantly
clad
in many colored
cloths.

The mountains in the photos
are as inconceivably emerald
and alive
as the slopes
I am wandering
through.

And
these carry bedrolls,
bundles and basins,
bags of belongings
on their heads.
Babies and
bottles of water
slung over shoulders.
Little girls carry chickens.
Live chickens cradled
under their
arms.

Their skin, their faces
glistening
ebony.
Lines etched in foreheads
and beside the eyes
indicate
exhaustion,
worry, fear.

One What's App picture
shows a plume of smoke.
A column of war.
An explanation
for this exodus.

As I hike,
the interpretive panels
at trail's head
instruct that
a century past
these mountains were under siege.

Ax, saw blade and mill
declared war
on each standing tree.
Every other living thing
destroyed in
the battle.
A hundred years war.

Some metal
bought and sold
fuels this present one
that sends these families fleeing.
The very tool that
lets me see
their frightened faces
contains this
resource of dispute.

I must not forget
as I bathe in the solace
of this wood.

My sisters
on the march
in
East Congo.
I carry them in
some way now
as I walk.

The lives once destroyed
here
now seeding resurrection.

A prayer strains to the surface,
uttered some millennia past
and wailed urgently now.
“May you live to see
your children’s children
living in
Peace.”
May you brave children
carry your chickens
home.

Was Poppin
Jennifer Arevalo



Cuba/Jamaica

Sydney March

beyond the roving clouds
I embraced your shadow
across barriers of consonants
and vowels
and gazed at that blue thread
of ninety-two miles
I could not cross

from the fringe of mangroves
I watched the agile boats
freer than seagulls
swift and reckless
dance carelessly on swells
and imagined the splash
of Caribs' oars
long silenced by time

our grandparents' parents
once stood naked
at the edge of endless blue
and dreamed
of sweltering cane fields
at the end of hopeless voyages
or the wave slapping its palms
to agitate the broad waters
that separate the living
from the dead

my memories, like yours
are sometimes nightmares
of uncertain voyages
when we cowered
in the holds of slave ships
but the time has come
we weep into music

and dance to dreams
your rumba and my reggae
shout songs of love
laughter and lament

we now speak eloquently
in the tongues of pirates
who pillaged our sacred rhythms
and under watchful eyes

of old men and roving clouds
adrift like dandelions
we count our losses, live, love
and swoon to the music
of throbbing drums

let's forget old griefs
and crumbled dreams
of uncertain voyages
let's mock the winds and tides
and abandon the perfect blades
of our machetes
send your canoe back to me
send it full of rhythms
across those ninety-two miles
of blue that braid our destinies
with those of the invincible dead

Pockmark to Zymurgy

Virginia Hartman

The second volume of the
New World Dictionary
is falling to pieces.
Duct tape supports its spine
where it sits next to its
A to Pocket-veto
sister on the built-in shelves
in a lightstruck room with
a tile floor, a wool rug.
Is it treasure? Or is it trash?

The volume's blue cover
is worn out from use,
consulted often
by a crossword completer
I love,
a Scrabble gloater.

Laying down all his letters
on a triple word score,
he would heh-heh-heh
his satisfaction, then announce
his oversized points.

When I was young, I endured
the game, his unbeatability,
his galling certainty of a win.

Now I conquer the daily puzzle,
seeking answers only from within.
I vanquish Scrabble, resisting
outward signs of triumph.
My scores mimic my father's knack
for language and a knowledge that,
in the end, when it mattered most,

he was not invincible.

Word! Beyond death,
you live in this faded, full book
I will not let go.

Love DNA

Wilny Edouard

It cries,
It enjoys,
It fuels pain,

It is blind,
It can't see your skin tone,
It is illiterate, it can't learn about your gender.
It cares less about sexuality.
Your social class is not even listed here.

It has low IQ,
But it does comprehend why!
Why I feel you....
Repeat its name to you a million times...
It has been less than a day since it has spent time
With both of us!

It has no human body;
It acts like a human
With weaknesses, with desire to be perfect.
It is mysterious.
It shows up any time,
Any day.
It plays musical chemistry instantly
Whether you are ready or not...
Or whether you want him and/or her or not.

It does not fit to any social container
The weight of its smile and smell are too enormous to cart

Prince

Joann Everly Tell



Red Room Window
Zaiasia Jones



The Space Between Our Birthdays

Byrne Hackett Kelly

My son's gone missing,
I am missing my son.
He was north of Eureka
But I have not found, or heard from him.

In his second year of coming & going
The gap widens
Being across the pond
seemed not as far away.

The Grand Canyon drew him closer
But he missed that abyss.
He peddled right by,
on Route 66.

Turned nineteen close to Smokey's Birthplace;
Capitan, New Mexico,
Sounds like a New World to me.
So glad he called me on his birthday.

Unlike Smokey, they didn't get burned as they coasted down to Roswell.
Three aliens, descend down from the higher elevations using gravity to increase their rates.

Hoping their rolling rubber and rotating steel will obey their brakes.
They did little to engage the colonists, eager to exit the state they were in.

Their compasses pointed southwest to Texas,
but how were they to know using only internet and GPS?
Heading for Halloween in Austin
with their back-home buddy, Austin.

He said, "I love you Dad,"
Recently, my bicycle was stolen.
Fortunately, I am only missing, my only son,
while he is wheeling his way, away.

the **SLIGGO**
Journal

Fiction

Caged
Alfonso Vicencio



Cephalopod

Esther Schwartz-McKinzie

The search had lasted for just a day, but with the sky darkening in anticipation of the gale—a second round of violent weather, fast on the heels of the first—the men in orange raincoats, accompanied by their frustrated dogs, had retreated inland. At the base of the dunes, thin red tape whipped wildly, the bright plastic garish against the sand, a caution thrown to the wind.

Three days before, the child, Jeremy, was the first to see it... the creature lay stranded in the shallow waves, one open yellow eye visible above the froth.

“It hurts,” he said to his father, tugging at the man’s camouflage vest and pointing a small finger toward the shore.

He had not anticipated the excitement, or how the men’s voices would rise as the discovery became an adventure. Naively, he had thought they might help—five strong men might push and pull and free the thing of gravity. Maybe.

But the tone of this gathering was something else: by the fire pit, two large bucks hung by the hooves, already eviscerated; the shadows of their antlers danced across bright Igloo coolers.

“What do we have here?” his father intoned loudly, in faux wonder. The edge in his voice called the other men to attention, asserting command, ownership.

His foot was the first to strike; the heel of his Timberland contacted flesh with a sickening, rubbery thud. The men hooted as the creature flinched and paled.

At dawn, early beachcombers found it there, eye open but unseeing.

A call was made. A photographer arrived, mystified at first, then outraged. Idiots, he muttered, and put away his camera. As he stood on the shore, a pale child with strange, dark eyes appeared and handed him a soiled, musty towel.

In silent agreement, they covered tentacles marred by the unmistakable black imprints of cigarette butts. Later, the man could not say precisely what had happened, only that the child had disappeared suddenly: there and then gone, as if swallowed by the green tree-line, or by the sea itself.

This was the last reported sighting of Jeremy Foster, a six-year old boy who wandered away from his father’s campsite shortly before the first deluge,

a freak of unanticipated intensity that eroded the shoreline with roaring waves and felled massive trees.

Efforts to find the child were necessarily abandoned as the second storm approached and the evacuation order was decreed.

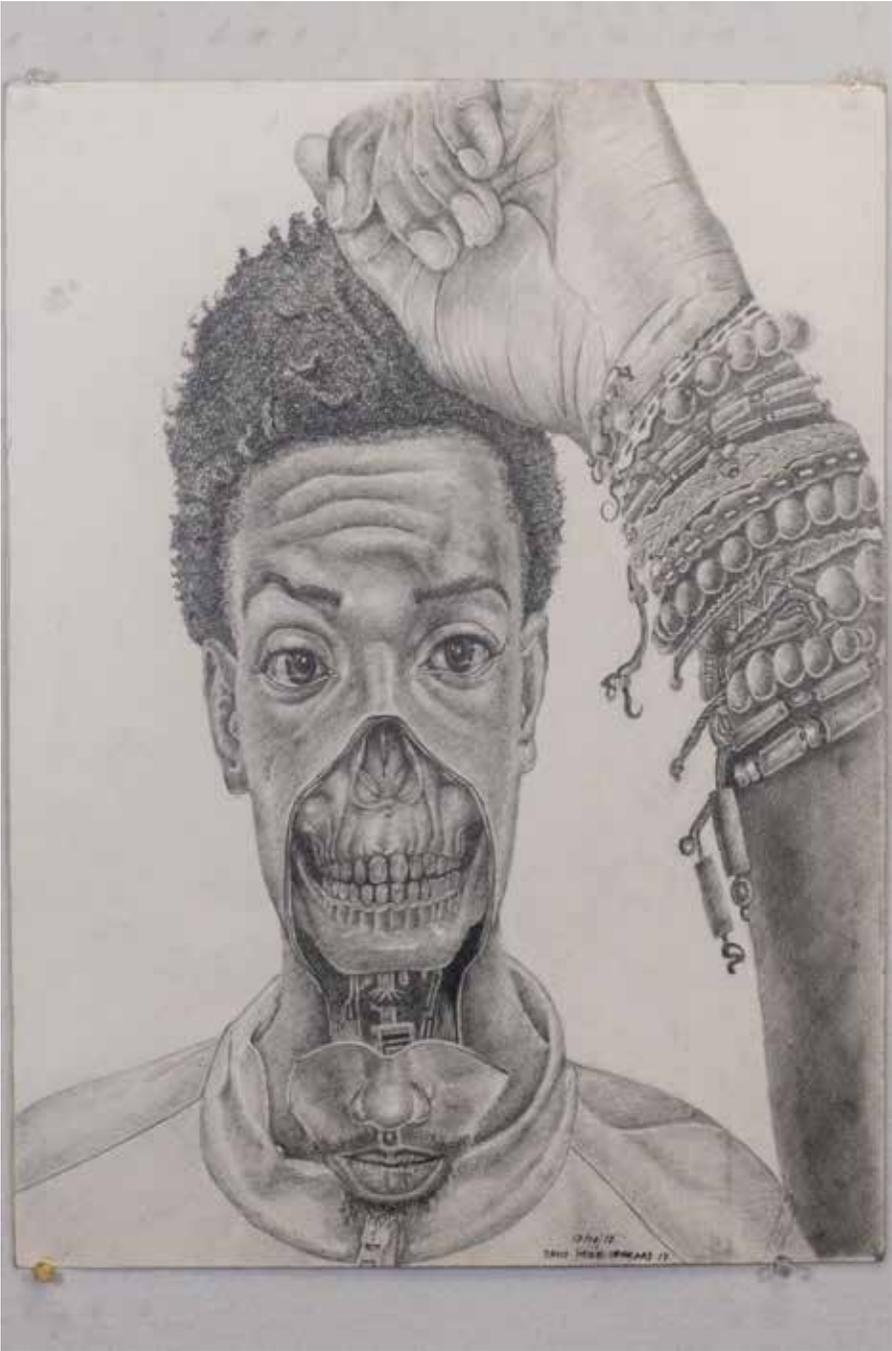
In the wake of the chaos, the mysterious stranding was forgotten. Oddly, the camera equipment had malfunctioned and the photos were all grey fog, except for a single grainy image that seemed (though certainly, this was not possible) to show a shadowy figure, partly human, kneeling in the sand, head bent, face obscured.

Light X Lines, Study 6

Mariza June Avila



Hollow
David Legrand



The Other Dead

Jeremiah Towle

It was a mostly pleasant surprise that Scotty had survived this long. The guy could barely make it through our band's tours, let alone the apocalypse. On the other hand, his house, purchased on the backs of our seven platinum-selling albums, was a decent hideout—a sturdy old brick mansion that seemed tailor-made to satisfy that teenage fascination he'd once had with castles. So it made sense that he'd managed to seal himself in there after the dead started to rise from their graves and devour the living.

I'd been in Safe Zone Alpha for a month and a half, and leaving it was scary as hell, even though the helicopter pilot, Jacqueline, kept up a generous altitude. Generous is exactly how she should be described. Very risky to take a civilian out on a scouting mission without clearing it, especially since the "scouting mission" was actually just a mission to recover Scotty. Regardless of what Scotty and I had been before the zombies, that was before, and after the two weeks I'd spent making my way to Alpha, running and hiding, dodging looters and psychos more than the zombies themselves, I didn't feel like a rock star anymore.

Time to change that.

We reached his house with plenty of time to spare, and I saw the crowd that had gathered around it, a pretty different crowd than the ones we'd used to play to. Even though it might have had some of the same people. The thought made my stomach churn.

"I'm going to bring us down slowly," Jacqueline said. "Doesn't look like there's space for a proper landing, so throw down the ladder when I tell you, and I'll be back in ten."

When we played at Coachella, all four of us—Scotty, Carlos, Jared and I—had made an entrance via helicopter. At the time, there hadn't been an aggressive, stinking horde around us (of zombies, at least). The crowd had been cheering for the most successful band on the planet. This crowd was groaning at the tops of their rotting lungs as I climbed down the rope ladder and dropped lightly onto the roof of Scotty's house.

I figured he had to be wearing earplugs. I'd heard a rumor that the soldiers stationed at the edges of safe zones were ordered to wear ear protection after three cases of guys going crazy from hearing that sound. The endless moaning, like a herd of damned cows. I wondered how I would get Scotty's attention. Luckily, he'd heard the helicopter despite his earplugs and he was

standing in an upstairs bedroom with a window that looked out onto the roof. He looked startled. Understandable—zombies finally happen, you barricade, and two months later, an ex-bandmate appears on top of your house.

“Perry?” he asked as he opened the window.

“It’s me,” I said, as if he couldn’t tell. “Hi Scotty.”

There was a long, awkward pause. The awkward pause is the cockroach of social interactions. Fittingly, it had outlived most of the human species, like roaches after a nuke. Scotty was staring at me, Jacqueline was flying away to do some reconnaissance while we gathered his stuff (most importantly, at least, one of his guitars), and behind me, on the ground, the zombies were groaning mindlessly and beating their decaying hands against the front wall of Scotty’s house. Finally he invited me in, and politely took out his earplugs.

The bedroom was empty except for the bed itself, a Gibson Les Paul on a stand, and a meager arsenal spread out on the floor: a baseball bat, a hatchet, some ammunition and a hunting rifle. Scotty didn’t hunt—it’d been a gift from Ted Nugent, back in the day. Scotty closed and latched the window, slightly muffling the sounds from outside. Then he stood, gazing blankly through the glass at the crowd of dead people outside. He hadn’t even asked me yet why or how I had shown up.

More pensive than I remembered, that was for sure. Back in the day, his hobbies had included throwing things and shouting at roadies.

“I hate them,” he murmured. As if I didn’t know who, he added, “The dead.”

I raised an eyebrow and gestured at the Grateful Dead shirt he was wearing.

“The other dead,” he said, irritated.

“Has that gift from the Nuge been helping at all?”

“Way too many of them, as you can see,” he said as he led me downstairs. “And they only die from headshots, like in the movies. There’s one in full riot gear who’s been here for ages—probably got infected right off the bat. Wasted a few rounds trying to get him.”

His living room was the mansion’s “great hall,” and like the bedroom, it was sparsely decorated; Scotty explained that most of his furniture was in use as barricade components. Since the power was out everywhere beyond the safe zones and he’d boarded up his windows, the only light was from a large assortment of candles and battery-powered lamps set up around the room. I could see a set of doors blocked off with a dresser and a couch and a cabinet with lit candles standing on it. The walls of this room were adorned with standard classic works of art—*Starry Night*, *Great Wave*, and so forth—and, framed like the other images, an old poster of our band. Our younger selves looked ghostly in this feeble lighting. I remembered that this picture had been

taken by Scotty's friend Ben, a photographer who had unfortunately overdosed around the time we recorded our first album. I didn't know him well, but Ben had always made sure all of us got equal focus in the promotional shots he took. Being the drummer, rather than the lead singer, I appreciated that. Scotty, Carlos, Jared and I had started jamming together when we were all fifteen or sixteen, and started gigging half a year later—unremarkable performances at talent shows and local restaurants. This was our covers period. We started writing originals in senior year of high school, and something clicked. Two weeks after our first show with original songs, we had gone viral, news networks wanted to talk to us, and record labels were emailing us with ridiculous numbers, one of which we accepted. It won't last, we thought. We weren't wrong. But it was all uphill for five years. "The new Beatlemania," said the headlines, including a Rolling Stone cover I'd saved. It only ended when that special something unclicked, and the four of us parted ways.

Scotty asked, "Do you know if Carlos and Jared...?"

"They're alive. They're both in the safe zone. I had breakfast with them this morning."

Based on his expression, this was a dizzying revelation. None of us had ever gotten together in the period between the end of the band and the end of the world.

"They can't wait to see you," I said. "So. Grab your stuff. The pilot's coming back soon."

"I don't need to be rescued," Scotty said.

Not something I had expected to hear. I figured he wouldn't like the other part of my plan, but had not anticipated that he would so much as drag his feet in getting out of that house. "What?"

He shrugged. "There's only two entrances, they're both blocked; I got enough food to last until this blows over."

I was stunned at how shortsighted he was being. Gently as I could, I said, "I don't think this is going to blow over."

"Sooner or later." He didn't look at me. He knelt, opened up a cardboard box on the floor and pulled out a bottle of lukewarm Everclear.

"Scotty, this is important. Really important. We need you."

"For what?"

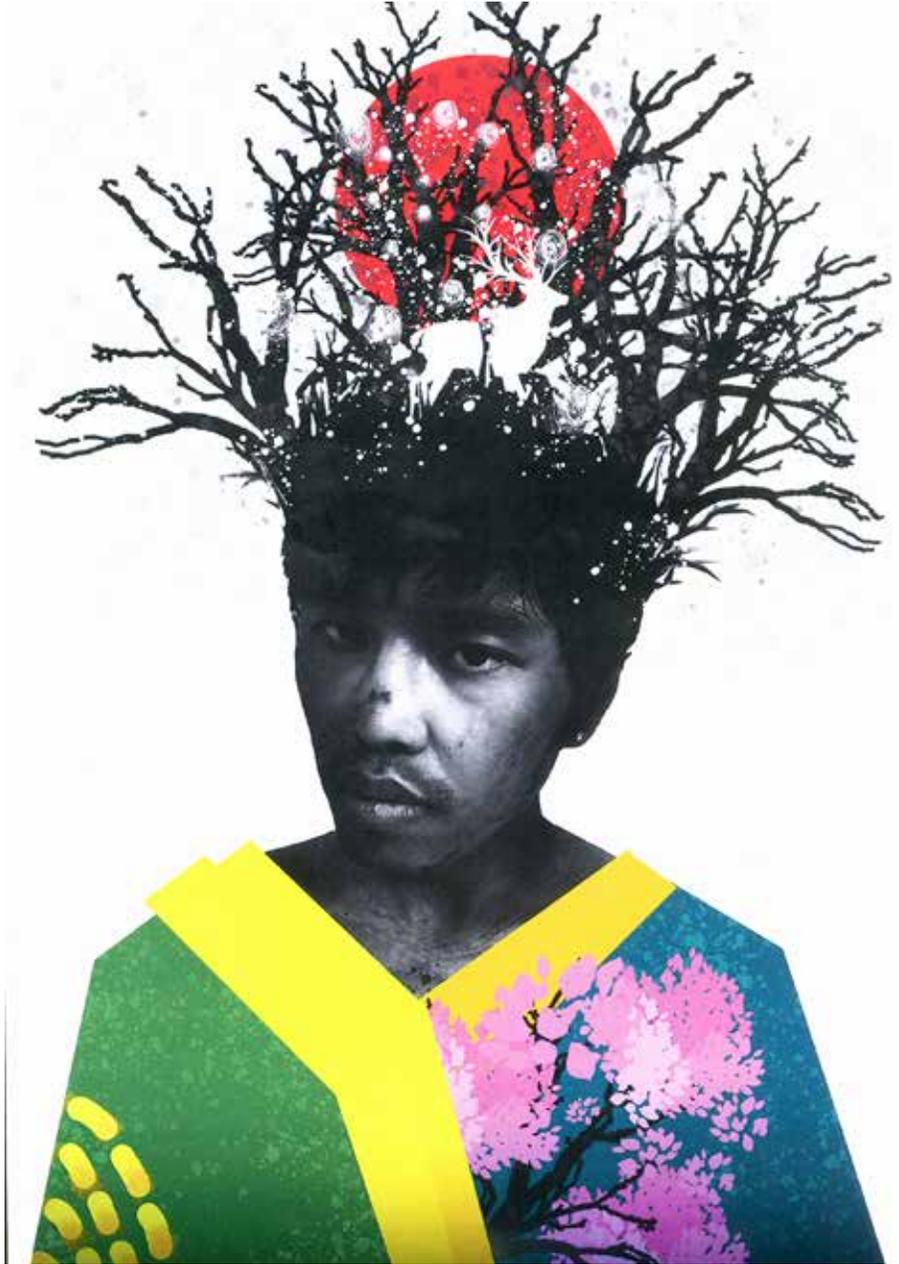
There was no turning back now. I had to tell him. "We're getting the band back together," I said.

Dead silence, except for the muffled moans of the dead, and the dull thumping of their hands beating endlessly on the walls and doors. Scotty finally made eye contact to gawk at me.

"Are you serious?"

"You know how people feel about us. It'll be a real morale boost for all the people in the safe zone. If we can get a broadcast going, people all over

Can't Miss (Self-Portrait)
Long Nguyen



the—”

“You’ve lost it,” said Scotty. “I’m not going anywhere.”

“Scotty, I’m not just trying to recapture our former glory or something.” (That was just an exciting fringe benefit.) “Doing this will improve people’s lives.”

“Improve people’s—? Look outside. It’s hopeless.”

“Oh,” I said, “so you do realize this isn’t going to be resolved anytime soon.”

“I’m—look, don’t put words in my...”

“Scotty, this—is—the—apocalypse. Why don’t you want to leave?”

“Shut up!” he shouted, and without warning he chucked his bottle at me. I ducked and it sailed across the room, trailing liquid, and struck the barricade. Specifically, it hit the wooden cabinet and shattered, splashing Everclear everywhere and knocking over some of those candles he’d lit, and the flames kissed the alcohol, and with almost the same ludicrous suddenness that had accompanied our rise to fame, the barricade started burning.

“Scotty! Scotty, do you have a fire extinguisher?”

“I—no, no I don’t!”

“Why the hell not?”

He looked dazed. “I threw it out the window at one of them!”

“Oh goddammit Scotty, that is so typical!”

The front doors were burning now, too. The smoke was driving us back, and we knew we would run into a wall of corpses if we went out the back door.

“Come on,” I said, hastening up the stairs. “Let’s get onto the roof. The pilot will—”

That was when I heard wood cracking, and the moaning got louder.

I turned around to see that the burning doors were already giving way, and that something that had once been a man was breaking through, not caring that its rotting body was catching fire and deteriorating further than it already had. An unimaginable stench assailed us, something like barbecuing maggoty week-old roadkill, as the zombie began shoving its way through the barricade.

I didn’t have to tell Scotty a second time to follow me up the stairs. The two of us ran breathlessly to his room and I opened the window, while downstairs, the living dead began beating their way through what was left of the barricade.

“Just another couple minutes,” I said. “Let’s block the door with your bed.”

“Wait,” Scotty said, and he grabbed the rifle and started back through the doorway.

“What are you doing?”

“The poster,” he said almost cryptically, hesitating just outside his room.

“What? You want to take—? Scotty that’s crazy, they’re already in the—”

“Ben took that picture.”

He seemed to realize that there was no way he would get it, with zombies pouring into the great hall. He retreated into the bedroom, tossed the rifle onto his bed, walked over to his Les Paul, and knelt in front of it. One would assume that he was feeling conflicted and defeated, especially because that constant moaning was getting closer and closer, but it looked like he was praying to the guitar gods.

“It’s time to go, man,” I said.

“Perry?”

“Yes?”

“Ben came back.”

If I had been trying to climb out the window at that moment, I would have slipped and fallen. “What?”

“I don’t know. Maybe they can remember a little bit.” He was almost choking on the words. “Because he—he came here. Like he came to see me. I didn’t even live here, back when I knew him. It’s like he knew where I was. We always used to hang out...”

I don’t know how Scotty could have recognized him, after so many years in the ground, but I was afraid to ask.

“And I killed him,” Scotty said quietly. “He OD’d because I wasn’t there for him, I was busy being a star, and then he came back and I blew his brains out.”

Only at this point did I understand. Scotty did know how hopeless it was, alone in this house. He just didn’t want to be rescued. No point in prolonging your life when you don’t feel like living. Some part of him wanted it to be all over.

He looked up at me and there were tears rolling down his face. “I never felt like a rock star, Perry. Never.” He looked at his guitar again.

“But you are.” It was the only thing I could think of. “You are a rock star, Scotty. And...”

And that was a pointless thing to say. When the house is ablaze and a swarm of monsters is coming for you, it doesn’t matter what you are.

I walked over to him and put a hand on his shoulder. The smell of smoke was getting stronger and the moaning was getting perilously close, but I had to shut those out for a moment. I thought about the time I had spent traveling to Alpha, running from what seemed like inescapable darkness, and it occurred to me that Scotty might have felt the same way in a wholly different situation, a time when it seemed to the rest of us that all was light.

“Can’t change what happened. It wasn’t your fault anyway. Bad things just happen, and you have to keep going. We all do now. That’s all there is.”

I don’t know where those words came from, but that’s what I said.

I could hear the helicopter coming back. I was heading to the bedroom door to close it, and about to tell Scotty again that we should get onto the roof, when the riot cop zombie, its uniform now singed from the flames, lurched into the room and grabbed my neck before I had time to arm myself.

It shouldn’t have been that strong, if it had been decaying for two months, but it was. Behind its faceplate I saw a loathsome, worm-filled mouth opening and closing, and I realized that it had stopped vocalizing because it realized that it was now close enough to its prey to bite, although it had not processed that there was a glass barrier that would prevent it from doing so. It started leaning in as if for a kiss, forcing me toward the floor. I tried and failed to scream as its gloved hands squeezed my throat.

Then Scotty screamed for me, a desperate and primordial rage-noise that might have been building up for a lifetime, as he took his Les Paul by the neck, lunged across the room, and swung the guitar straight into the zombie’s helmeted cranium. The creature grunted as its neck broke, its hands released me, and it collapsed to the floor with its head lolling to the side.

Scotty said nothing more to me in that house. Even now we don’t talk about that day very much—none of our new songs mention it at all. He helped me up, we climbed out the window armed with his guitar, and Jacqueline arrived. And we flew away, leaving the dead behind us as we had to, on the way to some kind of a future.

The Anniversary Gift

Alexandra Higgins

Katrina Nelson made a drink for her husband with the blood of a dead man still under her fingernails. She supposed he wouldn't mind. After all, her husband was expecting to come home and find her blood splattered across the kitchen floor. He clearly didn't have a problem with blood as long as it wasn't on his own hands.

Katrina and Wyatt's marriage was like a stained glass window: precious colored glass catching the light in just the right way, so beautiful you almost forgot it was a pretty lie made from jagged edges and wicked points. They were married young, young enough that Wyatt still had a baby face in their wedding pictures. By their third year of marriage, those full cheeks had sharpened into an angular mask she no longer recognized. There were no more lazy Sundays in bed, no more casual conversations over dinner or small smiles from Wyatt that she kept close to her heart.

She didn't know when the man she married stopped loving her, but she got the message this evening when she found a masked man standing in the kitchen. It was their third wedding anniversary. Wyatt skipped this year's gift—leather, like the briefcase she bought for him and wrapped in baby blue tissue paper—and went straight to year eleven. Steel.

The cut on her forearm burned while she made her husband a drink, shaking the cocktail mixer with all her might. She drained the dark liquid over ice, watching as it oozed down the glass and pooled at the bottom. For good measure, she spit in it, swirling the glass before adding a celery stalk.

A tic shuddered in her jaw when the front door opened and her husband's contented sigh floated down the hallway. He didn't bother to call out her name like he always did with a tinge of annoyance, like it was a chore to greet the woman he vowed to love until death.

She unclenched her jaw and plastered on a smile, the Bloody Mary sweating in her hand as her husband stepped into the kitchen.

"Hi, honey," she chirped.

Wyatt's gasp sounded suspiciously like a swallowed scream. She grinned when he flinched and knocked his head against the doorway with an audible crack. He quickly regained his composure, letting out a huff and tugging at the knot of his tie. When she took a step toward him, he backed up.

"Is everything okay?" she asked, sweet as saccharine.

"You—you scared me," he said, his voice hoarse.

Striving
Barbara Gelman



Of course she scared him. He was expecting her bloody corpse, not his wife dressed in her best dress and a slash of red lipstick. She took another step, forcing him into the dining room. He kept glancing around like he was hoping his hired grunt would jump out and finish the job.

“Have a seat,” she said, and he stumbled back into a chair. She handed him the glass and leaned down, letting her mouth brush against his ear in a sensuous promise. “I thought you’d like an after work drink.”

“I’m not—” He reconsidered his words when he saw her face. “Thank you, honey.”

Wyatt’s hand trembled as he brought the drink to his lips. She perched on the table before him and he glanced alarmingly at her rising hemline. He met her eyes over the rim of the glass and audibly swallowed.

He drank. The dark liquid slid down the sides of the glass, only half-full now.

Her smile gleamed like the wicked curve of a knife. “Do you like it, dear?”

“It’s...bitter.”

When he spoke, his teeth flashed behind his lips, coated in a red sheen.

“Ah, well.” She clicked her tongue. “That’s what I felt when I found a hitman in our kitchen this evening.”

Wyatt choked on his drink.

The masked man had rushed at Katrina with a knife. He capitalized on her shock, getting in a thin slice to her forearm when he was aiming for her heart. If she was anyone else, she’d be dead. That’s what Wyatt was counting on.

But her husband forgot he wasn’t the only one who changed during their marriage.

She pressed her heel to his throat before he could run, pinning him in his seat. “I took self-defense for years, Wyatt. They teach you to disarm your attacker.” She leaned closer, whispering, “I want you to know that when I drove the knife into his heart, I was thinking of you, my love.”

He gasped beneath her heel, his face turning an unflattering shade of purple. “What did you give me?”

“It’s probably not the blood,” Katrina mused, and Wyatt’s red-rimmed eyes went wide. “I’d bet what you’re feeling now is the rat poison.”

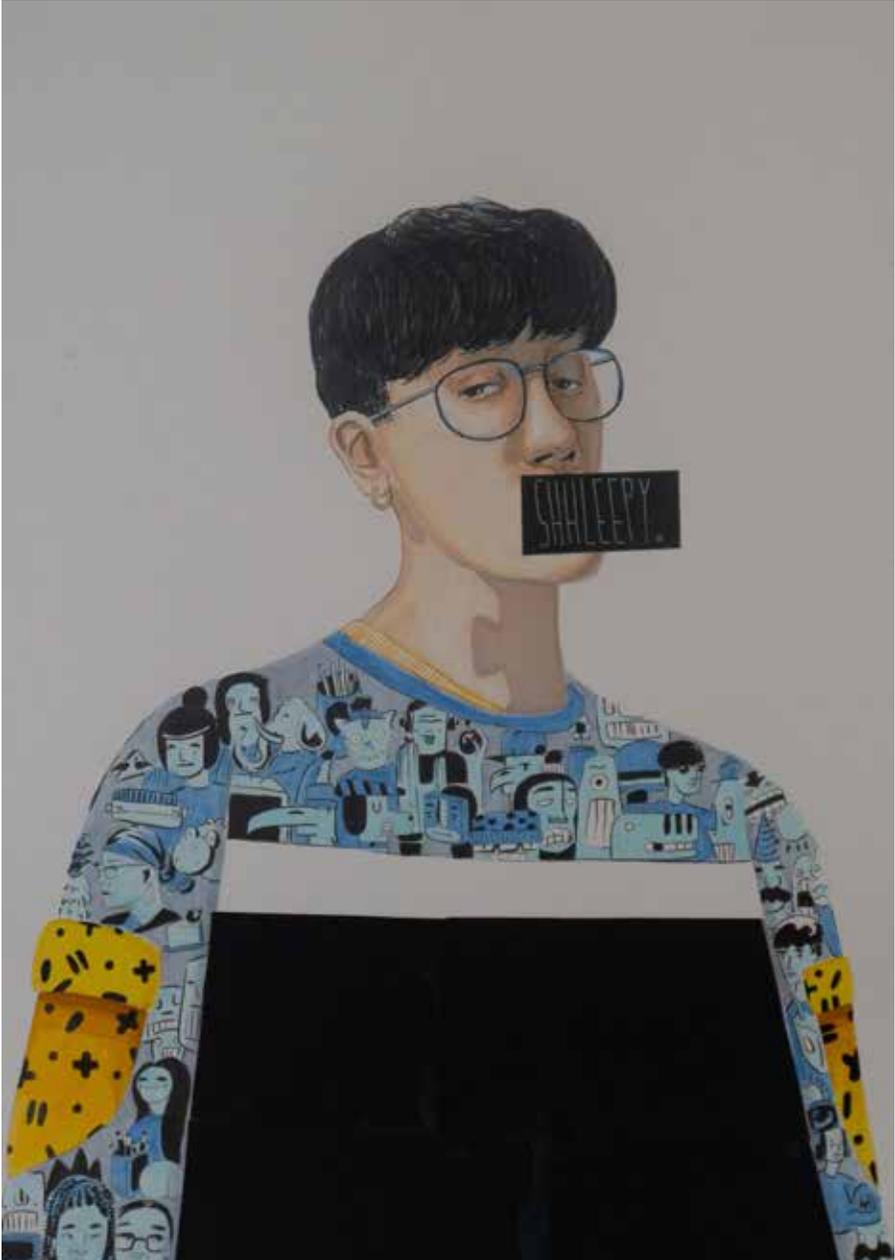
The perfect Bloody Mary was tomato juice, vodka, blood that should have been hers, and copious amounts of rat poison. The hitman’s blood stuck to Wyatt’s teeth, giving him a gruesome smile. Her husband would’ve called it dramatic if he could talk, but she called it poetic justice.

She didn’t want to hurt her husband, the man she swore to love and cherish, but he broke his vows to her. That was unforgivable.

Wyatt's breath came out in a gurgle. He slumped in his chair, eyes unblinking, chest still.

Katrina smiled. "Happy anniversary, darling."

shhleepy
Richard Soben



The Spell of Fear

Ruth Henderson

A long, long time ago, there lived in an old imperial city a wizard by the name of Marcus. Marcus the wizard was an old man, short and fat, with gray hair and a gray beard. He lived in a small but handsome mansion on the riverbank, not far from the great temples, baths, and forums, the circus, and the amphitheater. He was quite wealthy, although no one seemed to know where all his money came from. Indeed, no one was quite sure where he came from. No one knew he was a wizard. Everyone thought he was just a wealthy merchant, or maybe the heir to some unknown fortune. All they knew was that he had a peculiar reputation for always getting his way when he really wanted it, even with people of higher standing than his own. He was well-respected among the gentry, if not terribly well-liked.

Marcus had no family. His only companions in his mansion were three slaves, all young and beautiful but none in any way unusual, except for the strange fact that Marcus—who was hardly ever seen to have any business dealings at all—had gone to great lengths to obtain them. The first of these was a busty, pretty girl with long, curly red hair. Marcus had bet his entire fortune to win her from her former owner at a game of dice. She was called Camilla. The second was a tall, athletic, black-haired provincial who spoke in a strange accent. Marcus had spent more money than anyone knew he had outbidding several gladiator schools to acquire her. Her name was Ealasaïd. The last was a handsome, tan-skinned youth from somewhere in the east. Marcus had somehow single-handedly saved him from a shipwreck, in spite of the fact that as far as anyone knew, the old man had never set foot in so much as a rowboat before and would never do so again. He was known as Niko.

Camilla, Ealasaïd, and Niko were, to all appearances, ordinary slaves. Once the gossip had died down after Marcus's unusual acquisitions of each of them, no one gave them much notice. Only they, and Marcus himself, knew any different. When each of the three had come into Marcus's possession, he had told them that he was a wizard, and, after proving this to their astonishment, he had explained the reason for his interest in them.

"You," he had said to Camilla (the other two recalled similar speeches), "are very lovely, but that isn't why I wanted you. Lovely girls are everywhere, I don't need to gamble my fortune to get one. You, on the other hand—when I saw you, I sensed that you might have a rare gift for magic. I don't want you to be my lover. I want you to be my apprentice."

He had let her consider this for a moment in stunned silence, then continued. “If you’re not interested, then get out of my house. I have no use for you. I’m sure your old master would be happy to have you back. If you are, then stay. You will serve me, and in exchange I will teach you to be a wizard like me. If you truly do have the gift, that is. If not, no refunds.”

All three, of course, stayed.

Marcus was a demanding master, but not a brutal one. They served him, cleaned his house, and managed his day-to-day affairs. When they disappointed him, they were shouted at, not beaten. All three were quite well aware that, as slaves’ lives went, theirs were relatively easy. But several years had passed since they had entered his service, and Marcus had yet to teach them a shred of magic.

One day, late in the evening, Camilla was serving Marcus his dinner while Ealasaïd and Niko played music for him. It was an ordinary evening. Marcus rarely entertained guests. But the weather was fair and the old man was in a good mood, and Camilla, who was a little more audacious than the other two, judged that now was as safe a moment as any to ask the question that was on all three of the slaves’ minds.

“Master,” she said to Marcus, “when are you going to teach us magic?”

Marcus waved his hand at Ealasaïd and Niko to tell them to stop playing. They watched him closely. He considered Camilla for a moment, then answered.

“Tomorrow,” he said. “Tomorrow we will see if you can cast the simplest of spells.”

“What spell?” said Niko.

Marcus smiled. “The Spell of Fear. Who needs swords when you can strike terror into the heart of a man with the merest glance?”

All three of them stared at him. It sounded like much more powerful magic than they had been expecting to learn—indeed, it was much more powerful than anything Marcus had shown them before.

“How do you cast it, you are wondering?” Marcus went on. “It is simple. First, you must have total confidence that the spell will work, and second, you must have no fear in your own mind. Then, when you look into the eyes of your enemy, he will be terrified.”

He stood up abruptly. “Enough music for tonight,” he said, and before any of them could ask any of the hundreds of questions that had just occurred to them, he had drained his glass and left the room.

When Niko woke the next morning, he knew before he had opened his eyes that something was very wrong. The slave quarters of Marcus’s man-

sion were cold and drafty, but the air on his face was hot and oppressive. He sat up, heart beating fast, realizing as he did so that he had been lying not on his bed but on a straw-covered stone floor.

He was in a wide, torchlit dungeon with about a hundred other people, most already awake and all wearing only a cloth around their waist. He looked down. He was dressed the same way. Beside him, Ealasaïd and Camilla were still asleep.

He shook them awake.

Camilla gave a terrified squeak as she sat up and looked around.

“Where are we?” she asked in a very shaky voice.

“Below the Amphitheater,” said Ealasaïd, quietly. “I was here once, before Marcus bought me, when I was to be sold as a gladiator. We are—” she had to force herself to say it as her confusion started to turn to anger “—condemned to the arena.”

“Why?” said Camilla.

“To use the spell,” said Niko. “Marcus said we would see if we could.”

“But he said it wouldn’t work unless you had no fear!” said Camilla.

“How are we supposed to do it in the arena? I thought he meant we could try—”

The door to the dungeon opened. Camilla stopped talking. Two guards entered. One of them ordered the prisoners to form a line. They did so in silence, their expressions resigned. It seemed that everyone except the three slaves of Marcus already knew what to expect.

The prisoners filed slowly out of the dungeon into a long corridor. Another guard handed each prisoner an iron shortsword as they passed him. They accepted the swords wordlessly. Camilla, who had never held a weapon in her life, gripped hers tight with both hands. Ealasaïd tested the edge of her sword. It was quite dull. She wished she had her old spear. Niko just let his sword hang at his side. All three were scared. None of them believed Marcus’s spell could save them.

At last, they climbed a long flight of stairs and stepped out into the blazing sunlight in the arena. A dozen gladiators on horseback stood at the opposite end, armed with javelins, spears, and shields.

“What’s happening?” said Camilla. She had to shout for the others to hear her over the crowd.

“A contest,” said Ealasaïd. “To see which of them kills the most.”

“What are these for, then?” said Camilla, waving her sword around.

“A bit of extra challenge,” said Ealasaïd, derisively.

Before they could say any more, the gladiators charged and everything turned to chaos. Prisoners ran in every direction. Gladiators cut them down. Shouts of pain and fear drowned out the cheers of the crowd. Someone knocked Niko over. He picked himself up and looked around, brandishing

his sword, vaguely hoping to make eye contact with one of the gladiators, and then a javelin struck him in the back and he collapsed, flat on his face, in the sand. Camilla screamed, dropped her sword, and ran to him, tried to turn him over, looked up to see a gladiator charging at her just before he ran her through with his spear and she fell in front of his horse. Ealasaïd watched the horse trample Camilla under its hooves as the gladiator tore the spear out of her body and charged away. She was angry. Marcus could have seen prisoners slaughtered in the arena any day. Why had he gone to such lengths to acquire Camilla, Niko, and herself, kept them in his house for so long, given them the false hope of magical training, only to throw them away like this? Was he even a wizard at all, or just a degenerate, sadistic old man who happened to know a few parlor tricks?

As these questions went through Ealasaïd's mind, she looked around. Bodies were everywhere. Blood was everywhere. The gladiators were still charging around the arena, chasing down the survivors. Ealasaïd was breathing hard, drenched in sweat, heart pounding, but, she realized, only because she was angry.

She was not afraid.

One of the gladiators caught sight of her, wheeled his horse around to face her, leveled his spear at her chest, charged. She didn't move as he spurred the horse on. Her anger was starting to turn to exhilaration. She knew the spell was going to work. When the gladiator was just a few yards from her, his eyes met hers. He dropped his spear and hauled back on the reins, desperately trying to turn the horse away from her. The horse, surprised, reared onto its hind legs and threw the gladiator off. He landed on his back with a crash.

The arena was suddenly still. The rest of the prisoners were all dead or dying, and the other gladiators had all stopped and turned to watch.

Ealasaïd walked up to the gladiator as his horse galloped away. He scrambled to his feet. He was a huge man, a head taller than Ealasaïd and three times as massive, perfectly capable of breaking her neck with his bare hands. He stared at her for a brief moment, then gave a terrified scream and ran as hard as he could away from her.

His spear was in her hand. She did not remember picking it up. She raised her arm and threw the spear after the fleeing gladiator. It hit him between the shoulder blades and he fell on his face, dead.

Ealasaïd retrieved the spear and looked around the arena. The crowd, which up to that moment had been screaming louder than ever, fell suddenly silent. She felt the corner of her lip curl into a half-smile as she looked each of the remaining gladiators in the eye in turn. Each one turned and fled, desperate to get away from the half-naked girl standing alone in the arena holding a bloodstained spear.

“Marcus!” Ealasaïd shouted as she slammed open the door to her master’s mansion. “Marcus, you—”

She stopped as she caught sight of him. She was sure the man before her was the same Marcus she had known, except that he was no longer an old man. He was young, blond, and clean-shaven, still rather short and stocky but very handsome.

“Marcus the Younger,” said Marcus. “Marcus the Elder died while you were away and left everything to his long-lost son. Very convenient. Now, what were you saying?”

“So you can make yourself young again,” said Ealasaïd, scornfully. “What about Camilla and Niko? Can you bring them back to life as well?”

“They were not important,” said Marcus.

“They were my friends!” said Ealasaïd.

“They were not wizards,” said Marcus. “I am not surprised. You are the first one I have found in nine centuries of searching.”

“Nine centuries?” Ealasaïd was taken aback.

“Yes,” said Marcus. “When you have seen as many ordinary men come and go as I have, you will understand what I meant when I said Camilla and Niko were not important. Now, start packing up. We are going on a journey.”

“I am not your slave anymore!” said Ealasaïd. “The power you have given me makes me invincible!”

She looked into his eyes. She was not scared of him, and she was absolutely sure it would work, but when he met her gaze, he only chuckled.

“You have a lot to learn,” he said. “The Spell of Fear is easy to cast. Not so easy to block.”

Ealasaïd screamed. The little man standing before her was suddenly more terrifying than anything she could ever have imagined. She staggered backwards, crashed into the door, fell, picked herself up, and ran, still screaming, out of the house and into the street, just as desperate to get away from Marcus as the gladiator in the arena had been to get away from her.

Then, the fear disappeared. Whether it was because she was no longer in Marcus’s presence or because he had somehow stopped the spell, she couldn’t tell. She composed herself and returned to the house. Marcus was waiting for her.

“Someday,” he said, “I foresee you will become a being more powerful than I could ever hope to be. Until then, start packing. This city is no place to teach magic.”

Ealasaïd, still too shaken to speak, nodded. She turned away from Marcus and went to prepare for their departure.

Samota
Monica Sivak



The Disappearance of Brie Emerson

Ethan Christy

Margret Emerson was alone when she died. It was in the afternoon on a cold winter day. Her youngest son, Nestor, was doing the dishes in the kitchen, trying to keep himself busy. He didn't find her for another hour or so, as she had mentioned many times that she hated being awoken from her naps. She looked so peaceful in her bed, wrapped in layers of sheets, sunlight shining through the shutters and catching the swarming dust in its beams. Nestor had moved in three years prior in order to watch over his mother in her waning years, cooking for her, cleaning for her, and keeping her company – though she preferred to be alone. Often, she spent her hours in silence, sitting in front of the shrine she made in memory of Brie, her youngest daughter, who went missing twenty years prior. It was a simple shrine, consisting of a school photo and a couple of candles on either side of it on a table in the living room. They were old candles; the wax had spilled over and hardened, forming tear-like drops down the edges. Nestor tried to avoid that shrine when possible. There was a tense formality between them that never abated right up to her dying day. She was a woman of few words, and she frequently rebuffed his attempts to make conversation. Once, Nestor tried to broach the subject of Brie.

“She was a lovely girl,” his mother had said, distantly.

“Mom, I wanted to say, I'm sorry,” Nestor had said through his mounting sorrow. “For what I...”

“Isn't the weather wonderful today?” That was all she would ever say on the matter. He knew why she didn't want to discuss it with him. She never quite forgave him for the role he played in Brie's disappearance. Eventually Nestor gave up trying and resigned himself to idly passing the days. Standing there staring at her lifeless form, he knew he would regret that resignation for the rest of his life, and wondered if she felt the same way on some level.

The first thing Nestor did after his mother's death was start calling his siblings and informing them of the news. Rebecca, his eldest sister, was the only one of them to ask how he was feeling about the situation.

“You two have been really close lately,” she said. “I hope you're feeling alright.”

“Yeah, no, I'm feeling alright. We weren't really that close anyways. I mean we didn't really talk much, you know, towards the... end there. You know what she was like.”

“Still, I can only imagine how you must be feeling. I mean, first the divorce and now this. It must be awful.” There was pity in her soft voice.

“Really, I’m fine. I’m hanging in there.”

“Let me know if you need to talk to me. I’m always here for you.” She didn’t mean it, of course. Nestor wouldn’t call her, and she didn’t count on him doing it either.

“How are you holding up, Rebecca?” Nestor forced out a polite question; it felt rude to talk about himself this much.

“I’m hanging in there. Miguel just started college, and I’m so proud of him,” she said.

“That’s great.” Nestor felt a pang of jealousy. Miguel was Rebecca’s son. Her pride and joy. Nestor never had any kids; he couldn’t bring himself to. It was one of the many things he and his ex-wife fought over.

The funeral, which Nestor planned without the help of his sister despite her efforts to lend a hand, was held at a quaint funeral home called Shady Springs in the woods, off the beaten path. The secluded nature of the place gave it a private, intimate sort of feeling. The inside was rustic, with its wooden archways and homely decorations, rugs, and soft sofas. Just the way Margret liked.

“It’s a little small, don’t you think?” said Murphy, glancing around the reception hall while fiddling with one of the tables to see if it was wobbly. He was Nestor’s oldest brother. He was a large and imposing figure, a former athlete. He was stuffed into a suit that he probably thought flattered his build.

“That’s what I like about it. Mom always liked to keep things simple, even the important stuff.”

“Yeah, but I think you might have over-done it a bit. I mean, is it even big enough to accommodate everyone?” He gestured around the whole building.

“We don’t have that big a family. It’s just gonna be us and a few other relatives.”

Murphy paused. “I just don’t see why I couldn’t have been consulted,” he said, a little quietly.

“Because I was the only one taking care of her in the end,” said Nestor, turning from his brother.

Nestor went over to Rebecca, who was talking to a very bored looking Casey, the middle child of the family, looking very underdressed next to Rebecca. While Rebecca wore her best black dress, Casey wore dark jeans and a small blazer. Rebecca was discussing the specifics of some case she was working on while Casey had her eyes on basically anything else in the room that wasn’t her sister.

She saw Nestor walking over to them and waved an awkward, passive wave. Nestor returned a sort of half-smile that she didn’t really know what to

do with. Rebecca continued talking about her highly successful career in law. Casey, whose painting career was going nowhere, listened with the demeanor of a hostage desperately placating the unhinged ramblings of her captor.

Nestor perceived the hint and interjected, “Hey, Casey, can I talk to you about something?”

“Oh,” she said, picking up on his intentions, “of course, anything. Sorry, Rebecca.”

“It’s no trouble,” said Rebecca, “I’ll tell you more about it later.” She smiled an innocent smile. Casey and Nestor walked off to a secluded corner away from the other mourners. She leaned against a wall and said, “Hey, thanks. God, the mouth on her, huh?”

“Yeah,” he said nervously, “she certainly has a lot to say. About how great her life is – and pretty much nothing else.” He immediately felt bad about saying that. He didn’t like to speak ill of his family, at least not out loud.

“She just likes to rub it in our faces. Look at us, huh. The family fuck-ups.” Casey said with a bitter smirk. “I bet mom was so proud of her.”

“She was,” said Nestor. “She talked about Rebecca and Murphy all the time.”

“Did she ever even mention me?” she said, crossing her arms.

“Not really, I’m afraid. If it’s any consolation, she didn’t really care for me either. I could tell he really wanted Murphy to be the one taking care of her.”

“Figures. Ugh, this family,” Casey said, turning her eyes to the ceiling with a weary expression. “That’s why I stayed away once I moved out. Brie had the right idea running away like that. I wonder how she’s doing now.”

Nestor tensed up at the mention of Brie. He hastily changed the subject. “So how are things going with you?”

“For me? Things could be better. At least financially. The arts aren’t exactly a lucrative field these days, or ever really. But I’ll be okay. I’m about to move in with Liz, so she’ll be there to help me out,” said Casey.

“I see. So you and Liz, is that official?” Nestor was always nervous discussing this stuff.

“It’s been official for years, Nestor. I told you all about it. We just held off on moving in together for practical reasons.”

“But now... it’s just, when Natalie and I moved in together it changed everything between us. We weren’t ready for it at all. In hindsight it was a sign that things weren’t going to work out between us.”

“Wasn’t Nat your first girlfriend? That’s just happens when you rush to marry the first girl that looks at you. I’ve been down this road before. Me and Liz will be fine.”

“Yeah well, whatever. I’m happy for you.”

Casey muttered a small “thanks,” and they both stood there awk-

wardly. Little by little, more and more of the family began to arrive and soon the service had begun. They poured into the main hall and lined up in the pews. The number attending was small as Margret had few relatives and fewer friends. Nestor was the first to give his eulogy, keeping it short, simple, and sweet. He shed no tears. None of her children did. Only Murphy, the oldest and most beloved of her children had any trouble delivering his speech through the hoarseness of his throat.

When the funeral was over and Margret was buried, her four children decided to visit their old home, the home they were raised in, before leaving. They all gathered in the living room by the fireplace. For a while the only sound came from the crackling of the fire, which cast a flickering orange light into the dimly lit room. Murphy stood by the shrine to Brie on the table in the corner of the living room. Cracked pools of multi-colored candle wax had hardened on the table's surface over the years.

"You alright there, Murphy?" said Rebecca, breaking the silence.

"It's just not fair," he whispered.

"It's okay," said Rebecca. "I miss her too."

"I can't let go of her. Every day I ask myself why she ran away, if I could have done something, where is she now? Is she safe?" His voice grew hoarse with sorrow. "What was it about us that drove her away?" His heavy shoulders heaved with emotion.

"Whoa, hold on," said Rebecca. "We didn't drive her away. It wasn't anybody's fault."

"That's not good enough. I don't want your platitudes. I want answers." Murphy kept his voice low, suppressing the urge to shout in the home.

"Hey," said Casey, standing up and facing Murphy, looking like a house cat trying to face down a lion, "You're not the only one who misses her. We all want answers but there just aren't any."

Nestor hunched over in his chair, elbows on his knees, chin resting on his folded hands, eyes staring into space. He began bobbing his leg up and down anxiously. Murphy's severe gaze had turned on him now.

"Nestor, you've been awfully quiet. Do you have anything to say?" Murphy asked.

"Nothing I haven't already said twenty years ago," Nestor said. "I'm not doing this again. If I knew anything else I would have said it."

"I just want to know why." There it was. "Why did she run away and why the fuck did you help her?"

"Murphy, drop it!" said Casey.

"Why should I? He let her leave! He helped her and then didn't tell anyone until it was too late to find her. Now he comes back all these years later, cozies up with mom and suddenly he's the favorite. He planned her funeral! How is that fair?" He gestured wildly.

Self-Portrait
Julia Smith



“You are acting like a fucking child, Murphy!”

“I don’t need to take this from you! You disowned the family! What are you even doing here? You didn’t show up for dad’s funeral. What’s changed now, huh?”

“Go to hell!” Casey stormed off, “Forget this loser, Nestor.” She slammed the door on her way out, shaking the whole house.

“You should’ve stayed gone!” Murphy shouted after her.

A long, anxious silence followed. Murphy wouldn’t even look at Nestor, and Nestor avoided Murphy’s gaze as well. Murphy sat down, head pointed to the floor.

Eventually he said, “I just want to know why you helped her.”

“What do you want me to say?” said Nestor, leaning back and watching the fire. “I helped her because she needed me. I was the only one who listened to her.”

“Why didn’t you call me when mom died?”

“I tried. You wouldn’t answer.”

“That’s why I had to call you, remember?” said Rebecca.

Murphy didn’t seem to have an answer to that. He let out a deep sigh, and slowly left the house, out the same door as Casey.

Nestor and Rebecca were left alone in silence, the fire dimming, threatening to burn out and leave them in darkness. Rebecca kept shooting sympathetic looks to Nestor, but his eyes were still pointed elsewhere, out the window and toward the driveway.

She said, “Nestor, I’m sorry about him. You didn’t deserve any of that.”

Without looking at her, Nestor said, “Did I ever tell you why my wife left me?”

“You never seemed like you wanted to talk about it. Why are you bringing that up all of a sudden?”

His eyes still fixed to some point outside. “She told me that she couldn’t stand to be with someone who hated themselves as much as I do. She said it was suffocating. Can you believe that?”

“Nestor,” she hesitated, “I’m sorry. I have to go.”

Nestor still didn’t look at her as she got up to leave. His eyes stayed fixed on that point outside the window. He was alone; the fire beside him began to die out, casting only a faint glow in the room. When the fire went out completely and he was in the darkness, he still kept his eyes on that spot in the driveway. It was the spot where Brie had left, the last place he had ever seen her. In the shadows, phantoms of the past danced in the corners of his vision. Rebecca and Brie playing in the hallway. Murphy straightening his necktie in front of the mirror before heading out for his first day of college. His mom, waiting patiently for her soup as Nestor prepared it in the kitchen. The

explosive argument between Brie and their father. Their mom crying passively in the living room in the chair directly in front of him. Brie pulling out of the driveway in a car belonging to a friend of hers, waving to Nestor from the window. He watched this memory play out over and over again in his head. He watched from every conceivable angle until it was no longer a memory to him, but an idea. A free form story he wrote to himself again and again, changing a little each time.

Now he saw it in reverse, Brie pulling into the driveway in her friend's run down junk heap of a car. Headlights illuminated his face through the window. She got out, looking the same as she did the day she left, wearing the old denim jacket she stole from Murphy's closet, not looking a day older than she did when she left. She strode slowly, casually, to the front door and let herself in. Now she stood in the doorway, silhouetted against blinding light behind her, cold air rushing in and chilling Nestor to the bone. He felt her gaze, though he could not see her face.

She said, in her same old voice, "Hi Nestor. I told you I'd be back."

Nestor's head began to swim and he felt dizzy with all the phantoms rushing around him, "Where have you been?"

"Living my life. The life I chose for myself, not the one they wanted for me. I wouldn't have lived if I had stayed."

Behind him, the argument raged on. She had screamed something about wanting to be a singer. Her father, towering over her with his massive frame not dissimilar to his eldest son's, had screamed back something about not raising a whore. In front of him, his mother still cried.

"That white picket fence with a husband and kids shit. It just wasn't for me. I couldn't take it anymore." She came in through the door, her face still obscured in shadow. She stopped at the shrine, picked up the picture and examined it. "I had no future here." Wax began to pour from the candles, spilling colorful globs over the table and onto the floor, enveloping the legs of Nestor's chair.

"I missed you."

"I missed you too." She sat down beside him. The room was pitch black but for the light streaming in with the cold air through the front door. "Mom missed me too apparently," she said, looking at the picture.

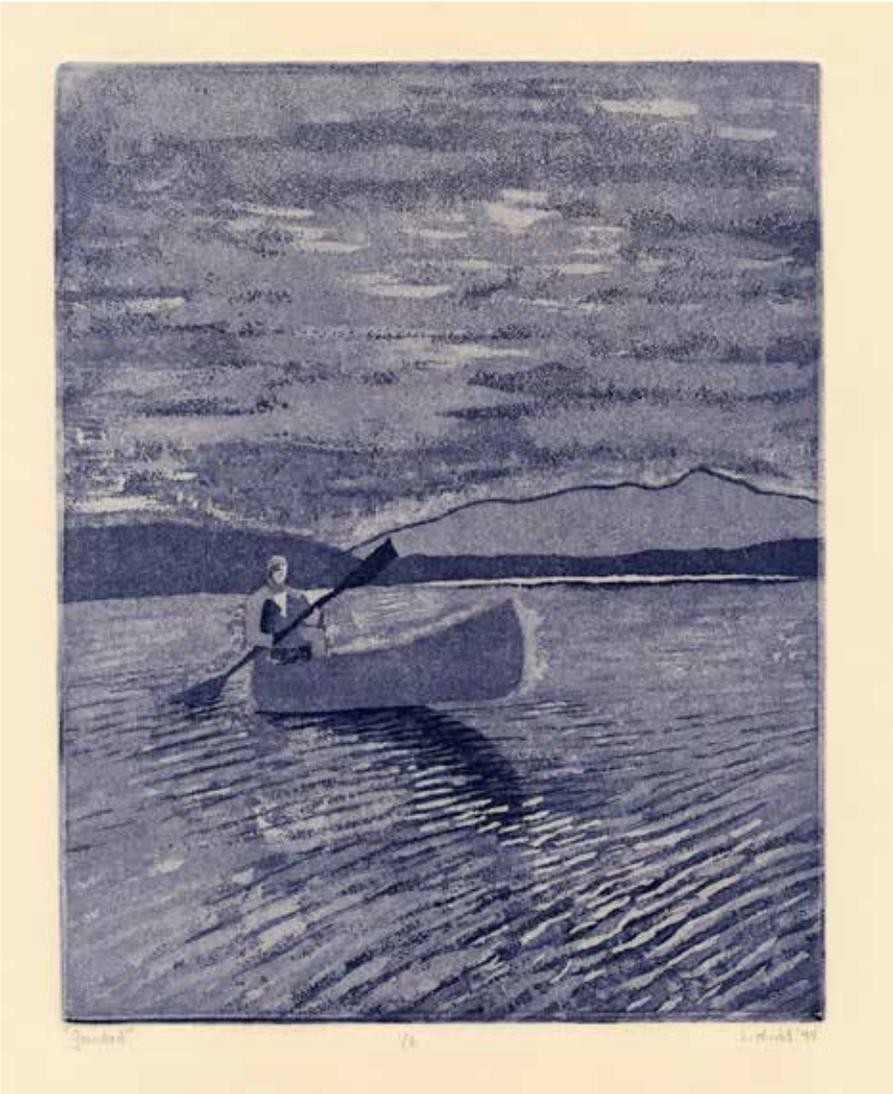
"If you came for the funeral," said Nestor, voice low and soft, "you're too late. The body was buried hours ago."

"No," said Brie, setting the picture down and standing up, "I'm here because I owe you one. You helped me escape this hell hole when I had no one else to turn to." She held her hand out to him. He looked at her for a moment. He was just able to make out her bright hazel eyes smiling in the darkness. He took her hand and stood up, freeing his feet from the growing pool of hard wax. Together they walked out the door into the blinding light

outside. He saw what Brie had seen when she left: the future. He saw the many paths laid before him like strands of thread on an unraveling sweater, pulled apart by an unseen hand in the dark.

“Now it’s your turn.”

Granddad
Lincoln Mudd
In Memoriam, 1958-2018



Contributors

Jennifer Arevalo is an art student at Montgomery College.

Mariza June Avila graduated from Montgomery College in Fall 2018 with her A.A. in Art. After receiving her Bachelor's, she hopes to establish a studio practice involving graphic design, printmaking, and digital photography. More of her work can be found at marizajune.com.

Ethan Christy has been writing for as long as he can remember, but it wasn't until he reached middle school that he realized that it was something he wanted to do seriously. Since then, he has been writing constantly, leaving piles of notebooks and computer documents filled with his personal projects. This will mark the first time any of his writing has been published. He grew up in Lake-wood, California, and has been attending Montgomery College since 2017.

Larry Cole is a Studio Art major at Montgomery College following a career in Transportation Engineering, most recently at the Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission.

Wilny Edouard is a Haitian American and a father of three boys. Mr. Edouard has written poems in three languages: Haitian Creole, French, and English. Poetry has been a passion since his adolescence, and he won a first prize in a poetry contest during his senior year in high school in Port-de-Paix, Haiti. Mr. Edouard earned a Bachelor's Degree of Philosophy from Ecole Normale Superieure (ENS) of Haiti State University (UEH), an Associate's Degree of Arts from Montgomery College (MC), Takoma Park and Bachelor's Degree of Arts from the University of Maryland (UMD), College Park. Subsequently, he gives credit to both institutions, MC and UMD, for stimulating his vivid interest to write poems in the American English language because of his exposure to the poems of Maya Angelou, Emily Dickinson, Langston Hughes, and so forth.

Amanuel Fetene is studying Computer Science at Montgomery College, TP/SS campus. He currently designs graphics and websites and edits videos.

Barbara Gelman has created sculptures in several media over a period of twenty six years, using a Representative style. Drawing on life experiences, reactions

to the impact of world events, and studies in Biblical text, she creates a sculptural narrative. The artist's work has been exhibited at the Jewish Community Center of Greater Washington in Rockville, in the Senior Perspectives Show for the past ten years, and in Student Art Shows in Montgomery College, Takoma Park, over a period of ten years.

Virginia Hartman, 2019 Pushcart Prize nominee, has published work in the *Hudson Review*, *Alaska Quarterly Review*, *Potomac Review*, *Beltway Poetry Quarterly*, *Common Ground Review*, *The Washingtonian*, and *Delmarva Review*, among others. She is the co-editor of the literary anthology *A More Perfect Union: Poems and Stories about the Modern Wedding* (St. Martin's Press) and is on the creative writing faculty at George Washington University.

Ruth Henderson was born and raised in Montgomery County and has been a part-time student at Montgomery College ever since high school. Ruth has been writing and cartooning for fun ever since she was little, but this will be her first published story.

Alexandra Higgins is a college student majoring in English. When she is not juggling schoolwork, you can find her working on her latest young adult novel, watching tennis, or scoping out the latest true crime documentary.

Zaiasia Jones grew up between Prince George's County, MD and Brooklyn, NY. This has greatly influenced her identity and her art. She considers her painting a distinct representation of how the environmental conditions in those two places influenced her understanding of self.

Nneoma Kanu is a 21-year-old multidisciplinary artist and college student. With an artistic foundation developed through writing from a young age, her aim is for her poetry to highlight the plights of Nigerian women, and women in general. Constantly exploring new mediums, she is on a journey to share the truths of those who have found their voices historically ignored

Byrne Hackett Kelly began writing poetry in the 9th grade, attending the Hun School in Princeton, NJ. He kept a journal throughout his three years at Brussels American High School where he was also the editor of the school's "newspaper." While attending Williams College, MA studying Art & Environmental Studies, he took Creative Writing to satisfy his English requirement. He began hosting poetry readings at the Takoma Park Community Center (Jamie Raskin was among the readers). After remarrying in 2011, he, and all of three members of his new family, continue to write poetry.

Triptych, Lab B
Ian White



David Mike Legrand was born in Port-au-Prince, Haiti in November 1995. He chose to study sociology. Due to political instability in his country, he had to drop out after two semesters to join the art school in his country, which in turn was closed two months later. He moved to the U.S. in October 2017. He is living in Maryland where he is working towards his Associate's Degree of Fine Art at Montgomery College.

David Linehan took a poetry class at Montgomery College.

Sydney March, a native of Kingston Jamaica, is a poet, essayist, musician, journalist and educator, and recipient of grants from The DC Commission on the Arts and Humanities and Poets and Writers. An alumnus of the Johns Hopkins Graduate Program in Writing, Sydney is currently an instructor of English and Writing at Montgomery College and a contributing editor for *The Sligo Journal*.

Maria Paz Pereira Martinez took a poetry class at Montgomery College.

Professor Lincoln Mudd (1958-2018) taught all levels of sculpture as well as foundations, design, and printmaking. Professor Mudd was born in Washington, DC, and grew up in Montgomery County, MD. He began attending Montgomery College in Takoma Park as a part-time student in 1994. Completing his Associate's Degree, he decided to continue his studies full time at the University of Maryland, College Park where he was introduced to metal casting and foundry operation. In addition to studio art, he also did work in creative writing (poetry) and comparative literature. He earned his Bachelor's Degree in Studio Art as well as a Citation in Comparative Studies in spring 2000. After earning his MFA in Sculpture in 2002 Lincoln worked as an Adjunct Instructor at University of Maryland, Montgomery College, and Prince George's Community College. In 2006, he became a full-time faculty member of Montgomery College. Beginning in 2012 he was an Associate Professor of Art. From 2014-2016 he served as Department Chair for Visual and Performing Arts.

Julianne Murphy is a first-year student at Montgomery College. She is a previous art student who enjoys reading and writing poetry, as well as exploring creative writing.

Long Nguyen is a Montgomery College student from Vietnam. He is thinking deeply about traveling to Japan because of its unique culture.

Kathleen O'Toole is the current Poet Laureate of Takoma Park, MD. Her

latest collection, *This Far*, was released by Paraclete Press in October 2019. Her other books include two chapbooks, *Practice* and *Waking Hours*, and a previous full-length collection, *Meanwhile. In the Margins*, which she co-authored with three other MD women poets, was released in 2017. Find her work at kathleenotoolepoetry.com.

Rafael Rodriguez moved to the United States in 2013 so that he could find a safe place far from violence. Two years later he found his love for art, and the artwork that he created now not only reflects his life as an individual but also the lives of many other young immigrants in this country who work hard towards their dreams.

Asa Rogers is a photojournalist based in Washington, D.C. who specializes in portrait, sports, landscape and event photography. Asa is also an adventure cyclist, with more than 6,000 miles across the country under his tires. He strongly believes in public transport as well as other non automotive methods of getting around.

Esther Schwartz-McKinzie teaches Composition, Literature and Women's Studies at Montgomery College as a full-time faculty member. "Cephalopod" draws on a childhood memory of a shark stranding, as well as on Greek mythology, especially Poseidon's wrath at certain individuals who harmed his offspring. She lives with her family in Silver Spring, Maryland, and she visits the ocean whenever she can.

Monica Sivak's life consists of animals, art, and early childhood/special education. Art has played an important role in Monica's life since childhood, and she is thrilled to be exploring new avenues through Graphic Design.

Julia Smith is an art student at Montgomery College.

Richard Soben is a Cambodian illustrator that resides in Maryland while attending Montgomery College as a Fine Arts major. By 2020, he plans on attending a four-year institution to receive his BFA in Illustration. Art has been a tool to express his enjoyment for creating and communicating. He mainly explores issues with identity in correlation with being Asian-American. He has exhibited in establishments such as Joe's Movement Emporium, Montpelier Art Center, and the Montgomery College Student Show.

Joann Everly Tell resides in Silver Spring where she studies painting and photography at Montgomery College. She holds a Bachelor of Arts degree in American history from the University of Pennsylvania.

Jeremiah Towle is a writer and performer based in Silver Spring. He has been a child actor, an employee of the Audubon Naturalist Society, and an intern at *Potomac Review*.

Ella Valenstein is a young contemporary artist based in Takoma Park and Chevy Chase, Maryland who balances her time making art at Montgomery College with work as a pediatric nurse. Her artwork focuses on alternative and psychedelic perceptions of reality and invites the viewer to look inward. She explores this idea through a variety of media, most recently working with photography and illustration.

Alfonso Vicencio (Fonz the Space Cadet) was born in Washington D.C. He will receive his BFA from Maryland Institute College of Art in 2021 and his MAT in 2022. Fonz has exhibited in the District of Columbia Arts Center, the National Museum of Women in the Arts, the S. Dillon Ripley Center International Gallery, and the University of Louisiana at Lafayette. Fonz lives and works in Prince George's County, Maryland

Judy Walsh-Mellett lives in Mount Rainier, Maryland with her husband with whom she has raised three children. They are now happy grandparents. Judy is an obsessed organic gardener and loves singing. Most recently Judy has begun welcoming guests to *Still Place: An Urban Retreat* in her home and garden.

Ann Weisgerber is a proud alum of Montgomery College and is currently attending the University of Maryland, Baltimore Campus, graduating with a bachelor's in Spanish in 2021. In her free time, she enjoys writing (obviously), playing guitar, singing, and watching the rabid squirrels run around campus.

Ian White was a graphic design student enrolled in the Montgomery College School of Art and Design. He is a born and raised DC native that took a drawing class on a whim in 2017 and fell in love with the visual arts. After experimenting with traditional media, he now works digitally to create vector illustration usually in an isometric perspective. He has transferred to the Maryland Institute College of Art to continue to pursue his love for graphic design, illustration and conceptual design. .

