

# The Lighter

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T H E L I G H T E R

All submissions remain anonymous throughout the selection process. *The Lighter* welcomes submissions from all undergraduate, graduate, and law students of Valparaiso University, regardless of race, gender, religious creed, or sexual orientation. The Editor assumes responsibility for the contents of this publication. The views expressed in these works do not represent any official stance of Valparaiso University.



VOLUME 66  
ISSUE 2

T H E L I G H T E R

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# EDITOR'S NOTE

To my fellow literary lovers and art appreciators,

This was an odd semester, filled with grieving all the memories I felt (as a senior) I would be missing out on as campus suddenly closed: remaining time with my other organizations, my last selection committee meetings, my last coffeehouse, and graduation became faded fantasies as email cancellations rolled in one by one. Social distancing and quarantine parameters meant half this semester was spent in solitude, missing my friends and family. But, as the name of this organization symbolically suggests, *The Lighter* provided so much solace during this time. And as you flip through this magazine, I hope it can do the same for you.

Every time someone asked me about *The Lighter's* fate I almost always had the same thing to say: "As long as I am legally allowed, we are going to print." The show must go on, art must persist, *The Lighter* must continue. If I had to print out the submissions myself and staple them together as a zine, I would have. Thankfully, through the work and determination of many, I'm proud to share this issue with you as is. My home printer is no doubt extremely grateful as well.

So, meet the Spring 2020 issue of *The Lighter*, Hortencia. Despite the cloudy days that lingered over her growth, her bloom is a beautiful one. This issue is named after my grandmother, who has never hesitated in her support for my passions. She, along with the rest of my family, is relentless in love and encouragement for everything I do. As this is my last issue, I thought it was fitting to name it after her. And, after a quick online search, I was also delighted to learn that "Hortencia" also means "garden." How perfect!

Hortencia holds everything I truly love about a literary magazine like *The Lighter*. Passionate expressions of raw emotion are found in "Lament for Lost Voices," "Love Song From Quarantine," and "IS IT LOVE?" Other pieces like "That would be an even better name for a band: The final chapter of an epic saga" made me laugh and brought closure I didn't even know I was waiting for. The mundane is celebrated in poems like "Routine" and "cereal box morning" while, pages later, medieval fantasy "Of a Knight in Shabby Armor" peeks out between glimpses into an impossible, star-studded future with the "Space Age" pieces.

*The Lighter* is my absolute favorite part of Valparaiso University. This organization has given me so much during my time as the Editor in Chief, and I've hoped to return the favor as best as I can. I'm so excited to share her with you, and I can't wait to see what Rebecca does with this magazine next semester. *Via Incensa!*

Yours in *Lighter* love,






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Meet Hortencia.  
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## Pyrografie

You hand me a warm five. The chipped horses  
on the carousel trot around behind you, last light  
purpling their infinite loop. With a quick strike, I ignite  
a match, then a sparkler. My hand draws in a Morse

code as I begin with your forehead – a dashed course  
singed into a blank piece of paper, fire slightly  
wavering in Oktober, Märzen-rich air, white  
sheet freckled by loose sparks. The burns morph

into the way you're looking at me, separated  
lips pink and upturned, eyes unblinking.  
I end with a dot on the left, your dimple.  
Sparkler out, you thank me with an unilluminated  
smile and turn, portrait in hand. I stay, kindling  
ugly portraits of beautiful people.

PHOTOGRAPHY | HAILEY KADOLPH

OD: -5:25 OS: -3:75, Chalk Pastels





## Cursed

I was born with watercolors layering upon themselves like passing adolescence until the fabric of my brain is left warped. Now,

my easel backbone groans with the extra weight it'll never fully adjust to. I wake with thick pigment pounding into tissue-stretched canvas, pulled

over the edges of marrow framing. I am always swallowing paint thinner, a fight to dissolve knots of oil crowning bruised temples. My nose weeps

heavy acrylic, runoff from an ever-emptying skull that glues together panicked fingers and renders them useless. And then the paint burns, blurring my eyes

with chemical color until I have no choice but to fold myself over the edge of a porcelain picture frame. I choke down palette knife pills to scratch away at yesterday's

dried remnants—but how many times can you peel paint and scratch stains from the same battered brain before the topcoat of primer corrodes?



# Multipurpose

PHOTOGRAPHY | MARK YOUNG

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## Parisian Apartment

This small space houses history,  
countless ways to explore.

A pink gnome gestures his middle finger,  
works by French poets populate  
the eccentric town of knick-knacks.

A rough covered journal holds  
intricate drawings surrounded  
by ink in a language foreign  
yet familiar. We open it up, breaking  
an unspoken rule to keep it shut.

Stacks of scrapbooks lure  
us in. We admire vintage images,  
a window to another world.

Photographs perform scenes before us,  
emotion transcending language.

Racket from the restaurant below

echoes through the walls. Our laughter  
floats down to join them. We pass  
cheap peach wine, sipping  
straight from the bottle.

Our meal radiates a fancy feeling:  
buttered bread and brie, fresh  
oranges and bright red strawberries,  
sweets from a jar on the trunk  
that becomes a makeshift table.

The time comes to say farewell;  
in place of candies we've consumed,  
a bouquet of baby's breath fills the space.

## simplicity promise

I have this vision I've been holding in my palms for as long as I can remember—a promise to myself, I think, that I press into my chest whenever I start to feel too empty or full. Simplicity at its finest, this idea of when I'll live alone in some distant-idea apartment.

I imagine how I'll put fresh flowers in the old San Pellegrino bottles and place them on the windowsill. I'll hang posters of beautiful Renaissance women and a rainbow flag on the wall, impossible to miss. I'll throw open the windows, turn off the A.C., wear a dress that drags behind me and keep fruit piled on the table. My cat will curl up in the sunlight and when I pet her, her fur will be warm to the touch. I'll keep my tea tins lined up on the half-kitchen counter and bake bread on Sunday afternoons. An overflowing bookshelf will sit in the living room and a pink couch too, just because.

I won't go looking for myself in the afternoons and nights—I'll open my windows in the mornings and let the breeze brush my body hair back. I'll get takeout and eat from the box and I'll get whatever I want and nothing I don't. I'll hang fairy lights in my bedroom and keep my mattress on the ground, nothing to hide under it, and play Frank Sinatra records while I clean. Perhaps there'll be a heatwave and I'll sit outside—on a balcony or porch, I'm not picky—and eat strawberry popsicles. I can see myself there now, reading romance paperbacks and staining the pages.

Maybe I won't sweep the floors enough or wash the dishes every day, but that'll be okay. I'll be safe and brave and probably a little lonely, but that'll be okay too. Instead, I'll sink my palms, open, into the fresh soil of a tiny patch garden and raise stems from seeds and grow.

## Secret Handshake

It starts with patty cake  
then our forearms knock  
into one another—the fists  
we made with our right hands  
collide before we splay our fingers  
wide and explode them backward—  
*BOOM!*—an imaginary basketball  
rests in our hands and we *swish!*  
it into the imaginary net above  
our heads before blowing a kiss  
to each other across the air  
and watching as it's captured.

PHOTOGRAPHY | HAILEY KADOLPH

## Feeling Double



## post cards

When I think of my sister, I think of anger. Hers or mine or our mother's, I'm not sure. I never get that far in thinking of her; as soon as that anger starts to drip-drop in me, I slam down the corners of my mind like steel traps before a storm, a refusal.

We haven't spoken in years, but that doesn't stop her from sending the cards. Every few weeks, pressed between the NIPSCO and coupon papers, arrives a bent and dirtied tarot card. Chalky, white paint covers the back where she sticks the postage, and thick marker spells out my address--never a message or a return address. Not even my name, which still pisses me off to no end. But I know they're from her—I wouldn't recognize her in a crowd, and I can hardly remember her voice, but her blocky handwriting has stayed with me. It's the only thing that has, I feel.

The corner stamp is blue with a yellow moon eye that follows me around. I peel it off and use a strip of scotch tape to press it near its siblings lined up on the fridge door, where rows and rows of identical moons stare back at me. I can't

decide if I think they protect me, or if I'm just lonely. I don't like thinking about it much, so I pick the card back up instead.

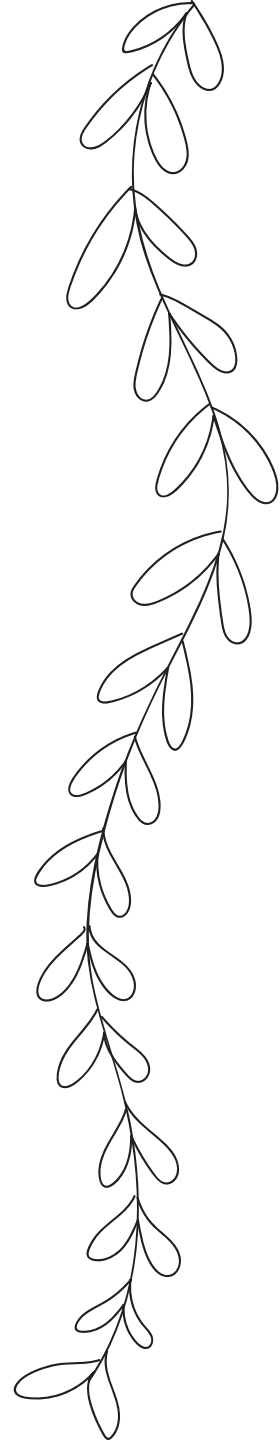
The paint is uneven and bumpy, sloppy. A single strand of brown hair, short and curled, was caught in the paint. I debate plucking it out but decide to keep it there. Something to keep her handwriting company, I suppose.

I'm insanely curious to the print hidden on the back and I don't know why. I want to chip off the paint to see it but I'm worried that if I do, I'll need more and end up chipping it off all the cards. I envision myself with them, their backs exposed, spread out in front of me. I'll be covered in freckles of white paint, cross-legged, and I'll suck on my fingernails to empty their undersides. I'll trace over the intricate pattern I imagine and hold my breath and finally feel something real.

The cards weigh down my palm. I wonder if I have an entire deck at this point. She's sent the Five of Wands four times now, each with the exact same design. Does she keep buying the same deck just for this? She must.

I've been carrying them around in my wallet, but the deck is an inch thick now and I can hardly button it closed. I pull them out, thinking that one day soon I'll have to either buy a new wallet or throw some of them away. The thought for either seems impossible; I would be giving up something no matter what.

I add the card to the deck and shuffle. I take a breath, run my finger down the side, and pull one at random. Five of Wands. Figures.



## Routine

I take my cherished tea cup  
from the shelf, housed inside  
a cushioned box of comfort.

I softly polish this floral  
piece before placing  
it on a matching plate.

One flip of a switch slowly brings  
water to boil—bubbles burst,  
crackling comes from the kettle.

A gentle pour allows playful  
steam to soar before  
vanishing in thin air.

As I lightly lower the tea bag,  
splashes of browns and blacks  
stain this hot sea in a shape  
resembling smoke. Sprinkles  
of sugar melt on contact,  
sweetening the dark blend.

Cold milk, the finishing touch,  
lightens the color bit by bit.

A whirlpool forms while I stir  
my beverage to perfection.

Thankful for my morning fix,  
a sigh of relief leaves my lips.

## cereal box morning

7:15:

I could finish my homework or start a book or start getting dressed but I linger over scrambled eggs and two-parts cereal, one-part-milk. My fingers fumble with my fork and spoon, tines clinking my teeth, dribbling milk caught by divoted paper-towel. Eyes glued to the dandelion-yellow back of the Cheerios box, I rake the same short blurbs for new meaning, thinking of the day I'll be older and read the paper over morning coffee.

8:15:

Mom corals us into the minivan, asking *do you have everything?* as she dangles her purse from an arm and scrapes for the keys. I don't know, yet, about Dad's cholesterol medicine nested in the right drawer next to his electric razor and hard plastic hairbrush, but I buckle my seatbelt thinking that my heart will thank me, maybe today or maybe in a year, or when I'm old, and I think about the rolling fields and the rolled oats and I wish I had a red heart-shaped bowl.



## bildungsroman

O, that this too too solid flesh would melt  
Thaw and resolve itself into a dew!

—*Shakespeare, Hamlet, Act I Scene 2*

my youth billows upward in trails  
of smoke, among other apparitions.  
that black sweater holds on, softening  
with age, nearing seven years old.

dark fabric bunches up softly,  
the pile of my past accumulating  
into something i don't recognize,  
swaddled in black and dwarfed

by the remnants of old photos.  
i sleep in the smoke & let it hold me,  
collapse onto my skin; i remember  
who i was, so small in every moment

that passed. the black material acts  
as a security blanket— no, a dream-  
catcher, it cradles me in memory:  
i haven't seen first light in nearly

six years. my impatience fogs up  
dawn as i attempt to peer backward —  
bring me dreams of cold spring days  
long past, bundled, solid, running

after one another: eager, watching  
our breath drift away as slow  
as morning mist above the grass,  
shifting with the ghosts i know.

DIGITAL ART | KAYLA SMITH

# We Crumbled Over the Things Left Overgrown



## Mountain Child

On top of the Ta Xua mountain lives a commune of Hmong people. Children here quickly ascend into their role of helpers in the shops and fields or buffalo herders along the unpaved cliffside roads. This child, only a few years old, is still climbing to their premature adulthood—here playing with flowers along the stairs to the peak. At the top, I bought a soda from their older sister, seven. Photo made with permission.



## Arbeit Macht Frei

The keepers of sorrow lean  
against their ruin, black hats tilted  
against the sun. Darkness  
curls down their cheeks. “There they are –  
there they stand –” one breathes  
as without breath.

He points, as they all do,  
to the ruins. I nod. They nod, too,  
dreaming. Eyes of ash. Feet bare.  
Mouths papery and full.

“Here we are –  
here we stand –” I breathe,  
uncertain, and squint. The keepers  
do not blink. Their ruins  
do not move. Their ash  
swells around them with the wind,  
the sun’s unbroken groan,  
and more keepers emerge,  
motionless, marked,  
bearing black hats.

## Be Kind, Rewind

*“YOUR FOURTH BIRTHDAY,”* Joan read off the cover, monotone. “Good choice.” She flipped it over to read the back description, some blurb about the various guests and gifts. On the front, the photo settled on some excited looking toddler covered in blue icing and confetti. “I’ve heard this one’s a hit.”

She hit three buttons on the register, completely for show, before sliding the tape back across the counter. “That’ll be due whenever you’re done. Have a nice forever.” The visitor stumbled toward the exit, their tape clenched tight and possessive and desperate in their hands.

Joan glanced out the window. The line curled around the building a few times, but that’s how it always was—the downside of one visitor at the time. If she cared, she may have insisted they change the policy. She’d stopped minding these things as much after Kath came on shift, she supposed.

By the exit door, propped up against the unevenly painted wall, there was a collection of cardboard cut-outs that they were supposed to pose around the store. Joan

had never done it, never even fully unpacked the things, so they had remained there. A pair of goofy-looking teens posed around the partial title *BILL AND TED’S EXC* with the rest of the title cut off by dark plastic wrap. She wondered if she’d ever be brave enough to unwrap them and find out the rest of that title, or if she’d just keep them like that forever. Maybe Kath would push back that plastic one day, her painted fingernails peeling the layers back and back until it was all revealed. Maybe she’d even show Joan.

The next visitor came through the door, completely ignoring Joan’s call of greeting. That’s how it usually went, so Joan didn’t mind much. As the visitor drifted down the first aisle, the cover photos on each tape began to shift and change into the visitor’s own face—much younger and much older than her current one. *YOUR WEDDING DAY, STUDYING ABROAD IN SPAIN, BEST FRIEND COMPILATION, PART 1: AGES 4-14* each shifted as if through water until finally settling on an image. The visitor paid attention to none of them.

Kath was handling the returns — usually destroyed, but they expected that. The one currently in her hands was crushed to plastic shards, still slightly smoking, with the bright title *YOUR DAUGHTER'S GRADUATION (UNIVERSITY)* looping across the cover, no photo in place. As Joan watched, Kath wound the dark hanging film around the tape like ribbon, tied it off, then placed it back on the shelf.

The visitor drifted and drifted down the aisles for an eternity before coming to a sudden jerking stop in front of one of the back shelves. Joan could see how hard she was shaking from here, as her hand extended out.

None of the visitors had ever tried to take more than one tape — maybe they couldn't. She didn't think it was a rule or anything but no one had ever tried, so she never had to check.

The visitor lingered in that position for another few forevers, probably an inch or two from actually touching the tape, until her hand slowly, slowly came to pick it up. If Joan was a more impatient person, or if she didn't have Kath to watch and occasionally smile at through the quiet of the store, she might hate her job. The visitor began to drift to where Joan was waiting at check-out.

Right in front of the counter, they kept a cardboard case filled with sealed bags of popcorn and boxed movie theatre candy. Cotton candy too, which Joan always thought was a bit odd. She kept thinking she'd steal a pack of something when she got hungry, split it with Kath, but that never seemed to happen either.

The visitor was already sobbing as she slid the VHS tape across the counter, maintaining heavy eye contact and poor, back-dipping posture. *YOUR MOTHER'S LAST GOOD DAY* was printed across the top.

“Good choice,” Joan said, “I've heard this one's a hit.”



Let Me Begin Again  
*after Philip Levine*

Let me begin again, enwombed. A head  
of lettuce. That size anyway and close  
in form—folds of skin and crinkly  
prints. Let me try to hear those mutilated  
words, absorbed as easily as craved  
graham crackers with peanut butter,  
though earned unumbilically.

Let me begin again, unspoken. A head  
with new ears and hushed lips. A revenant  
with an echoed heartbeat and cries  
yet unheard. Let my kicks on the mute  
djembe keep tempo with a solo  
that's not mine, because I have not  
yet known light and lavender breath.



## Lament for Lost Voices

*Especially in 2 Samuel 11-12*

### *Ch. 1: Hopeful Self-Soothing*

1 All that's left of her is watered-down  
traces where her life's path touched

the king; "Is not this Bathsheba?"

<sup>2</sup> But maybe her absence is louder

than tiny characters cramped onto thin  
pages, her life sprawling in the blank

space. And maybe some scribe did try  
to etch her story into history but his quill

became ash in his hand and the papyrus  
crumbled to burlap before his cursed,

hungry eyes; her own perspective  
unknowable. "Is not this Bathsheba?"

<sup>3</sup> All that's left of her is forgotten  
ruins; generations of men satisfied

with fragments— crumbs left in the wake  
of calloused hands. <sup>4</sup> Insecure, they limited

her vitality to fertility, reduced her magnetic  
charisma to "a woman of unusual beauty."

They nervously whitewashed her power  
over their David. "Is not this Bathsheba?"

### *Ch. 2: This Emptiness Cannot Be Filled*

1 O wise Prophet, come rebuke me!  
Skip the parables, cut to the chase:

<sup>2</sup> How dare you demand her story too,  
was not one enough? Must you steal  
David's? God gave you everything—  
both Eve and Mary (multiple Marys!).

<sup>3</sup> We all know greed is not the sin here.  
Come, let's talk about rape and murder.

<sup>4</sup> I demand an answer for why God  
was silent. Bystanders sing hallelujah

as David targets Bathsheba with a hunter's axis  
again and again: every time Second Samuel is read.

<sup>5</sup> He spied on her when vulnerable and already  
burdened by toxic "purification rites," washing  
away her own body's blood, menstrual shame.  
With hair still dripping and tears falling,

David abducted her. Thrusting his selfish seed  
and lust into her just-cleansed body, he forced

Bathsheba to break her own vows; her clean slate  
stained by his sin. <sup>6</sup>Your king, David, stripped her

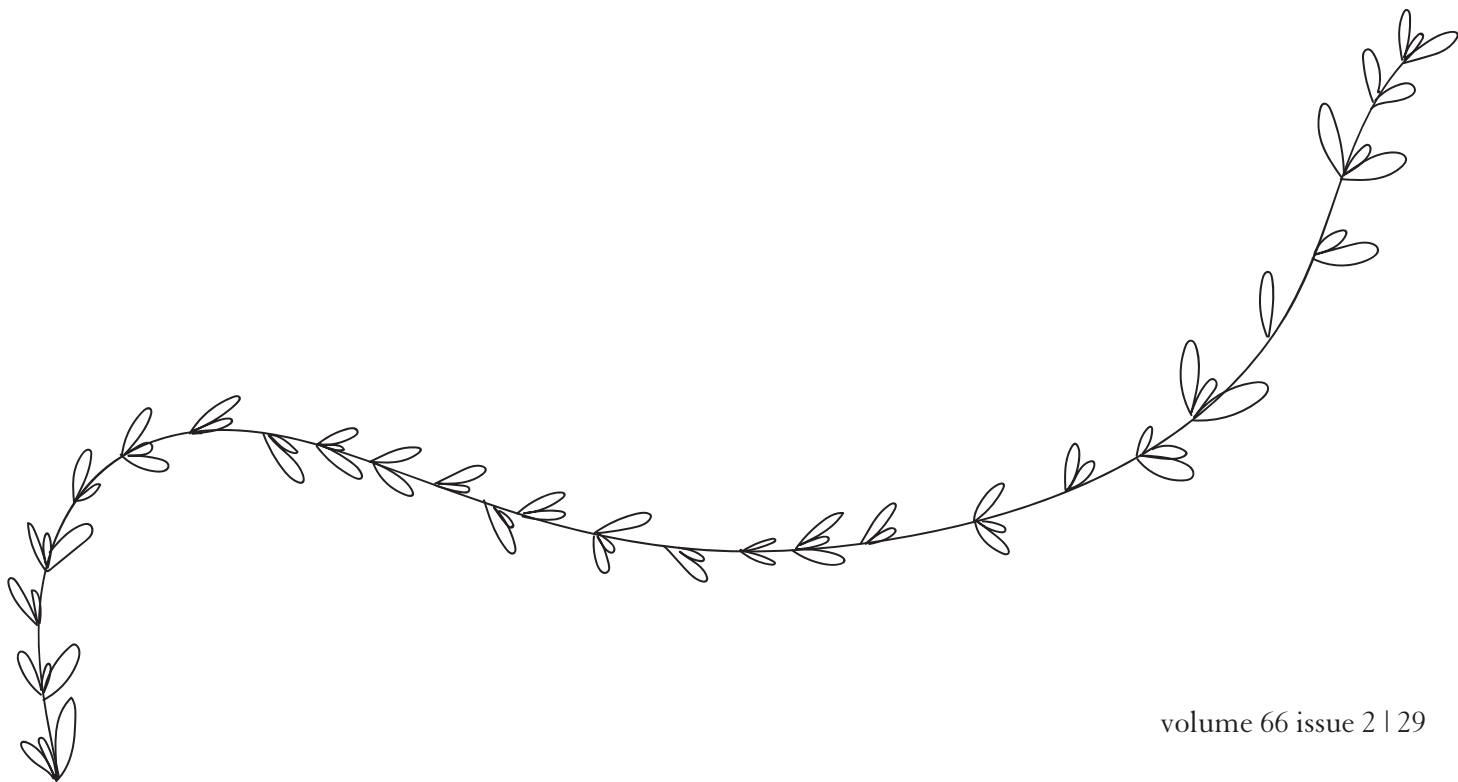
of her autonomy, fidelity, and husband. Your King,  
God, stripped her of justice. And you and the scribes

stripped her of her own story— that is *your* story.

<sup>7</sup>Still, my grief and your guilt remain unresolved.

You see, she “is dead. Can I bring her back again?

I shall go to her, but she shall not return to me.”



ETHAN JONES | PHOTOGRAPHY

# Sunshine



## Musings on Athena

I sit on the edge of the pond, my feet submerged under its cool surface. The sheep behind me graze softly, milling about serenely, mindlessly. I faintly hear the woman across the pond chattering to her companion as they work. The sun is rising, casting a faint glow on the grass and the trees. A soft breeze ruffles my hair, tickling my face. I glance behind me at the temple in the distance, wondering what it would have been like to have seen it in its glory, when it was painted, before the years wore away the paint and left us with a stark marble shell. Athena, standing tall to my left, looks much the same, colorless and stony, silently watching the world move about her. I wonder what it's like to exist like that, to be so loved and revered, painted brilliantly, only for your colors to fade and your followers to convert or die off. I wonder what she thought as she watched the land change, from togas to the dresses we wear now. Does she wait for war? Pray for peace? Does she like the world she sees, does it remind her of home? Her shield rests against her leg

and her spear points towards the heavens. Her helmet is permanently fixed to her skull, protecting her thoughts from the world. The trees rustle softly in the breeze, and I wonder if Athena's whisper is on the wind, buried in the crinkling of the leaves. I wonder if she sees the beauty in the world that I see, the grazing sheep and goats, the marvelous bridge, the trees, reaching higher than she. I wonder if it brings her pain, to have sat for a thousand years and watched all she loved change, to see people strolling past her, admiring her beauty, and watch them grow old. Does she wonder what has become of them when they don't come back? In a thousand more years, will she still stand, back straight, ready for battle, always watching? Or will she, too, crumble under the weight of time that crushes us all?

# “Destined to Write”

## An Interview with Amit Majmudar

Amit Majmudar, the author of books such as *Dothead* and *Partitions*, was one of this year’s visiting authors for the Wordfest Writers Series. Known for his poetry and prose writing, he was named as the first Poet Laureate of Ohio in 2015. When he visited campus in January, our Editor in Chief was lucky enough to sit down for an interview with him.

**HALEY BREWER:** So poetry, what drew you to it?

**AMIT MAJMUDAR:** I started out writing and reading a lot of espionage fiction, like James Bond novels and stuff like that. And then, at some point, they didn’t satisfy my mind anymore. And then, very unexpectedly, I just discovered classical literature, Greeks and Romans, and then European literature and poetry. And then at some point, I became convinced that I was destined to be a poet and a writer and I’ve never looked back.

**HB:** That’s how it feels—destiny, yeah.

**AM:** And I don’t necessarily have fiction readers or poetry readers in our family. I’m the only one. But for some reason, that became my thing, and it just became my defining obsession.

**HB:** So where do you find inspiration for your pieces?

**AM:** I often find inspiration in the language itself. I’m very fascinated with how words

sound, how they sound when juxtaposed with one another. I’m also very interested in religions. I’m a Hindu, and that’s obviously my home tradition. But I’m very fascinated in other traditions as well. And I’ve written a lot of work in the biblical tradition, in the Sufi, Islamic, Buddhist tradition, you know, through poems that harnessed the imagery and ideas of those traditions for creative ends. I sort of inhabit those traditions and study them through creative work. Memory, sensation, perception, meditation, all of those things, just kind of have a common endpoint sometimes in the literary form whether that’s prose, storytelling, storytelling verse, lyric poetry, you name it, it finds its way out in some way or another.

**HB:** That’s amazing. What other writers have influenced your work?

**AM:** I have read a lot, and everything that I’ve read in some way has probably influenced me. I think my biggest influence has definitely been Shakespeare from a



very early age. When I was 17 or so, I self-published a book and half of it was Shakespearean blank verse drama, and the other half was poems in the manner of Emily Dickinson. So, Dickinson and Shakespeare were my two lodestar stars as it were, the two of the poles of my world. And I think that Dickinson is very much the solitary poet, the poet focused on the self and on self-perceptions and the exploration of the self. Whereas Shakespeare is a very “other” directed poet. He voices a lot of people with a variety of moods. And you don’t think of Shakespeare as necessarily having felt those things or having experienced those things the way you imagined that Dickinson felt or experienced her lyrics. And yet, it’s just as powerful and just as its own type of writing. Those are two extremes of what literature can do—the very, very solitary self-oriented writing and then this very, very multifarious multi-vocal, polyphonic, “other” directed writing. And I think that in the first thing I ever self-published, *Entrance* back in 1997, it sort of mapped out the two extremes, within which I intended to pursue literature, if that makes sense.

HB: Yeah, totally. I’m a huge fan of Dickinson. So what’s your favorite piece that you’ve written?

AM: I don’t have a single favorite piece that I’ve written. It does change, you know, with how I’m feeling or what someone has just happened to have praised. I will say that I do probably have a soft spot for my translation of the *Bhagavad-Gita*, which was published a few years ago as *Godsong*. And I think

that’s because it was something that was a labor of love that I dedicated to the gods, as it were, and I did it for a higher purpose. I think I still have work to do, I still have to master the language of Sanskrit more thoroughly and explore that more.... I don’t know if ‘favorite’ is the word. It’s just kind of special in a way that the other stuff isn’t.

HB: Do you have any advice for undergraduate writers?

AM: I think that I don’t have any particularly original advice for undergraduate writers. I do have advice which is to be okay with failure and to write fearlessly and without fear of failure. And then hopefully, you can learn from your failures and continue to improve. Don’t be afraid of rejection, and don’t take rejection personally. Just keep going.

HB: So what’s your favorite thing about being a writer?

AM: Writing. Doing the writing is my favorite thing. I think it gives me some sort of endorphin rush, it takes me out of time and makes me feel powerful in that moment of creative access. And it gives my life direction and purpose. When I have this notion in my head like ‘that’s the book I need to write,’ I’m going to write that book.... It [writing] takes something that would be otherwise directionless, drifting, shapeless, purposeless and gives it direction, form, and purpose. It’s my favorite thing.





# Pipes

ANDRÉA KÜTEMEIER | PHOTOGRAPHY

OIL PAINTING | TONY STAROS

# All Eyes on Me





## As We Leave the Opera

at Kennedy Center I watch  
black-apron busboys and servers  
flip chairs over rickety tables  
and sweep up. City perennials—  
big red shade umbrellas  
in new fade-resistant technology,  
screen-printed with coca-cola  
across their taut petals—  
closed like the fluted petunias  
in the box across the sidewalk.  
D.C. rush-hour has passed,  
pedestrians in fits and starts,  
cars streaming across lanes  
with ease, nothing of the five-  
o'clock grid-lock. Banks  
and federal buildings, cold  
behind romanesque columns  
and tinted windows, dictate  
a city-wide strictness: business  
hours, 9-5. We are glad  
we ate before the show. We  
walk quickly against the loud  
voices and slow stroll of white  
businessmen leaving late.  
My feet hurt, the mark  
of a tourist's ideal day

in the District. Another tourist:  
a MAGA hat bright  
on the dusky sandstone back-  
ground of the slave-built  
Congress building,  
brighter than the carnations  
of the same shade propped  
and poked along the base  
of each veteran's memorial.  
The city bleeds in blotches,  
commercial remnants, capitalists'  
pristine stains, perpetual  
in redness, refusing to fade  
to brown, or away,  
as human blood will.

PAINTING | JESSE JOHNSON  
A Street Car Named Candy





# Holy Grail

KATE MATHEWS | PHOTOGRAPHY

retention

the bell tower casts an aurora  
of sorts upon the clouds – it lures

my mind to that other far tower  
we climbed – structure is slipping

through the cracks these days.  
cork is disappearing from me,

it's fleeting, it flees from all  
my daily recollections, attempts

to reconstruct the city by mental  
fortitude alone. i feel the bricks

crashing down around me,  
cadence rising, changing pitch

as the walls contort. it's noon  
downtown & midnight at home,

bells ringing all around, but  
the trick does not pull memory

into place (i haven't been trained).  
those bluebell days, all cerulean

stone, soft grass, are framed  
& shelved for later retrieval.

## Post Addition

*“In many ways, [the Post Addition] is a microcosm of Battle Creek itself: an unpretentious blue-collar community which grew up alongside a booming cereal industry. And like Battle Creek, it has grown old, facing the rigors of age with an odd blend of determination and quiet resignation.”*

*— Steve Smith, Battle Creek Enquirer, 1978*

There’s a Dairy Queen  
on Cliff St.,  
but you can only  
go in the afternoon  
because as soon  
as the uncivil  
dusk begins  
to obscure  
smoggy blue,  
the streets tune  
to play their urban  
lullaby: a gunshot  
or two, and the roll  
of a train’s  
steely wheels  
and its whistle,  
organlike, minor,  
surging through  
May air— a white  
flag, and drugs  
swarming

out of the hand-  
installed subs  
of a 2001 Buick,  
tan, rust around  
the wheel wells,  
and the quick thrum  
of deadbolts  
being turned.  
Faces nuzzle  
into blue striped  
pillows as dawn  
unmasks blanched  
houses, wind whirling  
foreclosure notices  
on the front doors  
of some, pinwheels  
in the trimmed  
yards of others.  
Men and women  
flip on  
their bathroom

lights to brush  
their teeth, foamy  
Colgate rinsed  
down by metallic  
city water.  
stovetops prepare  
for scrambled eggs  
with three clicks  
and an ignition  
underneath oil-burned  
pans. All tread lightly  
onto their front step,  
into their dew-coated  
cars and drive  
to the factory  
a couple blocks  
away, rousing  
the city with  
the sweet osmosis  
of artificial berry.

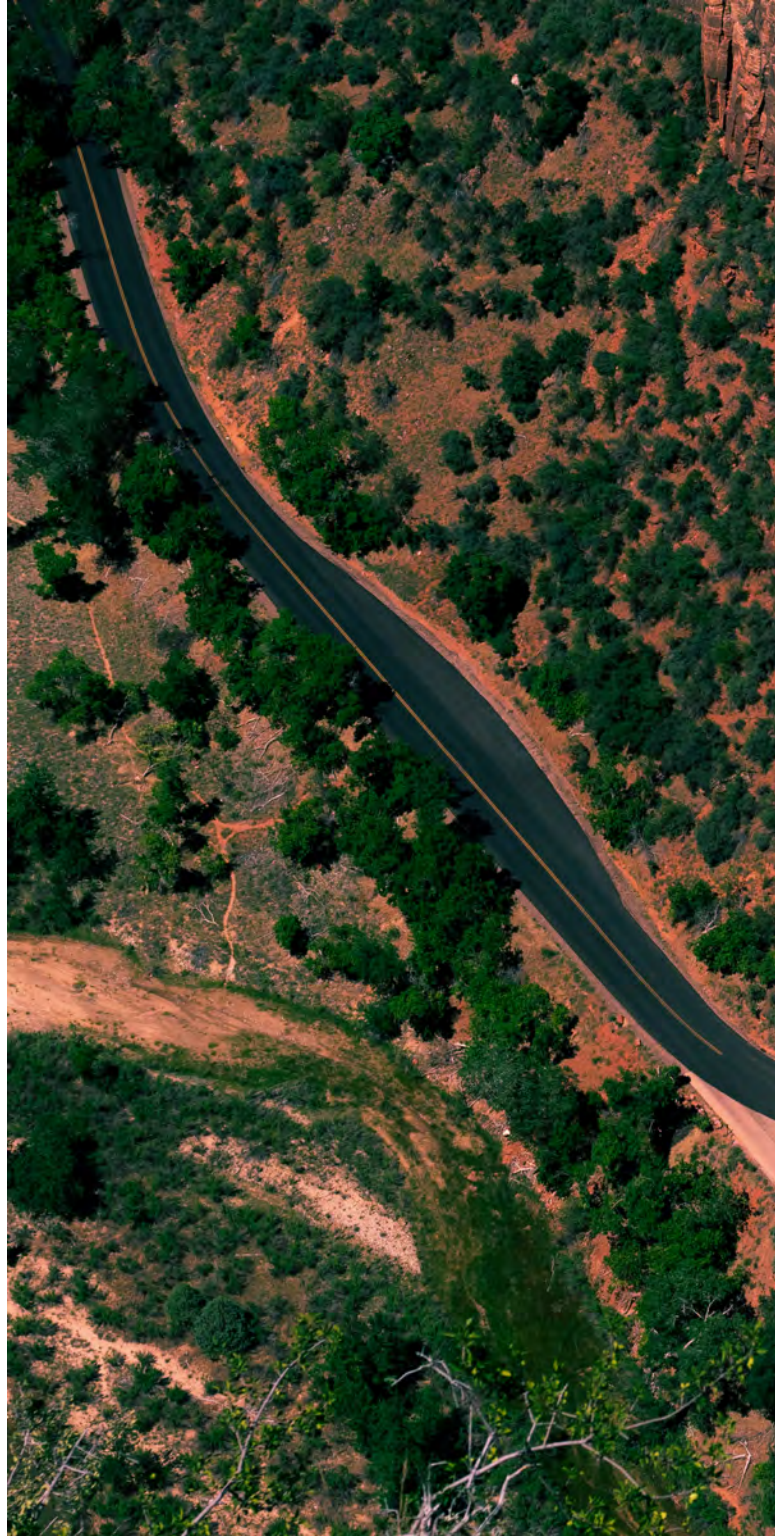


# Networking



# Utah

PHOTOGRAPHY | ETHAN JONES





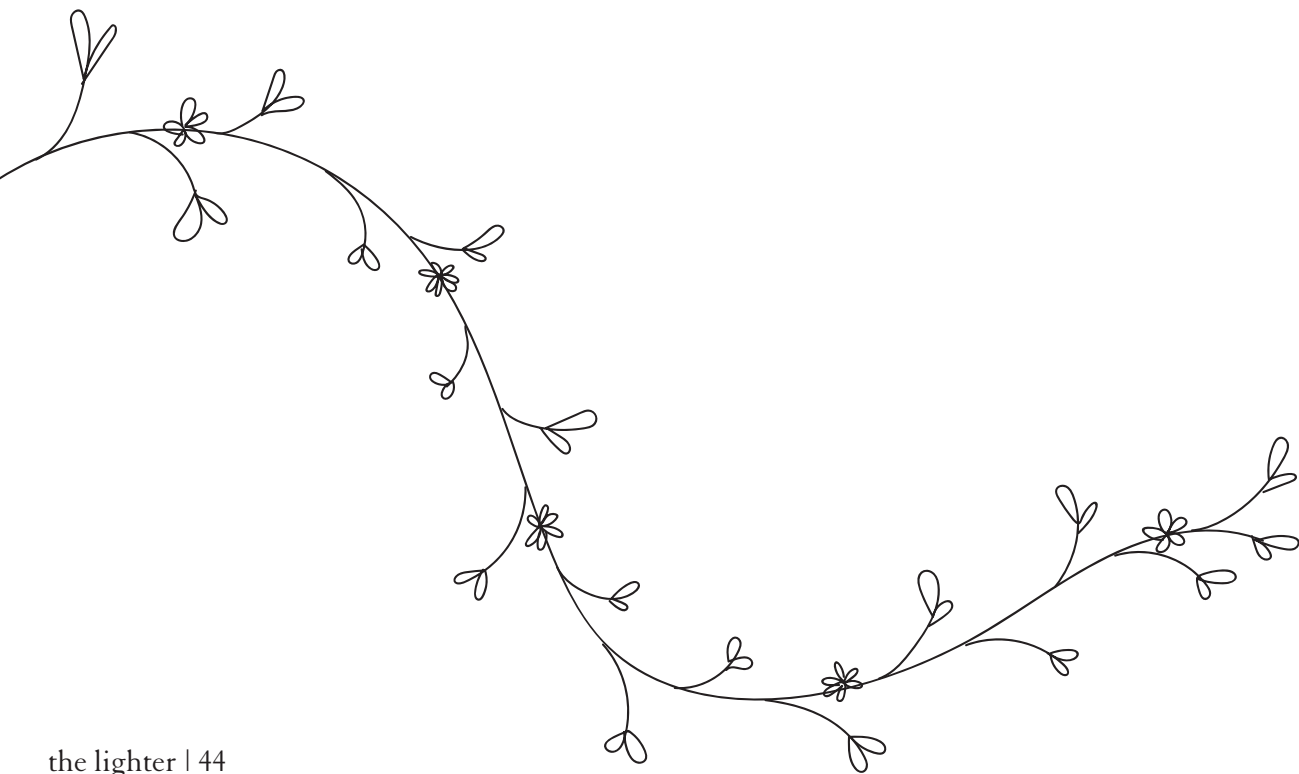




ANNA STYRCZULA | POETRY

## Orchard

I stole from him a corn maze kiss,  
an apple bite between my lips,  
the gold stalks bleached,  
the dry husks whipped  
by winter's wet and warning winds.



PHOTOGRAPHY | MARK YOUNG

# A Vietnamese Two-Lane Road



ETHAN JONES | PHOTOGRAPHY

# Mirrors



PHOTOGRAPHY | ALANA SWOPES

## West Lake





## A Lesson in Horticulture

Your trowel fits comfortably within the spaces  
of my ribcage as you begin to plant your flowers.  
They'll reside in the plot in place of my heart,  
dirt waterlogged but hopefully just soft enough

to foster a few well-intended seeds. You work  
against my wicked brain, an ugly overgrown weed  
whose roots run long, like crooked fingers encircling  
a throat. I suppose I gave up tending to the garden

long before you found it. It's a miracle when stems  
finally breach the layers upon layers of decay  
they're buried under. Perhaps your golden hour  
gaze, flooding my neglected greenhouse chest,

keeps the hopeful seedlings alive. And how I long  
to see your flowered love fill my hollow body, balloon  
my lungs with new clean air, color my tired eyes  
with brilliant petals, bloom beyond my poisoned brain

until it doesn't stand a chance. But the flowers, kept  
innocent, are unaware. So are we. Weeds are strong  
but nothing in comparison to the looming chill  
of winter, and with it, our garden withers.

# Overgrowth





## Abetting

After too much winter, too many snow  
    angels had disappointed us, refusing  
to spill even a drop of Easter light.

    We walked with our eyes down,  
watching the snow mash with the grit  
    of tan sidewalks, making March shorelines.

The patterns our shoes left, rigid chevrons  
    pointing backwards with soft arrow skids,  
begged us to turn around and witness our  
    path thaw and evaporate into the firmament.

*See, you leave no imprint on this Earth.*

## Orchid

Darkness. It surrounded him on all sides. His existence here in this dark, wet place was an eternal damnation from which he could never escape. His only consolation was that he could feel himself moving, growing from the tiniest seed. He had broken free from that shell and slowly emerged from the casing, extending his little green stem outward. But he was still confined to an endless darkness and silence accented by the musky scent of wet decay.

Until something extraordinary happened. He could feel himself break through some barrier that he hadn't even known existed, and he was opened to a whole new world. Suddenly, he could taste the soil that swallowed him, but its bitterness transformed into a brand new, sweet taste. He could feel the sun's soothing warmth as it gently caressed his sprouting leaves. The crisp air blew unsteadily past him, and it tasted cold and fresh as it connected with his stem. His world is filled with chirping robins soaring in and out of sight, stopping every now and then to dig a wiggling worm from the same soil that captured him. Honeybees

zoomed busily by him, and he stared in wonder as they so deliberately carried on with their work, stopping at each flower to give and take and then move on.

As he slowly extended farther from the soil, the enamoring sights and sounds, though still beautiful, lost their spark. With each day that passed, the sky's color became duller, the taste of the wind bland, and the sun's warmth indistinguishable from day to day. The same world zoomed by him day after day, and he was stuck watching it.

His movement, his growth, was the only movement he could make, and he had no control over that. He could not fly or speak or work like the birds or the bees. He could only watch, and soon his roots and his stem and his leaves and his bud began to ache at the thought of his stationary existence. The surrounding flowers did not speak to him, and he found he could not speak to them. He assumed they were all doomed to the same passive observance that captured him.

His usual daze was one day disrupted by an abnormal sight: a large creature the

likes of which he had never seen before. It was no flower or bird or bee. Its foreign hand, grasping a sharp, metal tool, extended toward him, and the fear only familiar to him from his times in eternal damnation beneath the soil returned to him in full force, knocking him over like a tidal wave, overcoming him. He wanted to scream, but he could only watch as the object missed his stem and disappeared into the dirt beneath him, jostled around among his roots, and ripped him from the ground. Some of his roots had torn off in the soil and one of his leaves ripped from his flesh and fluttered to the ground beside the crater left behind, and he felt he had lost a small bit of himself with them.

The hand lifted the rest of him and placed him in a clay container full of that damnable soil and patted it around him until the layer was flat. He wanted to squirm or run or fly away, but he could only let himself be tossed about like a rock. His new seat was lifted far above the ground and placed carelessly into a ginormous, shiny, alien vessel that smoked and growled at him, threatening him to keep still and keep quiet or else. Fortunately for him, he could not do anything else. Oh, if only he could at least cry, then he might be able to cope with this

terrible upheaval.

When the snarling, motorized monstrosity stopped moving, the creature returned and once again carelessly tossed him, along with hundreds of other tiny clay containers filled with solitary plants, onto metal pedestals with sharp edges and rough, bland surfaces that clanged piercingly when he landed on it.

All around him were groups of every sized container with every sized plant, trapped as he was, in silence and solitude, unable to even intertwine their roots with one another thanks to the clay prison walls. He sobbed in his mind, and once he could do that no more, he sat and stared at his new, dull surroundings, for once missing his birthplace.

He watched as gruesome creatures like the one that kidnapped him walked from his left to his right, from his right to his left, grateful that none stopped to mangle him again. He tried not to focus on the creatures who stopped in front of the clay pots, stared at his fellow plants, and swept them away like ravenous beasts to some unknown place far from there. Every now and then, he would have the misfortune of a smaller creature using its deplorable hands to rip a petal from his bright, violet bud,

leaving him dazed and mangled, wishing for his monotonous home. Still, even though he wanted so desperately to leave this horrible place, he would prefer to stay if it meant he could avoid being manhandled again and moved to an even worse purgatory.

When one of the creatures stopped in front of him, his fears came rushing to the front of his mind, but much to his surprise, his leaves and roots did not tremble at the sight of her. In fact, her round face was like a beacon that filled his entire plane of vision. Her hands were not rough like the first creature; they were like soft clouds gently floating toward him, stroking his petals with an angel's touch. A new warmth, better than the sun's, engulfed him, and he felt calmer than he ever had.

"Hey, little guy. What's your name?" Her voice was like the soft wind that had rescued him from his dark prison so long ago. He basked in her lullaby, "Oh, Orchid."

He did not know what a name was, but as soon as she said it, he felt a wave rush over him. She had gifted him with this name, *Orchid*, and he knew *that's it, that's my name*.

"I think you're the one. Let's take you home."

*Home*. He trusted her. She would

help him escape from his prison.

She carried him carefully across vast lands, and they ended up in a bright, welcoming structure. It's nothing like his latest prison. The walls are tall and covered in blooms of color and life. Depictions of creatures like her and creatures like him and all those creatures in between. He didn't know what to call them or what they were, but they were beautiful to him. She placed him on a tall, white table near a window filled with sunbeams. He felt special.

"Alright, my Orchid—"

*My Orchid*. He was *her* Orchid.

"Welcome home."

He had always felt so alone in his life. Life happened to him; he had no control over it. But now, he didn't care at all. If life happened to him, she happened to him, and that was all he needed. He was *her* Orchid. He was *hers*. What a wonderful thing to be someone's.

He had no table companions, but he was not alone. He had her. He watched her dance around the room, performing just for him, her hands and feet majestically floating through the air. He listened to the music she made for him, each note ringing like an angel's voice. She sang songs to him about flowers and nature and love. He never tired

of it.

He watched her paint the walls, creating colors he had never imagined, and she even painted him, larger than life. She gave him beautiful petals the size of her torso and a stem stronger than the tabletop. He could see her soul pouring into every paint stroke on the wall, and he was never bored.

She took care of him. She placed ice cubes at the base of his stem, carefully feeding him just the right amount of water to keep him strong. She knew what he needed. She caressed his violet petals with a gentility that could only mean love. She loved him. He could stay there forever. He never needed anything else.

Some days she would come home, and she would leap around the room with joy and life that he had never seen from the soaring birds or the working bees. She would run around and then make her way to him, telling him stories about her “job” or “lunch” or a “date” and then she would finish by saying with a smile, “My Orchid, you are such a good listener.”

*I could listen to you all day.*

Other days she would come home with tears streaming down her face, and she would sit cross-legged on the floor in front

of him getting a few words out through sobs and shallow breaths and he would sit and watch and listen. And after her last tear had fallen, she would sigh and say, “My Orchid, you are such a good listener.”

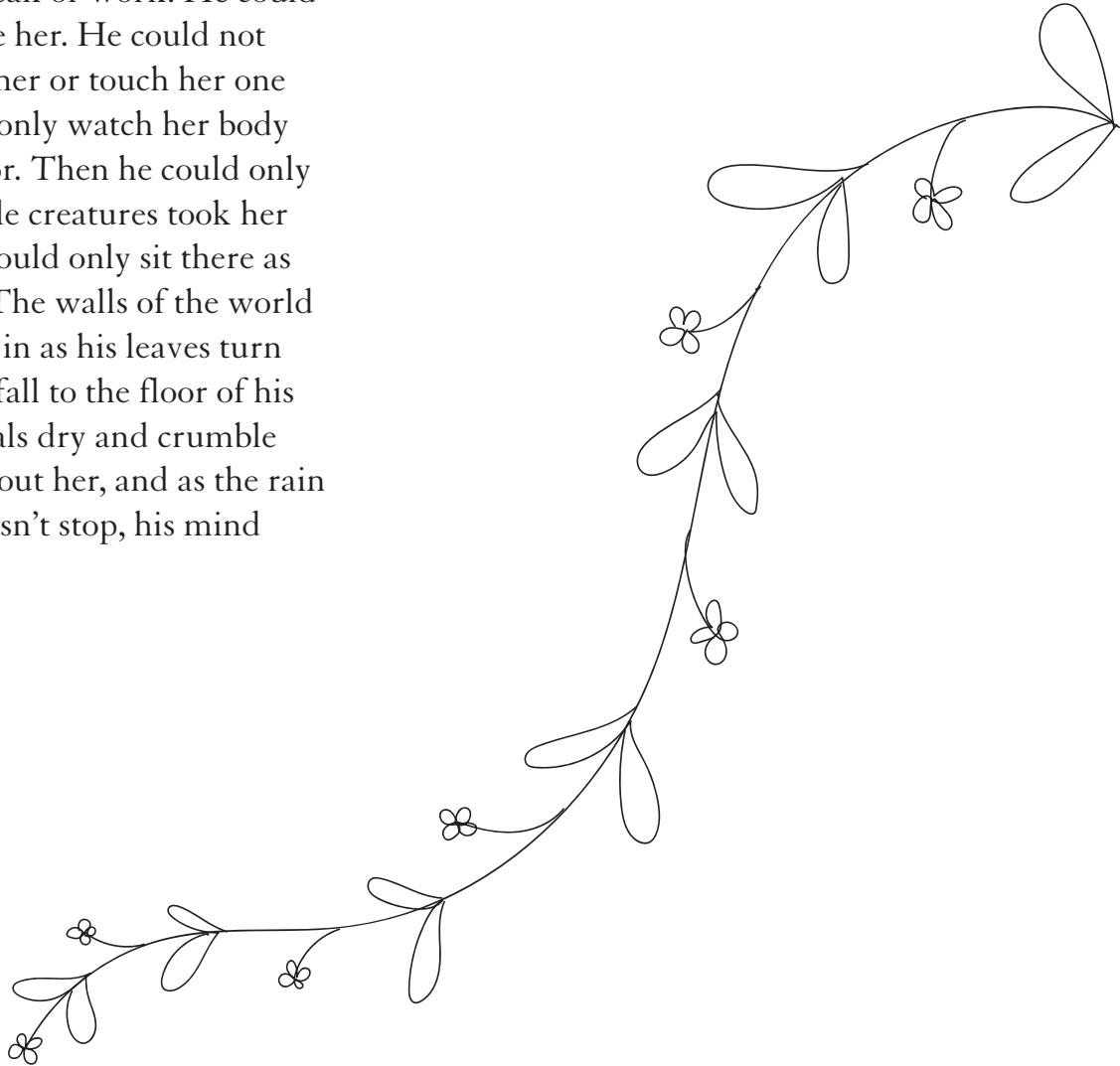
*I could listen to you all day.*

On a rare rainy day, thunder clanging beyond the silvery barrier, he felt faint, the lack of sunshine dulling his senses. Though his vision was blurry, he could still sense her walking into the room, finally home after a long, dreary day. But it wasn’t right. Her steps did not sound light and rhythmic; they were heavy and haphazard, almost as though she was tripping over the floor. When she finally entered his field of vision, her face looked as though it was melting like ice. She dropped to her knees and collapsed loudly to the floor, her face slamming on the ground. He watched in horror as after minutes then hours she did not stand up. She did not even move. He’d seen her sleep before, but never on the floor, never face down, and she was never that still.

Now he tried to scream. He tried with everything that he had. His roots tightened, his stem contorted the slightest bit, his leaves trembled, his petals closed, and yet he could not scream, he could not move to her, he could not pick her up, he could not cry, he

could not save her.

For the first time since coming home, he felt trapped. He was just a flower, and he could not fly or speak or work. He could not scream or cry save her. He could not tell her that he loved her or touch her one more time. He could only watch her body sitting still on the floor. Then he could only watch as those horrible creatures took her away from him. He could only sit there as the sun rose and set. The walls of the world dimming and closing in as his leaves turn brown and crisp and fall to the floor of his clay prison, as his petals dry and crumble and rot. He thinks about her, and as the rain falls and falls and doesn't stop, his mind fades to nothing.



# Looking Back at *The Lighter*

## An Interview with Alumni and Artivism Judges,

### Jake Just and Jeremy Reed

Jake Just, who graduated from Valpo in 2012, currently works as an exhibit designer for small museums. During his time at Valpo, Jake served as the assistant director for *The Lighter* in his junior year, and, in his senior year, he worked as the graphic designer. In terms of creative work, he tries to keep a regular practice of writing, reading and looking at paintings.

Jeremy Reed, who also graduated in 2012, is an English professor who mainly writes poems. He currently teaches at a liberal arts school in Fulton, Missouri called Westminster College. During his time at Valpo, he served on the selection committee and as the Editor in Chief his senior year.

Our Editor in Chief was able to video call with both of them to discuss their time on *The Lighter* staff.

**HALEY BREWER:** So what have you guys been up to since Valpo?

**JAKE JUST:** Since Valpo, that's a big question. I've been doing a lot of stuff. It's been a pretty peripatetic lifestyle, I would say. I've worked in this museum capacity for a couple of years. But in the in-between years, I worked multiple jobs. I lived in North Carolina for a while working on a farm. I worked in a Mexican restaurant for a while. I studied the hard sciences for a year while delivering flowers for a florist outside of Chicago. I tutored for the SAT and ACT for a year. So yeah, it's been a busy, busy

decade, I would say. But recently, I've been designing exhibits for small museums. And also every fall, I've been helping to direct and coordinate the Christ College first-year production and drama workshop at Valpo. So that's a great joy for me to do every fall.

**JEREMY REED:** Yeah, for me, I spent a lot of the time since in grad school. So when I left Valpo, I wasn't quite sure exactly what I wanted to do and I went into a master's in English Program for a couple of years in Montana. At the end of that, I still wasn't entirely sure what I wanted to do. So I took a year... where I was tutoring, mostly SAT



and ACT prep, but also helping people apply to college and get scholarships and kind of prepare in that way too. And then decided, through my MA and that year off that I had been writing poems, that I needed to recognize that [poetry] was where my most centered person was. So I applied to creative writing grad school, and I did my Ph.D. at Tennessee for the last four years, and then I just moved to [Missouri] to start teaching last summer.

**HB:** So what drew you guys to the creative arts?

**JR:** In high school, I started reading more deeply on my own time, and got really invested and interested in storytelling. It got to the point that when I went to Valpo in my first year, even though I wasn't a creative writing major or anything, I took some elective writing classes. And for me, that was helpful in terms of just seeing how other people were doing the same work and valuing it... it was always the thing that was more shared among my friends. [Creative writing] didn't end up being my major, I majored in English lit. and Spanish. So with *The Lighter* and my own writing, the stuff that I shared with Jake and our group of friends back then, it was the thing that kept me going in all of the other work that I did.... But it all started with just reading.

**JJ:** 'It all started with just reading.' I think maybe that's all I can say about it with 100% certainty. But also, the other thing that Jeremy said that really struck me that I think was true to my journey towards the creative arts was my relationships. I know that I

can't really trace my interest in the creative arts outside of reading before Valpo. But I know that particularly through *The Lighter* community and some of these other arts-related communities, I found a really great group of close friends who are passionate about these things, and who were really intelligent and thoughtful and kind enough to bring me into the circle.

**HB:** So on the same note, what drew you to *The Lighter* while you were at Valpo?

**JR:** So I was really interested in trying out my own stories. The first way I interacted with *The Lighter* was by sending in my own writing. And then they got rejected. But I kept sending in, and eventually, I wanted to know about what was happening in the committee meetings to learn more about that process.

But a big part of joining was the relationships. Really without them, I don't think I would have been Editor in Chief of *The Lighter*. I also think about all of the things that stemmed from that experience in terms of feeling like I could send my work out to other places or feeling like I could apply to grad school... And so a lot of it is like someone putting their hand on your shoulder and saying 'you should be part of this group.'

**HB:** I've had a similar experience with the selection committee, it's one of my favorite parts. So what would you guys describe your creative processes?

**JJ:** Well, first of all, I don't know if I have a singular creative process. But for work, which is a much more collaborative

process of designing exhibits, I would say that process looks like just asking a lot of questions of the experts who are passionate and knowledgeable about their field of expertise and just listening to them and letting that guide the design. So questions and listening, which, now that I think about it that also is a lot of the process of any personal individual creative work. Lots of reading, lots of silence. Sort of staring. But really listening in that silence.

**JR:** A lot of what Jake was saying is true for me too. I do think if I end up writing a poem, usually, it comes out of having been reading and being inspired or pushed into a new form or seeing something cool I want to try out or even seeing a word in a poem that just like strikes that memory or something, too. So it's either reading or it's needing to have a bit of quiet space, usually. And so if I put all my stuff away on my desk and quiet myself down, like my thoughts down a little bit, and sometimes a poem comes out like that... I don't write every day but I try to write consistently. I had a teacher tell me once that people worry a little too much sometimes about productivity. Like, if you wrote a couple of poems a week, by the end of the year, you'd have more than what you'd need for a book. And you could throw some of those out. And obviously, not all of them will work, right. But, you know, most people take more than a year to do a book. So, you know, you've got a lot of stuff to potentially throw out or remake,

**HB:** So what's your guys' favorite *Lighter* memory?

**JJ:** I can't think of any that are jumping out to me specific to *The Lighter*, but I do remember the great sense of celebration and joy at the Coffeehouses at the Art/Psych building. I just think about the Art/Psych building a lot with *The Lighter* and the community of artists and writers that developed. Jeremy, do you remember when I had the label maker for *The Lighter* issues, and we were all just furiously spelling out "The Lighter" in different iterations on a label maker and then sticking it to every additional *Lighter*. My apologies.

**HB:** Oh, that's hilarious. We keep the old editions in the office and we occasionally find those labels on the ground.

**JJ:** It was the poor staff who had to help me through that. Just hand labeling everything.

**HB:** We've wondered about that, too. We were like, did the printer do the labels? Did they order books like that?

**JJ:** That's great. Well, I think that those similar experiences helped me think. I just loved going through old *Lighters* and seeing what different generations were thinking about and what was inspiring other students... Maybe that's one of my favorite *Lighter* memories, just kind of being part of that tradition.

**JR:** Yeah, I was thinking of the same Coffeehouse, actually. It was the first one that we had in the Art/Psych building. Before that, they'd been in Mueller Hall and had been more of like an open mic. And so by being in the Art/Psych building, we had all these paintings and drawings up on the walls. And we had the label maker out and

ways that people could draw or make the cover themselves.

**HB:** Okay, so last question. So right now, things are weird. What advice would you give to artists who are struggling to make art right now?

**JR:** Thinking about my particular situation, I have been privileged to have this time with family and with people that I love, people that I can laugh and cry with, and that makes up a lot of the things I think about in my own creative work. There's also a lot of time to be reading, reading widely and deeply and slowly. And also, one of the silver linings here is that people are reaching out to other people that they're thinking about so a sense of community coming out of this too.

**JJ:** The first thing I thought of is that it is important, as artists and writers, to keep in mind that just paying attention is creative too. And taking care of ourselves is creative too. At least for me, I'm not producing a whole lot right now. But I think it's important to take care of ourselves and to just kind of keep our eyes open a little bit and to take breaks, but also know that we can write about this later.



GRACE BIERMANN | POETRY

## Love Song from Quarantine

I am not the first to say it,  
but I will say it again:  
there is more than one kind of love.

What other name could I give this feeling—  
the swelling in my chest  
that warms and burns?

What other name for the silent sobs  
wrenched out of me somewhere  
over Canada  
as I felt what I had left?

I feel it now—  
I'm laughing, my mouth still tastes  
like proper tea, bitter  
but for a spoon of sugar.

One of us has filled her tea  
with spoon after spoon of sugar  
and we tease her  
and wash the sticky spoon  
and grumble about it  
and love her all the same.

One of us has cut her hand  
and when it keeps on bleeding  
we give her bandages  
and help her with the sutures  
and click our tongues  
and love her all the same.

One of us had too good a time  
and spent the rest of the night  
regretting it  
and we bring him water  
and put him to bed  
and love him all the same.

We're all a little lost now,  
stumbling in the shade,  
caught in a maze of fear  
that is bigger than anyone.

We hold our past inside—  
the noisy family dinners,  
the gelato missions,  
the blanket forts,  
the punting and planning,  
the dishes and dancing  
and TikTok  
and Sharpay Evans  
and Harry Styles.

Do we look like the kind of people who  
will forget?



# ARTIVISM WINNER:

## GRACE BIERMANN

I wrote this piece two days after returning to the US early from what was supposed to be a semester studying abroad in Cambridge, England, but turned into only two months studying abroad when global worry over COVID-19 started closing borders and shutting down entire countries. I was really missing not only Cambridge and the UK, but also my cohort, the other Valpo students with whom I had lived very closely for the past two months. It was really hard--not only were we separated with a lot less warning than we had expected, but when we got home we were also all being urged to stay in the house and self-isolate.



So we went from seeing the same ten increasingly close friends every day, to seeing no one but our families for days on end. We all knew that this adjustment was going to be really difficult and when we were saying our goodbyes some of us told each other we loved each other. That stuck in my head, because we're often so squeamish about platonic love in our society even though it's incredibly important for a full life. Friendship never gets enough credit or attention, no matter who it's between.

So this piece is a response both to COVID-19, which really significantly altered my life in the span of a week, and to societal norms and our ideas of how relationships should be and what relationships should exist. I think art plays an incredibly important role when it comes to both of these issues. Art and creativity is one of the places we can take refuge when we're dealing with stresses and threats like a pandemic, and art and storytelling that portray and discuss loving, fulfilling friendships are probably one of the best ways to help people appreciate those friendships more. Beyond that, I think and hope the piece speaks for itself. I tried to write something that would be meaningful for any reader, but especially so for the eleven of us. At base, it is exactly what it says: a love song.



# Power Over Pain



# STAFF'S HONORABLE MENTION

## MELISSA AVILA

“Power Over Pain” is a mixed media painting with watercolor backgrounds and details, and printed images overlaid. This painting was inspired by the song and music video “Carmen” by Belgian musician Stromae as well as the #MeToo Movement.... The #MeToo Movement originally began in 2006 but did not gain the attention of mainstream media until 2017 through the means of Twitter.

The movement gained attention because of the allegations of sexual assault against former film director, Harvey Weinstein made by actresses like Ashley Judd. Many more allegations were made against famous or reputable individuals who are pictured in the piece in the following order (left to right, first row): Brett Kavanaugh, Jeffrey Epstein, and Harvey Weinstein. However, it is important to note that the title of this piece came from the purposeful placement of the accused, powerful men above their victims in the following order (left to right, second row): Christine Blasey Ford, Virginia Louise Giuffre, and Ashley Judd. These women represent how their pain from being a victim of sexual violence was only recognized through social media outlets which ultimately does not remedy their suffering and eliminate the power of these men.

Lastly, the individuals that are painted in watercolor are on opposite ends of the piece, and they are the only people of color in the entire piece. The woman located on the bottom right is the founder of the #MeToo Movement, Tarana Burke. Burke is located that the lowest point of the piece

because her original intention was to help black women and girls who survived sexual violence, but mainstream media changed the perception of her movement and placed more attention on Caucasian, well-known women. On the opposite end, painted at the upper left, is Bill Cosby who went from America’s favorite comedian to a known sexual predator. Yet, Cosby is at the highest point of the piece because there is still this disparity of the media placing more emphasis on targeting men of color for sexual violence than their Caucasian, male counterparts. The colors of the backgrounds were selected to symbolize the division between men and women. The teal color was used to symbolize sexual assault awareness as it is the official color of SAAM (Sexual Assault Awareness Month) in April. The color pink was used to represent femininity and the power that should be given to victims of sexual violence despite their gender.

Although the #MeToo Movement brought much awareness to the topic of sexual violence and had the ability to convict powerful individuals, the original intention of the movement was overpowered by the rich and famous thereby leaving the intended group of women that needed help the most unheard by the mainstream media. What can we do as a society to place pain over power?



## Love Song from Quarantine

I really enjoyed reading this poem out loud, and I loved the way it engaged all of my senses. The sounds and rhythms tasted good, delighting and surprising my mouth (“the punting and planning, / the dishes and dancing / and TikTok”). I can still hear that sticky little spoon clinking around in different parts of the poem. The repetition of the last line in the central stanzas (“and love her all the same”) soothed my ear and anchored my breath. It became a refrain, and I imagined myself arm-in-arm with family and friends, singing a favorite anthem. That litany of images at the end swept me up, and gave gravity to the final line, “Do we look like the kind of people who will forget?” All of these little things invited my whole person into the poem and made me feel part of something bigger. It’s one of the things this poem does really well: joins the particular to the collective. And I think that offers us something in this anxious and uncertain moment, when, as the speaker says, “we’re all a little lost now.” The poem keeps its eyes open, gives its attention generously, and takes delight in the little things. This poem cares for loved ones nearby and longs to be with those loved ones abroad. The poem seems to say, in answer to its own question, “*We are here. We have loved. We remember.*” I think that’s important and encouraging.

-JAKE JUST



## Power Over Pain

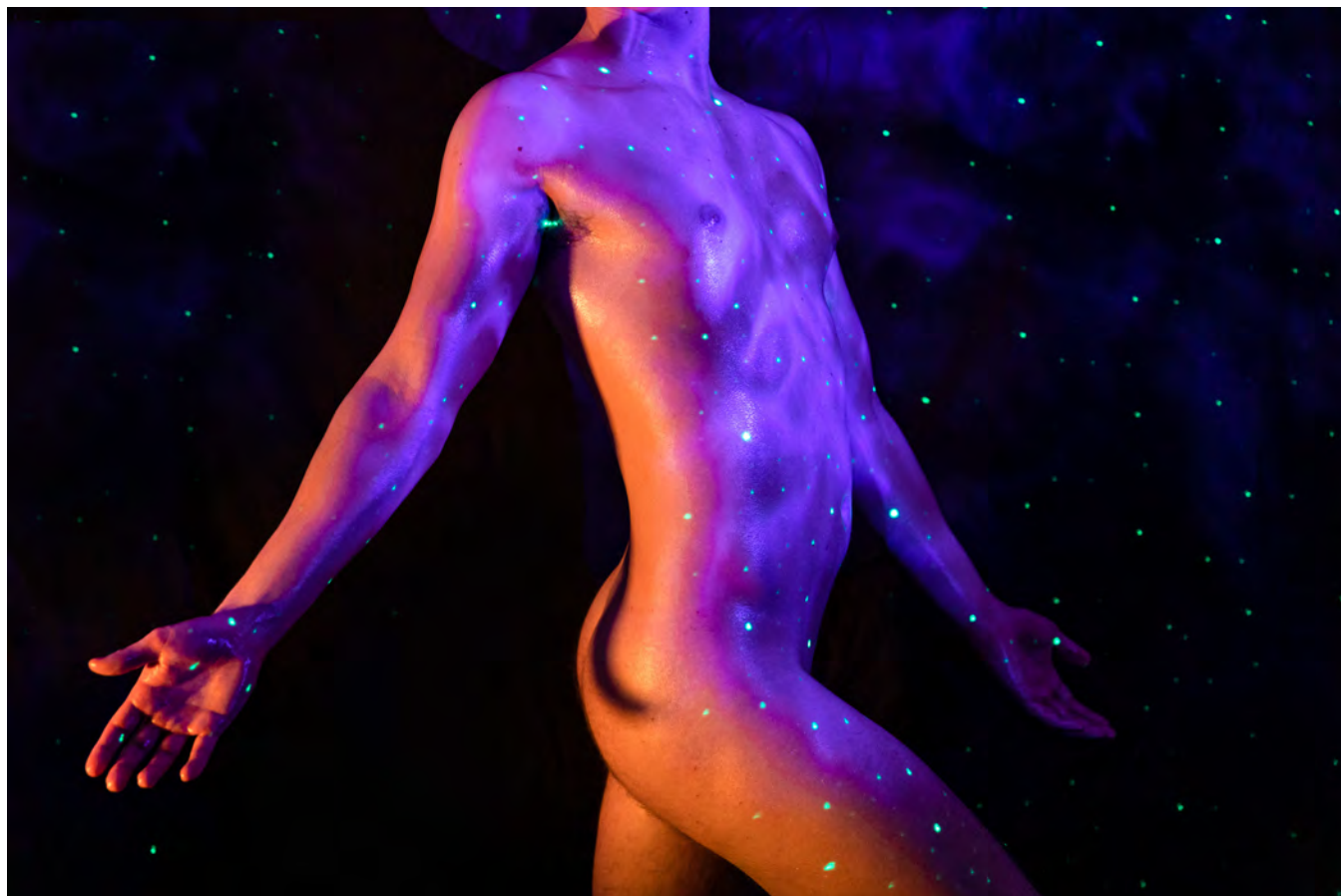
As the artist, Melissa Avila, has written, “Power Over Pain” is rich with symbolism and pointed imagery. Even the title can be interpreted multiple ways—at first, it seems to be hopeful, an idea of gaining control, or power, over a painful thing. But looking at the image, we see that in fact, this is not the message. It feels almost impossible that it has been nearly three years since the #MeToo movement took social media by storm, and yet, how much tangible, measurable progress has been made? What repercussions have we seen for predators? This piece made us rethink the issue, revisit the pain of those still silenced, and reconsider our complacency and privilege in a culture which still allows sexual assault.

-LIGHTER STAFF



CONNOR MARTIN | PHOTOGRAPHY

## Mission To Mars



## The Nightly Pitch

In us it begins petaled white:  
pollen carries and sticks  
to the sweet suck of dark sap.  
The softest bark bends to the hand  
and breaks into powder. Thus is the night's fire  
begun in the earth-cupping sky.  
The pale seed spit from an old man's mouth  
flies and buries into a lightless loam  
where it pushes and presses and nightlong grows  
into its father's thin lips. With a whistle  
the new bow bends in the hand  
and an arrow fires upon a white eye.  
The sun rises, wordless and blind.  
The night's flight, full-circle, waits empty-palmed  
for the eyeless old father to fall,  
dust-darkened and asleep,  
amidst his bedded magnolias—  
pale and pretty with pollen—  
forever pressed anew.

MARK YOUNG | PHOTOGRAPHY

## Hidden Faces

Millions of Vietnamese people work in rice fields like this, making their country one of the largest rice exporters in the world. Many begin work at sunrise and continue throughout the day, face and body covered from the extended sunlight exposure. The woman pictured was exiting her field for a rest after hours of work. Photo made with permission.





## The Mirror's Maker

Black feathers swept the snow as the raven glided to the ground. It shook its wings and raised them, higher and higher as they began to lengthen and curl, upward and back, the bird's shadow growing as if drawn toward the snow-weighted trees. A bluish-black pillar rose in the snow, feathers rustling as the woman raised her head and tossed back her cloak. She stepped carefully forward, scanning the muffled woods, feeling the faint pulse of life in the deceptively still air. And beyond that, the hum of magic, and a scent of blight, so faint it was almost unreal.

The witch bent down, hand hovering over the ground for a moment; her fingers dipped down and delicately lifted something colder and sharper from the snow. She held the silvery glass shard up to her eyes. A disfigured gaze met hers. Trees reflected from behind her looked twisted, the snow gray, the sky dull—the entire world, in fact, looked a little uglier. The longer she watched it, the more misshapen things seemed to grow. She flipped the glass over and blinked hard. The trees stood silent and gray beneath their frosting of snow, white and glittering. She placed the mirror fragment carefully into a pouch at her side, a smile creeping up her face.

She took several more careful steps, picking a second shard of glass, barely more than a sliver, from a branch, and a third from the ground. When she picked up the last, less carefully than the first two, it sliced into the tip of her finger. The witch hissed in pain, flicking bloody drops into the snow in annoyance before she dropped the goblin glass in her pouch. Nothing else called to her. She pulled her feathered hood low over her eyes and bent down in

her cloak, drawn down to the earth, condensing—black spun across the trees and the raven lifted back into the spindly winter canopy of the forest, up and out.

...

Perched on a stool at her worktable, the witch—who called herself Ashwin, though she was better known by other names in the fractured kingdom where she had long plied her trade—carefully arranged the three pieces of broken mirror around a cleaner and larger fourth piece. She murmured words that seemed to catch on the air with discordant twangs and poured liquid silver over the glass. It flooded over the shards, but went no farther than the delicate wooden twigs laid out in a twisted rectangle around them; silver rippled and rose, then smoothed out into a shining pool, covering the branches as they twisted and cracked. As the witch's words filled the space of her cramped, cluttered, and dimly lit room, the silver pulled back from a single piece of glass. It flowed beneath the twigs and froze.

Ashwin stopped chanting. She picked up the silver-framed mirror off the table, turning it this way and that as she looked into her reflection. Strands of dark brown hair with heavy streaks of gray tumbled down clear umber skin, showing no sign of the devil glass's corruption. She nodded, almost satisfied with her work, and propped the mirror up against a stack of codices at the end of the table. She pondered her next words for a long moment.

"Magic mirror, sitting here," she addressed it whimsically, "when will snow next fall?"

...

Someone knocked on the door, and Ashwin gruffly told them to enter. The door swung open with a spring breeze and a young woman who walked gracefully into the shop, wrinkling her nose slightly as she glanced between shelves packed with

clay jars, herbs, and warped glass bottles. Her lip curled up a little farther as she took in the witch standing by the counter near the back of the room. Before the door shut, Ashwin glimpsed a carriage standing in the road outside.

“I heard you are a witch. Do you make beauty elixirs?” the woman demanded. “True ones, which make a woman beautiful enough to bring an army to its knees.”

“Of course,” Ashwin grunted, and swiftly did the math to overcharge the obnoxious woman by a believable amount. “That’s eleven silver and three copper pieces a bottle.”

“No, I don’t want to buy it. You will teach me how to make it.”

“Excuse me?” Ashwin raised an eyebrow.

“I want to learn how to brew my elixirs for myself,” she stated, “so that I can be assured I am always getting the finest product available. I require—”

“No.”

“I will pay you handsomely for the lessons, of course. In gold, even,” the woman offered, smoothing the fine blue silk of her skirt. “How much—”

“Either buy something, or leave.” Ashwin made a shooing motion with her hand. The woman’s condescending smile slid into an ugly frown. She turned to leave, but cast a glittering, narrow-eyed look over her shoulder as she went, and slammed the door.

Ashwin knew she would be back. She only wondered how dedicated the woman could be in this; the witch had no problem teaching anyone who showed an interest in how to mix up a few unguents and mildly magical brews. It was only when someone proved they had a deeper interest that Ashwin bothered to concern herself with whether they were worth teaching for real, or too dangerous to let near anything more potent than a

good luck charm. She might have asked the mirror, but supposed she would see soon enough.

...

When the customer standing at the counter asked about a rare potion, Ashwin ran through a mental inventory of her stock and frowned. She held up a finger to the man and turned to check the wall behind the counter, pulling open a small drawer from one of the neatly labeled rows and columns of the same. As she had known, it was empty. She grunted to the customer to wait, and left Otthilde grinding petals into powder and keeping an eye out while she ducked into the back. The spoiled girl made a surprisingly determined student, though her focus on beauty potions and her own vanity hampered any effective learning she might have done. She pestered Ashwin daily for knowledge of more powerful spells, more dangerous ones, which the witch refused her.

Ashwin peered into the mirror hanging on the wall of her workshop. “Magic mirror, where will I find a wyvern’s scale?” the witch asked quietly.

Her reflection moved, though she didn’t; her own brown eyes stared dully back at her, the borrowed mouth forming the words reverberating from the glass as the mirror answered. So focused was she that Ashwin didn’t see Otthilde peeking through a crack in the door. Nor did she note the greed in the younger woman’s eyes a day later, when her gaze lingered a little too long on the magic mirror.

...

Screeching with rage and indignation as she was hauled backward out of her shop, Ashwin alternated between insulting the soldiers holding her arms and the woman standing smugly by the door. She heard another crash from inside and felt something break in her as well. Years of research and work to collect rare ingredients—she had been careless to store so many of them inside, in easy

reach. At least, Ashwin thought darkly, her greatest creations were safely hidden away elsewhere. A soldier emerged from the house with his arms wrapped around a chest, which he deposited by the door before going back for more. Another soldier replaced him, dumping vials and pouches on the ground. She eyed Otthilde. Most likely, the woman had paid handsomely to get her hands on a few things out of the shop as well as to get her former master arrested on trumped-up charges of magical harm.

Letting her tirade subside into despairing little moans and mumbling, Ashwin slumped in the soldiers' grips, letting them turn her roughly toward the enclosed cart they had brought. She made sure to stumble on the steps, playing up her age, but climbed willingly into the box. The door slammed shut, leaving her with only a single barred window to the outside. She could still see Otthilde in front of her house, and she cursed the woman again as the cart rattled and jolted and started away. By the time the door reopened, she would be gone. The difficult part, Ashwin knew, would be regaining what she could of her simple, secure life after this—if it was possible.

*You have made a grave error in trying to get the better of a witch like me, idiot girl. You will regret your betrayal.*

...

Otthilde peered into the mirror she had gone to so much effort to steal from the witch. It looked normal, reflecting the room behind her and her own quizzical face. She smiled, admiring her high cheekbones and the way the light reflected in her green eyes; certainly no one else could compare to her loveliness. The king—that sad, recent widower—should have noticed her when she was at court. She studied the mirror again, absently stroking her glossy black hair, wondering which gemstones would best set off her gown for the

morrow's visit.

"How do I win the heart of the king?" she demanded. She watched the mirror carefully. The witch had merely spoken into it, hadn't she? Yet nothing seemed to be happening. It was clear the mirror had been crafted with a delicate art and subtle design; the silverwork alone was tremendously detailed, and the smoothness and size of the glass were astonishing—it was worth a great fortune on its own, but a lot less to her personally if she couldn't figure out how to get the damn thing to work.

She resisted the urge to smash it. "Stupid mirror!" she growled. "Answer me, how do I win the king's heart and become queen?"

Her glaring face suddenly moved. Otthilde watched, dumbfounded and a little disturbed, as the mirror answered her with her own lips and her reflection spoke back to her, still looking angry. "If you wish to woo the king, three things you must bring: charm, beauty, and a noble estate. If you wish to win the man, his heart's dearest love you must locate. Do these things and queen you shall be."

She stared, and her reflection once again showed only her gaping. As the answer sank in, a powerful smile erupted over Otthilde's features. Her eyes burned in the reflected candlelight. She clamped both hands over her mouth to keep herself from yelling, and rushed from the mirror to find her best dress and jewels.

...

Otthilde glided across the floor to meet the king, curtsied gracefully, and smiled up at him with a carefully arranged expression evoking strength and beauty. The mirror had assured her of how to win his heart. She could already see the gold-trimmed lace of a wedding gown and hear the church bells tolling as the king took her hand. She would have ignored the dark-haired and fair-skinned child standing to the side of the man, but

the mirror had been clear.

“Princess,” she purred, “you look so lovely today.” *Though not nearly as lovely as I, of course,* she thought smugly. “Would you do me the honor of joining me for tea?”

...

Autumn cold ruffled her feathers as she took flight, again. She wandered, searching on foot and raven’s wing, for a place to claim. But no place felt...welcoming. None had the same comfort of the forest and its lingering traces of old magic, nestling a witch’s heart. She had returned to her old town behind a new face, but the memory of treachery lingered in the broken door of the vacant shop, tainting it, anger beginning to boil the longer she looked, and besides—the townspeople remembered those accusations. Remembered stupidly, wrongly. But remember they did, and trust was such a commodity that, once lost, it could never be regained in the same measure, if at all.

She flew until she heard the clamor of uncertainty, sensed the hum of opportunity. Black wings spiraled from the sky as she alighted upon the crenellation of a tower beneath the snapping white and red banner of the kingdom, and listened in on the churning conversations of the palace. *The king, ill, unlikely to last long. His son, too young, unready. Anyone who can heal the man will be granted a great wish.* She watched and weighed, and decided that perhaps she would try something new. No more bothering with people, only with her magic and experiments behind the pale marbled stone of the castle walls.

She strode to the gate.

...

*Time spins the years through a king growing old and dull, while a queen loses her cunning to mere jealousy, thinking her beauty is the only weapon she needs; the mirror tells her all, and her stepdaughter is too beautiful to be trusted, a*

*threat to be eliminated—yet the young girl escapes the hunter sent for her heart and flees into the forest; unexpected allies shelter her, but the mirror reveals this too; steps must be taken, but a naturally dramatic character and lack of training make for a poor, unsubtle magical assassin: suffocating ribbons, a poison comb, a poison apple; a sleep that looks like death in a coffin of glass; one fateful encounter with a stricken royal stranger, a stumble. Then—the princess tells the prince what her stepmother did.*

...

The prince entered the dark chamber on his own, a single guard taking up position just outside the door. He squinted as his eyes adjusted. A faint glow illuminated a large table in the center of the room, covered in flasks and small objects. Sharp, eerie shadows radiated out from the space, catching on dangling metal hooks, cluttered shelves, a narrow bed, and the hunched, seemingly feathered shoulders of the woman at the table. The prince cleared his throat.

The witch didn’t move. A slender hand delicately poured a spoonful of powder into a glass bottle, and the liquid began to froth. Light suddenly flared from the table, only to be snuffed into deeper darkness, and she huffed, putting something down with a muffled thunk. The room began to lighten as candles suddenly glowed along the walls. The witch straightened slowly, back cracking, then turned to face the prince.

“Yes, your highness?”

The prince knew how others regarded the woman who had appeared years earlier at their gate, but she had proven her place to him when she healed his ailing father, even if she could not cure the decline of age, the inevitable end. He trusted no one more to care for certain problems.

“You know of Queen Otthilde, and of my betrothed’s flight from her kingdom?”

The witch sneered. “I know of her; her



vanity far exceeds her skill, her charisma is a shallow trick, and she is yet the most irritating thing I have ever encountered. A traitor who would sing of your demise and dance on your grave. As for your betrothed, I may even know more than you.”

His expression was grimmer than it had ever been, tight anger shimmering in his dark eyes and the trembling fist clenched at his side. “I would have her punished for her deeds.”

Ashwin smiled thinly. “It would be my pleasure, your majesty. Merely leave it to me.”

...

The silver frame gleamed in the evening light, complimenting her earrings as she tilted her head, admiring how they lay against her dark hair for a distracted moment before she spoke.

“Mirror, mirror, on the wall, who is the fairest of them all?” Otthilde smirked as she said it, and the mirror responded with a curiously hollow smirk of its own.

“You, oh queen, are fair; it is true. But the new-crowned queen is far fairer than you.”

Fury and dread struck the woman, momentarily freezing her in place. Then she shrieked, sweeping her arm across her vanity table, sending priceless crystal and glass bottles crashing to the floor in sharp splinters. Pinkish liquid seeped toward Otthilde’s feet. After all that trouble to rid herself of the girl, someone else dared to challenge her? Someone else—some other queen—dared to be more beautiful than her? She nearly despaired of ever knowing peace.

“Mirror, mirror,” she ground out, “where is this queen?”

...

After the wedding, there was a grand celebration. Mountains of food filled the banquet hall of the palace; banners and ribbons festooned the whole town; harried messengers raced back and forth delivering invitations and acceptances and

directions. An invitation was duly extended to the queen of the neighboring kingdom, though she had already sent word that she was looking forward to attending and meeting the beautiful new queen.

Queen Otthilde swept into the ballroom, her dark hair swept up under a gleaming, gaudy coronet, eliciting muttered comments, a series of bows, and furtive stares; rumors had made their way around, but Otthilde appeared to take no notice of them. People bowed, kissed her hand, and complimented her astonishing youth and beauty. She drank it in, but her attention was elsewhere, waiting for a glimpse of the one the mirror had whispered of...and the door on the far side of the room opened. The newly crowned king entered, his bride on his arm. Otthilde had made the slightest of bows, and when she raised her head—

Her strangled gasp echoed. She stepped forward, shaking, toward the young queen, who lifted her chin but clutched her groom’s arm a little more tightly. Guards stepped in front of the royal couple and blocked her path before she could go another two steps. The rest of the guests, now unquestionably certain that *something* was happening, murmured and tittered, waiting with eager anticipation, hungry for a show. None of them had happened to notice the company they kept; for this particular engagement, the new king had invited only most of his less-than-eager supporters. The spectacle indeed began as guards seized Otthilde, despite her vigorous protests that they could not do this to her, the sovereign of an allied kingdom, a guest. The vizier read the charges against her in a ringing voice, followed by a decree from Otthilde’s own royal council, stripping her of her crown. A man in a heavy apron approached. He held a pair of tongs in either hand, a glowing metal shoe clamped in each. He placed them on the floor and held them there.

The former queen tried to flee. But the

guards bodily lifted her up, and her slippers were pulled off as she protested, as her feet were forced into the iron shoes. She shrieked as the hot metal bit into her skin, and sagged unconsciously into the guards' arms. The moment the shoes were on, her body stiffened and moved, eerily on its own, with her eyes still closed. She turned, taking a few steps forward, twirling. She began to dance.

Her eyelids fluttered. It almost seemed as though she had awoken and begun to dance on her own, though it was evident that she was straining to stop. The music had halted, and she danced to shocked and horrified silence. She whirled, skirts flaring, and bowed and backed up a step, then turned and twirled again, moving in the steps of a one-sided dance, her shoes smoking. As she danced, she streaked the floor with black and scraped the mosaic tiles, melting them in places where she spun, her ankles also blackening.

The new queen turned away and folded herself against her husband's side.

But she did peer over her shoulder for several seconds.

The king made an announcement only half-heard by the assembly, and then the guards opened the doors into another room and the guests were ushered away, the royal couple leading them, and the doors slammed shut as the music struck up a muffled tune.

...

From the back of the room, draped in the shadow of a column, Ashwin watched the grisly spectacle until the end. Otthilde spun, feet pulled along the floor, arms lifting and dipping, hands brushing the air as she danced, her fine dress glowing like her shoes in the setting sun. In contrast to her graceful—though increasingly jerky—movements, her face was haggard; her lips hung slack, her eyes rolled up in their sockets, her cheeks were flushed, and her hair clung to her sweating

face and neck. The woman twitched as she stepped through a complicated routine, her shoulders hunching and then flying to the side as if pulled by strings. Only a few minutes before, she had been gasping for breath—now her chest barely moved. She twitched again, more violently, and actually missed some steps. A shudder ran through her body; her head dropped. The shoes stuck to the floor, and all the strings were sliced at once. Otthilde collapsed.

Ashwin stepped away from her corner and knelt by the former queen. She splayed awkwardly on the dancing floor, eyes staring blankly at the ceiling. One of the shoes slipped off a ruined foot, clattering on the tile. The glow began to fade from the iron as Ashwin pulled the coronet from Otthilde's hair; she crossed the marred dancing floor, tucking it in her pocket as she went. Thoughts of a different treasure entered her mind, one of silver and glass and knowledge, vulnerable now in its distant tower without its thief to guard it. Silk darkened, crumpled, shifting to bluish-black. Ashwin raised her arms, the feathered cloak following her motion as she stepped onto the balcony, launched herself, shrinking, feathers spreading, off the edge—

The raven cawed once as it took flight over the forest.

KAYLA SMITH | DIGITAL ART

## Puppy Love



## A Sense of Addiction

*Watch the flames:*

Licking, gnashing their razor teeth,  
blackening everything you see,  
callous red crawling up your arms  
turning pure skin cracked and scarred.

*Feel the flames:*

Feasting, devouring your soft flesh,  
blistering tongues leaving nothing left,  
filling their bellies with sweat and blood,  
acidic saliva, a sweltering flood.

*Hear the flames:*

Smacking their warm, wicked lips,  
going in for seconds with a savage hiss,  
chewing and grinding their molten teeth,  
swallowing down your secrets deep.

*Smell the flames:*

Rotting, raw, entering your nose,  
the spice of Hades from far below,  
it's acrid and biting, invading your lungs,  
poisonous smoke you cannot expunge.

*Taste the flames:*

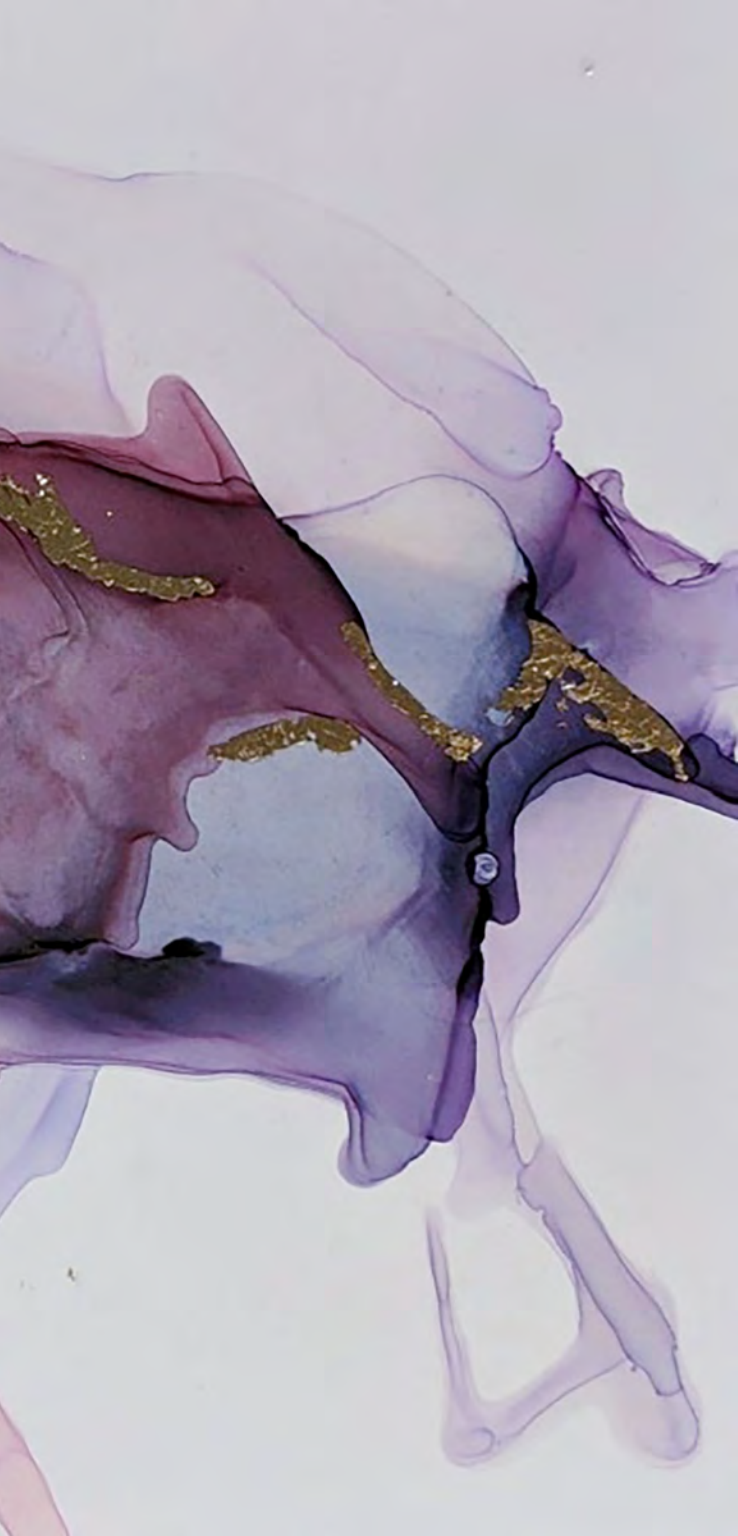
Bitter, burning, boiling fire,  
scorching even your greatest desires,  
tastebuds vanishing, shriveling up,  
your mouth filling with desert dust.





ALCOHOL INK | LEXI GAULT

# Rivers & Lakes



## Dear Useless Semi-colons

It is my personal opinion that you don't mean as much as they say you do. You're just idiotic punctuation and nobody even uses you. See? Two full sentences and no semicolons. Look, here's another sentence. I rest my case. Well actually I can't because Mr. Webster says ten minutes of free writing about what we just heard and it will be private so don't worry about what we say. So here's to you, stupid semicolons. I hate you. Maybe if we want to continue our sentences we can just use commas because commas are actually useful. And besides, sometimes sentences need to end, right? It's over, you said what you said. Period. The end. Why keep up a done thing going?

Like this free-write. I want nothing more in the universe than to put my pen down right now but I can't because Mr. Webster says ten minutes of free writing about what we just heard and it will be private so don't worry. I think that means private with him like he'll read it but it could also mean private like throw-it-in-the-trash private. Either way, you worthless semicolons, I've said about all

I can with you. You suck and you're useless and you do no good for anybody.

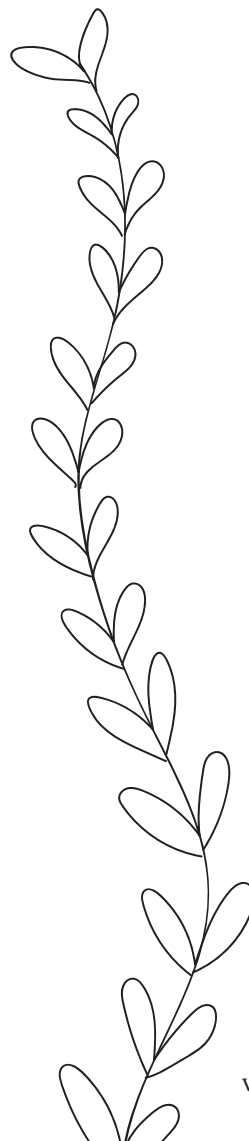
I guess we're supposed to be talking about our feelings and mushy stuff here but all I got out of that assembly was something about a semicolon meaning we go on and that we shouldn't give up even when things get hard and how sentences continue blah blah blah. Symbolism. Like what does Gatsby's green light mean and what does a semicolon mean, but I don't get either thing. I don't know what "our friend Jake" killing himself has to do with a semicolon. I get that okay maybe it could mean that my friend Jake's life didn't have to end or that we could all get better now that he's gone or something but semicolons? I don't know how you could fix anything.

I'm not a moron, I know sometimes things mean more than we think like how the Lord of the Flies isn't a character in the book no matter what Sparknotes says, so okay this semicolon thing can mean more than whatever whatever. Still, what do you, literally the most useless piece of punctuation in the history of time, have to say about suicide. As if you fancy commas have the power to stop what's gonna happen or like

that's gonna help somebody who's thinking about dying, like Jake, no don't hurt yourself, here's a semicolon, know what it means? It can save you from creeping death! Well, Jake got As in English until he got sad so I'm pretty sure he heard of you dumb things and he's still not here because I guess sometimes periods make more sense.

Mr. Webster says ten minutes of free writing about what we just heard and it will be private so don't worry but I just don't like these dumbass semicolons and pantsuit lady who came to talk to us and being stuffed in a gym full of people who keep asking are you okay and who pretend to miss Jake but they don't understand what it's like to lose someone and never get them back and all their stupid faces are still here and Jake's not. Stupid semicolons, everything goes on for these assholes but Jake, all he got was a period, end of sentence, goodbye, it's over for you. If you semicolons are so powerful why didn't anybody see when Jake never used them and he just wrote. and. talked. like. this. All wasted and depressed and confused and I didn't know what to do and where was Mr. Webster then with his private free writing and trying to stop kids calling him gay and Jake's dad from using his face as

a punching bag. Sometimes things are just so miserable you don't want them to keep going and you want them to be over. Period.

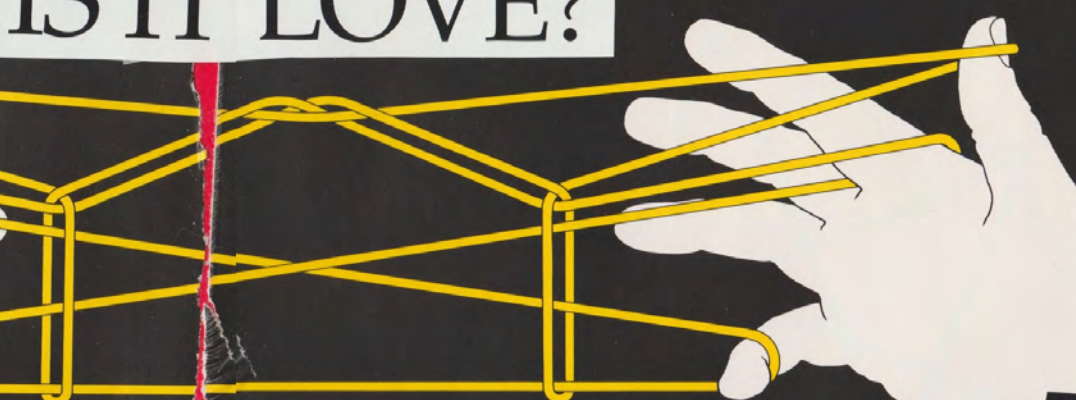


LEE SANCHEZ | COLLAGE

# IS IT LOVE ?



IS IT LOVE?



= Relationship

Platonic  
Discord

"I'm looking for someone"

I want anyone

I need someone

"I'll take anybody"



Hit



Home

THE TWO SHALL BE ONE FLESH



## A Moment

Can I have a moment?

A moment to think.

A moment to breathe.

A moment to be.

Just a moment?

A moment to reflect.

A moment to recollect.

A moment of rest.

Sorry, sometimes my words come out sporadic as I spiral down the slippery slope is me. Always on high alert for the situation or task or whatever the hell it is this time because there will always be a next time. Just always another thing to check off the neverending list. I'm pissed that it's on me to be both light and lighthouse. A beacon of hope and a source of stability when I don't even have the ability to rest. Rest assured that I'm here because I have to be everything and nothing at the same time because if I wouldn't then who would be. Who else would burn for you to keep you warm? All I'm asking for is a moment.

To think.

To breathe.

To be.

Just a moment?

To reflect.

To recollect.

A moment of rest.

Or is that too much?

Intrusive





## Scorched Earth

CONNOR MARTIN | PHOTOGRAPHY

## Card Players' Sestina

I hear my father's voice: "Never lead spades."  
But I am short-suited: no low diamond  
to hide behind. And I won't play a heart.  
You will, though. You're grinning: "I'm out of clubs!"  
I doubt it, but I groan and take the trick,  
already dreading what I next must play.

You said once, "Hearts is a dumb game to play  
with only two," and stopped it with a spade  
that vanished—your favorite magic trick.  
You smiled at me then, eyes like diamonds,  
as I sat, dazed—your smile was like a club.  
I shook it off too late. It bruised my heart.

With two, each player knows who holds which hearts.  
We know too much—we're watching—it's a play.  
Before you lead, you're waiting for my club,  
and later you will dodge around my spade.  
Your pale hands are certain, hard as diamond,  
as you reach out to scoop up your last trick.

It's all too soon I start to glimpse the trick,  
with twisting in my stomach, ice at heart.  
I used to dream of flowers, a diamond,  
and clever children with your smile at play.  
The dreams are different now—a garden spade,  
the soft glow of a cathode ray, a club.

We two have always been an élite club.  
I read your mouth and eyes. You know my trick  
of wincing when I lead that pesky spade.  
And woe to they who make a third in Hearts.  
It won't be long before they give up play  
while we smile, who each took only diamonds.

That day sticks in my mind, bright as diamond.  
And hard as diamond, too—too hard for clubs.  
I shuddered. There was no more time to play.  
No clever strategy, last-minute trick,  
would stop the slow, sharp splintering of my heart.  
Buried alive, I cursed the sighing spade.

One last time we play. You're out of diamonds  
and running low on spades. It hits me like a club—  
you'll take this trick, but I'll have every heart.

## Lucky Numbers

In a twisted way, I suppose it makes sense that now—*now*—the cookies are appearing. But that doesn't change the fact that the fortunes were and always have been bullshit.

Fortune cookies have always reminded me of this horrible Chinese buffet by my old house that we used to go to. It was smack in the middle of this long strip of run-down stores, right in between Jo-Ann fabrics and Big Lots. Twice a month or more we were there, staring at the jade green statues lined up by the register and the take-out boxes stacked under the counter. Horrible, because of the cold food under red lights, the boiling everyday egg drop soup, the same sheet cake from two days ago with hardened frosting; we were there because it was my father's favorite place to eat.

I hated it. But, even now, I'm not sure if I truly hated it as me, or because my mom did. I feel like that for a lot of things. *Me or her?* I ask myself as I trace a marker between the lines of my palm, a thick dark color that folds into the wrinkles of my skin. There's a blue vein that curls around the bottom of my right palm, under the thumb. I trace it and wonder about plucking it. *Me or her?* Black smudges stain everything I touch, but at least that's all me.

Whoever's hate it is, my face still screws up at the thought of those shiny wooden tables, the tacky peeling wallpaper. The numerous twine baskets of plastic-wrapped fortune cookies by the door, in the middle of the table, at the ends of the buffet lines.

I hate thinking about this, about that restaurant. If it weren't for the fucking cookies,

none of this would matter.

At first, I was finding them in my pockets, mostly, on off days. I'd find them and examine them curiously, but would shrug and toss them into the pantry, not much thought to it. They reminded me of my father, so I ignored them—figuring out the mystery would only make me think of him even more.

But after weeks of ignored cookies in my pantry, they were everywhere: finding their way onto my plate when I looked away, on the shelf when I opened the cabinet, tumbling out of the cereal box and splashing into my milk in the mornings, under my hand when I was reaching for my phone, a drink, the remote.

Now, a cookie appears in the corner of my eye. I reach for it and tear it free from its wrapper and toss the cookie to the side. I hold up the clear plastic and dump out all the crumbs before folding the wrapper over itself until it's a long thin strip. I fold it across the middle into an L. Then I press the bottom down, then the side strip over and I fold over and over until the sheet of plastic is pressed and twisted into something completely new. I hold up the wrapper to the light and smash my fist over the cookie without looking—anger shakes my clenched fist. *Me or her?*

...  
Mud coated my shoes—black, polished, shiny—as I walk back to my car. My face is dry; the skin aches with it in this cold. I couldn't even muster up the tears; he had drained me of them years ago. *Me or her?*

I felt the poke of a plastic corner dig into my thigh through the thin fabric of my pocket. I ignored it.

*You will enjoy good health*, the strip of paper had promised as I stood in the waiting room, licking at the film coating the back of my



teeth. *Doors will be opening for you*, a cookie, found on the elevator going down, predicted. *No snowflake in an avalanche ever feels responsible*, at the funeral, when my stomach turned into a natural disaster itself. I chewed, and chewed, and chewed.

I didn't even like the cookies, and the fortunes were (had to be) bogus. I wished it was something else, something I enjoyed, like maybe those glass bottles of tea and juice with facts printed on the caps. I could deal with that, I think.

Sometimes I couldn't bear to read whatever cheesy phrase was printed across white in red and just ate them whole, the crumbly paper going inky and sticky on the back of my teeth. I always regretted doing this the second I popped it in my mouth, but that never stopped me from doing it the next time. I hated them, I really did, but I always ate them.

A cookie sits on a nearby headstone and I didn't stop or pause, just scooped it up and kept walking until I was back and safe and almost whole in my car. I pocketed the thin blanket of plastic and slipped out the fortune without breaking the cracker.

I didn't want to eat it, I hardly wanted to open my mouth, but I shoved it past my lips whole. It started melting, dissolving on my tongue almost immediately. I wanted to hold it in my mouth forever, cradled over my molars. I wanted to spit it out and never taste another crack or fold of stiff-sweetness-crumbs again. I did neither, and I unfolded the paper. The fortunes were bullshit. It all was—every crumb and corner and poke of cracker digging into the softness of my inner cheek.

*Pleasures await you by the sea* it read. I folded it up, tucked it with the others, and I started driving.

...

The gas station was the only one for fifty miles, and, other than the gum-popping clerk, it was completely deserted.

My few purchases were mostly out of desperation to taste something not slipped out of a tiny plastic bag—a carton of waxy apple slices, triangle halves of a sandwich facing out of a paper box, a disposable coffee cup with a cardboard cozy hugging the sides. I handed a fistful of wrinkled bills over to the cashier, who silently punched away at the register before handing over my change.

"Oh, this is for you." Before I could pull away, she absentmindedly passed over the small cellophane bag. The cookie had gone to absolute crumbs, leaving the small slip of paper to drown in the tan shards. Her eyes were vacant, empty. "Have a nice day."

I took my bags, and the crumbs, and went back to my car. There were already a few waiting in my cup holder, in my open glove box, but this one was impatient.

*Do what you fear and the death of fear is certain.*

I tucked the fortune away in the envelope with the others and I kept driving.

...

The air is smokey from slightly burnt orange chicken, and the aquarium tank in the corner is musty and foggy. I am 7, maybe 8, in a sticky booth with ocean waves printed glossy onto the wooden top where pink, scaly fish jump out of the waves, frozen in an arch. In the middle of all our gathered plates is the bill and, most importantly, a small stacked handful of fortune cookies.

I select one very carefully—it matters which one you pick, I still think this—and tear the plastic. I slip it free and snap the cookie

down its middle. *All of your hard work will soon pay off*, the paper reads proudly.

At 7, maybe 8, I am more interested in mushing down the cookie into my cup of sherbert than any potential bit of rewarding hard work. I discard the paper and wrapper, crumbling the cookie into my dish.

“The fortune won’t come true if you don’t eat the cookie first,” My brother warns me, breaking his own down the spine before eating one half, then the other. He was always trying to warn me in one way or another, unsaid or not, subconsciously or whatever else.

Sometimes I forget my brother and I had the same childhood. I feel lonelier when I think of being a child, of growing. I wonder if he liked the Chinese restaurant; I never thought to ask.

How does he take it? Our childhood? I’m desperate to ask, but terrified of being wrong. *This is all I have*, I press my memories to my chest, glowing and stained and mundane alike. *You can have everything else, but you can’t have this.*

...

I’m not sure if I wished he had the cookies too. *The same*, a trademark insistence that he could thrash against. I’m not sure if I wished he was here, beside me, his feet sinking into the wet sand.

Now, I stare out at the water and think of old time captains who pledged to go down with their ships, who would rather sink into the ocean than abandon their pile of wood and nails and rope. This is unfathomable to me but I expect that, in a way. I just can’t love like that.

The tide brings a floating cookie, completely whole, to rest at my feet in the sand. I bend and cradle it in my cupped hands.

I don’t eat it; I can’t anymore. I peel the

plastic back from it and hold it in my palm for a few moments. I think about cracking it open just for the fortune, but I’d have to eat it then. I think about closing my fist around it until the crumbs are sand in my palm and I can open my hand and let them flow free into the earth. I think about just eating it and then eating the next one and the next one and the next one and the next one, going along with it forever until something—someone—breaks.

*Me or her?*

I can almost smell the greasy lo mein, the stale crab rangoons.

Why didn’t I ever think to ask him? Was I really that self-absorbed? Or was I just scared he didn’t hate it as much as I (we?) did?

I stuff the plastic into my pocket. I’ve never seen the ocean before, I’ve never even really seen the water. I never thought the sky could be on earth, but here it is—wide and vast, reaching everywhere I can see and so incredibly sad. No one really talks about how sad it is.

The water hits the sand and crashes over my feet—shiny black shoes, covered in mud. The ocean mist covers my face and that somehow feels like relief, like something finally normal. I let out a breath and hold up the cookie. This is the last one. Even if they follow me for the rest of my life, until my last breath, even if they fill up my casket and drown me posthumously, this is it. This had to be it.

I hold the cookie up to the dying sun and peek at the horizon through the fold of the cracker. To whomever, a goodbye. I throw it at an angle and watch it skip once, twice before disappearing into blue on the third. My brother taught me how to do that, I think.

## Life Cycle of a Panic Attack

The burning sand sears my soles,  
as I bound along the infinite beach,  
fading into every cardinal direction.  
My tilted face smarts from the sun,  
unrelenting in the stagnant air.

The distant ripple swells towards me,  
a new breeze brushing my arms,  
and my heartbeat pierces the silence.  
Slowly, my lips collect and expel air,  
expanding the lungs in my tight chest,

but wind-whipped sand strikes me.  
Roaring waves crash in the distance,  
and drops of sweat seep into the earth.  
I turn to run, but terror grips my legs,  
trembling and faint I await the peak.

I am swallowed by the froth of waves.  
The current drags my shaking body,  
as the pressure in my lungs mounts.  
My heaving chest and clattering heart  
force me into the blackened abyss.

When I wake up, with blinking eyes,  
the coarse sand shifts beneath my feet.  
The tides, which follow no cycle,  
recede into the horizon until next time,  
and I again caper between the dunes.

# What Lies Underneath

PHOTOGRAPHY | ANDRÉA KÜTEMEIER









## Of a Knight in Shabby Armor

Once upon a ye old April,  
Within a kingdom on a hill,  
There was a knight quite brave and grand  
In shining steel, sharp sword in hand,  
Who rode away to loud hurrahs  
To save a dame from dragon's claws.

Now late past noon, in sprinkling rain,  
Comes clopping, clanking, down the lane  
As one small group back homeward treads,  
The horse and man with hanging heads,  
But damsel with a haughty gaze  
For they've been going nigh two days;  
While she's been carried here and there,  
The knight is much the worse for wear.

Since riding out the day before  
He has grown weary, starved, and sore.  
Smoke gave him a persistent cough;  
Flames melted half his armor off—  
With what is left all singed and stained—  
And oh, alas, he's feeling pained  
By a gash beneath one scraped knee  
And burns in the second degree;

His arms and legs are caked in mud,  
He doesn't know who owned this blood;  
His ribs are bruised; he cannot scoot  
The pebble in his only boot;  
His muscles cramp up in his toes;  
A faint stink lingers in his nose—  
And tis his own, he glumly fears.  
But worst: the sharp voice in his ears!

So mean and loud it makes him flinch,  
The dame's assault gives not an inch:  
Complaining that her dress is ripped,  
Her hair is snarled, her nails are chipped;  
The wind threw dust into her eyes;  
She's hungry, worn, and traumatized;  
She wants new clothes and jewels to match;  
She has a splinter and a scratch  
From when the beast had clutched her tight,  
Then dropped her in its den that night.

The damsel moans that she's a mess,  
And her poor knight she does address:  
"Oh, you should have saved me faster!  
You're a dolt, you're a disaster.  
Why couldn't someone stronger go?  
A younger one, a real hero!"

Thus she mocks him, just as ever,  
All despite his brave endeavor.  
'Twas a beast so fearsome and great  
The king sent him to subjugate.

And what a battle to behold!  
He quickly dashed and stabbed and rolled;  
Ducked swipes of tail and claw so dire,  
Cried taunts and slashed while dodging fire!  
For every blow he took he gave;  
The dragon fell; they fled its cave.

The beast is vanquished, but the prize  
Is far from worth his near demise.  
This dame is always faced with plights,  
Caught up with beasts and blackest knights.  
He feels he's fought this fight before;  
Won't someone save him from this chore?



Suddenly! A roar like thunder!  
Wingbeats tear the air asunder!  
The knight looks up and then he pales  
As sunlight glares off burnished scales:  
Behold, the dragon had survived  
And sought them out— 'tis now arrived!  
Jaw unhinged with boiling flames,  
It dives to end this foe it claims.

An awful blast engulfs him there,  
A rain of blows with such hot air  
The wyrm is stunned: his breath goes out,  
As the lady rants and shouts.

The knight draws forth his broken blade,  
Looks back and forth, his choice now made.  
Then rapidly he says a prayer,  
And runs and vaults into the air—  
He flicks his wrist to toss the sword—  
Grabs one bronze wing and swings aboard!

The dragon blinks and looks around.  
It sees the damsel on the ground,  
All muddy, yelling, in a fright;  
It thinks of how the knight can fight,  
How fun he is, how they could play;  
The knight hangs on— they swoop away!

To her below, "Farewell!" he cries,  
And ever since, with dragons flies.

ALANA SWOPES | COLLAGE

# Space Age I



COLLAGE | ALANA SWOPES

## Space Age II





## Ode to My Roller Skates

When you arrived, the tar pavement had already  
swallowed the sun; tangerine-lilac melting, filling  
in every empty space above and rolling over  
what used to be. Maybe the heavens sent you, maybe

I spent my stipend from blogging abroad on you, every  
single dollar. Impulsive click-clicking until the paycheck  
was gone— lasting less than an hour. Stuck in a summer  
of transition, I shoved the post-checkout guilt under the rug

of “self-care.” At first you were ruthlessly unyielding, stiff  
leather resisted my blistering shins, ankles, toes. The new  
smell surrendered to sweat and mosquito repellent. My hands  
rubbed raw from falls and crash landings. The hot stinging

on my thumbs— friction from pulling on tight boots every  
night. Nosy suburban neighbors finally tucked themselves  
away. The forgiving moon whispered with the streetlamps  
the first time I landed a 180 on my toe-stops, “Yes!” echoing

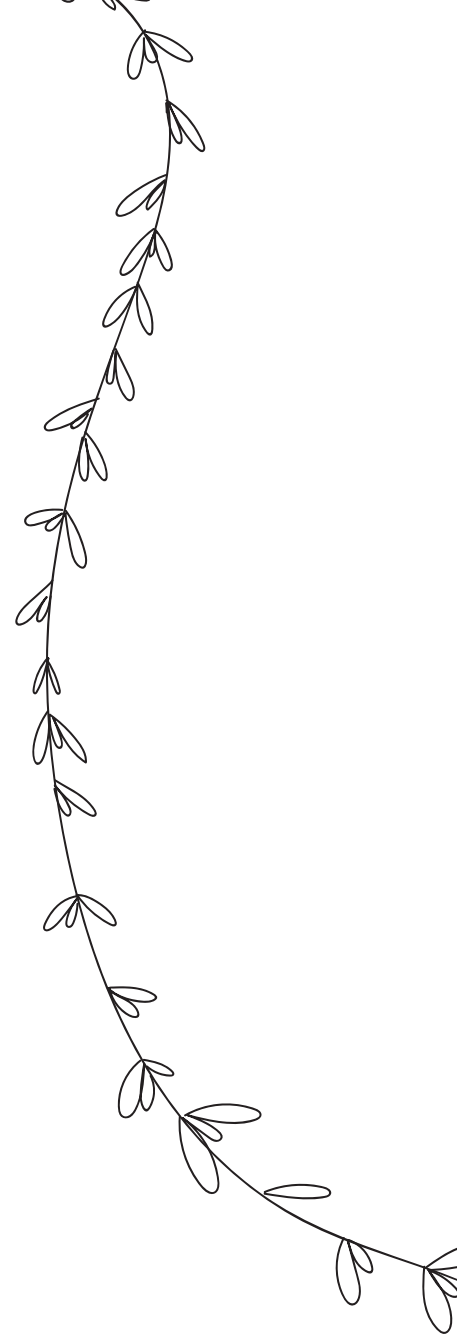


down dark sidewalks. Trying to twirl, I spotted the shadowed leaves and, I swear, they twitched in applause when I finally spun. You had molded to my body by July, all three of us alive. I sit in my cathedral of dusk, easing into the taut

laces. I notice your scars with pride: the tongues' deep creases, scuffs of asphalt adorning your rounded orange curves, scratches in the heels where left knocked right, all greedy for speed and space. I tighten the axle nuts clockwise

and shake the boot, listen for the right amount of jiggle. Slowly I slide my palm down four now-brown circles and wait, watching the cyclones for the runt of the litter. That one, I loosen. Some purple remains untouched around the bearings, but eventually

all eight wheels give in to the grit and gray. I earn their dirt by retracing a message, burning it into my blacktop passage:  
*As I tie on these five pounds of extended self, I become weightless, spinning this planet with my bruised body*



## The Hunter

My heart quivers with arrows  
flocked full and feathered red,  
fledged with blood,  
with bloodied hand,  
with raw and rough-hewn heads –  
my heart, quiver, impatient  
for the taut merciless arm,  
for finger, palm, and thumb,  
for the backwards pull of breath –  
my heart lies crouched and quivered  
like beast or brutal sheath,  
waiting for the slitted eye  
of flight – of pain released.

PHOTOGRAPHY | LEAH GATCHEL

where the mountain meets the moon—tropic, utah



That would be an even *better* name for a band:  
The final chapter of an epic saga

Dream Raisin

Polar Bear Garden

The Baby-Blue Leisure-Suits

Lawnbird

Shaking the Shimmy

Tears of Fury

The Purest Vegetable

Kingdom

10 Degrees of Bees

The Bony Walls

Four Gourds and Seven Years

Ago

Railroad Octopus

Echoes in the Tub

Carl's Yellow Pants

In the Futon Dimension

Digits Past Midnight

As Much Freedom as Peacocks

Heavy Fennel

Deconvolution.

The Saucy Lobster Situation

Hint of Lint

The Gravitational Waves

One Rogue Cranberry

Greasy Concerns

Broccoli and Beats

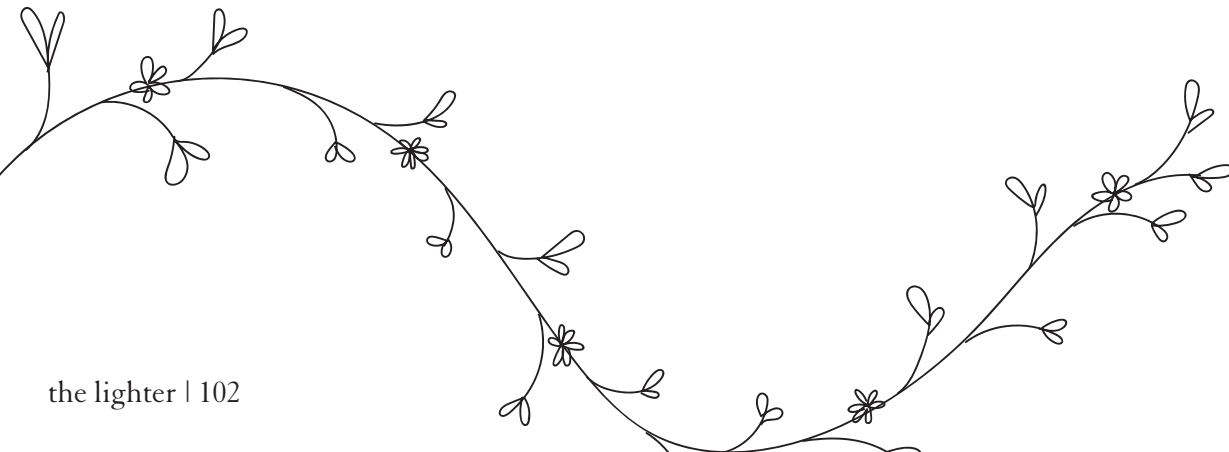
Good! Hot! Fire!

Jimmy's Backwash

Hashbrown Pocket

and

The Whoop Dilemma



CHRISTOPHER MALON | PHOTOGRAPHY

## Tiny Dragon





# CONTRIBUTOR BIOS

MELISSA AVILA is a senior political science, humanities, and Spanish major who enjoys painting, drawing, and origami. She loves to travel and learn about cultures unlike her own because she believes that everyone has an untold story.

ANNA BEDALOV is a junior creative writing major stumbling through time and space for the foreseeable future.

GRACE BIERMANN is a junior English and humanities double major from all over the Midwest. She enjoys reading, writing, watching movies, drinking tea, exploring the UK, cooing over Baby Yoda, and spending time with her friends, family, and dog. She wants to thank everyone in her life, but especially the wonderful people of Cambridge C-104. Let's keep cracking the code together, guys. Soli Deo Gloria.

HALEY BREWER is an English major senior who sometimes writes. She prefers peppermint mochas, paperback books, the color pink, and pretty much everything to do with cats. Every time she writes she feels like it's going to be her last good idea, but she's happy to report that hasn't been the case so far—will keep you updated on that front.

ISABEL COFFEY is “like a rolling stone” in her habits and homes and writing — she rolls from hobby to hobby, place to place, topic to topic... Some days it feels like she's being worn down to nothingness, and other days, it's more like she's being smoothed and refined. Nowadays she's leaning into the friction.

MAGGIE DOMINIAK is a junior creative writing and classics double major. She enjoys darker stories; Stephen King is an inspiration for her. Her hope is to become a novelist and screenwriter in the horror and fantasy genres. She adores reading, is obsessed with writing, draws when the Muse strikes, and dances when she needs to let the negative energy out. She loves being human but would prefer if she could be transformed into a dragon.

COURTNEY EARL is a senior student double majoring in creative writing and classics and minoring in theology, who loves writing about ancient history and mythology. She enjoys reading, learning languages, and spending time with her dogs and budgies in her free time. Courtney will be pursuing her MA in classics at Villanova University in the fall.

ZOE FISCHER (she/her/hers) is a senior psychology, professional writing, and humanities major from Joliet, Illinois. An aspiring psychologist, Zoe has spent much of her undergraduate career researching topics in criminal justice and trauma, studying prison reform and counseling, and training in suicide intervention and prevention. She enjoys writing pieces that might inspire change in communities she cares about.

LEAH GATCHEL is a sophomore creative and professional writing major. She is running to the rescue with love and hoping that peace follows. Her favorite movie is *marie antoinette*.

LEXI GAULT is a junior astronomy and math double major trying desperately to be an art student but only succeeding in the fact that she wears turtlenecks and doc martens.

EMMA HECHT is a creative writing & humanities major. She likes writing poetry because her philosophy is basically this: Why waste time, say lot word when few word do trick?

MADISON HENRY is a sophomore English literature major who enjoys reading, writing, and art. She plays division I college softball and plans to attend law school after graduation.

JESSE JOHNSON is an artist living and working in Gary IN. Jesse has received his BA in communications from Indiana University Northwest and is currently pursuing his MS in The School of Digital Media Communication. Jesse has shown his work in the Annual Student Show at IUN for the past five years. His experience with violence in different neighborhoods of Chicago has been a big source of inspiration for his works. From a young age, Jesse has been drawing, painting, doing photography and producing music. He is currently continuing his interdisciplinary practice at his studio.

ETHAN JONES is a physician assistant major who enjoys photography and writing. The goal he hopes to accomplish through his photographs is an emotional reaction, often to the natural beauty of landscapes or people.

HAILEY KADOLPH is a sophomore studio art major. Through exploring new and different forms of art, she is continuously learning more about herself.



HAYLEY KIM is a senior English major who can't wait to begin her full time job of Drink Tea And Do Taxes? Eat Flax Seed? Learn To Knit? Someone please send help.

ANDRÉA KÜTEMEIER is a senior digital media arts major who concentrates her work on photography. She enjoys shooting digitally as well as film with her large format camera. Check out more of her work at [andreanicolephotodesign.com](http://andreanicolephotodesign.com).

CHRISTOPHER MALON is a sophomore mechanical engineering major who enjoys photography and sketching in his free time. He especially likes taking pictures of nature such as wildlife and landscapes but also enjoys taking pictures of urban landscapes as well.

DEMI MARSHALL is a senior English major with a theatre minor. She enjoys writing, reading, listening to music, and spending time with friends. She mainly writes for online music publications, but has recently gained interest in creative writing, such as poetry and playwriting.


CONNOR MARTIN is a senior public health and sociology double major who believes in art with a purpose. He consistently pressures the boundaries of universal norms by calling into question the most basic experiences of the human condition. With chaos and beauty intertwined, Connor pushes unsettling pieces with comforting aesthetic.

KATE MATHEWS is a senior, studying English and striving to be Unemployed™ by May 2020. Outside of academics, her interests include speaking to her slowly dying plants in dulcet tones and dreaming of the day she can raise chickens in the English countryside.

ALEXIS MENTIS is a senior English major and creative writing minor. She spends her free time reading books that have not been assigned for a class, watching tv, and obsessing over *Friends*. She wants to thank her family for being the real MVPs as she has navigated the ups and downs of the rollercoaster we like to call college.

EMILY NEUHARTH is a senior studying creative writing & humanities. If anyone were to slander *The Lighter*, Emily would duel them to the death, and then set them on literary fire.





ESEOSASERE OKUNDAYE is a senior social work and political science major who was always anxious to submit her work for consideration, until now. As an avid supporter of *The Lighter*, Eseosasere enjoys performing at the semesterly coffeehouse and lending a hand when needed.

LEE SANCHEZ is a sophomore English and psychology major. Whenever they are feeling unhappy, they can always count on making art to cheer them up.

KAYLA SMITH is a freshman art major with too much free time. Enjoys drawing and is trying to learn how to whistle.

TONY STAROS is a senior art and communications major from Chicago. He enjoys painting, music, and skateboarding (probably a little too much). He plans on starting a career in communications, eventually moving onto non-profit work.

KYLIE STERLING is a senior creative writing and French double major, with minors in studio art and humanities. She enjoys reading, especially fantasy novels and comics, writing, and drawing.

REBECCA STOCKHAM is a junior English lit. and creative writing double major who is forever admiring the moon when she's not writing poetry.

ANNA STYRCZULA is a senior digital media art and humanities double major with a computer science minor. For more of her writing, check out her blog at [sophiechoir.tumblr.com](http://sophiechoir.tumblr.com).

ALANA SWOPES is a junior music major. From time to time she writes music and that other time is spent playing *The Sims*.

MARK YOUNG is a senior data science major who looks for unique ways to capture portraits of earth, people, and all things in order to tell stories that hopefully change the way you look at the world. For more photos, please visit [markyoungphoto.com](http://markyoungphoto.com)

## CONTRIBUTOR BIOS



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And lastly, you! Thank you for reading this semester's issue of *The Lighter*. Heart emojis to you all.



# THE LIGHTER

