

KINGS RIVER REVIEW 10th EDITION





Spring 2026

The *Kings River Review* is published each fall and spring semester by the students in English 15J, Literary Journal Publication. Our desire is to produce a journal that reflects the emerging voices and visions of community college students, designing a space for their creative expression. The journal is named for the Kings River which runs along the western boundary of Reedley College.

The *Kings River Review* is made possible by the support of Dean of Instruction, Dr. Todd Davis.

We welcome submissions from two-year college students from across the United States. Please visit our website (kingsriverreview.com) for submission guidelines:

Kings River Review
995 North Reed Avenue
Reedley, California 93654
kingsriverreview.com



Number 10

Spring 2026

Editors

Nikolai Yanovsky

Melissa Torres

Zofia Trexler

Cover Art: "A Cursed Blessing" by Trianh Ta

Eileen Apperson and Rebecca Snyder, Instructors

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Printing by Dumont Printing, Fresno, California.

Letter from the Editors

Dear Readers,

Thank you for taking the time to read the milestone 10th issue of the **Kings River Review**! Throughout the course of the **Spring** 2026 semester, we have had to make difficult decisions about this journal you hold in your hands. From the aesthetics, to the layout, and especially, the grueling decisions in regards to which submissions to include that would often come down to the wire, these pages are a physical representation of our choices.

Above all, our mission at **Kings River Review** is to highlight the varied voices of community college students throughout the United States, and each editorial flourish that is included was done with this in mind. Going through the submissions we received this semester, there were a few clear themes that are currently captivating the hearts and minds of our fellow students. Many of us had something to say about the people we have lost, the state of the world, and finding solace in our love for furry friends.

We hope to have provided an artistic outlet for our contributors while capturing the essence of the trying times we live in with the decisions we have made. If we have accomplished this to any extent, then all of the hard work that went into this issue will have been worthwhile.

Sincerely,

Editors of the *Kings River Review*

Nikolai Yanovsky

Melissa Torres

Zofia Trexler

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Hairy Constraints

by Maria Molund

I can't remember what made me self-conscious
and so embarrassed about my hairy legs
at the age of 11

But I recall my blue jar of Nivea
zesty yet comforting -
and smearing thick globs

down

the long dark-brown strands of fur
as if to tame them.

That same year I became a woman
according to old standards.

The ancient Egyptians,
women and men alike
shaved their entire bodies
as a sign of cleanliness and protection against lice.
But I am neither ancient nor a silky-smooth babe -
yet, I am absorbed by cultural standards of beauty
erect and upheld by whom?
Perhaps, a fear to admit our relation to apes?

These days, when Pamela Anderson
no longer wears make-up
and Aimee Lou Wood from that show on HBO
has charmed America with her buck teeth,
it might be time for my own revolution -
to let my leg-hair be
and finally run free.

Love as a Prism

by Maria Molund

Love is a many-splendored thing!
There is young Juliet on her balcony
perhaps only a passionate fling
but nonetheless now written into immortality.

Love is a desire for wisdom Plato proclaims
but the platonic love of which we speak
as non-sexual has more to its name
reflecting a deep love for the Universe that we all seek-

without knowing it. I searched for you
in the promising eyes of each successive lover,
dandelions, jewels, silk, and ice cream too
only to discover they were all a matte cover.

And so I tell you now, dig and dig because love is not to be found -
It is the very fabric of our inherent cosmic playground!

Furred, Fanged Beast

by Ren Cutrer

Bestial by night, man by day.
Though savage and monstrous you may be,
What melancholy question do you say?

Clawing and tearing through cattle and prey.
Though your actions force you to act beastly.
Bestial by night, man by day.

Never domestic, always a stray.
Very few things that bring such glee.
What melancholy question do you say?

Wandering alone along the brae.
Sometimes spotted by the sea.
Bestial by night, man by day.

Though you are no creation of the Fae.
More often are you riddled with fleas.
Bestial by night, man by day.
What melancholy question do you say?

When Tigers Go Blind

by Lelani Vo

The doctors said to “not lift anything more than 10 pounds for the first few weeks.” Open-heart surgery with a five-percent mortality rate will continue to be a pain in the ass even after you’ve survived it. That’s why Mr. Yu hesitated when he held the Amazon package, but didn’t yet decide if it’d be wise to lift it off the doormat. As he knelt before this precarious choice, goes over his head the numbers; the weight of the box and the new electric mixer combined. His heartbeat quickened. His face broke a sweat. If he was wrong, this could be tempting death.

“Honey!”

Mr. Yu released a breath he didn’t know he was holding. His heartbeat returned to him— to that *thmp-th-th-thmp*, like an old record in gradual repair. Blue flats click against clean floors until his wife stops at his side. She gasped and swiped the package from his hands— “what are you doing, trying to carry this? You know what the doctor said!”

“10 pounds or less,” Mr. Yu muttered, “I know, I thought I could handle it.”

“The new Kitchen-Aid weighs well over 30 pounds, *I* can handle it,” she watched him like a hawk as she went to put it on the counter.

Of course you could handle it, but he didn’t want her to. She dusted the dirty cardboard off her hands and shook her head at him, *like a child*, he thought. And he cowered before each punctuated word. “I’m home, with you. And you have to let me know if you need anything, even if you think you can handle it alone, okay?”

“Okay,” He grumbled.

“Promise.”

There was silence for a time. Mr. Yu mumbled and croaked out an incoherent syllable, like he had attempted to say it, “I—” and failed, because asking for help was already a foreign language on his tongue. Instead he complied to his own fluency and joked, “why do I have to promise you something that silly?”

She rested her arms on her hips. “It’s the only way I’ll know you will.”

Silence again.

So she wasn't going to budge. Mr. Yu huffed out a long sigh in surrender. "I promise."

It was no more than a whisper, but for some reason, it was good enough for her. "Thank you," she pecked him on the cheek, "now if you'll excuse me," and walked off.

The old man rose carefully to his feet. Once she was out of earshot, and he heard her drama on the television resume its foreign bickering, he cursed under his breath. None of course, were meant toward his sweetheart after forty years of marriage. It was only for the thirty-nine years that he had made himself useful to her before his heart gave out on him. Mr. Yu could no longer hold doors for Mrs. Yu, drive around Mrs. Yu, let alone be Mrs. Yu's tango partner at the YMCA. She had dropped that class as soon as the operation was underway, which was a shame, because he knew she enjoyed learning the *corte* with all her heart. But *in sickness and in health*, they had sworn that one day times like these naturally come with old age.

Now, what was there to return to?

Could you call this normalcy if there is only a semblance of it? Mr. Yu could feel his shirt chafe uncomfortably against the wires stapled in his chest, a phantom reminder that scalpels and other sharp objects were poking around his heart mere weeks ago. The old man shoved that thought aside. *One foot in front of the other, now.* He shuffled toward the kitchen in snail strides, holding himself to the wall, taking care not to be upset, agitated, or, doctors forbid, stressed.

They had told the old man to not lift anything more than 10 pounds the first few weeks. As if not being able to take care of his wife wasn't bad enough, other activities were now a new prohibition unto him. No longer could he enjoy the 007 action movies that'll get your blood pumping, conquer a flight of stairs if it looks like it could leave you out of breath, or drive, period, where Asian drivers always have you inbound for a road rage. All of the above has made him less of a man.

But one thing was allowed of Mr. Yu, his precious cats.

Mr. Yu had mentioned his cats to the doctor. They're not his of course, Mrs. Yu has always had mild allergies and he had to honor that boundary. They are strays who come to the house for food, shelter, and affection. He was glad he was healthy enough to continue caring for them.

He safekept the chunky cat food in the cabinet beneath the sink. Getting two cans, he used a can opener to peel back the metal lid. This small task wasn't too much on him. He went through the familiar motions of scooping out the pate into two paper bowls, enough for all his little visitors.

Mr. Yu shuffled back out toward the front door.

"Bao!" He called.

On cue, the name summoned a fluffy white shape.

Baozi. Bao for short. His most frequent visitor, his most consistent friend. An elderly cat, who was soon to go blind in one eye, swivelled out from behind the bushes and strolled up to the old man. His tail was fluffy, his fur was matted from old age, and his belly was fat and round from months of being fed the good stuff.

He walked circles around Mr. Yu's legs, purring happily. "How have you been my boy? It's good to see you again," the old man bent down to scratch the back of Bao's ears, who leaned into his palm for more pets.

His gaze softened. It had been a week, and even though Mrs. Yu had been feeding the cats in his place while he was in the hospital, he was sure that it had been some time since Bao had gotten direct affection like this.

"Now, where was I?" He set down the bowl of food and Bao made a beeline toward it. Mr. Yu lowered himself on the steps by the door where he sat to watch him. The sight of the old cat wolfing down the pate put his mind at ease. He wasn't the only neighbor who fed the cats, but he was the only neighbor who fed the cats good food by his standards. Some simply dump cold rice and leftovers on the grass, leaving the scraps to spoil, for cats to gather to and eat from like rats. But Bao was a loving creature, and he was hardly that.

The old man's gaze darted toward movement by the gate.

As expected and on time. More strays came to feast. Two of them he named and recognized. Mapo Tofu, an energetic calico cat barely out of kittenhood, and a lanky scarred cat with orange tabby fur, Schezuan Peppercorn Chicken With Chili Oil.

Mr. Yu had an odd thing for naming the cats after his favorite foods. There is sadly one in the wild named Costco Wholesale \$1.50 Hotdog Combo.

Schezuan Peppercorn Chicken With Chili Oil, or for the sake of this project's word count, Schezuan for short, was watching like a hawk from be-

side the gate, wary of the enemies that have laid claim to his meal. Tofu, on the other hand, wasted no time and scampered over to eat from the same bowl as Bao.

Schezuan's reaction was immediate. He hissed angrily at Tofu, who quickly cowered away.

Mr. Yu knew well of the orange cat's spicy personality. That's what the second bowl of food was for. From behind his back, he picked it up and went to set it beside the gate, closer to Schezuan whose dilated eyes went away from the docile Bao. Tofu was able to sneak around to eat from the other bowl in the company of the old cat. Now everyone is happy and there are no problems. He could humor himself here and honor this one constant in his life; the strays and their own social politics. It never gets old.



"Bao?" Mr. Yu called one day. He called his name once, twice, thrice, just to make sure. And when no summon was made, he felt that something was off.

He would be right.

Tofu's familiar meow was heard from the tall grass. The small calico cat appeared, shy and unmoving. She was likely unsure whether it is safe to approach the food without affirmation from her friend Bao.

Mr. Yu hoped that the familiar white cat would walk in after Mapo Tofu. He stood there expectantly, one hand on his hip and the other awkwardly holding the food bowl. When he did not, he felt ill with uncertainty. Where was he? Bao loves his meals, and would always make sure to eat his bougie breakfast, lunch, and dinner without fail. *Thmp-th-th-thmp*. The old man's heart had begun to speed up only ever so slightly, and he lightly massaged the left side of his chest.

He sighed. "Alright, you eat up, Tofu," he nudged the bowl closer toward the little cat. She took that as her signal and started to eat.

"Do you know where Bao is?" He asked her sullenly.

The cat did not respond, only burrowing her face further into the bowl to the point where she was getting her whiskers and muzzle dirty with pate.

That was pointless. Was I hoping for a response?

Recalling himself, Mr. Yu was still duty-bound to ensure Schezuan was fed. Yet how strange again. The state that the other cat came in immediately struck the old man as odd. Schezuan had many old battle scars of course, but

this time his injuries were fresh. He had dried blood all across his upper flank and, what's worse, a bad limp in his lower leg. *It must've been a nasty catfight*, the old man thought, *it's normal for feral cats like him to start them*. Schezuan was hotheaded and feral unlike the other strays, that much he understood. He did not want to ask help from other humans, and whether it was out of fear or conditioning, he must have surely grown up without them.

"Pstpspst," the old man tried befriending him anyways. Expectantly, for some reason that expectation comforted him, it didn't work. The slender orange cat did not budge from his place behind the gate where he hid his limp with a crouch. Mr. Yu decided against attempting to befriend Schezuan at all. He placed the bowl of food in its usual place and retreated back toward the steps. The safe distance was his signal to eat. Even with Tofu and Schezuan eating away, he was still worried about his old friend.



Mrs. Yu could not wrap her mind around her husband's concern over the fat white cat. Bao wasn't their pet, after all; it was odd enough as it is to put up flyers for strays, who one day, inevitably, go missing. The wise thing would have been to assume the obvious. But she still insisted on putting his heart to ease by printing a handful of missing cat flyers at Staples. He didn't ask for it, and he was thankful for it.

Mr. Yu was thumbing through the light stack of freshly printed paper in his hands. For his own safety, he managed himself at a snail pace through the neighborhood, taking care to post up each paper on every wall and pole. He was sure the flyers would be an effective advertisement. After all, he used his cutest most photogenic photo of Bao, loafing beside the door while slow-blinking at him from behind the camera. Did you know that cats slow blink at you as an indication of affection and trust?

Mr. Yu's heart ached at the fact. He could have also used the photo of Bao sleeping by the gate, Bao playing with his new feather toy in the driveway, or Bao nonchalantly lounging in the cool shadows of a hot day. Mr. Yu must have been walking faster than he should have because his heart beat trepidatiously like an alert on repeat. He stopped to rest with his back pressed up against the wall. Mr. Yu massaged the left side of his chest again and again and took deep breaths, one, two, three, repetition is key.

The old man's gaze darted toward movement by the gate.

"Schezuan?"

The tabby was crouching nearby. His orange tabby fur easily gave him away amidst all the greenery of some stranger's lawn. With squinted yellow eyes, his tail tucked close to him, he responded to his name with a sway of his tail. His ears were pinned backward.

Strange, that he responded at all. *Maybe I neglected his lunchtime?* He thought warily, *the first thing I did today was leave the house after all.*

"I have no food for you right now," he rasped.

The feral cat rose to his paws without the effort of hiding his limp. Mr. Yu was only left to stare after Schezuan in confusion. Schezuan slowly walked away, stopped, looked back at the old man, before he slowly walked away again. And for some reason, Mr. Yu was compelled to follow him.

One foot in front of the other now, Mr. Yu compelled himself. He tailed after the cat. "Schezuan? What is it-?" He asked with more urgency.

It must have been an unusual sight to the morning walkers on the street. Mr. Yu could not have noticed them, nor the surge of his beating heart as he trailed behind the orange cat limping ahead of him. In trust of this unusual guide, he tried to remember to manage himself with snail strides. He took two right turns, one last left left, before he found himself inside the parking lot of an apartment complex.

And that's when he heard him.

A pained, phlegmy yowl came from underneath the community dumpster. His heart skipped a beat, in fear, relief, happiness, and joy. Mr. Yu dropped his flyers as he came forward fast. "Baol! *Baozi!*" He called urgently.

There was another yowl, this time louder.

Schezuan had meowed after him too as if they were having a conversation of their own. The old man ignored his own grunts of pain as he lowered himself to a crouch. But he had to in order to get a better look at him. Mr. Yu searched beneath the dumpster, tried to pin where he was, and sure enough, he saw the familiar outline of his fluffy white shape.

Bao, thank God, was alive, but looked worse for wear. His most frequent visitor, his most consistent friend. The elderly cat, who was soon to go blind in one eye, was now blind in both! And it was clear that no cat was at fault for this as well. The size of the jagged claw mark across his face looked like it belonged to a coyote or a dog. Mr. Yu did not hesitate to scoop the injured cat out from under the dumpster and cradle him in his arms.

That's why he was missing, he agonized, *he wasn't able to find his way around*

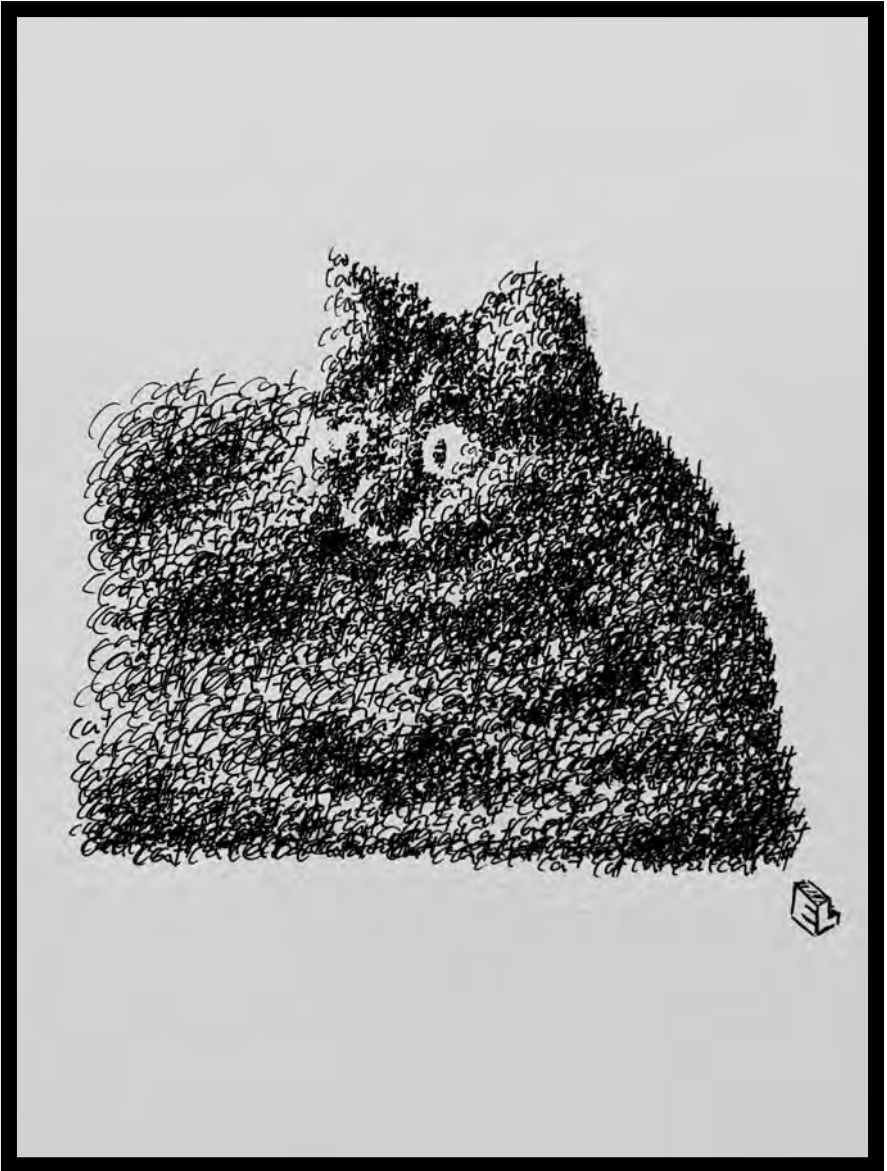
after.

The old man held his blinded friend closer to his chest and paid no mind to the peril of his speeding heart. As Bao writhed and meowed in pain, Mr. Yu peppered kisses to the top of the cat's forehead. Over and over, he had done so, as if in an attempt to sustain him with the lifeline of love alone. Bao looked like he was on the brink of death and he deserved a better place to lay than beneath a dumpster. He could bear with the weight of the creature in his arms so long as he could get him there.

"I've got you." Mr. Yu panted, "don't worry, my boy, I've got you."

And he repeated it like a mantra as he put his wife on speed dial.

"Honey, I need your help."



Ethan Lopez, "Cat Cat"
Ink Pen on Canvas Paper

Mister

by Michael Bowman

Old, old grumpy man
with that grey fur coat.

So so vicious, all those
years ago. We changed
together, growing as a family.
Now you're so sweet and loving;
filling my ears with sweet purrs.

Old, old grumpy man
with those lemon drop eyes.

You curl up on my bed,
tail hitting me in the face
as I try to sleep. I'm going
to miss you when you go.





Trianh Ta, "Enjoy the Little Things"
Acrylic on Canvas



Lizbeth Apolinar, "The Search with the Dagger" after Talbot Hughes

Acrylic



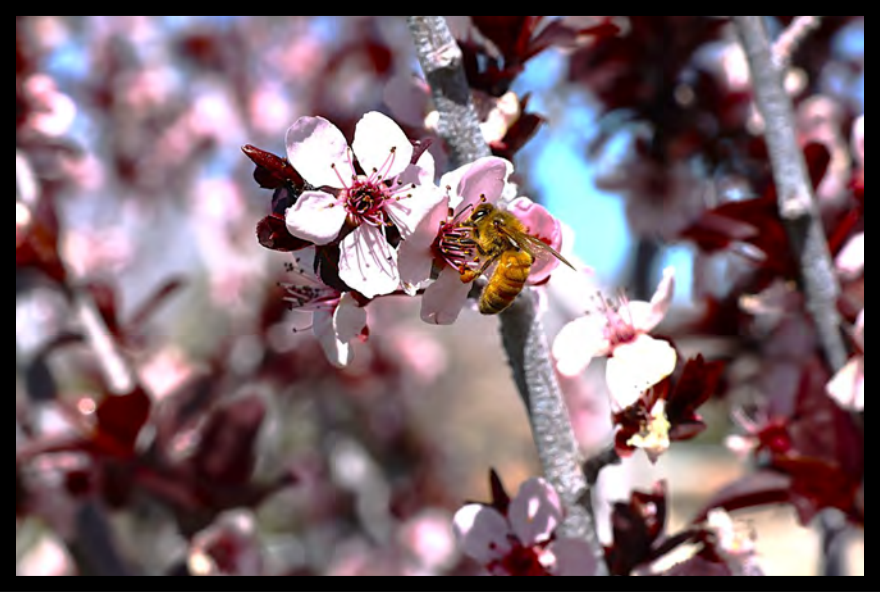
Ella Ellsworth, "Piper's Decade"

Oil on Canvas



Trianh Ta, "Dino Adventure"

Oil On Canvas



Dennis Hopper, “Bee Photography”
Photography



Trianh Ta, "Autumn Moonlight"

The Years Without You

by Kayla Jackson

Time has passed and yet you are
still here, lingering.
The soft orange of sunsets
and California poppies.
You don't know me at this age, but I know you.

I call to you in my sleep
And sometimes you answer.
A gentle hug, a whisper.
You are the lady in the grocery store aisle
with the same eyes.
I stare at her for a while and imagine a world with you in it.

The funeral was so long ago, but
it was also this morning
and yesterday, and when I laugh,
and most importantly on your birthday.

Sometimes I go to the beach to meet you.
And if I wish hard enough, you'll be there.

A Letter to my 16-year-old Self

by Dilyara Breyer

宁为太平犬，不做乱世人

Better to be a dog in times of peace than a human in times of chaos.

乱世出英雄

In chaotic times, heroes emerge.

Ms. Tenacity, reading Kipling

Please be proud of me

Sixteen-years-old

in an oil town

Deep in mainland

Of a clay colossal country.

They say it's a curse

To live in a time of change.

I was blessed with it

Twice.

All angles of a freshly formed teenager.

In a deeply fractured country

My refuge books and poets.

I love languages.

I live in stories and libraries.

Please be proud of me -

I speak multiple languages now -

Just as you dreamed.

I live on the other side of the world

- you never could have imagined -

In a much bigger oil town

of Angels

That pretends that it isn't

In a desert on the Pacific.

Just as you've never imagined
your country is hurting
while hurting other countries.

Which country?
You're a citizen of the world now.
A cosmopolitan
Carry the aches of humanity
As you travel the world.
Hug the planet
With your feet.
One step at a time.

The fabric of your life
woven in bright colors.
You've found people
Who became your nest
From which to spring.

Please be proud of me,
all-angled teenager. Please know
that everything will be OK.
At least sometimes.
A cynical pessimist, you've become hopeful.
Even when hopes are crushed
again
and again,
you believe
in humanity
in life and
People around you.

Your world expands
Taps into the vast universe
Of wisdom and knowledge of all

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who are gone,
The bearer of stories.
A keeper of secrets.

So many stories to tell
before I go away
Coded in poems,
metaphors for the next generations
to decode and gnaw on
like yummy ice cream of many flavors.
Sharing your truth out
Bit by bit.
Be the hero you need in times of change.

Thought Daughter

by Sharanjit Kaur

The thought daughter thought love was
a prize to be won. So she fought aimlessly
for every ounce she could drink up. Her mind
was a babbling mess of words and phrases,
incoherent to the rest but, to her,
it made every bit of sense.

The thought daughter fought
to be worthy and kept her anxious mind
at bay while her thundering heart gave
her away. She measured her worth
with the love she was awarded.

Every soft spoken word from whom she
was born, fed her mind for hours.
The lingering touches of a comforting
hand over hers made sparks shoot through
her and temporarily satiated her urge
for love and affection.

She ached for more like it was a drug
and the absence made the withdrawal flood
her senses with a passion. The brief exchange
of words from strangers who offered a simple
and fleeting kindness filled her with joy that
lasted throughout her entire day.

Sometimes she made sure to spread it through
her whole week like love was a dinner she
didn't know she'd get to eat.

The thought daughter was an addict for adoration.
She spent so long being an empty vessel for
nothing but her never-ending inner conflict,
that any form of love came as a welcome shock.

The thought daughter would fight wars in the
name of love for even the tiniest drop on the
off-chance that she won.

The Wish I Carry

by Jennifer Camara Brooks

The doctor's quiet words feel heavy, digging deep in my heart.
A future I had dreams of now cripples my heart.
I trace the outline of a face I never got to kiss softly.
Even emptiness has a weight that I carry in my heart.
People say time weakens loss, but time only circles back to me.
Some days I walk sure and strong; some days I want to rip out my heart.
I hide tiny memories like stars, tucking them where no one sees.
My love doesn't vanish, it just changes the beat of my heart.
If there is a place where wishes go when they cannot stay,
I hope you rest softly there, as safe as the memory I hold in my aching heart.

Child of Mother Earth

by Vanessa Luna

Peaceful loneliness

Fulfilled by sounds in the air

Everlasting rest

Heartbeat equals with the trees

Here, we are blended as one

Everlasting Seasons

by Alma Garcia

The room smelled strongly of antiseptic, a rather sharp and clean smell that mingled strangely with the array of flowers sitting on the windowsill and table. Sunlight streamed through the window, bright and warm, providing life to the flowers. The beeping of the heart monitor and the faint repeating drip-drip sound of the IV filled the otherwise quiet room, slowly marking the passage of time to its own unusual rhythm. As she slowly adjusted herself on the bed, the shuffling of footsteps could be heard outside, followed by a soft knock.

“Come in.” she spoke quietly.

The door rattled open softly, as if hesitating, her daughter cautiously entered, slowly surveying the room despite having been here several times already. Regardless of the fact she had visited practically every day, the stuffy feeling of a hospital is something one can never get used to.

Slowly removing her bag, she placed it on the chair while placing yet another bouquet of flowers on the windowsill, adding to the ever-growing collection. “Aunt Emily asked me to bring you these since she couldn’t make it herself.” Her mother hummed a small sign of acknowledgement and thanks as Olivia continued to fiddle with the flowers and get well cards.

Reluctantly, Olivia finally shifted her gaze onto her mother who was now reaching for a book she had pushed aside early. Her eyes drifted across her frame, the hospital gown looking looser than it did when she was first admitted and the thin blanket doing nothing to hide this. From the view of her more pronounced collarbones, she followed it to her face, and her sunken cheeks. The light outside brightly shined onto her, making the lines even more emphasized; it felt mocking in a way. The way the birds continued to sing, the flowers were fully in bloom, on the way over the kids loudly playing on the street, it was a perfect summer day, yet it felt cold, suffocating, and bleak in the room.

“The nurse told me that they switched your antibiotics.” Olivia spoke quietly, slowly adjusting the blanket for her mother before taking a seat in the chair beside the bed.

With a sigh her mother closed her book, once again placing it on her side.

“Not just antibiotics, they switched a lot of the medicine. The doctor said.”

A cough. She reached for a tissue on the bedside table and continued to cough into the tissue. Olivia frowned, reaching for her mother’s free hand and grasping it tightly. A hand that no longer felt familiar, it was frail and clammy. It’s not the strong and warm embrace she had become so accustomed to holding her entire life.

“They said these meds are the strongest they have. If they work properly, I should start feeling improvements as early as tonight.” She ran her other hand alongside Olivia’s slowly trying to ease her anxiety. “I know it’s scary... I would be lying if I said I wasn’t worried either, but it will be fine.”

Olivia’s stomach knotted and her heart quivered. She once again focused on her mother’s frame which had so drastically changed in just a matter of weeks. Averting her gaze quickly she decided to focus on the flowers instead.

Her vision lingered on the lilies she had brought from their own garden just days ago. She recalled bringing home a flower back in elementary school, insisting that she start her own personal garden in the backyard. Her mother had agreed and took her to get more bulbs, and it then became routine for them to water the plants together.

She remembered her mother’s hands slowly and patiently guiding her on just how much water the plants needed, their small celebration once the flowers began to bloom, and her own arguments against picking any of the flowers, insisting on leaving them alone.

A light knock on the door interrupted her thoughts.

In walks the nurse, wheeling in a large cart with food placed on top.

“Mrs. Owen’s here’s your lunch as well as your medication. Make sure to take them with all the water and fill out this paper for what you would like for breakfast tomorrow” she instructed while adjusting the bed so Mrs. Owen’s sat upright.

After some more instructions on the medicine as well as checking the IV bags the nurse promptly left the room once more.

“Want me to turn on the T.V. while you eat?” Olivia peeked at her food; it didn’t look appetizing but that’s what’s to be expected from hospital food. It looks sad and beige.

“Please do and hand me the remote.”

The sound of the television, IV dripping, and the nurses’ voices outside weren’t enough to drown Olivia’s thoughts. Would this medicine truly help? If it didn’t how long was left?

As her brain continued to play out every worst-case scenario, she focused back on the television. Her mother watching a sitcom she had no idea the name of laughing out in joy.

The day went on, simply watching television, which was occasionally interrupted by a mundane conversation that didn’t seem to fit the circumstances at play. It was simple conversations and questions about whether they had been getting enough sleep, how work had been, if she had finished the book she had begged Olivia to bring a few days ago.

With the sun quickly setting, the nurses seem to be stopping by more frequently. Throughout their conversations they had popped in with another classic plastic cup with medicine to take as well as fluids. However, now they continue to walk in and out, writing on their boards. Every time Olivia heard the same soft knock at the door her stomach twisted, it never ended and just happened again. This time the nurse arrived with dinner and more medication to take after.

“Will you be staying overnight, Olivia? I can bring you a cot and some blankets if so.”

Thinking of how her mother had said she had a possibility of getting better by tonight, yet also considering all the visits the nurses paid in these short hours, Olivia decided it would be best to stay at least one night. As Olivia began to set up the cot her mother softly called her name. Her breathing was long and deep.

“Lay here with me, dear.”

“Is everything okay?”

Olivia gathered her blankets quickly and got into the bed beside her, grabbing her hand. She then adjusted the blanket making sure she was fully tucked in.

“Just a little tired.”

Olivia could see tears starting to welt up in her mother’s eyes as well as her voice cracking. It’s obvious that the medication hadn’t been helping, her fever hasn’t broken, her cough is as insistent as ever. Yet she tried to hold it together, she didn’t want to accept it.

“It’s funny to think about how I used to tuck you in every night, and now you are doing it to me.”

Her mother slowly moved hair from Olivia’s face and ran her finger across her eye, getting rid of the tears that started to form.

Olivia whispered back, her own voice shaking, “You did it every night... even when you got home late. I would stay up and-and... just wait until you came in to say goodnight.”

She couldn’t hold it together anymore and pressed her face to her mother’s shoulders, letting the tears fall as she wept. Laughter could be heard outside, the insistent beep of the machine that’s rhythm was slowly changing, and the persistent sound of crickets outdoors. It felt so cruel.

“I-I’m going to get a nurse! Hold on!”

Olivia went to stand yet a gentle hand grabbed onto her, pulling her back, despite the pull having zero strength it was enough for her to stop.

“Just stay here dear” A small cough erupted from her.

“Let me hold you just a little longer,” she whispered and softly petted her head.

The beeping of the machines got quieter as Olivia listened to her mother’s heartbeat and continued to weep. It was all too much, too quiet other than the sound of her own turmoil. However, it didn’t last long as the sound of rushed footsteps could be heard and then the loud push of a door with doctors rushing in.



Mornings used to be the best part of the day. I loved rolling out of bed and drifting down into the cozy kitchen. There I would be met with the strong smell of freshly brewed coffee and faint sounds of movement. Mom would shift around cleaning and humming a song as I sat and ate my breakfast, which would be much too sweet.

But now everything has changed and even just getting out of bed is a struggle. As I slowly make my way out of the warm blankets, I look outside the window. Time stops for no one, and just like that, the seasons have so drastically changed. The large cherry tree that sits outside my window is now bare, the gray sky hunched over the rooftops pressing down onto the world.

I carefully make my way down the stairs and to the kitchen. Everything is quiet. Just as it has been for the past few months. No longer am I greeted in the morning by the soft drips of coffee, the sound of eggs sizzling on the

stove, or small chatter. Instead, it is just pure emptiness.

As I go to prepare my own breakfast, I turn on the television in hopes of it helping drown out the quiet atmosphere. A sitcom plays on the screen, as I pay half attention and can hear the family having a silly argument. It helps fill the space, but not the absence of side comments and laughter that should be followed by the bad jokes.

My thoughts are interrupted by a drum sound playing from the phone. I make my way over to my cellphone and answer upon seeing the familiar, “Aunt Emily” displayed.

Her voice rings softly as she notices I have picked up, “Hey Olivia, how are you feeling today?”

As I make my way back over to the stove, continuing making my eggs and bacon, I briefly debate how to respond. Dealing with my emotions and grief hasn’t been easy. The first few days I completely shut down. I stayed in my room for days, not wanting to see the world outside and how it continued to move on. However, as time has went on, the days get easier and I’ve been able to get out of bed. Yet, dealing with grief isn’t linear. Some days are tougher than the rest, like today. Everything has been reminding me of my mother, from the sounds to her broken old mug that I couldn’t bear to get rid of.

I don’t want to worry my aunt any further though, I have done that enough in the beginning. “I’ve been fine... just getting ready for the day.” I respond after a short pause. “How have you been?”

The conversation continues until I have finished my breakfast. It is all rather mundane, just about what we have done the past few days, future plans, the weather; it was all small talk. Yet in the end, I appreciate it as it helps fill the air on this heavier day.

The shift from small talk to the once again empty home was sharp. My eyes can’t help but wander to my mother’s throw blanket. It sits in the same spot of her favorite recliner, which is slightly flattened from all the years of use, now going untouched. From the blanket to the recliner, the small trinket box by the television, all her books. My eyes can’t help but bounce around all her belongings. They are all things I love and cherish, yet they currently felt as if they are suffocating me.

It feels as if I am drowning in the house, despite the lack of sound it becomes far too loud. I have to get out, I have to do something. Quickly

making my way to the closet, my hands shake and I reach out, grabbing a large black winter coat, tugging it on in a rush and grabbing my wallet as I head out the door.

Where am I going? I have no idea.

Before I can think further about my destination, the cold air hits my face. I try to bury myself further in my coat, in hopes of it hiding me from everything. As I continue to trudge through the cold frost sidewalk, my steps are heavy, filled with uncertainty, and my head hangs low.

Somewhat up ahead, a loud bark slices through the frigid air. Looking up, I am met with the sight of Mr. Carter, my neighbor, and his golden retriever greeting me. The dog's tail wags furiously as it approaches closer and starts sniffing my legs as it gets into distance. Mr. Carter gives me a small smile and gently tugs at the leash, "Cold day, isn't it?"

Any other day I would have reach down and pet Luna for a while, but I don't have it in me today. I just give him a small nod and mutter something that I can't even hear myself, then continue my walk.

Eventually I reach the bus stop at the corner and decide to stop. I drop onto the bench, hands shoved deeply into my pockets. The strong wind continues to tug at my coat as I sit firmly waiting for the bus. Across the street, a family attempts to build a snowman. The children laugh as they observe it from further away and notice how lopsided it is. The father is desperately trying to fix the sides while the mother sits back with a camera.

I just continue to sit and watch, completely absorbed in their happiness and laughter. They continue to play and eventually the children start throwing snowballs at one another. The entire scene is chaotic and silly. For a second my chest feels lighter and a small smile reaches my face.

Then a tear drops.

And another.

And another, before I even realize they continue to pour out. I try to press my palms against my eyes and blink the rest away, yet they just keep flowing out faster than I can wipe them away. I continue to wipe away at my eyes, hoping the cold air would help numb and distract me somewhat when an older woman approaches the bench as well. She takes a seat, not right next to me, yet close enough that I know I've been caught. I don't want to look up at her though.

We sit there for a moment, the only sound being the harsh winds and

my sniffing. Then a quiet voice beside me speaks, “Rough day?”

My breath shakes. I swallow hard before giving her a small nod and wipe my eyes with the edge of my coat once more. “Y-yeah,” I whisper to her, my voice breaking slightly.

We continue to sit in silence for a while longer until she once again cuts through the air, “Your mother used to volunteer at the same community garden as I a few years ago.” The lady doesn’t look at me directly and just places her own hands inside her large coat, trying to keep herself warm. “She was a lovely person, very kind, had the best taste in flowers too,” she says with a small laugh. “You could tell she loved that garden and every plant in it. She always cherished the little things.”

“I know,” I whisper, finally turning to look at the lady sitting next to me. She smiles at me faintly, a gentle warmth in her eyes that feels comforting in this cold weather.

“Then, perhaps you can try to do the same. Notice and care for the small things and let those be enough to push you forward rather than hold you back.”

As I sit there, my face feeling numb from the cold, I let her words sink in as I take another shaky breath.

Behind the Gates

by Marcel Borg

I come from a bad place.
I was born in prison
Rested, ate, labored,
a little time out in the yard
every now and then
Waiting out my sentence,
as a man,
like my brothers from back when
who are never coming out

Sitting in my cell,
pondering
Am I the bride?
And he my bridegroom?

After this childhood of sex and violence,
how could I ever be purified?
This world,
it didn't have to be this way
Bathroom sink with the proximity sensor,
and the soap dispenser, too

The dream that I had
where I rolled out of bed,
and everything was the same,
except when I looked in the mirror,
staring back at me was a beautiful young woman
Curly blonde hair down past my shoulders,
olive colored skin,
eyes baby blue,

and they were mine
I jerked awake from the dream,
and for a long time I cried

Something old, like my King
Something new, like this pretty white dress
Something borrowed, like my time here
And something blue, well...

I find that I come from a divine place,
and my Lord is so handsome

So when the warden comes to find me
to inform me of my release,
I'll be ready.

Children of Palestine

By Odie Solorio

One dreamt of being an artist,
red paint on her face and art showcased.

One dreamt of being an actor,
his smile in the spotlight and never erased.

One dreamt of being a teacher,
her book in hand and sharing knowledge on the first day.

One dreamt of being a journalist,
camera in his face and spreading the truth of Gaza's fate.

One dreamt of being a doctor,
needle in her hand instead of watching as Mama screams away.

War II

By Vanessa Luna

Soldiers are we, trained at birth
Every battle plan, carefully thought out
Every day we step on the battlefield never knowing what it might entail
The breath of danger crawls down our necks as we march forward
We stick to our meticulous training and proceed with caution
Though we fight valiantly, and are braver than most, our battle is never won
For we were born into this war, armed with the forces of our ancestors
We've been taught since we could walk, and we will fight till the end
This armor is our skin, no matter how hard we try
It will never come **of**



Skyler Basherian, "Brainrot"

Oil on Canvas



Skyler Basherian, "Mental Virus"

Oil on Canvas



Skyler Basherian, "Mouthful"

Wood Block Print



Lizbeth Apolinar, "Pedestal"

Acrylic



Lizbeth Apolarin, "The American Kirk"



Oil Pastels and Color Pencils

Different

by Emma Berry, Reedley College Featured Author

The smell of sweat and uneasiness filled the damp, darkened quarters. With every leaking crash of waves against the hull's weak wooden boards, the crew's breathing and hearts hastened loudly as we peered through the cracks to try to see ahead.

Torres, like always, was taking his sweet time spotting the approaching ship.

I hated that. I didn't know why Captain chose him to be the lookout – Old Torres could barely even see his own playing cards! How're we supposed to trust his shoddy eye to spot promising cargo while we sat beneath the deck waiting?

It wasn't fair.

It should've been me.

I could only sit there and loathe for a moment as Torres broke the silence with a whistle, giving our crew the signal we hoped for. I rushed ahead of the others and grabbed every shiny weapon I could possibly bring. Excitement surged throughout my body, burying my weaknesses and fears. This was a chance to prove myself. Prove to everyone who I am and what I'm capable of, especially to the captain. I prayed he was watching as I led the crew off our ship and harpooned towards the loaded merchant vessel that lay waiting ahead, who was horrified by the now surprise attack.

"Pirates!" The merchants screamed to each other as they tried to fight us off, but they were no match.

"Lord save us!" The merchants screamed to the skies, but no one came.

We tied any remaining merchant sailors together, assuring safety to those who surrendered. Captain even scouted a doctor who was on board, since illness always plagued the crew. Then of course, we took what we needed – well, more of just what we wanted! It's hard for pirates to resist shiny jewelry and rum while looking for the rather boring necessities and trade.

Eventually, we set sail again, leaving the plumaged merchant ship behind. As the rest of the crew partied, drank fresh rum, and ate their hot meals,

I sat alone and pondered the raid with my journal. I drew out the attack and analyzed what went right and what could've gone better. It also contained my earlier concerns about dear Old Torres in a rant that may have stretched from a few sentences into long, detailed pages filled with my building frustrations.

The pages began to dampen with tears of anger as I dwelt on what could be. I just wanted it to be me. I felt like I deserved it, after all the hard work and dedication I had to this ship and crew.

What was I missing that Torres has?

The nib of my charcoal suddenly broke in the middle of my ranting, leaving charcoal residue and streaks everywhere on my paper and clothes. I sighed in annoyance as I carefully sharpened a charcoal piece with my knife. These charcoals were always so hard to write with; I was so used to the neat and contained feather pens I had growing up. I just couldn't reason with myself to waste ink on the journal. So, rubbish charcoal had to do.

As I twisted the blade and refined the charcoal, I looked out at the bubbly crew. In the middle of the deck sat Torres, who was laughing and holding his rum up to the heavens as he was held by two other men. My initial scowl towards him softened as I saw how happy the crew was around him. No one seemed to care that he was old, stunk rather terribly, and couldn't do much. He was loved, and he was the captain's lookout.

Meanwhile, here I sat hiding, while being young, trained, and practically ready for anything. I was alone and basically a cabin boy.

I began to wonder if I seriously needed to be *that* old to finally rank up. I began drafting up my plans for the upcoming years but was then suddenly interrupted by a loud thud on the barrel beside me. Just from the smell of natural sea musk and a faint smell of rum, I knew Captain was waiting. I immediately stood to attention, saluting an acknowledgement to what was my superior. He towered over me like a mountain with a ginger river of a beard that almost reached the ground. He was proud of it too, despite the insanely hindering length, and never took anything from anybody about it. He was the feared Firemane Pirate after all, and my Captain.

Captain Firemane laughed heartily at my salute, grabbing and shaking my shoulder with his strong hand that almost covered my entire upper arm.

"Ay, James! Always so formal with ye! Loosen up, eh?" Captain pushed a drink into my hands, the liquid spilling all over my trembling fingers. I took a tiny sip of the foul-tasting rum, resisting the urge to spit it all out. He gave

me a nod in approval, as well as a firm slap on the back in assurance. I returned a nervous laugh, trying to appear calm as my throat and back burned.

“Apologies, Cap’n. Just wanted to show my respect.”

“Awe. Always so sentimental and respectful. I like that about you, son. Makes you... different.” Captain shrugged.

“Wait... different?” I perked up, alarmed and a little offended. “What do you mean by that?”

Captain walked forward unannounced, grabbing the journal that was peaking behind the barrel. I held my breath as he flipped through the pages, each page turn sending me into a spiral of embarrassment.

Captain then paused and closed the book gently, giving me a warm smile. “Hah. It’d be great if I could read any of this, huh? That be a shame.” He chuckled as he handed the journal back. “Though you are a good, uh... what’s it called... drawer? That’s what you call ‘em, right? The folk who draw pretty pictures?”

“Artist, sir.” I corrected, but immediately regretted it due to how annoyingly over the top it sounded. I shook my head and assured the captain that the word ‘drawer’ could work as well.

“Yeah, that. You’re good at that. Most of the crew can’t draw, read, or write. At least, not in the way like you. You’re more... classical. Raised a little finer than the rest of us. Detailed. Different.” Captain gave an understanding smile, offering his hand. “But that doesn’t make ya not part of us! Why don’t you come over here and eat? I think you earned it.”

A genuine smile stretched across my face. I couldn’t help myself as I gleefully took his hand and followed his lead. He guided me to the table of drunken crew members, making sure to pull back a seat to offer to me. Under different circumstances, I would find such gestures insulting and a sign of concern, but this felt so caring and genuine from Captain. He was just so warm and nice to those he chose to be close to, while also being so vicious and feared by his enemies.

Captain Firemane was a free spirit. Something I wish I were allowed to be.

The night continued, with more drinks to be had and stories to be shared. I was to watch over everyone as I refused to drink more of that wretched rum, and I didn’t have the freedom to get drunk and lose myself completely in front of them all. Not with what was on the line.

I escorted everyone back to their sleeping quarters, including Captain, who thanked me for my ‘resilience and loyalty’ as he drifted to sleep amongst his fluffy covers and wooden toys he was adamant were very manly.

I crept back to the main deck, which was now empty and cold. Most men would find this unbearable to be in and would run back to the warmth of the decks below, which gave me the chance to unwind.

Sitting on the edge of the bowsprit, I removed my dirty shirt and unraveled the bandages that had been tightly snug across my breasts from binding all week. The bandages were bloodied from overuse and clearly needed to be replaced to prevent unnecessary infection.

I didn’t care, though. *Not now.*

I stood up, breathing in the salty air and balancing on the bowsprit that stretched out to the dark ocean, lit only by starlight. Wind brushed through my shaggily cut hair and bruised skin, bringing relief and peace to my aching body and mind, even if it was only for a short while.

Captain wasn’t wrong. I was definitely different. Just not in the way he expected or knew.

I had to keep it that way, whatever it took.

A yell from above the deck jolted me awake from the little slumber I was able to get. I wasn’t quite sure what the yell was, but a crewmate confirmed it was the captain who called. We all rushed to get ready and ran up the deck, not wanting to make the captain wait long. Captain didn’t seem to mind though, as he awaited us with a big grin spread across his face.

“My wonderful crew!” Captain gleefully shouted. “Bit of an early morning, huh? I know, I know. But it be a good one and I got a little something you all love to see!”

Captain then pulled out a piece of paper, unwrapping it as the crew began to cheer.

Captain continued as he began to show off the contents of the paper, “Found this among what we raided yesterday. A map to our greatest treasure yet.”

“Our greatest treasure?” I stood up, confused. “Better than the gold we found in Nassau?”

Captain chuckled as he walked forward to me. “That was a fine treasure, James. But this? Way better. Unlike anything you’ve seen before.” Captain

then handed me the map, which didn't look much different from what we had seen before. It was located on a small island west of where we were, and its surrounding areas weren't that notable or particularly defensive. A big and unhelpful 'X' lay across the island to signify that *something* was there.

I shook my head, conflicted. "Cap'n... not to doubt you, I never would, but... do you mind explaining... how you know this is so grand?"

"Just trust me lad. Or be surprised." Captain shrugged. "But be ready. That goes for everyone, y'all hear?" He announced as he returned to the helm.

My doubts were not quite extinguished, but my curiosity overrode them. I've never seen Captain so excited and determined. Surely it was worth it to see why, right?



Despite the easy passage, it was going to be quite a long one. Captain predicts it'll be 2 days before we arrive, and that didn't include possible obstacles.

I was definitely wary. I wasn't sure what Captain saw in this map; it didn't seem exciting. These treasure maps were also notoriously not trustworthy and rarely worth the journey, as who would want to leave their goods on a random island? Map treasure was also more of a tale, something you tell the kids to wean them away from what else us pirates did.


If I were being honest, I'd much rather we chase ships for cargo and possibly a better vessel. Our ship was nice when I first got on board, but its age was beginning to show through cracks in the hull, and steering it was growing to be difficult. I'd also appreciate a bigger ship with rooms that I could have to myself. It would be nice to sleep without the bandages. Plus, the more we pillaged, the more we could take. One day, we could even overtake a navy vessel. We'd be unstoppable.

Despite my worries and scheming, I still pressed on. I did everything I could to impress Captain and get him his treasure. Occasionally, I might've overstepped. Made a command of the crew too out of my lane. Made corrections to the course. Messed with the sails a bit. Captain didn't seem to mind, though. He simply stayed put in the helm, watching over us as we worked.

Over time, it began to worry me. Clearly, something was on his mind; he usually engaged with us more. He was a talkative Captain, but now he was only giving us nods of approval and winks. It was a bit scary seeing him so

quiet.



I worried he knew what I had been  ling.

A hard, full day of sailing passed, and nighttime overtook the ship. Everyone was tired from the workload; no one even had the energy to drink much. This gave me freedom over the main deck by midnight.

I released myself from the binding of bandages, relieving myself of the aches of the day. The bruises and cuts along my chest still didn't look any better; infection was visibly near. I sighed, wishing I could just wear nothing. How freeing it would be to not care about the role I was born into. Men get to be anything they want, but I have to pretend and conceal so much just to be given one opportunity they wouldn't even think twice about. I've clearly gotten good at hiding, but it's also made me bitter. Seeing old Torres be look-out despite his age, seeing crew members just love each other without caring what anyone on shore believes, and wearing whatever and what little they like. Everyone was so accepting, but *how* accepting?

I shivered. It was starting to be way too cold, despite the freedom of the bow spirit. I slowly turned around and walked back, securing my bandages and whistling myself a little tune as I wandered back to the entrance of the lower decks.

Suddenly, I stopped, my heart sinking in my chest.

The latch to the lower decks was wide open. It was supposed to be locked. I always made sure and double checked it was locked or at least held down by a box of cannonballs. Yet here it was, completely wide open.

My panic was interrupted by a voice behind me, echoing throughout my body and soul.

"I knew it." It whispered.

I spun around, hiding my bandages with my arms, as I still hadn't fully buttoned my shirt. Behind me was the doctor we had picked up from the raided ship. He had a crooked smile, and terrible intentions stretched across his face.

"Know what?" I croaked back, trying to keep my appearance. "You know nothing, doctor. Go to bed."

"I've been a doctor longer than you've been alive, James." He walked towards me, laughing. "Trust me, I know a lady when I see one."

I rose up, trying to grasp at any last possible defenses. "How dare you?"

You cannot accuse me of such without- “

“You skipped the check-up the captain asked everyone in the crew to attend.” The doctor interrupted, bringing his fingers up to count my missteps. “You stick out like a sore thumb. You may have a nice disguise and fight well, but you are just so different, aren’t you? Spending your time writing in a diary that you don’t hide very well.” The doctor pulled out my journal from behind him proudly. “It wasn’t very hard to figure out.”

I was horrified. I didn’t even know how to respond. Any kind of bravery I had escaped my body and was replaced by terror. I couldn’t even move; I was completely frozen with shock.

The doctor grinned, seeming to be enjoying this. “Oh, relax, would you? Very improper of you. You *should* know that, guessing by your educated handwriting.” He flipped through the pages of the book as I watched in horror. “My, I wonder what Torres would think of what you’ve been saying about him, hm? Or even better... Captain Fireman! Does he know he has a little whore running around, bossing his ship? Hmm, I wonder... how much would he pay to know...”

“Please don’t tell him.” I stepped forward, finally breaking my silence. “Please. I know I don’t have much to offer, but...”

“You do, though. You have plenty, actually. Quite.” The doctor’s eyes began to linger towards my chest perversely, making his bribery clear.

“... no. I can do anything else. But not that.” I gasped out, pleading. “Please. You can have any of my future payouts. You can also have my food, my drinks. Anything but... that.”

“If I wanted anything else, I’d ask anybody else, James.’ Is that even your name?” He brushed his ashy hand across my face, making me recoil in disgust. I slapped his hand and pushed him away, shouting. “I said no!”

He hit the wall after my push, making a loud thud. The gravity of my actions began to set in as the doctor put a finger to his mouth in a shushing motion. Clearly, it was loud enough for others to hear as there were knocks and talking beneath the deck inquiring if everything was alright. I shouted back some reassurance that everything was fine, but as soon as I looked back up at the doctor, he disappeared from sight. I immediately ran out onto the main deck, where he was still nowhere to be seen. I looked everywhere, behind every block and barrel, for what felt like hours. But he was nowhere to be found.

I crept back into the lower decks, still checking everything I could. He was nowhere to be found.

It was over. I was going to lose everything or lose myself trying to stop the inevitable.

I sank into my hammock for what could be the last time.

The morning began like any other day. I honestly expected to be charged in the middle of the night and stripped of all I worked for, then I was to be killed, or worse, used. None of that occurred when I woke. It was all tired smiles, wishing me a good morning, asking what I wanted for breakfast. All normal.

The doctor was still nowhere to be seen. He didn't even show up for breakfast, which worsened my anxiety. What made it worse was Captain also didn't attend, confirming my suspicions. The only place the doctor could've possibly hidden was the captain's cabin. None of the crew could enter after hours without permission, but there was truly nowhere else he could have run to. Plus, with that kind of information the doctor had, Captain must have forgiven it.

I sighed. I couldn't take the anticipation and guilt anymore. I would rather just face it and get thrown off the ship already than wait for my demise. I excused myself from the table, taking in the last moments of peace and conversation. The walk over to Captain's cabin felt like forever despite it only being a few steps. My breathing was labored, and I already felt like I was dying. At least it was over soon.

I knocked on the door, letting Captain know of my arrival. After some shuffling and unlocking, he opened the door with a sleepy yawn. "Good morning, James. Come in." Captain offered, opening the door for me. It felt almost sarcastic, like he was mocking me with the knowledge he now knew. I could only accept it in shame as I walked through Captain's door for what could be the last time.

As soon as the door shut, I began to exhaust any possible goodwill he had. "Captain, I am so sorry. I would've told you. I should've—"

"Told me what?" Captain pondered, which still sounded like he was bluffing.

"... What he told you. Regarding my... womanhood." I admitted, shamefully. I could barely even look at Captain, who was stumbling out words

in response.

“James, this is—“

I held up my hand. “Please, Captain. Let me talk. I promise I can explain.”

Captain paused. He almost seemed unsure, but still gave me the floor.

I took a deep breath and then started from the beginning. Captain listened intently as I began detailing my life. How I grew up wanting adventure, chaos, treasure, and...

Freedom.

I never fit into my noble beginnings. I couldn’t bear to just watch the big ships at the pier in my bedroom window sail away, as I rotted in fine dresses and small talk.

I wanted to sail. No, I *needed* to sail.

And so, I did.

I described to him how I ran away from home at 12 and started from scratch. I redid everything about myself, including cutting my hair, strengthening my figure, and changing my name. I joined the first crew that would take me as Sir James. It wasn’t Captain’s Fireman’s ship; it took me years of tiring and continuous work to get where I am now.

And now, it was all going to fall apart.

I looked up at Captain, who was taken aback by my story. I couldn’t even resist the tears now streaming down my face, destroying any last strong image I had. I was barely even able to speak through my sniffles. “... When you took me in that fateful day of the raid, you said I was one of the strongest fighters you’d seen in all your years of pillaging. That I had potential. Surely that can’t all be erased because of...”

I sighed, knowing my existence broke everything I promised to this ship. “... But I lied. That was unfair of me... It goes against our crew rules, doesn’t it? To never lie to Captain?” My breath hitched as I bowed my head in shame. “It is up to you what is to become of me, my Captain...”

After a long and silent pause, Captain finally gave his answer. “I... appreciate your honesty, James. I did tell you that you are full of potential, and I do still believe that. However, you lied to me. You know how I feel about lying.” Captain’s face darkened in thought.

I nodded my head, still trying to wipe away my tears. At least he admitted my potential; I could die with that.

“But...” Captain continued, standing up from his chair. “You did come clean. Told me the truth and acknowledged your wrongs even when it puts you in danger. And from your own initiative. That, I can respect. Hmm... I’m not quite sure what to do with you. What do you think, James? Or would you like to be called something else now?”

I rose up, confused at how lighthearted he sounded. “I uhm... are you not... mad?”

“Not really. Am I supposed to be?” Captain laughed as he circled me, curiously.

“No! I mean, well, usually someone would be mad at a crew member being a woman-”

“Would you?”

“Of course not. I am a woman after all, or... was? I do like being known as James...” I always reflected warmly on James. It’s similar to my given name, but in a way I like and one I got away with easily. It became so natural; I don’t even remember my given name most of the time.

“Then, James it will be.” Captain smiled, placing his hand on my shoulder. “Do tell me, James, what shall I do?”

I was surprised by Captain’s playful questions. I tried to put myself into the head of a Captain, ignoring my own personal interests for the sake of his hypothetical. “... Well... I would put me on mopping duties for a week. No more free charcoal, and... use that doctor dickhead as fishing bait. That’s what I’d do.”

“Doctor dickhead? What a name...” Captain laughed. “Haven’t seen him in a while. He’s quite weird, isn’t he? Shooed him away last night; he was talking nonsense. Could barely sleep after that and had to miss breakfast! Ahh, speaking of breakfast, surely they have some extra...”

I froze, thinking about what Captain had just said.

Shooed him away... does that mean the doctor never even...

Captain left me with my swarming thoughts as he wandered out to the main deck for food. I had gotten away with everything but understood nothing of what was to come.

**

I waited all day for something to change for the worse. For Captain to change his mind, or for the other crewmates to find out and kill us both. Despite my worries, nothing happened. Everything returned to normal.

I even found the doctor eventually, who still tried to advance me after I found him asleep and hungover in the supply closet. I made him aware that I had already told Captain and that he had made his decision to keep me on board. The doctor had nothing to hold up against me anymore. So, he gave up, but also said that the offer from before was still up while staring me down.

Em. Absolutely not...

It did give me an idea, though. I would no longer restrict myself for the approval of men any longer.

As I returned to the main deck, I untied and tossed my bloody bandages overboard. I didn't care for the confused looks I received; I had a job to do. I didn't make it some grand spectacle either; I just returned to my duties, which were now cleaning the deck, like I said I would. Captain gave me a smile of approval as we continued to sail towards our treasure.

We arrived at the small Island in the late afternoon. Torres didn't spot any possible trouble on shore, and I assured Captain that the area was not usually hostile, so anchoring was very easygoing. I directed every crew member to look for purposeful shallow or odd-looking areas of sand to dig. It could be anywhere, so we had to cover what we could. Right as we were about to head out on our boats, Captain peeked out from his cabin, yelling out in glee.

"Oh, it's perfect! You all did wonderful! Help me put these on the raft, will ye?" Hel

The crew looked at the captain in confusion as he held up the bags he was holding, filled with all his belongings. He placed one in my hand full of food. "Don't worry – I left plenty of extra clothes and food in case you all need it. Now help me, will ye?! I don't wanna be building all night!"

The crew rushed forward, trying to help Captain with his bags. However, I was in utter disbelief, so I rushed forward and pulled Captain aside.

"But Captain!" I questioned in confusion. "What about the treasure? Shouldn't we focus on- "

"Ah, right! Almost forgot." Captain unraveled his war-ridden jacket from his shoulders. He carefully placed it on me, yet the weight still pulled me towards the ground. It was huge on me. When I stood, the coat was dragging on the floor and sliding off my shoulders. He also placed his hat on my

head, shielding my eyes. I was dazed, unaware of what this all meant.

Captain giggled. “All a bit big on ye, huh? Well, you’ll grow into it, just like I did, *Captain James*.”

I rose up at the title, now realizing what this passing down of clothes meant. “Captain...?”

“Mhm.” Captain hesitated. “... Unless you wanna be called something else. Whatever it is you choose to be, this ship will be behind you as you lead ‘em to sea and whatever your filthy hearts desire!” Captain exclaimed as the crew cheered.

“But... what about the treasure?” I stammered in confusion. “We came all this way for... nothing?”

“Not nothing. Sure, I may have made up the map myself, and there’s no real treasure, but...” The crew gasped and exploded in anger at there being no treasure, but Captain shushed them quickly. “It was for a point, you hooligans! I wanted to make sure y’all were ready for the high seas without me, ye hear?!”

“But Captain...” I murmured in shock.

“No longer your Captain.” George interrupted. “You can call me Firemane, or... George.” George smiled with warmth. “I miss being called George.”

George glanced at the sun setting in the west, the light glimmering through the trees of the island. “It’s my time to step down, don’t you all think? I’m getting old, and I’d rather go out on my own terms. Finally... relax for a bit. Plus, this is a nice island, eh? Those English and Spanish will never find me here.”

“So... the ‘treasure’ was... retirement?” I laughed, still in disbelief.

“Ha, I suppose you could see it that way. For me, the real treasure was testing to see if my crew was in the right hands.”

“Well... are they...?” I questioned, worried.

George laughed. “Seems about so.”

My first command as Captain was ordering everyone to help Captain build his home. He argued he only wanted help with getting everything down, but I assured him that it was my decision as Captain.

It took us till morning to build the house with wood from the island, due to wanting to make sure it was perfect. He was fine with little, but I gave him

the most.

There was also a small part of me that didn't want to leave him behind. It was inevitable though, since the crew was getting tired. They said their goodbyes and gratitude to George and then traveled back to the ship to prepare to sail. It was now just George and me alone, as it was now my turn to truly say goodbye.

"Ever decide on a name, eh?" George asked me as he sat in the chair that the crew and I built with sticks and rope. "No rush, of course."

"... I like Captain James... it'll work till I get a mane like yours. Then I can name myself blondemane?" I joked, awkwardly.

Firemane snickered, quickly standing up and approaching me. "Keep workshopping that. Not as catchy." He softly grabbed my shoulders and pulled me into a warm hug. I hugged back tightly, taking in his natural scent of ocean musk, for what could be the last time.

"Captain..." I mumbled out through tears.

"George, remember? You're captain now, James."

"Right." I sniffled. "Thank you, George..."



Ethan Lopez, "Day Ruined"

Acrylic on Canvas

Doug Wants the Chicks

By Caitlin Cahill

I feed a dollar into a truck stop vending machine. The crumpled bill disappears on the first try, and the machine spits out two cans of Coke.

I crack one open before I even reach the car. The metal pops sharp in the quiet lot, and the first sip burns sweet down my throat. When I climb back into my beat-up 4Runner affectionately named Doug, the second can gets tossed into the backseat, where it lands among a graveyard of empty cans and the kind of trash that collects when you've been living out of a car for a week.

My bedroom back home wasn't much better. Laundry—clean and dirty—lived together on the floor like they'd made a truce. The stuffed animals I used to fall asleep holding every night sat untouched on a shelf, slowly collecting dust. I didn't bother packing any of it. Whatever that room becomes now is none of my business. I only took what mattered.

Every CD I own is shoved into an old milk crate that now rides shotgun, strapped in with the seatbelt like a traveling companion. When I pulled out of the driveway last week, I figured the Dixie Chicks CD my mom gave me for my thirteenth birthday would be a fitting send-off.

For about four minutes, it felt cinematic. Leaving town with the sun coming up behind me and Natalie Maines singing like she understood exactly what I was doing. Then the track started looping. Over and over, the same song. No matter how many times I press eject, Doug refuses to spit the disk out. It doesn't seem to matter to him that there are two other CDs already loaded. Doug wants the Chicks.

I considered stopping somewhere to get the stereo fixed, but I barely have enough money to make it to the next town. And if I turn around now—if I accept defeat—I'll end up back at the same bars that only serve my ghosts. Leaving homes easy when you were never really there.

I pull away from the truck stop with only the hum of the engine for company. It takes about thirty minutes of open road before the silence starts eating at me. After the millionth cornfield, I cave and press play, rolling the windows down so the wind can carry some of the sound away. I hum along

reluctantly the first few times the song comes around. By the fifth, I've accepted my new reality.

"She needs wide open spaces," I sing to the endless Midwest.

By the time I reach Tennessee, the Chicks have probably sung that song a hundred times. I spend the night in the corner of a Walmart parking lot under one of those buzzing yellow lights that never turn off. The second Coke is still rolling around somewhere in the backseat when I fall asleep.

Waking up at the crack of dawn, I hum my way into the Walmart bathroom, toothbrush already in my mouth. The fluorescent lights make everyone look a little sick. There's a guy mopping the floor near the sinks—maybe my age, maybe a little older. He glances up when I walk in.

"Morning," he says.

His voice is soft, like he's not used to talking to strangers.

"Morning," I say around a mouthful of toothpaste.

He leans on the mop for a second, studying the toothbrush sticking out of my mouth and the clear lack of proper sleep in my eyes.

"Road trip?"

"Something like that."

He smiles—not the polite kind, the real kind. The kind that looks like it might ask another question if you let it.

"Anywhere good?"

I shrug. "Just... away."

He nods like that makes sense. For a second it feels like the world pauses there between the humming lights and the smell of lemon cleaner. Like maybe he might say something else. Like maybe I might stay in one place long enough to hear it.

I intend I rinse my toothbrush and give him a small salute with it.

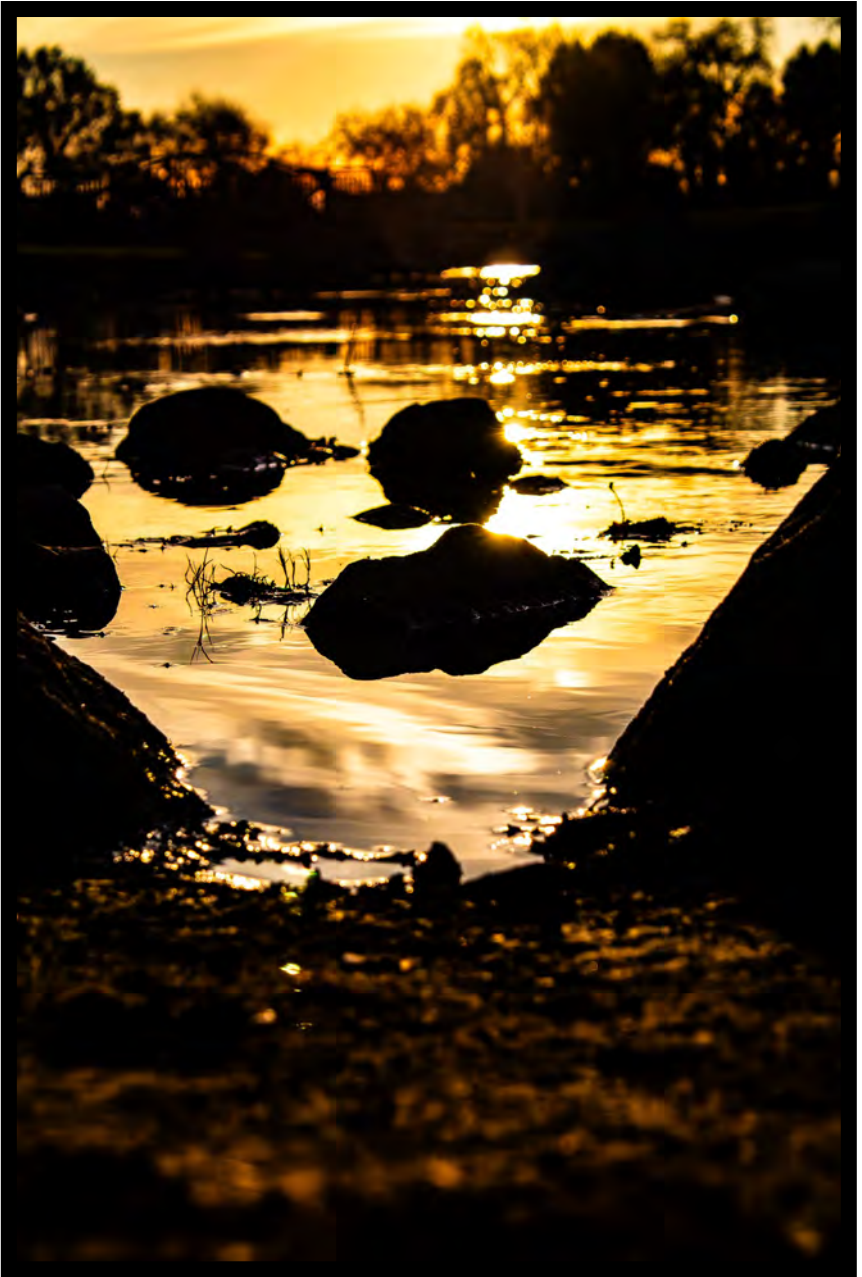
"Have a good one," I say.

"You too."

When I walk back outside, the morning air is cool and empty. I start Doug and the Chicks start up again like they never left.

The road is already filling with early morning trucks. People going somewhere. People coming home from somewhere. I wonder how many parking lots like this I've slept in. How many towns I've passed through without anyone asking where I'm heading.

I pull onto the highway before I have to answer.



Jason Fuller, “Hidden Beauty at Riverwalk”

Photography



Ethan Lopez, "Pismo Tree"

Acrylic on Canvas

Poetry Keeps the Best Secrets

By Sharanjit Kaur

Poetry is a hidden thing. It keeps secrets
and peeks around corners. It giggles
from under beds like its playing
hide-and-seek. You ask, “What does that
mean?” but poetry will never tell you.

The poet reads while the audience translates
and tries to give meaning to paper plates.

But it's the hand that feeds. Feeds me the
foot in my mouth because it doesn't like
where my words are going. It attempts to
mislead. Poetry is a hidden thing

and by that I mean it does not wish to be explained.
Explanation is the death of feeling. It implies
there is something to be contained. But poetry

hides behind corners from those who refuse to be
part of the human race. It comes out, giggling
and full of life, though, for those who refuse
to let their mundane minds be replaced.

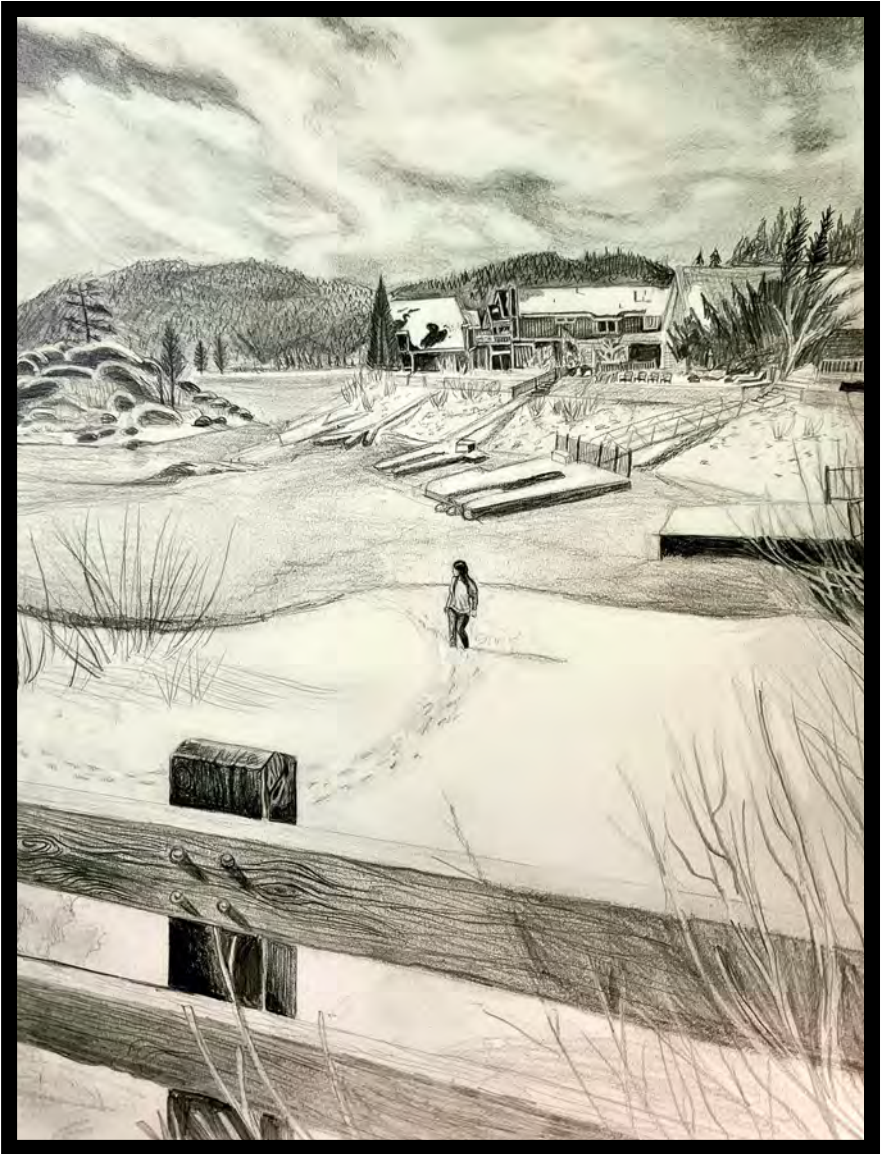


Reedley College Featured Visual Artist
Daniela Gutierrez, "Tender Hands"
Photography



Jewell Breadmont, “Shadow Dancer”

Photography



Trianh Ta, "The Lonely Crowd"

Contributors

Lizbeth Apolar is a Studio Arts major at Madera Community College. She plans to transfer and earn her Master's in Art.

Skyler Basherian is a multidisciplinary artist attending Fresno City College. As a non-binary Latinx-Middle Eastern artist, self-identity is a vital theme throughout their work. Basherian explores concepts of mental illness, self-reflection, and dreams, focusing on the fleeting and powerful emotions these subjects hold in our daily lives.

Emma Berry is an art major at Reedley College, who is transferring to CSU Northridge. She loves reading and writing fantasy stories, as well as drawing them in her spare time.

Marcel Borg is a writer currently studying English and Sociology at College of the Canyons in Santa Clarita, California. He has been writing poetry since he was 16-years-old.

Michael Bowman is a student writer and artist at Elizabethtown Community and Technical College, studying for an Associate's in Art. He works in painting and drawing but has a fondness for poetry. His work often leans strange, reflecting his belief that weirdness is essential to one's true self and honesty shapes his creative voice deeply.

Jewell Breadmont is a photography and design student at Bakersfield College. She began her photographic practice in 2022 after discovering a passion for image-making. Her work has been selected for exhibition at the Wylie and May Louise Jones Art Gallery in both 2024 and 2025.

Dilyara Breyer is a Los Angeles-based poet currently studying poetry with Wilfred Doucet at Santa Monica College. She views her poetry as sketches of everyday life and reflections.

Jennifer Camara Brooks is a mother, wife, daughter, sister, and friend who cherishes words and books. Stories have always been her refuge, allowing her to explore many a distant shore. One day, she hopes to create her own and be brave enough to share it with others.

Caitlin Cahill is a creative writing major at Grossmont College with a passion for fiction and poetry. She was born and raised in San Diego and can't imagine living anywhere without easy access to the beach and good Mexican food.

Ren Cutrer is a student at Elizabethtown Community and Technical College, pursuing an Associate of Arts degree. He writes in his spare time but isn't a published author by any means, though he wishes for that to potentially change one day.

Jason Fuller is a student at Bakersfield College pursuing an Associate's Degree in Studio Arts.

Alma Garcia is a student attending Reedley College where she is pursuing a degree in English.

Daniella Gutierrez is an English major at Reedley College.

Dennis Hopper is a 63-year-old Bakersfield College student.

Kayla Jackson is an English major attending the College of San Mateo. She has a passion for writing poetry and wants to pursue a career as a published author, writing both poetry and young adult fantasy.

Sharanjit Kaur is a student at Fresno City College majoring in English. She has hopes of becoming a professor and will be continuing her own education at Fresno State University.

Ethan Lopez is a 20-year-old student at Madera Community College. He is an art major with a concentration in animation who specializes in digital art forms, including 3D animation, 3D modeling, video editing, and graphic design.

Vanessa Luna is a current English major at Cerritos College.

Maria Molund resides in Los Angeles and has her roots in Sweden. Along with her passion for poetry and frolicking in nature, she is studying early childhood education at Santa Monica College, and can soon be seen acting in the film “Disconnected,” a romantic comedy co-written with her life-partner.

Odie Solorio is a 19-year-old English major at Lemoore College. They dream of being an author and moving to a big city one day.

Ella Ellsworth is a Biology Major at West Hills College, Lemoore. She has been painting since a young age, supported by her maternal grandmother and her mom.

Trianh Ta is a 23-year-old first generation Vietnamese American. Ta has been creating art since the age of 3 and loves to dabble in different mediums. Ta’s specialties are realism and naturalism, and their favorite subject to depict are animals.

Lelani Vo is a Communications major at Golden West College who loves writing and window-shopping at Barnes & Noble in her free time. She hopes to transfer to Cal State Fullerton next fall.

